Oral History with Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez

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Session 1
February 18, 2011

COLLINGS

Here we are on February 18, 2011, Jane Collings interviewing Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez in his home. We'll just start right out with when and where you were born.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Great. I was born in Los Angeles, California, in 1977, February first.

COLLINGS

Oh, you just had a birthday.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

It just passed, yes. It was actually--now it's Compton, and the hospital is Martin Luther King [Hospital]. It's been in the papers recently. I was born to a--I should start the story with my mother.

COLLINGS

Yes, please.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

My mother was a single mother and came from Mexico with my grandfather, who did the trail from Mexico up to the grape fields and the garlic and all the, what you consider the farm land there.

COLLINGS

Up into Salinas, that area?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Absolutely, all the way, Bakersfield. And what happened in those days is that the border didn't exist.

COLLINGS

What year would this have been, roughly?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, I want to say in the early sixties, late fifties. And what the family did was--because there was no border, you just came up from Mexico, did the year-round and then the season, and then came right back to Mexico. When they started sort of clamping down on the border, more and more people just stayed.

COLLINGS

What part of Mexico was your family from, or is your family from?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

My grandfather is from the center, Mexico, and then my grandmother is from the borderland, so Mexicali is the capital city of Baja California, and that's where the family settled and my grandmother was from. So that's a four-hour trip, and I remember as a child going every--even before school, I remember going. Every week we did a trip to Mexico, like on a Friday night, came back on Sunday night.

COLLINGS

That sounds nice.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

You know, it was, because it was what it was. You went, you came back, and I just remember that.

COLLINGS

So you were living with your mother and grandfather at that time?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, what happened was--I should go back to the fact that the family was very agricultural, and in those days, if you were of age, you were sort of married off and went off. And so my mother was a thirteen-year-old bride, who had my sister--I have an older sister--at fourteen, so she was already a parent, and she went off with the man, who was older than her. It didn't work out, so then she came back to my grandmother and grandfather to live with them. And so then my sister grew up. She was about four. Then my mother met my father, and I was born.

COLLINGS

I see.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So even then, we all lived with my grandparents. And at that time, my grandfather, like I said, they lived off the land and they traveled a lot, and so what ended up happening is that my Aunt Nina, who had raised my mother when my grandparents were finding their way, ended up raising us while my mother went to get reeducated. She had dropped out of middle school. She went to Wilmington. So what happened was after we were a little bit older, she went to beauty school to get a degree.

COLLINGS

So she went back to get her--back to school--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Trade.

COLLINGS

--in the city of Wilmington.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, I'm sorry. The school that she was going to was the name of Wilmington. The place she went is--it doesn't exist anymore. At Abrams right off the 10 [Freeway] there, I'm not sure if it's still there. But it was the only other thing to do, get a trade, because in those days--but I want to tell you an interesting story about when my mother was fourteen and she had my sister.

COLLINGS

Okay.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

She was a child then. A man actually had my sister. A man walked into her triage or wherever my mom was, her hospital room, and he told my mother--had it translated into Spanish, because my mother didn't speak English for a long time. I didn't speak English for a long time, until I was about seven. He said, "Sign here, please." And my mother said, "What is this?" He said, "This is so that you can get help with your child." And it turned out that those papers she was signing were for welfare.

COLLINGS

Oh, I thought you were going to say sterilization.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, that would have been a really good story. No. But the reason why I share that with you is because it shows the progression of the social sort of net. Before, they sought people who needed services. Now they hide services. It's like, don't, get out of here.

COLLINGS

He said, "This is to help you and your child."

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. So I always tell that story because, you know, we were raised on subsidized housing and food stamps, and I remember being a teenager and getting sent to the store, and back in the day, they didn't have Ebt cards. It was in a little booklet, so you had to rip the bills out so that they knew they weren't fake. And, of course, nine times out of ten there was this really beautiful girl right behind you as you bought your things with your food stamps, and so it was a source of great shame for a long time for me. But now that I am a professor, I have a one dollar food stamp framed in a gold-leaf frame, because now it's a source of pride, interestingly enough, that that's where I was able to come from.

COLLINGS

Right, I understand.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So then my mother went back to school and cut hair for a while, and somewhere something happened to her. Somebody told her that education was extremely important for her children, and so when we didn't have enough to eat, we had the ability to go to school and have the resources.

COLLINGS

So she would buy a notebook before she would buy a gallon of milk.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, exactly, that kind of thing. And, of course, with the situation of us being raised by my Nina, it was facilitated, you know, that if there was nothing else, they would provide us with food. But I mention that because where I am now, I always look back and say, how did this happen? And it had a lot to do with the fact that at a time when quality education wasn't exactly readily available in the area that we lived, so my mother jumped around. We lived in Compton for a long time, and then, if you know L.A., they built the 105 [Freeway]? Well, the 105 was built on top of where we lived. So all those people were displaced, so then that forced us to find a new place, and the place that we landed was in Watts. And so we lived there for a while, and this is a time--

COLLINGS

When did you arrive in Watts, then?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I was, I want to say six years old. And the journey there was interesting. I remember living in people's living rooms. I remember that. You know, you're in a place where there's like the house is three bedrooms, but you live in the living room, and people want to use their TV and you're like, that's your living space, and it just did something--okay, so we're in that situation, and I still remember walking to school with my mother, with my uniform, to go to school.

COLLINGS

Was it a Catholic school?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

It was, definitely. It was run by the Augustinians, Recollects. So without that--and you know, this school was in Watts, San Miguel, it's still there and thriving now. When I was going there, it was not as large. It's expanded since. So that's what I mean by like education. My mother dropped out of middle school, so she was thirteen, so she was just in that eighth grade or whatever it was. She's dealing with that. So then we come to jump fast forward to my Watts days, when we finally got settled in Watts. Like my mom talks about the loan was--the house was, like, I don't know, 130 or something, but it was like 16 percent interest, you know, because this is like a single woman. She has a job, but not necessarily any savings.

COLLINGS

So she was going to buy the house.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, definitely, with three other people. So my uncle cosigned, my aunt, and it was like that was the only way. Other people now, you know, before the crash, you just live with six families in your house. Back then it was people cosigned for you, and they didn't necessarily live with you, but they gave you that little help. And so my mother was able to build a little bit of equity, and then we moved on up to a two-story house, in Watts. It was an interesting move, because we could carry our furniture from the one house to the other. It was like, I don't know, I want to say like four blocks away. But it was new, it was new.

COLLINGS

Yes. That must have been really exciting.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And so I remember us moving in and having arrived, because only people who are well off live in a two-story house, and so as a kid that's my thinking.

COLLINGS

And they're kind of rare in Los Angeles anyway, aren't they?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Right. But the lot was postage stamp, like most lots in Watts are, because, I don't know if you know the history, but basically, that place was built for the industrial workers during World War II and then through white flight, they all left. But they left these little bungalows where they used to live, and blacks and Latinos moved in. But even before then, Watts was pretty undesirable. It was called "mud town" in the 1920s, and because of restrictive covenants, only certain--that was one of the few areas that blacks could live. And so, anyhow, L.A. had like its own renaissance during the Jazz Age, like the central--

COLLINGS

The Central Avenue.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Exactly. That's where you went to get bootleg and prostitution. It was sort of like the playground of the city, because it's all poor black, you know, clubs. So anyway, so that's where I grew up, and I remember as a kid like never seeing that many Latinos other than my family, but seeing a lot of black people, you know, Watts.

COLLINGS

Why did your mom choose to go to Watts then?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, because the house that we were living in was--eminent domain for the freeway.

COLLINGS

But why Watts in particular?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, okay, great. You know, I haven't talked to her specifically. It's my guess the homes in Watts were the cheapest. Still are, right? It was, I want to say, 1980s, at the height of the crack epidemic and gangs, and so if you know the geography of Watts, it's between two--it's a high concentration of subsidized housing, and gangs had affiliated with certain of the housing

projects, and so what happened was when they wanted to fight, the middle ground was Watts. And so, naturally, property values were in accordance to the high mortality rate, and up Latinos and blacks who wanted to own something, that's where they would go. They couldn't go to Bellflower or to Southgate, just couldn't afford it. The homes were too expensive. So I think that's my guess about why Watts. And, again, it was in that region of where they knew the people and they knew the places.

COLLINGS

There was the school there, perhaps.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. And the school was close, absolutely. But even back--you know where King Drew [Hospital] is right now, 120th? That there, and then there's George Washington Elementary, where I went to school. I remember going to school, and it's still there. And then all that is in that general vicinity of a very, say, lower income at the time, until you can't make the leap to Beverly Hills, so you go to the next best thing is Watts. And then the people who lived in Watts and moved out, they moved to Southgate. So it's sort of, that's an interesting thing about the Latino journey is that Latinos don't--in general, and there are studies about this--they don't linger. It's like they're always thinking, "Yeah, I'm living in this living room, but my children are going to live in a house," or, "I'm going to live--." And so there's that desire to move forward and to build, and my mom, with her middle-school education, definitely embodied that, you know, that even in the midst of poverty, you still have control over your future. And so I think that's what drew them to that opportunity, because that was the only place they could afford. So she was able to, again, make a small leap in the community, but into a new property, because the house we moved into on Croesus [Street], was the street, wasn't new. But the house on 107th [Street] was new and two stories and pink.

COLLINGS

Wow.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So that's where I grew up.

COLLINGS

You and your sister and your mom?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, no, because, sorry. By then, let's see, ten years, when we moved to this two-story house, my next sister was born, okay? She's ten years away from me.

COLLINGS

Ten years younger.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. So she was born there, and I was, yes, I was ten. So I was still going to San Miguel and then we grew up there. Then my next sister was born, and she is three years younger than the youngest one, and then my mom had another one, another sister. So I have four sisters. I'm four years away from my older sister, but ten years away from the rest of them. So, basically, I was a babysitter. I mean, I'm not the most mature person, but I remember like having to take care of a lot of things that you might think, "That's not a ten-year-old's job." Maybe so, I don't know. But I'm talking about complex, like mixing formula and stuff. My sister did a lot of the diaper changing, but yet I remember the expectations were, "You're a citizen of this household, and you take care of your siblings."

COLLINGS

So your mom was at work all day?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. My mom--we were latchkey kids. I mean, again, the money she was bringing in was minimal, and then the other thing was subsidized. Like our food was food stamps, and that's how we were able to manage. But even in that, through scholarships, she found the sixty bucks a month to send my sister and me to--I forgot what tuition is, but I have letters from the cardinal, Cardinal Mahoney, who was like the head of the archdiocese at the time, saying, "You've been awarded a scholarship for this year."

COLLINGS

And was it all Latino kids at the school?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No. No, it wasn't. I remember in my class the numbers being maybe 90 percent Latino. You know, but there was this like--I don't know where they came from, Filipino students and black students. But black students were--you had maybe like two in each class, so this is like 1 percent, 2 percent. But those were the sort of forward-thinking black families who--they weren't Catholic. I remember my classmates were Baptist, but they knew the quality of education even then. I mean, now it's like reached a point where you can't ignore it, but back then it was like it was just this sense of, this is inferior. Like my kid's coming home with like duplicate, fill in the blank, and there's not a lot of critical--I'm only assuming that that's what the black parents who sent their kids there, because I know it wasn't because of the religion. And the safety--maybe it was as simple as safety. You know, people are getting stabbed at those other schools, and here's a more religious sort of protected environment, sealed off with gates. Yes, so, but I remember, and I

have to say, you know, racially it was really interesting, because I had never seen a white person. My teacher--I remember teachers being white. Like my eighth-grade teacher, Miss Scarborough, she was like the only white person who I ever had any real consistent contact with, and something happened to me that I thought like the world was black and brown, because it was in my world, right? And it wasn't until I went to college--even in high school, it was like all Latino--and in college that I saw, like, there's white people, and they're not sort of--they're like terribly human. Because you sort of make assumptions, you know--

COLLINGS

Yes, of course.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--about them, and then you--I would sit, because I went to the school in an extremely--it's what they call a white-topia, which is Salt Lake City, Utah, and it was very interesting that--

COLLINGS

Okay, we're back on.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Great. So--

COLLINGS

You said that you had kind of a culture shock when you went to--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, absolutely. But the culture shock was one of just realizing how we have a lot of things in common. For example, my approach to white people was to glorify them and fear them, and so when I went and sat and broke bread, I said, "Wow. You're just as cracked as we are." [laughter] Just in different places, you know? And so I was so--I felt so relieved and it sounds a little bit cliché, but that we do have more in common with each other. I live that.

COLLINGS

So your only exposure to the white world, so to speak, was through television, right?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, television, policemen, who were usually white in that area, and then like I said, these few, like, sprinkled. But as far as people living in the neighborhood, forget it. Yes, it was limited. And

I think if anybody ever called me brilliant, I think that that's why I'm so brilliant, because television was like nonexistent in my house. You could read, and--

COLLINGS

Did you have a TV?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

My aunt had a TV. We didn't have a TV in our house. And we didn't have--like VCRs were like hip and new--

COLLINGS

Yes, very new.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--and we didn't have that. Later on we started filling our house up with stuff, but in my formative years, I remember like a lot of like make believe and a lot of like playing outside and running around, so I wasn't dulled early on. I associate it with that. So what happened, back to Utah, is that I realized that these people are dealing with the same issues in different ways, and so it was a really amazing awakening, and I came back after sort of converted, and I would hear people say things like, "But you know, that's how white people--." And I'd say, "No. No, not really, not from my experience, and I've actually been outside of this." So in a way--I remember my first week at the University of Utah--

COLLINGS

And that's, to me, I think I would have a culture shock going to Utah.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. You know the term homesickness? You know, I always thought you're sick for home. You feel that? It's a physical reaction.

COLLINGS

Right, it actually is physical.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I threw up multiple times my first week, and I was like, that's how like sick I was, because there's nobody that knows me, and like I don't anybody, and they certainly don't understand. And then I remember people like not knowing what to do with me because, I mean, my accent is present now, but back then I was a Latino in Utah sounding like I was black.

COLLINGS

Oh. That must have been confusing for people.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, because it's like, "You're not black. Why are you talking like that?"

COLLINGS

Is that how the kids at your school talked?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, my neighborhood.

COLLINGS

Oh, but not at your school.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

All my friends were black. And then high school--so this is elementary, right? All these Latino kids, they're all speaking in that way, with that accent. Friends that you hang out and play stickball with, same thing. And so I took that and I would say, "What are you talking about? What accent?", right. Then I went to high school, and I didn't go to high school in South L.A. That's another sort of bullet that I dodged there. I was on the bus anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half, going to school in Boyle Heights.

COLLINGS

Was it a magnet program, or a charter program, or what?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No. No, it was a Catholic school.

COLLINGS

Oh, I see.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And so Salesian High School, and so all the prime time troublemaking time, I was on a bus. By the time I got home, they had already gone and started their mayhem, and then I had to eat and

do homework. So it really did sort of release me from any sort of questions. But let me tell you, I--

COLLINGS

Did you ever think maybe you wanted to go to your neighborhood school and hang out with your neighborhood pals and rebel against this?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, I lived two blocks away from Jordan [High School]. That was the school I would have gone to. People were getting stabbed at Jordan when I was--

COLLINGS

Oh, okay.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So there was that reality, you know. So I don't remember longing. I remember longing for friends, but not longing for that institution. So that's sort of jumping ahead. But I want to tell you a story about the first time I got arrested in Watts. I was the youngest of a crew of football players that we were playing flag football, and I had to have been, I want to say, like eleven. So what happened was, we saw these kids with these like Raider uniforms in boxes, walking. It's like, "Hey, where'd you get those?" "Oh, they're in a train. It's open. You can go--."

COLLINGS

A train you said? On the tracks.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

A train, train, yes, on the tracks.

COLLINGS

Boxcar.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. So we're like, "Let's go." So we went. Sure enough, there's a train. Sure enough, somebody broke the thing open. Sure enough, there's plenty of uniforms. So all of us load up on these bags of things. Of course, by that time they have called the police from the first raid--

COLLINGS

So you were there too late.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So it was like [makes whooshing noise], everybody encircled, handcuffed, in the cop car.

COLLINGS

Oh, great.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Crying. "They made me do it. I didn't do it." And it's like, "Oh, you're in big trouble." And so my mom came, of course, and they gave her the paperwork. And interestingly enough, back in the old days you could hit kids.

COLLINGS

Yes.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

It was legal. Now it's only legal for--

COLLINGS

It was recommended.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, recommended. [laughter] But interestingly enough, my mother didn't touch me, which is like, that's what I remember, because I used to get beatings. My mom broke a chair on my back once, a little plastic chair. It wasn't like a wooden chair. But there was no sort of--and you know, I remember I told my mom once, "You touch me, I'm going to call the cops on you." She sort of just like boxed me in the ears, pulled me over and says, "Take the phone. Here, call them." Like, "Do it now."

COLLINGS

Why did you say you were going to call the cops on her?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Because she was hitting me.

COLLINGS

I know, but did you think it was illegal at that time? I mean, you said back then it was not illegal.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, I knew. No, you knew that. That's interesting. Why did I think--well, because it was like a convenient threat, like, I don't know, "We're in America now. You can't be like disciplining me." Whatever it was. And I deserved it. And you know, you think of your upbringing, and you think of like the discipline and what it does. So I said that, but I remember my mom's reaction being like, "I will drive you to the cops. That's not a problem. You think they're going to take care of you better than me, go." And if you want to look at like the details of it, did it verge on abuse a lot of the time? You know, my mom, she didn't take these parenting classes.

COLLINGS

I don't think they really existed at that time. I mean, the whole term "parenting" is pretty new. It's from, what, like 1990 or something, or maybe a little earlier, I don't know.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. I hear you. And again, here's something like that again I go back to the community aspect of it, that there was my aunt to be like, "Take it easy on him," and my uncle, a male figure. Although, you know, the male figures in my life--because my mother wasn't able to really find--she had bad luck choosing men. I always tell her, "Mom, you had good taste in men," because she wasn't able to settle with any of my sisters' fathers.

COLLINGS

Was it, she had an independent streak, or what was it?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, I mean, if you talk to her about it individually, like abuse was one. Like my father was addicted to crack. He came from a very, very affluent family. He's from Ecuador. So his brother is a doctor, one of them, and then he has another brother who is a lawyer--

COLLINGS

Wow.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--and has his own business. And my father also had his own business, but he drank and smoked it all up when my mother met him. He wasn't able to really control his addiction.

COLLINGS

Did they have their businesses in Ecuador or in the United States?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, they were here. But that's what happened is they were dating, and then six months into the relationship, my mom left him because of the drugs. My sister's father was abuse. And there was an independent streak. My mother's a very strong-willed woman, and you kind of have to be to raise five kids on your own and have two children with master's degrees and two in college. So all three of my younger sisters are in higher education. My sister is married with her four kids, so she went the route of that. But that doesn't happen if you don't have a woman who's like doing the job of--

COLLINGS

Absolutely.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So in a way, like in context--everything is in context, right--this woman, the fruits that she bore, both the positive and the negative come from that roots, right. And, unfortunately, that's true, I feel, for a lot of black and Latino students today, the fact that they're being raised by single women, because the men, in many ways, don't know how to--I don't know how to be a father. Me with two kids and a wife, I don't know. And it's funny, because I have a six-year-old daughter, and I remember my wife saying, "Well, you never take her to the park," or in conversations, like, "So what?" Like once you get that that's part of the deal--I bring home a paycheck, I make sure they're not cold, wet, or starving, and I'm a man. And so I'm just now learning that, yes, that's great, important, but there's more. There's like interactions, and there's like emotional support, and it's so--and I'm an educated man, and I didn't know that. And so I really feel for these youngsters who, you know, they're being dismissed and it's true, like you have to provide for your family, but in a real way, nobody ever taught them. And whatever you want to do with that information, just not assume that these are universal things that everybody should know.

COLLINGS

Well, there are behaviors that are specific to a culture, a particular culture, so it's not just genetic information that is imparted.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Exactly. And how is that information transferred to culture if there's not that role there? And so it goes back to that maybe government steps in and tells you how to raise kids, because you don't have your grandmother, she's in a home, or your father, who's in prison or gone. So that's my sort of upbringing, so I really do almost obsessively sort of focus on the ideal of the nuclear family and really trying to make sure that that pattern is shattered with me, because I think ultimately that's the only way that we're going to get out of this situation that we're in America, especially

with black and Latino people, is that we have to empower ourselves to make the difficult choices. And I guess metaphorically, it's the idea that before it was always some external force, like usually white people coming down and making sure that you don't succeed. And then something happened where you internalized it, and then they left, they weren't there anymore. Nobody was fire hosing anybody. You could sit at any counter you wanted, but it was already there, and somehow it got cultivated, and so, you know, I taught high school for a long time, and that was always the question, that the chains that they put on you, shackles, that's easy. Like you can deal with those. The internalized ones, those are like unbreakable unless you do sort of the Herculean task of calling yourself and all your beliefs into question. And so I've developed these theories that they could be considered iconoclastic in the context of my generation that came out from the same area. They don't think like this, because I don't think that they've been slapped around enough with the reality of other places. So my experience is that I just attribute that there's a complexity that the old model doesn't answer, because now, like your mayor's like you, so is it a race thing anymore? Your president is like you, so how does that hold water anymore? But people are still clinging. Why?

COLLINGS

Well, there are still class problems.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Definitely. But, see, that's the thing you have to say is class. You can't say it's race anymore, because then you can attack it properly, and so that's what's not happening. But there's that, a very legitimate sort of holding onto real issues, real wounds, but moving forward requires a next step of, I feel, of like looking to ourselves and figuring out what we can do, because ultimately--this is just my core belief--I am infinitely more capable of helping myself than any government agency or any institution. As long as they don't--not to get in people's way. I mean, I'm not sort of championing the idea of this totally like absence of the resources, but it's like, where is the impetus for it? It has to be internalized, so we have to do that.

COLLINGS

Well, let me just go back a little bit. At your school, were any of these issues being addressed, issues of social justice?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, let me tell you. When I was in elementary school, Miss Mack--I remember this Jamaican woman. I remember her because she had dreadlocks and like, what is this woman doing at this Catholic school? Okay. She would get up--she was social studies--and she would preach, and this was a constant theme. She would say, "You feel bad about being on welfare? Let me tell you who the biggest welfare recipients in the world are." And she'd say, "The royal family right out of England." She's like--I remember that. And if you think about, what do they do for their resources? You know? What do they do for it? So this is like third--I'm talking about elementary school you're hearing this. And so I remember like a dream. Sister Olivia--also she was an Irish--

Olivia. I'm talking about like Irish-Irish nun, talking about the situation with the--however you want to frame the Protestant-Catholic situation in Ireland and everything in between. So I definitely was exposed to it at a young age, and I credit the people, especially in high school, with not sort of--it was very Socratic. I remember that it was being like very, very Socratic, and the first time sitting in religion class and having a priest say, "So you believe in this? Why?" Having a priest say, "Why?" and, "And do you believe, and is it true? And why is it true?" So, hey, you're a priest. You're supposed to be encouraging. No. It was sort of a shaking of like the core beliefs that we had grown up with, and I think that that served us to say, if you really sort of embrace this, then this is the reason why, and this is your actions that come from that, and if you're not willing to go, then don't claim to really be whatever.

COLLINGS

Because sometimes you hear about the Catholic church, Catholic schools having a strong social-justice agenda.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes.

COLLINGS

And would you say that the schools that you went to were inclined in that direction?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

You know, I would say that when I went to school and there was an earthquake, there was always the collection to send people. There was always a drive for the homeless, a canned-food drive. There were always those things. But again, in looking back at it, as a child I didn't see sort of the agenda of like--

COLLINGS

It wasn't made explicit.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No. But we knew, like we knew that there were priests marching with Martin Luther King. We knew that, you know? We knew that even though you always hear in the Holocaust the silence of the Church, we knew that. But we also knew that nobody did more to help the Jewish people save themselves than clergy did. That's like historical, you know, number-wise, more than any other organized government or--and so I feel like--

COLLINGS

What about the Liberation Movements that were taking place?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, yes, liberation theology. I mean, there's still--we just lost the Red Cardinal in Chiapas who was like very--he was the intermediary between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government. But I think the shift has happened. It's like all theology has to be liberation theology. I mean, if you look at the man, the historical man Jesus of Nazareth, he was left of center. He was quite the liberation theologist himself, so it's just a consistency. And I, like, prize my interactions with non-Catholics, non-Latinos, because they bring that new perspective to the way that--well, I look at it like this. I happen to have a lot of homosexual friends, in this whole marriage business, having conversations with them. I think we're the richer, not that we arrive at we have to agree. We just arrive at an understanding, and so I feel like that's something that we don't have enough of. Everything is like, "This is my silo. This is the way things are," and not enough cross pollination that really feeds progress. And so it happened in my early experiences at San Miguel, you know, being exposed to different ideas and different ways of looking at things. And, I mean, I'm sure you know the historical fact that the first people to convert to Catholicism were the Greeks.

COLLINGS

No, I had no idea.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. Yes, that's why the Bible was translated into Greek first, from the Aramaic. But that's significant because if you're wondering where saints come from, it's all the gods. See, these people believe in polytheistic. "Oh, we have one God, but let's turn their gods into saints, then." And so you have saint of like shoelaces, and saint of bad haircuts. It's a wonderful cross pollination. And then what happens? The Romans step right in and do the same thing. "Let's call him Jupiter now," like, not Zeus. So I was exposed to that reality, and it freed me, because when I do things that are--maybe people say, "That's amazing," like, "That's so original," I know it's not. It's been done before and better than I'm doing it. The difference is that my work is authentic. So when you're released from being the first, the original, you can really progress. And then also when you don't care who gets the credit for coming up with things artistically or idea-wise, so that's informed my life a great deal. And so after San Miguel happened, I went off straight into Salesian High School, which was run by the Salesians, and they're an Italian order of priests. They're like Jesuits who actually do things, like crafts, like a trade, and so carpentry. So I went to that school, and even though they didn't have the carpentry program, they did have the theater program, and they had--

COLLINGS

They didn't have carpentry, but they had theater.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, yes, right, right. Exactly. Theater you put on a mask, you act. Carpentry, you need tools. But at one point they had automotive departments. The school was in decline. It was built for 1700 students. When I got there, there were like 300.

COLLINGS

Oh, gosh.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And that's one of the reasons why I got in.

COLLINGS

Oh, really?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Because I wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed. I was a troubled kid.

COLLINGS

Oh, you were?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, yes. I was suspended quite a few times.

COLLINGS

What was troubling you?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I think--I wish I knew. I think it was the fact that there was no consistent sort of strong arm. My mom was off at work. My aunt was an amazing caretaker, but outside in the streets, you know, I picked up a lot of things, and so I wasn't sort of disrespectful or belligerent that I remember, but I do remember getting hit a lot, because you could hit people in school back then. So it was like, "Guillermo, come here." And so what you did is, like there was a ruler--

COLLINGS

Ruler, right, across--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And so, well, it depends. Like this teacher, Miss Williams, was special. She was a black retired Army person. So she had three rulers--

COLLINGS

Oh, great.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--and they were duct-taped together--

COLLINGS

Oh, my god.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And get this. It gets better. She wrote--she had the word "Ouch" with a sad face on it, and she's saying, "Come here." It's like, bam, bam. Now, we got lucky, because it used to be you had to give your thumb, you'd have to cup your little hands like this [demonstrates], and then they would hit you on the tips of your fingers. And if you've ever been hit--there's a reason why you have fingernails there. And so that's the sort of discipline that we got, and it worked. But then it wore off, right, a week later, and so my mom was called in quite a bit. And maybe they saw something, because I should have been expelled from that school, but I wasn't. So I was referred to like psychiatrist, a psychologist, and I think ultimately it was part of not having a male figure in my life, consistent male figure in my life that had that--and like I said, my mom was extremely strong and focused and--

COLLINGS

What were you thinking you were going to do with yourself in the future?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Military.

COLLINGS

From an early age you thought that?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. I mean, I was going to go to the Marines. That's how you got out and you made a life for yourself, and so everything, I remember from an early age--although early, early age, for some reason I wanted to be a scientist. I think I liked throwing liquids and making them smoke or something when I was a kid. I remember that. And then in school I started discovering art, and I

remember getting awards for my creativity, in the Halloween costuming, getting awards, so that artistic thing happening. And then it was my final year in high school where, through an experience with a theater company, Cornerstone Theater Company, putting me in a show, I was able to see, like, this is the way to go. Or else I would have been in Desert Storm. I mean, that was right at that time. So even to think that you could be something other than a gardener or a--

COLLINGS

What did your mom want you to do? Did she ever talk to you about that?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Lawyer.

COLLINGS

A lawyer.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, because lawyers, that's when you arrived. And then later I discovered that it doesn't matter really what I--my mom was always going to need me to be something else. So it was like if I became a lawyer, she was going to want a doctor, and if I became a doctor, she would--architect.

COLLINGS

No, but just wondering--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, no, no. That was like I discovered that recently. It's like, no, it's not really--it's about being successful, and if you're successful, if I was successful, which I feel that I am, my mother would have been happy, is happy.

COLLINGS

But she wasn't encouraging you to like get a job right out of high school or something? She did want you to go to something else.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Right. She wanted me to go on. My extended family did. I remember conversations with my uncle, who, you know, he was in and out of prison. He said, "What are you going to college for, man? That's for white people. Need to come over here and work like a man." And I should say that I didn't internalize that. That was like shocking and anathema to me at that point where I was. But I was going to say, you know, I want to tell you a story. My mother had--my youngest

sister's father lived with us. He's like the closest thing that I remember to a father, but even he was only around for maybe two, three years. But before him, my mom was married. She got married, and it turned out that he was married in Mexico, the man she married, so it was like null and void. But anyway, I remember him taking me to work, because he was a gardener, on weekends, and this is like five a.m. to, you know, in the summer.

COLLINGS

God. That's hard work.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And I remember coming home and talking to my mom and saying, like, "No, I don't want to do this anymore," and her saying, "Well, that's why you're going to school, because if you don't, that's what's waiting for you." So in a way, it's not even me internally like overcoming some--no. It was like, I don't want to do this, because this is hard. Maybe I'll do this something else. And so I credit those really tough experiences with approaching, giving the choice of like that there is no maybe you'll end up a gardener, working with your back till it breaks. It's like, that's what's waiting; what do you want to do?

COLLINGS

Did you have advisors at high school?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, I did. We had Father Jim, who's still there, luckily. He was the father figure for the class. I had fifty-three people in my class. It was a tiny--like I said, it was--and I remember things like when I first got my license, I didn't have a car to take the test in. So only in a Catholic school would this happen. He's like, "Come on. You can drive my car." So he took me, I remember that, and then he drove me, and I drove with his car, and I passed the test, got my license, and then he brought me--like nobody would do that for you nowadays. Like nobody wants to get sued.

COLLINGS

Yes. That was real mentoring, wasn't it?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, right, it was that. And there was just that expectation of like, I want to say just--I was going to say perfection. It's not that. That expectation of just never settling, the concept being that nothing ever should be; everything should be becoming something. And so that I remember from high school being--and that's very Greek. That's like straight out of like Greek philosophy. It's like, nothing is; everything is becoming. It's like, if you think you've arrived at goodness and righteousness, no. That's when you're like the worst. You've got to be moving towards it. And so I remember like Brother Tom, who now has the field at Salesian named after him, I remember he

took us--part of the thing if you got detention was you had to work on Saturdays. So you'd go around cleaning the school and picking up cans, and then Brother Tom would go take you to sell the cans. Right? So what happened this one time--this is like--and Brother Tom is like this big Iowa--

COLLINGS

So everybody wanted detention, I would think.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

[laughter] Right. Yes. That's funny how that works, huh? But, no, it escalated. It escalated. But what I remember is driving with him once to go drop off the cans, and a driver--we had just left--cut him off, and I don't remember him cursing. I just remember him saying, "What is this guy doing? He doesn't know what he's doing." And then going, continuing. Well, after that happened, all Brother Tom was talking about was how he should have been more patient, he didn't have to yell. He should have--

COLLINGS

Because he was showing you how to act.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, I guess, and I don't think he was modeling. I think he was really saying, "Oh, man. That was a mistake. If that happens to me again, I know how to handle it." And this--I don't know, I'm fourteen, fifteen. I'm like, "Really? Wow." Even he has to work. And so I was at the University of Utah when he passed away. I was doing a show, and it was tech week, and tech week is like sacrosanct, but I flew back. I told my director, "Like I have to be there." I thought I was doing what--he had hundreds of people there from like New York--

COLLINGS

Wow.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--and like, this is like thirty years of--because he was the cross-country coach, and this is a school the size of a postage stamp population-wise, and they won the CIF championship, like the cross-country award for the whole state, and so that's the generation that he sort of influenced. So in a way, I owe any sort of brilliance that I may have at doing what I do, which is basically teaching, it goes back to that idea that, no, you're never really done, and there's that extra layer of, you have to let people--this is another thing. He would be like, "Guillermo, I can't deny you the consequences of your poor choices." [laughter]

COLLINGS

Oh, that's a good one.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

He's, "Come on, just let me--oh--,"

COLLINGS

I'm going to have to remember that one.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So there's that, that tough love, tough love I want to say, that to me--and I taught at Jordan [High School], and that's what I sort of just embodied. "Don't come crying to me, because I grew up two blocks away, next door to you, and so that doesn't hold any water anymore." And I went to Markham, and I taught at Markham for a spell, and so I feel like that's a big part of--a big piece, you know, when the family has collapsed, who fills that? I think we, the friends and families and community have to fill that, and we're not doing it enough. More so than we were, but--

COLLINGS

So how long was the association with--was it Father Jim, you said?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, Father Jim. I mean, Father Jim was four years.

COLLINGS

So for four years.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, because from freshman year, he does the mass when you first start your first week of school, and then the graduation, and he's still there. Father Jim is from--he taught us to function in wealth, because he comes from a very affluent background, and I remember him taking us to these like really restaurants with cloth napkins, which never in a million years, like, did I know. And that awkwardness of being, like, I've never been in a place like this, like how do you act and what do you do? And so he would take groups of students. I remember once there was a fight, and I broke it up. And then the next day I got called out of class, and Father Jim said, "When do you have time to meet after school?" And then I said, "Oh, I don't know. Call my mom," or whatever. And so he took me to a restaurant to talk to me about that, to say, "You did the right thing. That's what you have to do when things like that happen." I don't know why he felt that--I think he was like highlighting the positive and sort of letting the negative fall away.

COLLINGS

He sounds like an amazing resource for that school.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, absolutely. The school has a lot of amazing resources, I mean the people. And the amount of alumni who have come back to teach there, it's like in the 70 percentile. It's a special place. You know who graduated from there? Before my time, though, is Juizar. Councilman Juizar graduated from Salesian.

COLLINGS

Oh, gosh. Yes.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

In, I want to say the early eighties. So it's cranked out some people of note, some filmmakers, a film editor, prominent film editor. He did "Footloose" and he's done like a lot of films and he works with Warner Brothers. So those are the people that I was sort of surrounded with, and I feel that it affected the way that I look at the world. I mean, everything, right? It's an amalgam of the combination of everything. So when I finally did graduate from eighth grade, I applied--I could have gone to Verbum Dei [High School], which is on 103rd [Street], but there was something internally in me that said, "That's not the right place for me." And maybe it's this internalized shame of where I live, poverty or whatever, but Verbum Dei is like right smack on Central, right next to the tracks. It's up next to the projects, but there's an elementary school to it. But I just feel that it was like not--not intellectually, but I knew it's like, you're not going to grow. You're going to be in the same area with the same people. No, something else. And so I made the leap to Salesian and I got accepted.

COLLINGS

And made the commute.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, the commute, which I've already spoken about how like by dumb luck, it kept me out of like--I wasn't conscious enough to know that that was like--it wasn't a strategy. It just happened.

COLLINGS

It was a bus that the school provided? Or a Metro bus?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, you took the Metro, RTD in that time. I had to take two buses.

COLLINGS

That required a lot of commitment on your part.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, and a lot of--you know, it's funny because it also required a lot of something that people don't do enough, forethought and planning. You know, when you don't have a job and you're waiting for your check, they sort of blur into each other and there's no established pattern. And so it forced me to do that. Now, I'm not the most organized person in the world, so it didn't totally sort of like cure me of that, but it did do that. It's like, "What's the schedule? If you don't wake up at this time, you're not going to be ready by this time," which means somebody is going to have to drive you, or your mom's going to have to drive you, and you don't want that, get dropped off by your mom at the school. And then your friends are all waiting on the bus. But I remember that. Yes, I hadn't even thought about that logistical reality of doing that. And so I did that four years, and then I engaged in sports for, I would say, like two or three years. I wrestled. I remember wrestling. I remember football. And I remember shows, plays. I did plays in high school. So I had like four years there, and I sort of kept my nose clean enough to pull, I want to say, like a 2.0. I wasn't the most studious person. I was more like the social person. But it was enough to get me into the University of Utah with a recommendation, with academic probation. Now, the day before my SATs, I don't know how this happened, the schedule happened, but there was a football game against the rival high school, Cathedral, and then the party after. So, I mean, you would think of course you have to get your rest. But I just--I remember that. I remember staying up, then going at eight a.m. to the test the next day.

COLLINGS

With a headache?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. So I remember that, and so my score in it was such that the University of Utah was like, "We'll let you in, but get this." So they let me in on probation. And I was taking only theater classes and then some, but mostly things I wanted. I took like literary classes in like Latin American theater, literature, Shakespeare, you know, and I got a 3.9, 4.0, dean's list, dean's list, and so I actually bloomed in college. And so the most studious, like valedictorians in my class in high school, were partying and smoking in college. So like I said, I went to college to learn, because it was like there was nothing else to do. It's not like I can hang out. These people are all like--

COLLINGS

So why did you go to Utah instead of going somewhere in California?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

The theater--I was interested in--I wasn't going to go to college, period. I was going to go to the Marines. And so when Juliette Carrillo finished the play that I was in with Cornerstone, she's like--

COLLINGS

And we'll back up later and get more of the details about exactly how you got involved with them.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Sure. Oh, totally. But I just finished a show there, teaching--"Let me write you a letter of recommendation." And so I remember sending a tape, doing all that because I couldn't fly there, and getting accepted. The drive was to stay in theater, not sort of education. And I do remember applying to Cal State L.A. and all that, but I don't remember getting any acceptance or rejection. Maybe the acceptance from the University of Utah--it did, it like totally, like I'm going to another place, and it's like never in my mind did I think about tuition, about logistics, like that didn't matter. Like that's, I'm in and now stop me. And like it was a situation where for the first time I felt like--before, there was an inevitability of failure or like of turmoil, and now there was one of like inevitability of success, because how could I not succeed in this place? And so my whole life became about proving--and I arrive at the University of Utah with a humongous chip on my shoulder. Like I said, like white people are racists, and they're out to get me, so it took years to chip away at that, like gradually.

COLLINGS

Now, did the people at the Catholic high school support your goal of joining the military?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Absolutely.

COLLINGS

Oh, they did.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, yes, definitely. I mean, at the time, if you think about it, you've got the choices--Guillermo has a 2.0 or whatever. Guillermo's not going to get into Georgetown. So what are Guillermo's choices? Go to work, go to trade school, what? Go to the military. Give him a little discipline, get some G.I. money [military benefits], and then he can sort of go. And so I can't say that I never saw an, "Are you sure?" But--

COLLINGS

And also, this was before there were any real conflicts.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

That's true, yes. And, you know, the joke is Salesian is like the extension of the LAPD, because a lot of young men--it's an all-boys school--a lot of the young men who graduate from Salesian go into law enforcement.

COLLINGS

Oh, really. Okay.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. Yes. I mean, people in my class are like on the SWAT in LAPD. So the danger now, of course. But what happened, Desert Storm. That would have been me, right there. That's the chronology. I'm terrible with dates, but I remember that. Hey, that would have been me. And so how the view the military, the people there, I think maybe necessary evil, I don't know. But the way I viewed the military was as an opportunity that nobody else was affording me at the time, until I was able to go. So I was recognized in high school for--I got to perform at the Greek Theater, a monologue that another priest, Father Chris, gave me. John Leguizamo, before he was like HBO famous, movie famous, he did a one-man show called "John Leguizamo's Mambo Mouth," and Father Chris found the book and says, "If you like acting, you should look at this." So I did, and I took a monologue. It was called Youth at the Greek and I got in. I was the only theatrical performance. Everybody else was like dancers, music. This is right before the Cornerstone thing and getting that opportunity. But again, who drove me to the audition? Father Chris. He sat in the audience, supported, so there was that aspect of there was a net. And I think maybe the cost of the--and again, everything was subsidized. For my mother I think it's like, "This boy needs some men in his life." Like, "There has to be a male figure." I mean, as much as we talk about the importance of the feminine, of course, to male and female, there's something about having the same-sex parent sort of teaching the person. And I think it's vicarious. I think it's like, you know, it's what it is. The difference between--I know that's not a very popular sort of thing to highlight, the differences between male and female. But they exist, and I think that the differences are positive. They're not negative. I think that a father should bounce his kid up in the air and make the kid feel like, "Oh, he's always going to be there for me, and I'm scared but he's always there," whereas my wife maybe doesn't want to throw him up in the air like me. But both of those things are important, and I feel that I got as much as I could get from my high school experience.

COLLINGS

Yes, it sounds like it.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And they were--I mean, they specialized in single-parent young men, with a fair dose of, like I said, tough love and discipline. So then I had that very formative experience, and I go up to University of Utah, and I think I could sum up my experience of the University of Utah with one story. What happened was I was long hair, Army jacket with patches--

COLLINGS

The exact year that you went there? Let's just get that in there.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Ninety-six. And I'm terrible with dates, but I graduated high school in '95. A year later I go to the university, so it's '96, '97. So I'm walking--this is maybe my first quarter. The school shifted from quarters to semesters like my second year or something, but so first quarter, I'm like rocking out, whatever, walking down the stairs. And the University of Utah is beautiful. It was spring, whatever it was. Like there was no snow, I know that. It was just beautiful. And the student union was this like three-story building with those windows that are mirrored. You could see out but you can't see in, so it's just like a big mirror. So I'm walking, and I see this blonde, blue-eyed little girl, maybe six years old. So she's at the bottom of the stairs and I'm going down, and she stops me and she starts talking to me. Her father, her mother, and her little sister, who I think they were twins, because they looked alike, were like on a rock. There's like a rock-garden thing, so they're playing over there. And so the father takes one look at me and says, "Susie, get over here." And she's like, "But we just got here." "Time to go," looking at me. Looking at me. So I don't know if you've ever been like so angry that you like tear up and that you just want to like hurt things, hit things. Like that's how shamed--I was just angry, I was, that this white man--

COLLINGS

This was your first day?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, no, no. It was early on in my academic career there. I don't know when exactly. So he leaves, and she's like crying. You know, she was asking me about my bag or something, one of my patches. And after that initial rage I was like, I wanted to tell him, "I'm not going to hurt your daughter," like, "Why are you--you've never seen a Mexican in your life?" whatever. So they leave and then by divine intervention, I have an epiphany. What happens is they're off in the distance, and I'm like crying or ready to burst, and I look to my right where the union was, and I see my reflection. And in that moment, everything that I had believed shifted from holding things sacrosanct, that no matter what, racism was wrong and this was injustice, to a possibility of, I wouldn't want my daughter talking to this guy either. I didn't see my skin. I saw my hair, I saw my jacket, I saw my ripped jeans, I saw like more homeless than anything, and I saw that if I was white, pink, black, green, children shouldn't be hanging around with this rocker guy. So that's the attitude I took into my four years, and it relieved me. It didn't cure me, but it relieved me from so much sort of preconceived notions about everybody and myself and that there's a possibility sometimes that you have control over the way people see you. And so if you dress

like a homeless person, then don't feel angry and sad and enraged when people treat you like a homeless person.

COLLINGS

Right. Were you dressed like that because your friends were--that was the style with you and your friends at the time?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No. I was into classic rock, you know, so the Doors. And actually in high school, one of my friends--now he's a prominent artist--he did a mural of the Doors on the back of my Army jacket, and I had the Grateful Dead and Led Zeppelin. So I still have that jacket. It's like a museum piece. So the idea of, "Okay, if I want people to treat me a certain way, then I have to--I have to act a certain way." And trust me, I've been very civil and clean and everything, and people have still had sort of like, "Really?" You know, treated me like--and I remember in Utah that happened to me, but again, my attitude was different. When somebody said, "Can you proof this?" and then you used proofing marks, and they look at it and say, "Oh. Oh, you know proofing marks." It's like, yes, like why wouldn't I? Oh, because I'm Latino, and typically, they don't get to that level of education before they have to go mow lawns. But again, my attitude was--it was a positive approach now. I'll give you an example. Three years ago I move into this place. The gentleman who lives up there--

COLLINGS

Across the street here?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--across the street--

COLLINGS

With the very sort of moderne landscaping?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. That's his house, and he rents the other one, and he's a pretty affluent guy. Well, you know, this neighborhood's not that--two weeks after I'm here--nobody's said two words to me--I'm mowing the lawn, and he says, "Excuse me, sir. Do you live there or are you just mowing the lawn?" And so to this day I kick myself, because I should have answered him in Spanish. I'm fluent in Spanish. I should have answered him in Spanish and said, "I live here." But I missed that.

COLLINGS

Why was he asking that question?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Good question. I think he wanted to know if I could do his lawn.

COLLINGS

Oh, I see.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Which I don't think he can afford me, because I'm too expensive. But, see, I could have thrown a fit. I could have been like, "Racism." And friends--I think it's hilarious. But when I tell my friends, they're like, "Guillermo, you should have cursed him out. You should have like said--." That's not where I am in my life right now.

COLLINGS

Well, I think it's interesting that his confusion even. I mean, he didn't just assume that you were mowing the lawn.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, he didn't, because I'd been here too long. I mean, it's like, I haven't seen him come out of the house, but maybe he's using the restroom when he goes in. Who knows what? I haven't talked to him about it. Maybe I should ask him.

COLLINGS

Do you think he's embarrassed? Or he doesn't care?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I mean, I'm not going to put somebody on the spot. Like I think he realized what he had done. It was sort of one of those awkward--like I associate it with telling a woman like, "Oh, how long have you been pregnant?"

COLLINGS

Exactly.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And she's not pregnant.

COLLINGS

"I'm not pregnant." [laughter]

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So it's not a bad thing. It just sounded silly, like, and that's what I chalk it up to. But trust me, like there's been moments when it's hard to shake that race and that idea of like, could it have been that, or was it like--? So I don't know if you've heard of Father Greg Boyle, who started--

COLLINGS

Oh, yes.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Okay. So he wrote a book called "Tattoos on the Heart," and he tells the story of how he started his tattoo-removal business. And he started the business because a young man, who wanted to clean himself up, was going to interviews, and he couldn't get a job. Well, it so happened that he had "Fuck the world" tattooed on his forehead. So he's like, "Hey, Father G., like I can't get a job." And he's like, "Hmm."

COLLINGS

"Hmm. Let's study this."

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And so Father Greg Boyle said, "Let's get tattoo removal," and that sort of, that's how it started. So, well, I guess what I'm saying to you is, there's people with fuck the world tattooed to their forehead, more people than you know, and who can't figure out why they can't get a job. That's how. And it doesn't negate that there's racism and that there's class issues. Again, it's about context and perspective, and I think for too long, one perspective has won out, and now it's time to balance it out, because we've seen the consequences of that. In my life, at least. So that was my education. And remember, again, I go back to this, what I try to do with my students is like shake the core of what you think you believe. Again, again, very Socratic. It's like, "Why is that so? Who told you? What makes that true?" And you can do it in theater as well as you can do it in philosophy, as well as you can do it in physics. There's that idea and, again, questioning all these preconceived notions that we've accepted, internalized and accepted. So then the high school time finishes. I will sort of confess to not having squeezed as much juice out of that lemon as I could have. Enough to get to where I was, by whatever it was. You know, I was talking to my wife, and she says, "No, it's because you were born in the year of the golden dragon." "Yes, a lot of people were born in the year of the golden dragon, who don't have charmed lives," you know? Which I consider myself extremely grateful. And sometimes like, let me tell you, in the house we're in, I was, for the first year, very anxious and very uneasy here, because I couldn't figure out why, but it was because never in my life had I lived in any place

that was bigger than this living room. Like the whole house was not bigger than this living room. And so here I come to this expansive place, and it's like I don't know what to do. And do I deserve it? Psychologically. And so it's an interesting--only because I became conscious of it--and interesting dynamic that happens, I'm sure, in a lot of people's lives. They don't quite identify what that is. And now I feel not only worthy of being here, but very grateful and very at peace. And so all those things sort of tie back to even though I had this amazing experience, it's a work in progress, always sort of gently becoming and improving and chipping away at things.

COLLINGS

Okay, so here you are, you're at high school. How did you first learn about what Cornerstone was going to be doing in the Watts Residency?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I was in church with my friend, holding up the back wall, and after Mass this wild-haired woman comes up to make an announcement, and she said, "Cornerstone, blah, blah, blah, blah, auditions, blah, blah, blah, blah, Saturday at blah, blah, blah." Like so it's that kind of thing. Hmm. So what happened was I got the flyer information, went to the audition whenever it was after, and I didn't know what an audition was. I didn't know what you have to bring, anything like that. I knew plays and acting, so I went. Met the people, you know, signed the papers, and then they gave me something to read. I read it. And now, later on, I come to find that they were blown away by me. They cast me in--because I had no training, absolutely no like Saturday school, you know, works, nothing.

COLLINGS

Which play were they doing at this time?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

It was an adaptation of the Faust legend, called--

COLLINGS

Okay, so this was "Los Faustinos."

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--"Los Faustinos," exactly. And I was cast as Wrath, because all the characters had a mortal sin, one of the mortal sins. And so then I was cast in the show, and the director, Juliette [Carillo], took us through the process, and they took care of the people very--I remember that very well, because there were issues about, like, the food. In the show we have a party, and there were chips, and the conversation about those chips being stale because it was like the second week, and I remember Cornerstone having a meeting and saying, like, "No, we will collect from the professional actors and make sure that you have the quality--." The methodology that they use is

bringing amateur actors, or just community participants, not actors, and professionals. So I was able to see professionals in action, like to interact and see how they functioned and how they communicated and sort of vicariously have my own master class, right, because I was in that place in my life when I could do this. And so I did that. The show ran to like sold-out houses, and at the end of that show is when the conversation happened. "Hey, what are you planning to do with your life?" da, da, da. "Oh, I'm going into the Marines." I'm almost a senior, almost done. The next year they put on another play called "Sid Arthur," based on the Siddhartha myth, and so I got to act with this seven-foot-tall semi-pro basketball player named Quentin Drew. His real name is John Jones.

COLLINGS

Oh, really?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes.

COLLINGS

Oh, I didn't know that.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

He changed his name, because he wanted to act, right? And so we met. He played the Sid Arthur character, and I played his sidekick. I'm sorry, I have to tell you. This is not Cornerstone-related. But I went to the top ranked theater program in the nation at UCSD, and every single role that I got at that place was for a gardener.

COLLINGS

Are you serious?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. I played in--no, but it's beautiful. Look how creative they are. I was in "Faust Legends." It's a show. Brian Kulick, who's at the Public, directed it, and I played God, but he had me gardening. Anyway. And then there's a show called "Arcadia," and I was a landscape architect, which is a fancy way of saying the gardener. Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that because I will forget. So anyway, so I was in the "Sid Arthur" show, and I struck up a friendship with Quentin, and Quentin's talking about, like, "We've got to continue this." He was a visionary, like, "We've got to do this, man." I said, "Of course. Let me know. I'm going to school. I just got accepted, but let me know." He said, "Well, when you come back, you do something with us." I said, "All right." So then we did this show, and he played, like I said, the lead, and then we never lost contact. I then went to Utah for one summer--I got to fly back once, I think--I came back, and it lined up with the last show. They do a--

COLLINGS

The bridge show.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. And the bridge show was called the "Central Ave. Chalk Circle," and they took people from all the shows that they had done, and they put them in this show. And I was back in the summer when they were doing the reading of it, but I wasn't able to be in the show, because I was going to go back to school. At that read through is where I met Lynn Manning, because he was writing it. So I did a reading, I met him, I knew Quentin, I left. They did the "Caucasian--," not Caucasian--

COLLINGS

Yes, they did call it "Caucasian Chalk Circle."

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

The "Caucasian Chalk Circle" is the original.

COLLINGS

Oh, the original.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

The Bertolt Brecht.

COLLINGS

Yes, excuse me, "Central Avenue Chalk Circle."

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, exactly, right. And then they met, Quentin and Lynn met on that show. I was off. They started with a--I have a cardboard check that Cornerstone made for $500 as a donation to the Watts Theater Company at that time, when it first started. And then because the WLCAC [Watts Labor Community Action Committee], they're like the movers and shakers of Watts--they own like 70 percent of Watts, and that's why it's in the state that it's in right now. So they co-founded the company with these two artists. I was off. The power struggle that happens when everybody wants to be in charge--and the company split. And so the Watts company, Watts Theater Company, collapsed, because WLCAC are not a theater-savvy group. That's not what they do.

COLLINGS

What does that stand for?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

It stands for the Watts Labor Community Action Committee.

COLLINGS

And they were doing community building with using theater as a tool, perhaps, put charitably.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, thank you. Because I do want to say, I'm not here to like throw them under the bus. They have been described unfavorably by some people as poverty pimps. I worked for them for five years when I got out of UCSD, California, San Diego. I came back to teach theater, and I worked there for five years, so I'm not speaking from theory. Like I saw it. It's what happens when you run a nonprofit like a family business. And so the group splintered. They kept the name, but it collapsed, and Quentin changed the name to Watts Village Theater Company, so then they continued. And the founding board member, Leslie Tamarabuchi, was still on our board, who came from Cornerstone, and Lynn co-founded the company, and the company cut its teeth doing shows in places nobody would dare go.

COLLINGS

Like what?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Like Nickerson Gardens, Jordan Downs, housing projects, and then they started like branching out to more venues and doing actual plays. They did that for about five years, I want to say, and then ten years even; yes, eight years, nine years. Then I come back, and I say, "Hey, Quentin, like what's up?" He's like, "Man, we're going to get an education program going, and you're going to head it." I said, "All right. I can teach." So Watts Village Theater Company placed me at Jordan High School to teach theater. So I was interviewed. The principal--you have to understand. Jordan High School, David Starr Jordan High School in Los Angeles and Watts' interview process in the eighties, nineties even, was they would put a hand on your shoulder and see if you were warm, and then they would put you in a classroom to teach, because that's how hard up they are for people, or were. Like now it's changing. And so I was given access to these students. We did a play, "Simply Maria." We staged it. It was great. I have to say that unfortunately, that was the highlight of many of our students' high school career, unfortunately, that one play. You think about like all the other opportunities that high school students should have, and--

COLLINGS

And also, doing the play is like voluntary, so not even everybody is getting it.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Right, right, right, right. And they worked hard, and it was one of my proudest moments to be able--because this is not Hamilton. This is like you don't have lights, so you'd better go scrounge. I mean, we did it, because the company was behind the project. So what happened after a while is the grant for that ended, but then this cycle of substitute teachers--like they would go through a substitute like a day, right? But there was this special class. I'm telling you, these people were special. I'm talking about like urinate in the corner of the classroom special. And so the teacher that had sponsored us said, "Hey, Guillermo. You should just like go and emergency sub, like they need you. You know, the kids here are like doing--." I said, "All right." So I went, and they gave me this classroom, and I have to tell you, like I can teach, because of that experience I can teach on the Moon, underwater, with my hands tied behind my back. These kids were like, will call you out of your name, curse you out. When you'd say, "Let me talk to you after class," they would jump out the window. Like the first time I got cursed out I said, "Let me talk to you after class." I stood at the door. The kid opens the emergency hatch of the window and climbs--I'm like, this, like what can you do? But then, see, that's the thing is, that it's sort of like knowing the DNA of your like Adams area. Because I grew up, so I knew it. So I knew this kid who had cursed me out, I knew that he didn't have a father, like just instinctually. But I also knew that his mother didn't know what he was doing. So I started visiting people in their houses.

COLLINGS

What a great idea.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Just showing up. You would be--I'm like, if you want to solve the educational system--"Would you like some coffee? Oh, sit down here, sir. Yes. Oh, really, he did that? Juan, come here. You did--? Ooh." Next day, blam. Now, let me tell you, I know the logistics of it. It's difficult, gas time. You're waking people up by six a.m. sometimes, because they go to work. But once the parents are activated, even if it's like, "Don't you make that man come to my house and wake me up again," even if it's that simple, it works. And so that's how I survived. And I would get to school at five a.m. to be prepared for these like battles, like epic battles. But after a while, I chipped away at it. Like Jordan, you know, people would be like when the students were in the school, it's really difficult, and so I was very creative. Like I sealed the windows, because one of the things is people would climb up to the window and be like, "What's up?" and have conversations, so I put butcher paper up. Tagging, it was like my existence was like trying to identify where it was coming from, and assigned seats was very helpful in that. But I just like, these little techniques that I used helped me survive in a place where like elephants were getting killed. So anyway, I survived, and not only did I survive teaching English, I thrived. And they kept me on, and I said, "You know what? I need to get my credential." So I went back to school, to National, one class a month, and then I got my single subject credential right in time, after eight years, to get laid off. And I got sent--they're like, "We can give you a Spanish class." And I said, "But I have to do student teaching in English in order to get my credential," the Clear credential. "Sorry." So I left Jordan, and I moved on up to Fremont, which if you know, it's the same population, different geography; same. So there I have students smoking weed in the

corridor, and a lot of other high school shenanigans. So there I did my year and then I think the trail followed me, and I was approached to take over a standing program at Eagle Rock High School, which is like heaven. You know Eagle Rock?

COLLINGS

I've heard of it, yes.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

The guy who ran the theater program, his name is Russell Copley, he got promoted to the district, arts over like everything. I took his place. I put on a show that people were like, huh, who is this guy? I did a show that high schools, they don't dare touch. It's called "Ubu Roi." It's a French play. But it started the absurdist movement, and it caused riots when it was first released, because the first word of the--it's a French piece--the first word of the piece is "merde," and nobody had ever cursed onstage. And so later on in the piece, he curses again, and basically, they shut down the theater because of it, because of the riots. So anyway, so then I did that show, but I updated it, and so I set it in a circus, so it's this absurdist circus piece that we had people hanging from the grid. And they were floored, because they were used to these like million-dollar sets, and all I had was three rings and cloth. And so it catapulted me into like this place where I had a home. It was like great, and then the cuts came, and it was tenured, and I was released. I applied to the new arts high school. I was scrambling. I'm like, "I have two kids. What am I going to do?" I went into sub-ing, and I subbed at Markham [Middle School] for a semester. I hopped around and then I was offered a full-time position at Markham. What happened was right at that time, the applications for this new full-time tenure position at L.A. Mission College opened up. I applied, long shot. It's new. I'm telling you, this is the attitude that I took. When they say, "How did you land that job?" It's like six hundred people with Ph.D.s who didn't get that job. This is why. The moment I found out about that place, I went and I read their five-year strategic plan. They had posted it on the Internet. I researched the president, the department chair, and the dean. I knew the president's favorite color. I knew her blood type. But to get to her, I had to get past this application process. And with the funding the way it was, there was my initial interview and then there was something like four months in between before they called me for a second interview, so I had let go of that and I was ready to accept the Markham gig, and I would have been in middle school. They called me back and what happened was I had a second interview. I had the initial interview, where I gave a lesson, and that was to get me to the second level. And the second level, once I got to that level, I knew that it was a short list, that it was me and three other guys, me and four other guys maybe, or people, women maybe. I don't know if any women made the final thing. But so that's when all this work that I had done paid off, because I knew that the president--she's not the president anymore--Judith Valles at the time, was the first female Latina mayor of San Bernardino. I knew that. I knew that she had a stint on a radio station when she was younger. I knew all these things. They didn't serve me to sit there and be like all the things I know. They served me to say, "You know, my mother, who lives in San Bernardino, says--."

COLLINGS

Yes, tie in.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Absolutely. And you'd be like amazed at how--so, strategically, talk about knowledge being power, I was able to make in my lesson--I had to make a fifteen-minute lesson--I was able to reference the neo-futurists, who is a group that works out of Chicago, because my dean did her dissertation on--it was in literature and poetry, but it was in Chicago at University of Chicago. And so all those things sort of made me familiar, which is really what you need when you're an outsider. I'm like the dark horse. Everybody else knew somebody on the panel or was there for like short-listed, I'm assuming, because people were like, "Who is this guy?" But then, of course, again the recurring theme. Once I get there, right out of the gate I perform. I organize with no funding, no resources, two main-stage productions, one in a cemetery. It's a Halloween show called "Voices of Pioneer Cemetery." We collaborated with the historical society and researched the people who are buried there, and then dramatized their things in a "Spoon River Anthology" sort of a dramatic, site-specific way. And then I did a faculty holiday party, holiday show, where the students wrote their own script and we performed. So, I mean, this is a show a semester with nothing, and I think the idea, I hope, is, when we throw something at them, maybe we'll get something more resource-wise.

COLLINGS

Well, it sounds like in researching the committee, it was almost like you were kind of using those skills that you learned with Cornerstone in Watts Village, of finding out who the community is that you are addressing, and finding out something about them so that you can have resonance.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, let me tell you. I mean, I wish I was that smart. It was instinctual. I needed to know who these people were, because the person who doesn't invest time and energy is the person who like, "Maybe I get it and maybe I don't." The person who makes it their part-time job to learn everything about this community is the person that gets the job, because that's the level of investment. And I'm telling you, this idea of running a theater company helped me, because it was like, this guy can reach--I get a community sense, like, and I've done nothing but reach out to community in Sylmar, and that's not even my community. But I guess the sense--and never forget the demographics. I mean, that place is like maybe 90 percent Latino right now, Sylmar. Not that that's the reason why I got the job, because I applied to this Arts High School right there on grand that's 90 percent Latino, and I didn't get the job, and I knew the theater teacher there, and I knew the vice-principal over the theater department. You know? Just like, it's like you can't--but then so I did that homework, and it really separated me, I feel, from the rest of the--over people who were more qualified than me, I'm sure, more experienced maybe, but I think nobody had the whole package, because theater had been dormant for fifteen years at Mission before I got there. And so what happens is I come in, and they're going to--somebody with strong back to open this new program up and build it, and so I had that going for me, I think. And then honestly, what I also had going for me is that I just couldn't see anybody beating me. Like, "Who's going to beat me for this thing?" If you made a job specifically for Guillermo, it would

look like this. I'm hungry to prove. You need somebody who's hungry to build. And I think that's what I told the president. I said, "I think we'd make a good couple, Mission and me. That's what we will do, you know. We'll make it." And we have made an amazing couple in our work. So I brought that. I'm bringing it. I'm still in the midst of that, with no resources. Because if there's something that Watts knows, and I know from growing up there, is that you make--when you have that shattered thing, you could cry, or you could use it to decorate a tower. So it's that attitude.

COLLINGS

That's a really good way of putting it.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Absolutely. I mean, that's my life. You know, people say, "Lemons, lemonade." I say, "Like shattered glass, art." It's just my medium is theater. But that attitude I think people really respond to, and there's never a time when I'm going to come to you for anything that I haven't already secured or tried to secure for myself, and that relieves, in this budgetary reality. It's like, if they can be self-sustaining, do it. Let them, because one less thing to fund. And never waiting for things to land on your lap, you know, I feel like. You strike out. You sort of throw the net, and it's like sometimes you get it, sometimes you don't, but the net has to be wide and you really need to have that attitude, and I think it's served me. And so to go back to the Cornerstone situation, that community engagement and the reverence for knowing that you can't love somebody who you don't know, so if you're really going to love this community, you'd better get to know it and you'd better invest, and so that level of, you could call it infiltration into a community, you know, if you're an outsider, but it's more about the in-reach rather than outreach. You're sort of doing that. I was definitely very heavily influenced from doing Cornerstone, and just from feeling when people don't do that, you know, when people don't include you in the decisions that they make for you, it's disheartening and it sort of saps your energy, and I wouldn't go into a community and do that. The community needs to be invested and want to be a participant in whatever project that is. And that, interestingly enough, I tie into my social sort of sociopolitical exposure more than anything. In Spanish, the word power, poder, has a can-do connotation, so I've always associated power with doing, with action, not with talking, not with philosophizing. And so you couple that attitude of you need to do with this other attitude of, I'm going to do everything that you say I can't or shouldn't be or can't be, and you start achieving like these amazing results. "Meet Me At Metro," which it's going to be an institution years to come. People are going to be, hopefully, studying it so they can do it all over in other public transit systems. That took more than three years to do, and I'll tell you, it went through about two and a half years of people saying, "You're not going to do that. There's no money. The Metro--." And now the question is not, "Is it going to happen?", it's, "How big are we going to make it? How big can we make it?" Total accident, because I didn't know the only people in four years from when I started, they were going to have money was going to be Metro, because they have bonds. Their money's like secured. They're the only people whose money--and nobody can raid it, because it's earmarked for this transportation. Just so happens that they have a budget attached to their bigger budget for inaugurations, for grand openings, for art at every station. Hmm. Why can't that be theatrical art? Why can't we do the Expo line opening, the curatorial? So it all sort of ties into

that long-range planning, not for like right now but for tomorrow. And I don't have it down as pat as we need to have it personally, but the idea that you're going to be around tomorrow makes you act differently than if you're just going to be here today. And I remember when I was a kid I learned that--not that, I learned the opposite. My mom, when she got her check--we're talking about like back then Sizzler was like the hippest place. We'd go to Sizzler, lobster, steak, da, da, da. By the end of the month, you'd be eating Ramen noodles. Like that was my attitude. Get your check, go spend it so you remember why you're working. And so now I've sort of identified that and I've chipped away at that idea, that if you don't eat at Sizzler, everything, then you'll have food at the end of the month, or you can buy restaurant if you save enough. You know, it's sort of like that metaphorical thing, it doesn't say one thing is better than the other. It just says, it's just another way. And so those are the influences that now, later on in my life today, in my theater world with Cornerstone even, have influenced me. For example, this other very symbolic, beautiful thing. Cornerstone Theater Company is performing a show in Watts. They are co-producing that with Watts Village Theater Company. It's being written by Lynn [Manning]. It's written by Lynn already. It's called "The Unrequited," based on a Jewish folk tale called the dybbuk. That, the circular nature of that, of coming full circle, and now you started as a young high school student and now you're an equal, it's what Cornerstone, in their model, dreamed of. We are the poster child for that model of empowering the community.

COLLINGS

Right. Absolutely. Yes.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And that has been us bringing resources and connections to the people. I feel like that's one of the really powerful synergies that have been created from this collaboration between Cornerstone and us. And, again, I don't think it's the last time, and I think we're going to feed off of each other, and this is going to grow. It's the future, the model. The old model is broken, the, let me write my grant and I do my work and I don't talk to you, and I only do theater for Latinos, and you only do theater for blacks, and you only do theater for Asians. Nobody's going to give money for that anymore. They're barely giving money now, but they're going to give money for you do to a white-Latino-black--

COLLINGS

To do interact--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--yes, cross-disciplinary, like multicultural. But let me tell you something about--I don't know if you represent this, but I've been uncharacteristically positive. So let me now tell you the not-so-positive thing.

COLLINGS

Okay. You've been uncharacteristically positive, all right. [laughter]

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

This success is also born of another element that's not to be missed, and it's this. When doors are shut on you, that's a good thing, because you know you're doing the right thing. You're knocking on doors, and they're being shut. When the doors are shut by people that shouldn't shut them, you're left with anger, resentment, or another that you have to deal with. So, metaphorically, not to cast myself or the company, Watts Village Theater Company, as a victim, but the mainstream theatrical community of Los Angeles neither recognized or embraced, all right, initially. So we were left with a choice. And what we did was we said, "We're going to double down on the work that we know is important and true." And so we embraced the Starbucks model of theater making, which simply stated says, "Ten percent of the population drinks coffee. Ninety percent of the population does not drink coffee. Go after the 90 percent of the population that doesn't drink coffee, and you will build an empire, because the people who do drink coffee don't have a choice. They're going to go to you eventually." And we have Starbucks. There are so many lessons to be learned from Hollywood, from corporate America, and theaters running away. They should be running to. They should be stealing like they've stolen from us. What is advertisement? The grand larceny of every artistic technique to convince people of things. But people don't embrace it like that, you know? The massive crowd-control techniques of the Los Angeles Police Department, like that has spent millions to study the best way to control people, crowd control, like when we do massive concerts or shows. Don't we want that? Don't we want those skills? I do. And so I and the company stopped running away from lawyers and advertisement, and we started running to them, and we learned so much. My friend whose in advertisement, he said, "Guillermo--." He does political campaigns. He said, "If you say it enough, it will be true. It will become true, even if it's not true. But if people hear it enough in enough different ways--." Like what artist and theater couldn't use that information? Like what does that mean, and how do we act accordingly? And you don't act accordingly, because you even accept it and you don't even know it. But the advertisement world knows it. Why not steal it from them? And so we started saying that Watts Village Theater Company is the next, I want to say big thing, but that's not what we said. We said, "Watts Village Theater Company is doing the most cutting-edge work, and everybody knows it except the theater world." And you know what started happening?

COLLINGS

What?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

The theater world started coming to us and embracing us in ways that never in my life had I seen that. We're talking about a five-year span, so it's not like twenty years later. I'm talking about like three years later, the same people who were patting you on the head saying, "Of course you'll do shows on the Metro," are like now, "Hey, we need to collaborate and figure out this and that." So I guess what I'm saying to you is the motivation is not a negative motivation, but the reaction to this denial or lack of embrace has been, I think, what has separated us, you know? Because we could have said, "No, no. Love me. Here. [pants]" No. We left and we went to people who are

nowhere near the arts, who need it the most. That was a conscious choice and now we have both. Because when "Meet Me At Metro" gets advertised, it's not going to get advertised in the arts section, because it's not an arts project.

COLLINGS

Yes. It'll be environmental or--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Environmental, ecological, you name it. It's like it embodies that.

COLLINGS

Urban planning.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Urban planning, art as--it's reciprocal, because artists who go to, you know, hip people, theater people, never take the Metro to go to plays, right? People who take the public transportation never go to plays. I'm sorry, the theater people don't use the Metro, and the Metro people don't go to theater. That's what I was trying to say. And here's a project that cancels both and gets both of these people together. We ran surveys after "Meet Me At Metro," and we found that 86 percent of the people who came to see our show had never been on the Metro. These numbers you give to Metro, they understand that. Because the billboard that they spent $500,000 on, 84 percent of the people who see that aren't going to ride the Metro; maybe 1 percent. Look at your return on investment. But in order to say that somebody, you have to know what return on investment is.

COLLINGS

You have to have the data.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And you have to not feel bad about saying--

COLLINGS

Return on investment.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--return on investment, which we don't. We'll steal from whoever we need to. And furthermore, not only is it of benefit to them. It's not just about them. There were 79 percent who had never seen a Watts show until this. So we've got this synergy of things happening that it's only going to

snowball, and it is snowballing. But I guess it ties back to necessity, that when you said, "You cannot be in mainstream because the shows you do don't talk to the real theater," we say, "Okay. Let me take my fake theater to the masses and see what happens." And so now this theater is going to be the only theater left, because the theater that lives in buildings is collapsing. Theater as noun is dead. Theater as verb is thriving. And eventually, you've seen the bankruptcies, they're only going to pile up. The massive organizations like CTG Center Theatre Group are only going to contract, and the people who are left standing are the people who know how to function in this new way that I'm talking about. Strategic partnerships and very tenacious sort of fixation on reaching the hard-to-reach populations, and that's what people will get behind. And so it goes back to the door closing and you looking for the window, to crack the window and sliding right in.

COLLINGS

Like the kids in your class.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

[laughter] They were going the wrong way. They have to come into education, not run away from it. Yes, that's right, exactly. That kid. But can I just tell you a story?

COLLINGS

Yes, please.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Let me tell me about why this kid was this way. I went to his house, and the gate was locked the house and then an alley in back. I went there once, and there was nobody home. Like I yelled, "Excuse me--." Nothing. Went to the neighbor, nothing. Still acting badly in my class. I've got to go back. I go and I see a man coming out the back in the garage. "Sir, excuse me. I'm looking for so-and-so's father." "That's me." "Oh, can I speak to you? I'm the teacher." He says, "Come here. Go to the alley." So I go around, through. These people live in the garage of a back house, and the only way to get in is through this gate. The kid, if he did get visited, nobody could find him. I go into their garage. There's a little table. They're having dinner, you know, coffee, and it's a conversation with a man who had no clue that his son is a terror, no clue. "He did that to you? He took--?" One of the things that he would do is you'd say, "Excuse me, Johnny. I need to talk to you. Stay after class." And Johnny would stay. Then this kid would be like, "Come on, man, let's go. You don't have to stay." So then he gets up and leaves. It's like that when I knew I had to sit on this kid, because now he's causing, you know. He's like, "My son did that?" So, "Here's my cell phone," da, da, da. So I got to the point where little Juanito, let's say, was in class. I'd be like, "I'm sorry. Do I need to make a phone call? Because I got--." So I have my cell phone in my hand, waving it around and being like, "Let me see. Do I still have your dad's number? Oh, look, there it is. I don't have to call him, do I?" And that was like the--he's like [growls]. But that's the only way.

COLLINGS

Community organizing.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

[laughs] It's like the only--it's the only way to do it. And so that idea of having that attitude of it, it's what saved me and kept me sane. And it's not even him. It's the other kid saying, like, "I don't want to have to--." "This guy, he will go to your house," like, you know. And I did that, and in some cases, you know, I never, ever had a parent ever tell me, "Get out of here. What are you doing bothering me?" Like which is what some people say.

COLLINGS

Oh, really?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. They say, "Don't go to people's houses, because their parents are crazy," and blah, blah. Never. I've had experiences where the student, the child is running the household. I have seen that. But then again, it's like it's all about your approach. And as long as you do due diligence--you can't fix that broken home. All you can do is keep your classroom sane and do a truce. "You don't come here and cause trouble, I don't go there and cause trouble. Let's just move on," and you just leave it there.

COLLINGS

That's a really good way of putting it, yes.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Because it's all you can do sometimes. So there's that aspect that I bring to--that level of investment, that it seems like a lot of work, but it's less work ultimately, because your classrooms are like harmonious, and most of the kids want that. I mean, you hear--and now let me tell you, when I taught at Jordan--this is echoed a lot, the tough life that they're having, and it's a smokescreen. Because one of my kids, there was a drive-by and one of his friends got shot.

COLLINGS

Oh, gosh.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And so he comes to school like a zombie. You know, he's like, he's goes off to counseling. But then the conversations were like, "You see? That's why our kids can't learn. And the Beverly Hills kids don't have to deal with this." And so sitting there hearing that, I knew that that was

foolish, dangerous, and just wrong, that approach, because what I said to him, and I wasn't very popular because of this, but I said, "No. Miguel needs to get an education even more now, because that's his fate if he doesn't. It's not like, he's not free. He's actually compelled now to learn and to get out of here and to get an education, because that's his fate." As opposed to an excuse and license to not, it's actually approaching as like, "That's what's waiting for you." And it was like never in their life had they thought about that. You know, and I'm not saying like the day of. Like I'm not saying a week. But how long does he get that sort of inability to learn, that get-out-of-education-free card, okay, because you've had--? And so, again, it's the way that you look at life is, sometimes it's like a polar opposite is true, and I think it's true, and I always tell people, "It is true when you stand in front of a mirror that you have your left hand up. That's true. But it's also true that the reflection is the opposite. It's the right hand that it's showing you." And so the idea is like, what truth is it and which one do you subscribe to? So I'm not saying it's not devastating to grow up in Watts. I'm not saying that, because I grew up in Watts. I know that. What I'm saying is that while it is devastating to grow up here, it is also imperative, okay, to not use that as a crutch, and to move beyond that, and to not let that define you. And so that's what people don't want to hear, because it's, in my opinion, the arguments that I've gotten in with people, it's one of like, "Well, then, you're judging people because you've made it, and now you're--." It's like, "Okay. I can't convince you otherwise. I'm just telling you that the facts don't line up with what you're saying."

COLLINGS

Well, I think maybe people are concerned that it's like the thin end of the wedge for other people who don't particularly mean well for the community to withdraw services or whatever.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Okay, yes, yes. Yes, speaking of services, Watts is saturated with social services. You know, you name it, it's there, from like continuation high school to pregnancy, a special for special mothers, youth. Watts is two miles by two miles. Inside of that you've got clinics, you've got the Kaiser, so it's not like there's a dearth of services. It's like that's all there is. You can get like your liver removed, but you can't get your shoe re-sewn. You can't get your clothes dry cleaned. It's really interesting, like what that area--and, again, I'm not judging it, and I wish somebody would say that so I could tell them where I'm from and where I grew up. The thing is like that's why I think people who recognize, who are fair, who see both ways, are more dangerous than any other person to the establishment, because the establishment is making a lot of money out of this like conditioned hopelessness. You know, we talked about the concept of poverty pimpdom. It's like, "If these people start to empower themselves, then I don't get a paycheck, because my whole thing is--."

COLLINGS

Is to lift them out of poverty.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Right. And again, so I have that, and people like--I don't wear my flag of where I was born and what I did and my circumstances, because I don't need that to legitimize me. But the moment people try to dismiss what I'm saying as sort of something else, then I want to point them out. And I'm not--it's just a consistent thing with me. It bothers me to simplify people. You know, like simplify both black, white. It really bothered me when people were calling--I'm not a registered Republican or anything, but when McCain ran for president, it bothered me that people were calling him racist, and when you asked them like, "What did he do that's racist?" and then you said, "Well, you know that his adopted daughter is black," they were like, "What? How could a racist man have a black daughter?" "Yes, a dark-skinned Indian girl. How does that like connect? You don't even know? Like how does that connect with you?" And again, flash back to high school. Question everything. Shake that sort of tree of notions and see what happens. Could there be other--trust me. There's plenty of reasons why you shouldn't like X person, but a made-up one shouldn't be one of them. So there's that, and it happens on the other side, you know, with Obama the same thing, sort of these unfounded notions that people were throwing out and I questioned just the same. By the way, politically, I just want to say I think when I go to the supermarket, there are easily like twenty-six shampoos, right? I think choice is good. When I go to vote, I have one choice. Okay? I have heads or tails. The difference between--and I did performance, I did a lot of guerilla theater for Ralph Nader when he was running for president the last time, when Gore won. The performance that I did, he got to speak to us and he said, "You know the difference--," so this is his notion. I loved it. He said, "Well, the real difference between the Republicans and Democrats is the velocity, the velocity at which their knees hit the ground when big business walks through the door." You know, it's like, wow. I'd never thought of it that way, but that's true. And I tell my hardcore Democratic friends that, and my Republican friends, "Come on, admit it. It's the same party. We need a third party in this country, a fourth party, a fifth, sixth, like you need air, but we don't have it. We have amazing choice unless we want choice, and then you can't have choice." And so communist countries, if you line up six cans of soda, 7-Up, Sprite, Diet Coke, Diet Pepsi, Shasta, they know. They know propaganda, and they know that that choice is really only two choices. Those eight cans is two choices. You think there's eight. There's nine choices, right, because I can not drink, or I can drink one of these eight. No, it's two. You can drink soda, or you can not drink, and those are your two choices. That's it. People think they have--they don't have it. And so I've sort of conditioned myself to like preach this idea of like, "You think you have choices. You don't have choices. You own your house? Stop paying taxes on it, see what happens. See if you own your house." So it's just me trying to let people, especially youth, like know that things are not what they appear, and they're constructed in a way, for a reason that's sort of peripheral to the truth." Say, "It's not important to be truthful and honest like in acting, cinema, like 'Social Network.' You watch that film and you don't know that one of the co-founders of Facebook was Brazilian."

COLLINGS

No. No.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, you don't know that, because they cast a British actor. So this guy's dark as dirt, and he co-founded this thing in real life, and you cast a British actor. Why? I'm not angry. I'm just saying,

like what a missed opportunity to be truthful, and on and on in Hollywood. When people complain to me, I say, "Well, make your own movie. Cast whoever you want." Russell Crowe in "A Beautiful Mind" is another great example. His wife was Latina.

COLLINGS

Oh, really.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes.

COLLINGS

In real life?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. Jennifer Connelly is Irish, beautiful, talented. What a missed opportunity. No anger, just Ron Howard, you could have done better. Maybe you'd never worked with Jennifer and you want to work with her. I mean, I see it. I mean, I'm just saying, what a missed opportunity. But, yes, so going back to this idea of, well, we were talking about choice that really doesn't exist as much as it should, I feel, and the way that we view the community and outreach/in-reach and theater world and my personal life, I think it all sort of ties together with that, with those very, very early experiences with getting slapped around in what I thought was my reality, and so questions about that and having to hold up on subscribing to something before you've analyzed and explored it from different angles, which I don't think we do. We don't get the 3-D of issues. We get like right, wrong. I'm telling you, I'm finding that issues are usually multifaceted and kind of gray, actually, and only like I'm making that discovery now, you know. And so again, I inject into my life as much as I can. I'll give you an example. Last week I had my first day of classes. We were talking about film and truth and then we got on World War II, on bad guys, like who was bad. And so Hitler came up, and in the discussion, everybody was saying, "Well, here's what he did. He organized this." And my Socratic method postulated this. I said, "Hitler, in my opinion, is bad. He is bad. But he's not bad for any of the reasons that you've said. Hitler is bad because he lost the war. If Hitler wins that war, your president gets put on trial for war crimes, because he drops two atomic bombs on innocent women and children in two cities." And they were floored.

COLLINGS

And because then the narrative changes.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Thank you. The narrative shifts, because the narrative is now written always by the victor, and actually Hitler said that. He said, "You're doing all these things, but history is going to judge--."

He's like, "The winner writes the history." Don't worry about that. Who remembers the Armenian genocide? A bunch of like, in Glendale, like maybe are thousands of Armenians that march every year, but ultimately--so it's a very uncomfortable sort of thing for these young, mostly Latino students to deal with, but if you don't deal with that reality, you're lesser for it. That's just one of the recent examples, but there's a million examples like that throughout history that just sort of shake things. And trust me, on the record, this is the greatest country in the world, or the worst country in the world except for all the others, depending on how you want to frame it. And I believe it, and I'm grateful. In the context of everything that I'm saying, for me that's a given. We're very fortunate and lucky, and on top of that everything else is built about the issues that we have in this country and the problems and how to fix them and who has to fix them, and so that's where I am in my thinking as far as the political spectrum. But I know that that's not where we wanted to go. We wanted to go to Cornerstone, which we did, right? We sort of--

Session 2
March 4, 2011

COLLINGS

Here we are, March 4, 2011, Jane Collings interviewing Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez in his home for our session two. I wanted to kind of back up a little bit with some of the stuff we were talking about last time and get some more information. In particular, you said that you had appeared in "Los Faustinos" with Cornerstone and that you had, at the time, you said, "I had the opportunity to work side by side with pros." You had said that Juliette Carrillo was a particular mentor for you in that experience, and so aside from that, could you tell me, how did you view the Cornerstone people? I mean, here you were, a teenager living in Watts. You kind of like ran into them sort of by accident. You were at church one day, and they made an appeal to the community. I mean, how did you see these people? What did you think of them?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, initially they were a curiosity. You know, I mean all of them, almost, were white and not of the type of--and they were artists, so not even like the white people you're used to seeing, like police officers or professionals. But then I do remember sort of this distant feeling of distrust, of like, what exactly is this? Partially because not knowing what the play process was, and why do you need all these people? I can say that there was in the community a feeling that they were--from certain people--that they were interlopers, yet another group coming in to sort of milk whatever they could off of these people in this community, which is not uncommon in Watts. They get a lot of like drive-by grant people, sort of, "We came here to built this and then we'll leave," and forgot to hire people to do the upkeep and the training, and then the building is dilapidated in five years, because nobody's there who knows how to run that building. It's like the story of Watts. And so they were coming in with that historical aspect, because the money from the riots had already sort of long been gone, leaving the people with this like, "Oh, is this another manifestation of people coming in and then leaving us hanging?" So I had heard that, and I had that in my head, but not at all subscribing to it. And then as we went on, I saw that they were truly committed to the community and not judgmental of them and really not coming to do for, but do with, which is what separates them, I feel, from a lot of theater companies that come in and say, "Look. We're doing--this show is worth $56 a ticket. Come see it," not recognizing that these people, the value that they place on that is foreign, and $56 doesn't mean anything, because the art doesn't mean anything. A musical about whatever doesn't mean anything to people who are living day to day.

COLLINGS

Right. So they put forth the appeal, and what was the first place that you went to?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I had to audition for the piece, and I did. I auditioned for a part of a young boxer, and I did it with Chris Liam Moore, who was playing the devil character. That's another thing. The devil was

white in this play. I know that that might not be very significant now, but you have to understand, like the heroes, in our experience, are always Anglo. The villains are always minorities. And here was a play where Chris was the devil, and it was just very interesting to see that dynamic and that approach. So I got the part. I had to read with--I remember Shishir Kurup was playing Death, and he's now directing the Cornerstone show that's in Watts now. And then they called me back to read with my mom.

COLLINGS

Oh, how interesting.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

The woman who played my mom.

COLLINGS

Oh, oh, okay. I thought maybe your mom had gotten involved.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No. And then I did it, and that was it. It was really a brief--I remember them taking a photograph on those old Polaroids. I mean, they're nonexistent with digital photos now. But it was sort of like, to me, an official, "Sign here," and I was like, "Oh, interesting." It's a whole process to this thing. It's not slapped together, call your friends and put on a show. So it was my first exposure to professional theater. It's community theater, but in that sort of--"We're serious about this, and there's a method." I just remember that like being very interesting to me, not foreign or shocking, just very interesting that there was--"You have to sign your name, address, and phone number, because if they liked you, they'll call you at your home to come bring you back," and just the whole thing. It was like breaking into the inner workings of--

COLLINGS

So sort of the seriousness of it, it sounds like that was almost a revelation, that something that was innately intriguing, enjoyable for you, could also be like a serious professional thing at the same time.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. There was a process to it. And I think--you know, I liken it, and I tell my students this all the time--Michael Jordan woke up every day at five-thirty in the morning to shoot jump shots. There's a correlation between that and his performance on the court, except that when you saw the game, you didn't see that. All you saw was him being brilliant and flying through the air. And so it's that peek into the fact that there is no secret to it. It's just a lot of hard work, a lot of dedication. Except that people, I think, just subconsciously, not consciously at all, I think some maliciously make it sort of a, I think, like a cryptic sort of holy, esoteric, only by a few,

understood only by a few, and I think that just being in this process is like, "Oh, is this how it happens?" It was just pulling back the curtain on it and making it possible and realistic, and I think that's what I took away. That's how I interpreted that. So it did that for me, and it made it, you know, why can't I do this, for me in that time. But I was going to sort of backtrack a little bit and tell you about just one story for me that stuck with me about the way that these Cornerstone people at the time--you know, they're all moved on. Bill Rauch is running the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, so after twenty years they've moved on to bigger and better things, or bigger-better--

COLLINGS

Different things.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, different, thank you. Yes, that's good. Better things, different things. But when they were there, there was a controversy, because there was a dinner scene where people were eating chips and salsa at this big dinner, and the chips after the second week were stale. And so there was, you know, the deputy, which is another thing. Like who would have thought there's a deputy representing the sort of issues of the cast in a production that voices the--which is another sort of revelation. "Oh, is that how people communicate?" So then what happened was the chips were stale, so Cornerstone's reaction was, all the professional actors in the show gave donations and they bought new chips for the rest of the run. Now, they could have very easily said, "Look. There's no money. That wasn't budgeted for. Pretend you're chewing on them." But it was a very telling action for them, that didn't go--it wasn't lost on us. It's like, "Oh, interesting. They will go that extra mile. These people are not just here to make money off of us or to get this." And so that action, that confirms--you know, because people talk a lot. We all say very beautiful things about what we want to do, but we don't always do them or follow through with them, and this was a case of where Cornerstone absolutely, you know.

COLLINGS

Yes. Now, that's interesting, and I had wanted to raise that, because what I've heard about the Watts residency was that there was an issue with kids from the neighborhood showing up for rehearsals hungry.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, yes. Right.

COLLINGS

And, of course, no surprise that teenagers want to eat all the time. They're hungry, you know. But it wasn't really described that way. It was more like, "Oh, these kids, they've come from school, they haven't had anything to eat. They can't rehearse or anything, because they need to eat food, so we need to buy food for them." And you're painting it differently.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, it's sort of all that can exist simultaneously, because my perception is as a cast member in the cast. Those sort of feedback about it is from the production side. And rightfully, I think this is a very smart thing in a production is that you compartmentalize issues. You know, you don't have community meetings about interpersonal issues. You pull those two people aside, you deal with them, and the rest of the cast is not oblivious to them. They know something's going on, but they're not sort of involved in that. So the food situation, definitely. I remember those conversations. I remember people saying, "How can you keep us from--." And by the way, Equity rules were followed. But, you know, professional actors know to bring their lunch when they're called for--and we're not professional actors, so we don't know that.

COLLINGS

So you were being kept for long periods of time for rehearsal.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

For that period of time that's required. You know, you a ten out of eleven. I mean, there's Equity rules. They can't keep you for eight hours without giving you an hour lunch in between there. So there was never a question with Cornerstone that I was aware of, where they violated like Equity rules. See, I think that's the brilliant, I feel the brilliant sort of strategy of Cornerstone, that they go into this community with amateurs and mix them with professionals, but the cast is treated as a professional cast, and we're paid.

COLLINGS

Oh, you were?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

We were absolutely paid. Now, I remember, what was Equity then? I remember getting a check for like twenty dollars, because it was four dollars a performance at the time, or whatever, six dollars a performance. I don't quite remember it, but I remember like, "Oh." Even that was sort of a, "Oh, I can make money doing this." And so I think it speaks to the consistency that Cornerstone has. And again, they maybe had those issues. I remember actually a lot of students being in the show.

COLLINGS

High school students.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, and young people, even elementary school. I had a younger brother. I forget his name. But he was black, so here's a Latino family with a black younger kid, and he's--it's never dealt with.

It's like, is he adopted? Or is like the mom like--anyway, I thought that was beautiful. There's like that 'nother layer, right? So, but all of us being sort of treated, as much as possible, as professionals. I remember a conversation with Juliette where--Cornerstone, as wonderful as they were, they were outsiders, and they weren't the most prepared for the realities, and I think it was shocking to be in a place where things like this were happening. Like we were rehearsing one day and there was a drive-by, and all the Cornerstone people are like freaking out, and all the Watts people are sort of like looking around and saying, "No, those gunshots are actually like three blocks away," like from the sound of it. But I guess then the other thing was, they wanted to dress me in purple. And I was like, "Look, Juliette, like--," as articulate as I could be at fifteen or whatever, however old I was, "hey, you know, the gang situation here," and it's like, "Well--." And so that discussion of like, "You're not going to be out in the streets wearing it, and those gang members are probably not going to come see the play anyway, and if they do, you can say we made you wear these," because it's a designer question. But I remember her walking me through the logistical things, like if an actor doesn't feel comfortable saying or doing--nudity, for example--that the actor's responsibility is to go to the director and explain. So after that whole conversation, I said, "No, I think I won't. I don't need to."

COLLINGS

So you didn't want to wear purple because it was a gang color?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Let's see. The gang at the time--Watts is divided into two sort of sections, the Bloods and the Crips. And so the Bloods are red. At the time, the Crips were blue, and then there was this gang called Grape Street Mafia. So the Grape Streets at the time, and the Crips, who wore blue, didn't get along with each other, and that's like Watts there in a nutshell. And so here I am, living and walking to school in Crip territory, and I didn't know--at the time I was thinking, they're going to have me walking around from rehearsal to my house in purple, and I'm going to have to deal with that. So I was explaining that logistical thing to her, and she's like, "No, the costume stays in the theater, and you don't have to wear it, you don't have to take it home." But just the mere fact that like I walked through that allowed me to say, "Okay, then I'm fine. If it's only onstage, it doesn't matter. Like I can explain."

COLLINGS

That's interesting.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

But that's another manifestation, another example of just how she didn't dismiss it and say, "Well, you're not a professional actor. Trust me, when you get to be a pro, you'll understand. Just wear it." And we arrived at the same place, same solution, so that was a--again, it's all about the events. It's not about what they said, "Oh, we care about you." It's about how did it get manifested, and I feel that it was very well executed. I remember the conversations, to go back to your point about them not taking care of the kids who were hungry, as maybe as [snaps fingers]

quickly or coming in knowing that was going to be an issue. But like I said, these are a bunch of Harvard like students who aren't the hippest to the inner-city workings, and they just got caught off guard and blindsided by it. All the plays that they had done in rural places, with people bringing food or whatever, that's not going to happen in Watts. People are working two jobs. And so I remember the culture, them having to deal a lot with the--I'm talking about--I don't mean like Latino-black culture. I mean like the culture of poverty, that they were not prepared for, and I remember them doing the best they could, from where I was. And again, I was in the cast, and I think of all the players, I think the actors were the most taken care of, because they were the most volatile. You know, because these people, they don't like--"What do I need to rehearse for? I'm out." Like, you know? And maybe that's me reading into it in this context. But usually, the actors are the least important, in general. At least compensation-wise, like you're going to pay a director, designer, before you pay an actor.

COLLINGS

Do you remember having conversations with other community members? Were other people making the same kinds of discoveries that you were making?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

You know, I remember the woman who was playing my mother sort of talking and not sort of being wholehearted and sure that this was thing, because she was having trouble with scenes. It's like, "Oh, I'm going to look like a fool," so there was insecurity there. But then I remember her saying--I don't even know if Cornerstone knows this--she said--there was a Vicente Fernandez concert. I don't know if you know Vicente Fernandez? Vicente Fernandez is like the ultimate like symbol of--he's like a big hat and riding pants, mariachi pants, and the ultimate manly man, right? And this silk voice. So she was coming, and she had like call backs on the same day, so she made like an event of it, saying that it was her anniversary, because her husband and her were going to this thing. And so I remember her like being very militant, like, "I have to go to this thing," and then the director, Juliette, saying, "Okay." No sort of blow back, just kind of like, "This is important too. We'll get it done, but you're going to come in early on this day so that we can get it." So, again, it was like in Watts at the time, I feel like all of us were like ready just to pounce and to like fight and battle--

COLLINGS

Oh, did you feel that way?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I think there was a feeling of that. I know it happened with me. It's like, give me a note and I'm going to be like, "Why? Because I'm not doing something right?" There was a sensitivity, because, I mean, it was my first real professional show, and there was a sense of like, do I belong here? Am I going to be discovered as a fraud because--? No, but they know that I haven't done this before, but that maybe the talent that I exhibited is not like being--so I had that, and if I had it and couldn't articulate it, my other cast members, the older people, of course they had it. But,

yes, that reminds me of just the amount of praise that I wasn't sort of expecting. But at the end of the run, I think, we had somebody say--somebody was very surprised that I wasn't professional. You know, for a seventeen-year-old, sixteen, whatever, however old I was at the time, to hear that it's like, "Oh, I can run with the big dogs." It's like, "Yeah, yeah, you know what? You're right." And to have Chris say, "I'm jealous of you being able to memorize so quick,"--

COLLINGS

Wow.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Because I remember, because he was doing a lot of other things, because he was also like running the company, right? But I'm here, like all I'm doing is this play, and so because I'm serious about it and I'm excited, and I'm like memorizing the script and trying new things and sort of they weren't prepared for that level of commitment, I think. But that's what happens when you give people opportunities that are ready for that, to prove, and so it was a great validation, enough to shift my sort of whole thinking about my future from there to the arts, and I was able to maneuver that and get myself to school. But I'm very grateful, and I think that of course it wasn't perfectly executed, though, the production and the show, but enough people left--there were students, young people from the neighborhood, who went to every single show of that play.

COLLINGS

That's great.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Like it was like packed. You know, fire marshal would have seen that, it'd been like, "You've got to get half of these people out of here," because it was ninety-nine seats, supposedly. That place was like a hundred fifty, two hundred people every show, because there was a dearth of it and people were hungry, and it was beautiful, because I remember getting notes from like the students. She'd be like, "Why don't you try--you know in that moment when you're boxing there? You should try this." And so the level of investment, they felt like, "I can make this better, not only by witnessing but by sort of giving--." It was something that Watts, I felt, had never seen before, that level of--that we finally could maneuver this big ship, the show, to the direction that we wanted to take it in, and I think that was the real jewel. The show itself, critically, I mean it's funny, because I always think of Van Gogh or I think of like Bunuel, and I just think of these masters now who when they did it were like, "What is this? This is like amateur sort of art." Because the rubric that they're using to judge the art is outdated. It's like it's useless for the future. The future needs to be judged by the level of participation and the investment of the community, and that's sort of the jewel, again, of the Cornerstone process in "Los Faustinos" was that, look what it produced. It produced--the whole residency produced people like myself. Lynn Manning came out of that. Lynn Manning was accomplished, but it was like another level. Quentin Drew, you know, these people who are not going to be maybe pillars or recognized in the mainstream theater, but who are shaping it and moving the theater from this south of the 10

[Freeway] location, in a way. And so I think that had Cornerstone not had that residency, I just don't know. I would probably be in the military at some mid rank, if not dead, because I would have been one of the first to go to Desert Storm.

COLLINGS

Gosh.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So, you know, it's funny how that--what could have been. But then again, you know, action. What did they do to manifest these things, these altruistic ideas? Well, getting me into the door. I would have never gotten into the University of Utah without that letter of recommendation.

COLLINGS

Right. So there was real follow through--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Absolutely.

COLLINGS

--coming out of the production.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Definitely. And that was an investment in the--and I never lost touch with Juliette. I mean, when I auditioned for graduate school, she was in San Francisco doing a show called "Eyes for Carmona", a Sam Shepard play, and she gave me tickets to the show, watched my audition, gave me feedback. It just lined up. And then I ended up getting into the premier theater program. Even now, it's still, UCSD is still the premier. And so there's been a lot of I guess what Malcolm Gladwell would call, you know, those occurrences of being at the right place at the right time. In "The Outliers" he talks about that, how very, very little is really having to do with natural talent or--

COLLINGS

Oh, no, no, don't--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, no, no, but that's his theory. But I embrace that, because there's a lot of talented people like myself. There's millions who are now in jail or selling drugs or dead, my classmates. I have classmates who could intellectually run circles around me, but they used--unfortunately, they

were sort of derailed and their energies got defused in what we know now as like the height of the crack epidemic in Watts, in the eighties, the early nineties. And so that's the context in which I share that with you. So I feel like the Cornerstone, again, Juliette especially, who's now--she wasn't an ensemble member at the time. She is now. But it's that, yes, this is wonderful, but what else? And how does this take flight? And the fact that they invested in real time is something that the community wasn't used to. You know Vivianne, my sister in the play, is now a lawyer. You know, maybe she's a lawyer anyway, you know, if the show doesn't happen? But I'll tell you, the writer there was like rewriting as she spoke. You know? She was like very articulate and she had that quick mind in the play, sort of tailored, and I don't know that another theater company could have, would have--first of all, another theater company is not going to venture into Watts. Are you kidding me? Like now they do, because now it's a lot safer, and it's still like not that safe, so I think all those things speak to the process.

COLLINGS

Do you know of any other outcomes of people that were in the play with you?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So Vivianne's one. One of the community--my father in the play, founded an organization called WCLO, the Watts Century Latino Organization, that is now a $300,000 a year not-for-profit that helps people with job training and home equity, like so they won't lose their home. He co-founded that with another man who is still running it, Arturo Ybarra, and all of them were very, very sort of integral to making the Cornerstone collaboration happen. So that's a non-artistic sort of manifestation that--the ripples of it. And the organization wasn't sort of founded by Cornerstone. It was already like sort of coming together. But it was aided and helped by that residency. So that's still going. As far as personal stories, I can't think. I know the residency brought Marcellus Earle, who is now--

COLLINGS

M.C. Earle?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--M.C. Earle, who is now a Cornerstone ensemble member. He came out of that residency. I saw him perform in "Breaking Plates" at the Watts Towers. You know, he spent a couple of years in jail, but got cleaned up and is now acting professionally, so that, to me, is the whole point of doing this type of theater, social-political theater. And it's not to knock any other kind of theater, because to tell you the truth, I have friends who say, "Well, do we need the [Mark] Taper?" And I say to them, "You know what? You do need McDonald's, because sometimes you're driving to work and you only have half an hour, and you can't sit down at a gourmet restaurant or at a homemade--you can't--Mom and Pop, because they're not everywhere. But this sort of serves that purpose. It's ubiquitous. It's not healthy. You shouldn't be living off of it, but you need it, between the three jobs you're working." And so I guess it's the same thing with this professional theater. You do need musicals. You do need multi-million-dollar traveling--you do. You just

don't need to live off of them. You need to live off of the community and be the sort of relevant theater that we're making. That's your gourmet. But you do need fast food. And I think the problem right now is that our people aren't getting either. That's the real problem. But my theory is, you and I are uniquely positions to serve that community. You know, the Taper can't. Even if it wanted to, that big battleship can't turn and serve the community. We, the frigates, can. We can turn on the dime. We can go into the community. We can help these people. So you have that very important cultivating of the next generation. I'll give you an example. Like I spend--I haven't done my sort of calculations, but I spend a lot of money going to plays. Why? Because I love it, and because I want to support the art. If I don't go to a Mark Taper Forum as a kid--I go to the Mark Taper Forum--do I become a lifelong theater lover? Maybe. But I can't sort of help but to become one with the Cornerstone model. It goes deeper, and it's like it's about the depth, not the sort of--and the frequency. I can be exposed to theater many more times when it's grassroots than when it's professional, because of the financial. And again, so do I feel that they shouldn't bus kids to it because it's not as impactful? Absolutely not. You need to bus as many kids from South L.A. to the Taper to see whatever is going. Of course. That's professional. It's good. I remember as a child in Watts going to go see this play with a humongous rabbit, and I remember not understanding what it was all about, because I didn't speak English.

COLLINGS

What was it about, looking back?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

It was "The Velveteen Rabbit."

COLLINGS

Oh, I see.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And so it was a kids' play that this teacher was crazy and took us, and it was not that I remember anything other than a humongous rabbit, but sort of the sense of being there and witnessing and having people, like--it was not a movie, which would be the closest that I had gotten. It was real people, who could sort of like stop and then talk to you right after the show. And so you know how the velveteen rabbit transforms?

COLLINGS

I don't even know the story.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

[laughter] So the velveteen rabbit is a young boy who has a toy rabbit that he brings to life through his imagination. But the scenes are this little boy with a little toy rabbit, saying heaven

knows what, and then these other scenes where the rabbit comes to life and is moving life-sized in his world. That's all I remember. And you know, it's funny, because I direct now, and somebody told me--I said, "Oh, I'm going to direct this play." He goes, "How are you going to fit dolls into that piece?" And I said, "What are you talking about, dolls?" He said, "Every show you've ever done has a doll in it." And I sat there and I said--

COLLINGS

How interesting.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--"Let's see. You know, you're right." Every show that I've ever done has had a puppet, a doll in it, or a life-size--I was like, that's how much influence that show had on me.

COLLINGS

Wow. That's interesting.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And I'm talking, I mean, I've directed "Inherit the Wind," I mean these plays that have--there's no purpose for a--but there's a monkey in "Inherit the Wind," so what I use is a puppet, a monkey puppet instead of, you know, where are you going to get a real monkey? But that could have been represented a million ways, like behind a screen. Anyway. And I've had dolls who like talk. Maybe that's a direct connection to that. I don't know. But it's funny how things like that, you have no idea what the impact might be. And I don't think, if you ask any Cornerstone people, they would say, "We were there to make sure that we produced more directors and actors in the community of Watts." But that's sort of a fringe benefit. What they produced were people who sort of were empowered.

COLLINGS

Right. Well, they were brought in to deal with black-Latino frictions in Watts. How did that work out?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, it manifested in my family being interracial. And I remember a lot of the pieces were integrated, I mean for lack of a better word. I first met Quentin Drew because he and I were in the same piece, and we were acting together. He played Sid Arthur, Siddhartha, but the play was called "Sid Arthur," and he played that character, and I played his sidekick, and there was that interracial. It was directed by--

COLLINGS

Shishir?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, no, his wife, Page Leong. And she directed it, so it was an Asian director, you know, and the cast is Latino and black, so it was like working together onstage. And I remember Dennistine Lyle was my--no, in the piece she was a crossing guard. She represented, you know, the ferry men of the river.

COLLINGS

Yes. That's neat.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So it's just humanizing the other side. You know, I have to tell you, like, I was just very, very--but the interactions with blacks and Latinos from my generation was different than the interaction of--

COLLINGS

Yes, because you were talking about how you grew up with a black accent.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, totally. Oh, yes, absolutely. And so, but hearing Dennistine and Quentin talk about just their experience with racism, you know, hearing that, it was just very interesting for me to get a glimpse into that. And then I remember Dennistine Lyle, when I got accepted to the University of Utah, once a semester would send me like a hundred-dollar check. First when I went off she gave me that. I was like, "What for?" Like, "What is this?" And then I started sending her my report cards--my report cards, right, in college. That was my recess, right? I was just floored that that was the level of investment, you know. And they threw me a little sort of "Success at the university of Utah."

COLLINGS

Oh, that's great.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And I don't know, I think that it was the weight of that community on me, not the weight, but I guess the wind of their sort of saying--I mean, it might seem like romanticized, but, "You're going to college to prove yourself not only for yourself, but for a lot of other people." And so I remember that being--I took the banner that they made for me, and I put it up on my dorm wall--

COLLINGS

Oh, that's great.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--and it was at the moments of sort of like depression, because I was what I was, and it was very difficult to integrate myself--in addition to going to Utah with a huge chip on my shoulder, right, like do I belong here, like how was it that I got in exactly, and is it deserving, do I deserve, and all that good stuff, but having that be a reminder, like, "Don't give up, because you owe a lot of people." And also, it's not owe, but like--

COLLINGS

They're counting on you.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Thank you. Because like they're invested in this, and it's a lot like what a semi-pro basketball player might feel, except I was in the academic-artistic side of like, I've got to score this. And because of that isolation, I lived on the dean's list. There was nothing else for me to do. I didn't drink. I didn't smoke. I didn't do any drugs, partially because of knowing my personality, my addictive personality, knowing what that was going to do, so that didn't leave much time for anything else other than to study and to work. You know, I had, at one point, four jobs. I felt like a liver. Like I went from my school, which was nine to--depending on the semester. They were quarters until the first end of my first year, and then they went to semesters. But I would go to school and in between I had a job at food services, from five-thirty to like seven or whatever, prep cooking. Went to classes. I taught at a--sorry. I had different jobs at different times, but at one point, I remember this, I would work four jobs, because after I did that, then I went to Little Caesar's, where I made pizza, and then I went to UPS shipping like from--I think the shift was a midnight shift, so it was like seven-thirty to like midnight or whatever, a three-hour shift. And I was like in the best shape I'd ever been, but I was also going crazy with like lack of sleep. But I remember like, you know, UPS did these sort of monthly awards, and nobody knew who I was, but like four months after, I get called into this thing and they give me a like employee-of-the-month award. And it wasn't because the high turnover and there was nobody left. It was really because all I did when I got there was unload these like humongous bins of like product, and I did it almost like with blinders on, just like isolated, and I was like the ultimate machine, right, just kind of [makes sound]. And if they ever said, "We need somebody to stay late for the morning shift," I'd stay, take a thirty-minute break and work again. So I was bringing that work ethic because, again, I hate to frame it this way, but in my early mind, in my early days, it was my core belief that I had to be amazing to be considered good, and if I wasn't amazing, then I would just be--even if I was good, I would just be not enough. And so the idea of that and the fact that I worked while people who were more--I perceived them to be more talented than me--slept, because I had to, because I couldn't sort of not be at the top, because that would give people a chance to say, "Well, look." And I have to say that I didn't--at the University of Utah, I had a lot of sort of cultural shocks, and I've shared some of them with you, but just some other really kind of what I would say were difficult moments of, I want to say shame. That's kind of

what it is, because being ashamed of my background and trying to hide like a lot of things about myself--

COLLINGS

Like what kind of things?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, I'll give you an example. My story about the food stamps always--you know, the fact that these people didn't know what food stamps were, I guess, though in college at the University of Utah, and feeling like really badly about that at that time. Like I don't want to be discovered that I come from like this poor neighborhood. And so I was with my girlfriend at the time. We were shopping. We went to the supermarket, and I sought for like Latino places, and there weren't that many. Now there's more because of the Olympics. Like in Utah, a lot of people went there and they just stayed, because it's a wonderful place. So we're in line, and the person in front of us takes out a booklet of food stamps. They still had them at that time. Now it's all EBT, but is ripping, and then she turns to me and she says, "Oh, look. They take Mexican money here."

COLLINGS

She thought it was a foreign currency.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. She had never seen food stamps. And I was like, I was tense with like, what if she asks me like if I know what those are. So, not that I was ashamed directly, like, "Ah, ha, ha," but it was like the prospect of being discovered was--and just to let you know how far I've come, I got my hands on a one-dollar denomination food stamp--they're brown--and I framed it in a gold-leaf frame, and it's in my office just to remind me of the distance, because now I'm proud of it. But back to that moment, it's like, who cares? Now, now Guillermo says, "Who cares?" Guillermo in his first or second year at Utah is like that's the world, like these people don't know about that. And there were other moments in the feeling, like I was at a party once, and it's like there's these like blond, Aryan, like blue-eyed people who like couldn't pronounce taco. So I remember like being like, "What's your name?" It's like, "William," like, "Willy," because Guillermo, I felt like I'm going to put them sort of in an awkward position to try to say my name, and I just even--that's the level of like insecurity that I had and that I had to get over, and at the time, it just taught me a lot about where I was. So going from like anger at the injustice to like really needing these people to accept me, and honestly, like glorifying the other, right? So it's going from fear and hate to glorifying, and so I had to go back, so that was an example of like even my name was like an issue. You know, and it's funny, because when I was in high school, I had a black--Miss Robinson, she was a black math teacher. Why is that important? Well, because when I tried to change my name--

COLLINGS

Change it?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--to like William, yes, "Call me William," she's like, "Excuse me." She sat me down and she's like, "Let me explain something to you," and so, of course, like that was a big effect. But even with that, I ended up not--it didn't stick until like I made the decision of like, "You know what? There's a lot of people with weird names, and it's only weird to these people because they haven't seen--."

COLLINGS

So among your friends at Utah, did you go by Guillermo?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. Yes, yes, definitely.

COLLINGS

Did you have a roommate?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I did.

COLLINGS

What was your roommate like?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Okay. His name was Carnell Cummings, and he was from Washington, D.C., and he was black. Now, this is Utah for you. Like we were the only minorities in the theater department, and they put us in the same dorm. [laughter] Big mistake, because ultimately--I mean, I appreciated it. I understood the good natured sort of like, "Well, they know each other, like put them there." And we hit it off, of course. And he is now--he stayed in Utah and got married, and he is now a special-ed teacher. And I remember that boy was like--he was the, in my point of view, he was the opposite of me. He was also in the theater program, but that boy was like everywhere, like in the girls' dorm room, partying, getting things done, because that's what you do in college. I didn't know that's what you did in college. Like now I understand the joke of like you go to college to like drink and party and have sex. I didn't know that. I thought you went to college to like learn, and so because I had no idea about--nobody who I'd ever known had ever gone to college, and so I went with that attitude. And then I started seeing like, no, you do other stuff, and sort of learning becomes a peripheral activity to your social, like joining frats. So he and I were birds of a feather for a long time, because we both worked at food services, and I remember the racial

discomfort that people had. I call it racial discomfort, but it might have just been like unease. Like, "Are these people students?" You know, because, again, this is not like an exaggeration. I'm talking about maybe--not even like 1 percent--I'm talking about maybe like twenty minority students.

COLLINGS

In the entire university?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. Like, again, who knows what the numbers are, if people consider. But I knew an Uruguayan. It's very diverse. But I knew an Uruguayan, another Uruguayan student in the theater department who's like whiter than like--he was Aryan white.

COLLINGS

Were there any groups like MeCha and that kind of thing?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No. I mean, there were organizations. MeCha was going on, but MeCha was worried--their energy was going into like making sure that the box on the application didn't say Hispanic, it said Latino, right. None of this like militant--

COLLINGS

Well, I just meant like meetings, parties, something like that.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, but I stayed away from those people. I stayed away, as far away as I could, because it wasn't academic, and my militancy showed up in other ways. I mean, I did guerilla-theater plays where, like, in one, my first--this was like my introduction to the--well, at UCSD it really got--I mean, remember that Confederate flag controversy? Like they had the Confederate flag in the South--

COLLINGS

South Carolina.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--in 2000, right. So I made these flyers up. I wrote a show and I made these flyers up, and I put them all on the department. I said, "Please come to the first flag burning of 2000." And everybody's like, "Who is this guy?" Like, "What is he doing?" And so I got into the quad, and I stripped down to my underwear, and I did a song about--oh, I took Gil Scott Heron's "The

Revolution Will Not Be Televised," and I changed the lyrics to fit this race issue. And so the show culminated with me--I had put a kerosene, or like lighter fluid, like Zippo lighter fluid in a roll of socks, to make it look like a phallus, and the tip of the candle was there, and so I stuck it in my underwear and when the climax of the show came, I pulled out the Confederate flag, put it on like this pedestal that I was in, and I urinated lighter fluid on it, and then as the audience was crowding, I threw matches, like strike matches, so I invited them to strike the match on the concrete and throw it on the flag.

COLLINGS

There's a strong tradition of performance art at UCSD.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, absolutely, yes. Although I didn't learn that until I started sort of going to the Che Café, because that's where I really sort of discovered the community. But, I mean, there's people who had set themselves on fire there in the sixties, and, of course, Angela Davis was a student there. So that was my first sort of like political thing at UCSD, and it scared the shit out of everybody. But I was clueless in a way. It's like, "What's illegal about it?" The cops showed up, and the cop's black, and she's like--I booked it, but my classmates were there, and she's like, "The balls on this guy to do this." And then they were like the black cops, like, "Well, yeah, you know, it is a Confederate flag. But he needs to get a permit and put like a metal thing under it."

COLLINGS

Put it in a barbecue.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Right, right, exactly. And so it's like, "Yeah, that won't defeat the purpose of--." So anyway, so I did that, but I had done other sort of things, like vandalism. It's not like breaking things, but it was like--Ring Lardner [Jr.] was one of the--in the time that people were getting blacklisted, he was the last of the surviving writers of the blacklist, and he passed away while I was at UCSD. So a friend of mine and I made stencils that read "Remember Ring Lardner." And so what we did is we spray painted that in front of the library, as you entered, and in a few other strategically placed locations. And, of course, like two seconds after they go up, they come and like sand blast it off. But that was another thing that we had done that wasn't malicious at all. It was a political statement. But I did that. Now they're going to get the research, they're going to be like, "That's who did all these things." [laughs]

COLLINGS

Oh, so say, "We're going to have to prosecute now."

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

But no, and then that was another moment of--remember [Frank] Shepard Fairey? Shepard Fairey is still around, right? The graffiti artist who does "Obey," the "Obey" stickers?

COLLINGS

Yes.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

He started in San Diego, and I was working with him--or the theater department had wanted to do a show with him. Anyway, he has these stickers that said "Obey the Giant," and it's like 350 pounds. So what we did was a group of like graphic artists put the chancellor on them, so it says "Chancellor Dynes, Obey Chancellor Dynes." And so the stickers were put like all over the campus, and the funny thing was that the janitors wouldn't take them off, because they thought it was like the Chancellor Dynes--

COLLINGS

Had put them there.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, yes. And so I knew Chancellor Dynes. His picture's on there. So I went to him and said--he was like in a meeting, and he was promoted to like the head of all the UCs. But I remember like just getting a kick, and it was wrong, but getting just a kick out of this conversation, because I went up to him and I said, "Chancellor Dynes, let me tell you, your advertisement campaign--,"

COLLINGS

Is fabulous.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--it's a fabulous campaign. Everybody knows who you are. I don't think that it's self-serving to put your picture on our campus, because you do run it." He said, "No, actually, I don't know who's doing that. I don't know why they're using me. What does it mean?" I said, "I thought you knew. I thought that was your--."

COLLINGS

That is so funny.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I have to say that it was one of my most--it was that guilty pleasure of like--but the whole thing is that that is the point, that you inject your own meaning into the object or the image, because it

doesn't have an image in and of itself, and so that was one of the moments that some of my more conservative classmates were sort of taken aback about it. But again, it was the balance, because I had Yale-schooled classmates, and I had people from very affluent backgrounds, and I was sort of one of the outsiders again. But I think the program was the richer. Like had I not been there, like one of the things that I asked the professor, like everybody was tense because of the finals week, and we were doing a mask class where like we have hoods, and so in the talking about like relieving stress it's like, people do it in mourning. They like tear their clothes off, you know, like somebody's like--especially parents, their son dies, or daughter, whatever, they do that. Nudity is like considered that sort of stripping of all the excess. And so what I did--it was like nine of us. The first-years were rehearsing for voice or whatever, and so we took off all our clothes, put on the hoods and ran through the class, like just into class, through the class, and out, and that was the sort of tradition that stayed, that guerilla sort of theater. And, of course, I was the first one to run through, so it was that type of a program. Like it allowed for that experimentation and that like pushing of boundaries. And Charlie O_____, who's still the movement teacher at UCSD, would bike like from his home, like forty miles to school. He was from Colorado, so it was very much a sort of avant-garde, cutting-edge kind of a program, and it was like feeding lettuce to rabbits when I got there. It was like, this is exactly--the program was not about crafting like the next generation of film actors, it was the next generation of influential performers. And it still has that. I mean, even though Ricardo Chivera, who's on "Desperate Housewives," came from there, a lot of other--"Fresh Prince of Bel Air," the father, whose name I always forget, he graduated from there. So it's not like the program doesn't have a tradition of you know--Benicio del Toro was a UCSD product, undergrad. So it had that, but it also had this other thing of producing the people who are shaping theater. I mean, I don't say this like at all with sort of anything other than fact. I came out of that program, and I am shaping the direction of L.A. theater, if not national theater. Partially because we just got out ahead of a trend that's unstoppable, you know, the movement, and we talked about this, the movement from theater as a building, as a noun, to theater as an action and a verb. And without UCSD, that doesn't happen. It just doesn't. And so I think that. But that was a very fortunate thing that I was able to get into that program.

COLLINGS

Okay, let me just back up a second.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Of course.

COLLINGS

What kinds of work were they doing at University of Utah? I mean, it seems like you stayed engaged. You weren't turned off, and, in fact, you wanted to go to the next level--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, absolutely.

COLLINGS

--which was the master's program at UCSD, and you were accepted. So what was happening at Utah that you were responding to and that was helping you get to that next level?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Okay, well, it was a conservatory program, so you were in class from nine a.m. to eleven, because you went to class from nine to five. Then you had a break, but then you had rehearsal from six to ten or seven to ten, whatever, or seven to eleven. So that was part of it. There was just no time to do anything else in a real way, with meetings and everything else, and because the organizations have meetings during the day when you had class, so the aspect of the conservatory model was what kept me engaged.

COLLINGS

But were they doing any of this kind of critical-thinking type stuff that you're describing at UCSD? And what was the focus of the work there?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

It was a traditional Stanislavsky program with a multicultural angle, believe it or not. I'll give you an example. The head of the program--his name is Kenneth Washington--he's now at the Guthrie Theater, the regional theater, but he headed the program. He left my third year there to go to the Guthrie. Now, Kenneth Washington is a black Julliard-trained artist who I still don't know how he ended up in Utah, but he ended up there. He brought on Dwight Bacquie, who is now at CalArts, to teach voice and acting. Dwight Bacquie is a black Jamaican Yale-educated theater artist. Jerry Gardner is a New York native, Utah Tai Chi and movement coach. He's also a professional mime. He was my teacher. So it's like the fact that the program was not diverse in student population--it was extremely diverse in faculty. And so we have a situation in Utah where they're making a conscious effort to diversify. Even if the student population isn't yet, the people who are teaching are. And so that also was very--if nothing else, it was familiar. I knew these people. I felt like a kinship with them and a connection. Not that Sandra Shotwell wasn't connected to me, but I remember her laughing at me and being very amused at me when--she cast me in a--this is also like, I auditioned for the part of--I sound like these--and I can't do Shakespeare, but I go, and somebody drops out, a servant, so they're like, "We need a servant. Oh, Guillermo, come here. Read this for me." "Yes, your majesty," or whatever. Okay. So I show up to rehearsal, and I remember this as being a very early rehearsal, and she's going around asking everybody about their character, and, "What do we feel about--," what was it? "Measure For Measure" was the play, "Measure For Measure." So it's like, "What do we feel about the duke?" And people are saying, "Oh, the duke is--." It gets to me, and I'm in the circle, and I say, "Now, well, basically they think they're the bomb and shit." And everybody explodes, including her, laughing. And I remember sitting there like, well, what did I say that's so funny? And so that was just clueless. Later I found out that that's what it was, that the way I sounded. So then I show up to rehearsal, and I had sort of been thinking of this, like, servant type and had created this life

story. And so what I did was, I hammered plates, metal plates to my heels, so that when I clicked it would click, clink, because I thought that's what servants do, right?

COLLINGS

Oh, that's a neat idea. Yes.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And then I would show up to rehearsal, and she had me bow, and then I would always click, and she's like, "What the--? Where is that sound--?"

COLLINGS

Where is that noise coming from?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Finally, like after like two or three rehearsals, she's like, "Can somebody tell me?" And I says, "Oh, that's me. I put metal so I can click my heels when I say--." And she just busted out like laughing about it, because--and then she explained the time period, they didn't have those kind of shoe wear. And she wasn't taking it--even though, you know, "Measure For Measure" has a lot of comic relief in it, that's not one of the things she wanted to dig into. But so I remember fondly the experiences that I had with that play. And so I learned a lot about the industry and the etiquette of the actor.

COLLINGS

Well, when you said that before, I thought you said that you were saying that kind of in character, like you were sort of auditioning. You're saying that you had a kind of a street way of talking--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes.

COLLINGS

--and somewhere along the line, you had to change that, or you did change it.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I had to.

COLLINGS

And how did that happen?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, because in the conservatory, voice and speech was featured prominently. You had to do that in the program, and so you had--Dwight Backie taught you voice, Sandra Shotwell taught you speech, and there were a few other adjuncts who came in to teach dialect. You know, it's funny, because everybody was like very afraid of being considered racist or whatever, because it's like, "Why can't Guillermo sound like this?" But then you had people like Dwight Backie, who has [imitates deep voice] like this voice like this, and he talked about how, "They're not trying to take away your accent, they're just trying to teach you a new one.

COLLINGS

So he addressed that directly with you.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Right, because I was fighting, and it's like, "Why can't I sound--you're saying I can't play--." And so he framed it like this. "Look. It's a disservice to you if you're only able to play these characters. You have to be able to learn this neutral--," neutral which means British. Like it's funny because the IPA, the International Phonetic Alphabet that we were learning, this dialect, or Mid-Atlantic, right, somewhere between England and the United States is really like, that's the accent that you want.

COLLINGS

It's like floating around.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, yes, exactly. But it's basically like--this is an example--it's what people do to justify their job. You know, like, "You can't be a professional actor if you haven't taken a class in this that I came up with," and spent thousands of dollars. Not to say speech is not important. Vocal training, very important. But the difference between that is there's a level--if you can be understood, you know, in real life, people, if they can be understood, that's the key, not that they sound alike. I mean, this is all theory. It's sort of falling away with like cross, colorblind casting, and things are becoming like, "You know what? You're right. Like what are we doing fabricating this thing here?" And so that was something that I had to come to grips with and had a very, very difficult time.

COLLINGS

Now, this is jumping ahead, and we want to kind of stay with the chronology, otherwise we get all lost. But you did do work later with paroled and institutionalized youth.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, yes, absolutely.

COLLINGS

What voice would you use to speak with them?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I consciously, instinctively concentrated on a formal way of speaking. "Gentlemen," cutting out all "you know," "what's up," like all that, because the theory that I have is, they will always get the familiar. What they won't get is the compassionate formal. And so, absolutely, I'm really an iconoclast when it comes to working with at-risk youth, because the prevailing methodology that's used with at-risk youth is one that's detrimental. They're treated as helpless sort of beings, in my opinion, from what I've seen, and it's happened like at every level, like especially in high school. There's no incentive to push them, you know, because we might hurt their feelings. But I'll boil it down to the reason why I did that, why I always became--one is so that they could have a model of an educated sort of professional Latino, the possibility of that, because they haven't seen it, and I don't think they know it's possible, because I didn't know it was possible. But my approach is this. You, when you're born, are not born with a limited amount of self-esteem that I then chip away at if I say bad things to you. I think you're born with nothing, and you have to earn the esteem through hard work and dedication. At least that's what I approach it as, and that informs the way that I run my classes and that I treat these youths. When they come to me with sort of issues, I always frame it like that. You know, "The bank doesn't care. The bank wants its money. So either you lose your house or you pay them. What do you want to do?" And it's difficult and jarring, but it injects consequences into the mix, that right now it's devoid. Like I feel like youth, especially in Watts, they're like there's no consequences, because if you get shot, I mean if your friend gets shot out in the street, it's a free ticket for you to never ever have to work hard again, because you've witnessed trauma. And my thing with these students was always, "No. That makes you have to double down on your focus." So it's like that's my core belief, that if I talk to these incarcerated youth down at their level, they're never going to learn any other level. I don't need to be hip or their friends. I just need to give them the experience of having a successful production. It's funny. Like I have to fight with people, because they wanted to give therapy sessions. It's like, "First of all, I'm not a therapist, and I would do more harm to them by doing that. But I'm an amazing theater teacher and director, so that's what I can do." And it's funny, because it's counterintuitive. "Don't you want to help these people above and beyond?" "Yes, but I can't. This is how I'm going to help them, experiencing something that they really have never experienced, success." And so all those things. The attitude that I bring to the table, I think, is not very common. There's people out there like who, the successful ones, like Marva Collins and people of that generation, thinking about, "You know what? Let's try something else, because this is not working." And you know with what's happening in education that it's finally, finally--thank God it got to the point where people are like, "This is not working. This compassion, this low expectations, it's not working. Let's try something else." In come the charter schools, you know, daring to ask parents to participate in their children's education. I taught at L.A. Unified. I couldn't even--it was difficult to get permission to call parents. It's like,

not that I asked, but it was like I was discouraged from visiting them at their home. I was told, "You can't ask them to volunteer for your--or require that they give any sort of amount of hours to your production. These parents like work double time," and all this stuff. And so that's where they departed from. And I departed from, "Let's ask, and if they can't, they can't." And I had parents like sewing Greek costumes for my twenty-five-person cast. Why? Because I asked. Didn't charge me. I paid for the material and they did it. So it's like, those people want to participate. My mom, the mom of the student, she came and she like recorded the show, and it was like, "Look what I did. I did this. I did the costumes for this." But that was something that was not sort of cultivated and fostered. Now it is. Now there's no choice. There's no money. So I think that's why I would never, ever treat a young convicted felon as anything other than a young person. And I'll tell you something. This attitude didn't serve me very well with like more affluent students.

COLLINGS

What attitude?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

This attitude of expectations, rigor, no excuses. And this is just one man's perception, but in the experience that I had with more affluent after-school programs in San Diego when I was at UCSD and then in L.A., when I got to teach at a more affluent school--

COLLINGS

What school was that?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Eagle Rock High School. I was so saddened, because I had cut, you know, worked my fingers down to the bone to produce theater in Watts and resuscitate it, get resources, beg, borrow, steal. I get to Eagle Rock, and I'm presented with all the resources and more. I'm getting letters from the district saying "We're having auditions for the magnet program. Send your students." I'm talking about like two times a semester. I taught at Jordan for eight years. Never once did I get an invitation to go and send my students to audition for a magnet program.

COLLINGS

Ah, a magnet performing arts program.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Right. So, why? I'm the same person. I'm the same teacher.

COLLINGS

Oh, how heartbreaking.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So I felt--I came to that, and you know what? You shake it off and you just say, "They need theater as much as everybody else," and then you see this expectation, this, what I comically call "entitle-itis." You know? I am entitled to this, and you have to this and that. That, they had a rude awakening with me, because I'm not having that. Better or for worse, like I like to--and I joke with my college students now. I'm in heaven in college, because I can tell it like it is, and if they don't like it, you can just take another class. High school is a little bit different. But I would say, "You know, people think of this as a democracy. My class is not a democracy. It's a dictatorship, and I'm the dic of that dictatorship. So if you don't like it, the drop deadline is two weeks. Feel free." It's just very much like that, and I feel, believe it or not--I know it's counterintuitive the way that I'm presenting it, but people are relieved. Students are relieved because it's like, "Oh, okay. We're going to have a teacher running this class, not a student," or students, you know, that mob mentality of like--I've had it. Like people trying to vote. "When shall we take our break? Let's--." "Oh, no, no, no, no, no. I know your other classes may let you decide. I decide, within these district guidelines, that I have to give you twenty minutes for each three-hour block." But I have no qualms with that, because I cut my teeth at Jordan, where people are like, "I'm going to slash your tires." "Are you threatening me?" "No, I'm promising you." What is this? And so, again, the other thing that served me at Jordan to survive is like these were my neighbors. These were like little kids who were like little kids when I was growing up there, so this whole thing of like, life's tough, is like, don't come preaching to me. I know it. And because of that, I'm here getting administration booting me in the, you know, arse, every time that I try something new.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So there was that aspect of like only I could do it, because I would never tell maybe an Asian or a white student that I understand their upbringing or their culture. I would never do that, because I don't. But I understood South L.A.-Watts area, black and Latino students, which were 99 percent, 100 percent of my student body at the time at Jordan. So that's my--

COLLINGS

Okay, let me go back on. Okay, go ahead.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So back to this incarcerated youth. My feeling, and I think my supervisor would attest, is that the qualities of my shows, the quality of the process of my shows, were head and shoulders above many of the other instructors, who are brilliant, but who went at it from the other direction. Because while it's mechanical, while they were holding--because there's a lot of conflict in these emotional times--while they were holding counseling sessions, like, "Let's talk about it," and da, da, I was rehearsing. And you know, let me tell you, I'm going to share this story that sort of encapsulates my feeling about at-risk youth. I was directing a show at a mental institution, at an

institution for youth who were there because of mental problems or drug abuse. So I'm directing a show. I cast this brilliant kid, who half of the time is medicated. But a week before the show, he cuts himself.

COLLINGS

Oh, god.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So the rules of the place are, now he's on lockdown and there is no if, ands, or buts about it, you're going to be sitting. But I think it was like the first time you do it, it's like a two-day, then the three. So basically, it was going to be finished, his punishment was going to be finished a couple of days before the show. So everybody's like, "Well, we have to like talk to him." I said, "No. This kid knows. He's invested." Because by that time it was towards the end. "He's invested. He wants to do this. He wants to prove that he's great." So I sat him down and I said, "Look. Do you want to do the show? Okay?" And he's like, "I do." And then I said, "Okay. You, right now, cannot cut yourself if you want to be in the show, between now and this date. Do you understand that? And if you do, and if you want, and if you feel you do, you can't have both. Which one do you want to do?" Now, that was the most vicious thing I could have done, according to some people in the circle, because it was like unfeeling, uncaring about his feelings. And my only answer is that in my interpretation it was empowering, because I didn't put the decision on me, that I didn't want you to do it. I have very strong feelings about him and what he should do. But the real issue in directing, it's empowering the person. And guess what? He didn't do it, and he did the show, and he was brilliant.

COLLINGS

That's great.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

But he did it. I didn't keep him. And so to me it's like, people have to make decisions, and they have to accept consequences. And so what I said to him, right, I said, "Look. I guarantee you, when you do that, if they don't keep you from the show, I'm going to keep you from the show. You can't have both. What do you want?" And so I think for students and for a lot of people, it's the inevitability, and that's the great thing about, like, fire. Like whether you're nice, black, Latino, infirm, healthy, the fire's going to burn you, because that's just what fire does. And so it's like if you create an environment in the art where it's almost clockwork, it is like unmoving and the deadline doesn't move, and do you want to? Then you have to speed up. This doesn't come to you. Then with this population, something clicks. But you have to establish it early, that there is no retreat, and arriving at it unready is a product of the process. And so nine times out of ten, the students match. They sort of click in, "There is no safety. I have to empower myself to do it." And they do it. That has been a consistent theme in my work, and I think that it accounts for a lot of my success in the arena of working with this population, that they hunger for that knowledge that they're going to be treated fairly, no matter what. The one single-parent-home person is

going to get treated the same thing as the two-parent thing, and everybody's going to get treated equally poorly. [laughter] Which is funny, because think about it. I'm going to treat everybody equally well, right? Yes, but what that means is you're treating everybody equally poorly as well, right? That's what that means. And so I always say that to my students. "I'm proud of that fact. I could hate you and pass you because it's your actions, you know? And I have failed people who I like a lot, but they're not doing the work." So it's a mechanical sort of distant--there's feeling there. It's just I don't run on emotional--I'm very passionate, but I don't run on emotional currency, because that's fickle. It's like, maybe my stomach hurts today and I don't feel as good about you as I did. But mechanical, the mathematics of it never change. "You didn't turn in three assignments. You missed six classes." It's like clockwork. It's like flame. You stuck your hand in the flame one too many times. Now your hand is cooked. What can I say? See you next year at the next class. That doesn't fly too well in high school, but it's perfectly suited for college, community college, and so I've been having a field day with it. And what's happened is--and this is not at all me sort of creating a fiefdom--I've developed like a base of students, like a following of students, a core of students who will push me, like, "Why aren't we doing a production--," da, da, da. It's like, "All right. Okay, good. Let's go." Unempowered students never do that. They wait for the instructor to say, "Okay, now I want you to do--." No. Then things don't grow, and if they do grow, it's like an inbred, sort of like a program that's like a reflection of the person, you know. Whereas if you empower the students, I could remove myself and the fuel is there.

COLLINGS

It almost sounds like the Cornerstone model.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

That, very much thematically, influenced by the fact that they were into that empowering of the community. Absolutely. You know, you try to trace back that? It's there, absolutely, I think. I remember conversations with Bill Rauch, sort of him articulating things to me and asking me to articulate things to him and talking about typewriters, when they still existed. And I know if you remember like the hybrid typewriter, electronic old school?

COLLINGS

Yes, I do. Yes.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

They had these things called micro shift. Remember that?

COLLINGS

I don't remember what it was called, but I remember that--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So it's like space, boom, huge space. But there was like a micro shift, which is like a half of a shift, and in articulating, Bill Rauch knew exactly what we were talking about. He was so amazed that I was--when he was talking about subtlety in the performance--because he helped Juliette coach. He was talking about like, "You know, you're doing great anger," because, me, it's like extremes, right? Extremely angry, extremely sad or whatever, so on the stage. So he's like, "But what we need is something subtle. Do you understand what I'm saying?" I said, "Yeah, like on a typewriter. You want a micro shift in between the scene." And he was just floored, and I remember him being, one, because he didn't expect it. This is not a judgment. It's like you come in ignorant to a situation, and you have preconceived notions of the poor and the needy as maybe not intellectually ready, or not as sophisticated, and so you bring that, and they had that chipped away. Just like we had our preconceived notions of these white interlopers, they had their preconceived notions sort of chipped away at. It was a very beautiful learning experience for both of us. And I feel like that's the real--again, if there's one thing that happened it's that we both shifted our trajectories. Personally, they shifted mine, but I feel like the company's trajectory got shifted after the Watts, because if you can produce theater in Watts, you can produce theater anywhere, the Moon, like underwater, you name it, outer space, because it's like who's going to drive by in Hollywood? Who's going to drive by your rehearsal and shoot in close proximity? Nobody. It's like you're never going to experience that again. You're not going to have to worry about it, and so it's a baptism of fire, I feel. And so it's not a coincidence that Watts Village Theater Company, having come out of doing plays in the projects, has placed our founding managing director at the Kennedy Center's internship program; our founding or first grantwriting-producing associate producer is now doing her master's at Columbia. Like that is not a coincidence. That is a direct result of producing theater in this very--producing theater is stressful anyway, but producing theater in Watts in this incubator, it like really heightens--it gives you a sense of hypervigilance that you then employ and use everywhere, and everything becomes sort of like slower. It's a lot like what happens to people who race cars, you know, at two hundred miles an hour. When you get into a Lamborghini and you're going a hundred, it just feels like nothing. That's what happens to us when we produce in Watts. This community is very aggressively invested in the work, and they'll tell you. I mean, we did a census project at the park, in Ted Watkins Park, people like smoking weed like coming up, like jeering the actors. You know, it's like when in your life are you going to have people jeering you during a performance? Only in Watts, on a street corner. But then it's like, you know the focus that you need to either engage them or to like focus and stay? It's like, is this crazy guy going to come at me? And stay focused? You could take that anywhere. You can take that to like anywhere, that hypervigilance that you develop, that ability. And so the company has fed, I feel like, off of that very difficult situation. And now we can produce theater on the Metro, which is like bureaucratic city. Like if you're thinking like bureaucratic red tape, like Metro is like our contact has to like get an application filled out in triplicate to go fart in the thing. It's like I didn't get permission from the right department to--so, anyway, that's a way to tell you that it was very difficult to talk to the bureaucratic, and they're wonderful people. They're just very concerned about dotting every single i, and we were fine, because we've dealt with like negotiations that were much more pressing than the Metro one, with people who are less capable of negotiation and are much more about like, "This belongs to me, and if you want to use it, you come in with your hat in your hand or you don't come in at all." So we cut our teeth doing that, and now I think we're stronger for it.

COLLINGS

All right, now we're back on. So we sort of jumped ahead a little bit, because I had asked you about patterns of speech and jumping into the work with the youth. But let's just kind of like get back to Utah. There you were. You had this great group of professors, it sounds like. And then so when you wanted to go and do your master's program, did you consider any other programs besides UCSD, or was that a natural for you?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, I did. I auditioned--this is how much hubris I had. I auditioned for the top three theater programs in the nation at the time, Yale, NYU, and UCSD. I went to San Francisco to do it. I got there. I had friends at ACT at the time, and I got a tour of all the rooms where I was going to be, and I did that research. I prepared as if there was no sort of chance that I would not, so it's like it was a given in my mind, you know, I'm going to get into all these schools, and I'm going to have to choose between them, and this is a formality. So I remember lining up people to give me feedback on my monologue and getting a good night's rest, so I remember that level of commitment. And so I go there, and I audition, in that order. I think all the auditions were on the same day, so I scheduled at a different--so that was on one day, early in the day, and then if you got called back, you came back the next day, and I got called back for all three.

COLLINGS

Oh, wow.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So it was a very heartening and sort of exciting thing to do. And then I went in to the other, and every school has its own callback method. So in the class, or in that group of people, I auditioned with another classmate who got into UCSD as well, and I remember them pitting us--this is like a big like seven-foot-tall white guy.

COLLINGS

Really, seven feet tall?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, I mean, he's like big, to me. I'm like five-six. Everybody looks eight feet. What was he? He was tall, whatever, you know. I don't know how tall he is. But he got called back to all of them, too, and I would keep running into him, and it ended up that he also went to UCSD. But the thing was that he was a Yale-educated guy, and so it's like he's the prototype of who they want, right, the strong, white sort of--because the roles out there, mathematically, a program will let in--75 percent will be Anglo, and then the rest will be broken up between black, Latino, and maybe Asian.

COLLINGS

And this is your perception, or this is known?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

This is mathematically. I see what you're saying. No school is going to admit it, but you cannot produce a theater program with nine black students and expect them to work in the industry consistently, because those black students are fighting, cannibalizing the same roles. So what you do in the theater program, and why UCSD has been so successful, is because they take the demographic reality that 70 percent of the roles out there are for males from twenty to forty, and then you have women, subdivided by race as well, with Latino women at the bottom, black and then Anglo, and then you have Asians, who are like a sub-subset. So that's why you'll never see a theater class--or that generation--with like more than one Asian student. And the Asian would be male or they'll be female, but you don't have a male and a female. UCSD sort of bucks the system. They're like sort of out there with their numbers. They'll let in two like black students, a male and a female, and then like two Latino students, which is like unheard of, and then the rest. You have to have your Irish sort of like redhead, and your female brunette. It's like almost comic, like this is me interpreting, because I've seen enough showcases to know, okay, they've got their like--they've covered the spectrum there. So how did I get on that?

COLLINGS

You were talking about your auditions for the graduate programs.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, right. So I got called back. I auditioned for all three theater programs and then got accepted to UCSD. So Yale didn't accept me, and NYU didn't accept me. Now, that, at the time, was not devastating. It's still not devastating. It was just like, okay, I got into UCSD. Now it's the greatest blessing that I've ever received, because NYU would have taken me--both NYU and Yale would have taken me to New York or East Coast. UCSD brought me home. And so from Utah I was able to come home, two hours away. My base was here. I was able to like cultivate that. It wouldn't have happened there, and so it was a humongous blessing. And by the way, this is not--I'm just again stating fact. The most exclusive program of the three is UCSD, because UCSD lets in six to nine students. Yale lets in eighteen to twenty-five, and it cuts half of them the first year, and then same thing with NYU, because it's a financial thing. You get all this money. Get rid of the ones you don't want. Keep the ones that have promise, talent or promise, whatever, financially. But I got to UCSD, and it was specialized. There's no more like rigor of like history. I mean, we took very interesting historic classes that we have to take, but ultimately it was rolling around on the ground like animals most of the time. [laughs]

COLLINGS

Now you're getting into kind of like some of the performance-type things.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Like the techniques. And sometimes you'd look around and be like, "I'm getting a master's for this?" And I'm like learning how to juggle. You know, I'm learning how to balance on a whatever. But that was for the physical.

COLLINGS

Now, what year did you start there?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

It was in 2000, 2000 to 2003, I want to say, like in that span. It might have been like even '99. And then it was a three-year program. So I was there, and I remember, again, not feeling this like insecurity about it, because now I'm with like--now this is like the program. Like that I knew. It's like, "Shit, I'm in this like premier theater program," and these people have all like had training from the day they were like babies.

COLLINGS

The other students.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. And, you know, you hear it in talking. "Yeah, when my father took me to like the Bahamas, and we like--." It's just like, wow. But I'm here, and I'm right next to you. So it was that aspect. So it was perception. It's like you could either feel like, I'm a fraud, I don't belong, or what it became was like empowering. Like of all these people, I can live in both worlds. I know both sides. And so I spent a long time learning as much as I could, being steeped in it and really trying to shake my insecurities, and I think I did. And now, I mean, I'm in a place where I'm providing jobs for those people who I went to school with. I'm able to do that because of the work that I've done.

COLLINGS

Now, you began to get involved in sort of political theater for the first time, right, at UCSD?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Official--I wouldn't say--formally, yes. I think formally. But it was always something like forever I wanted to do theater that spoke about the people who I knew. You know, when people were asking, "Oh, what shows?" It's like, "Well, police brutality is like an issue." They're like, eh. So then I started seeking, and I, through the Che Cafe, which is the hub there of political life--now it's become more of an environmentalist kind of thing instead of political. But I remember Ralph Nader, the first time he ran for president, we wrote a show that we performed at his rallies, and it was really--like now I look back--and, of course, we didn't record it. But I remember the

show being very jarring to people, because it was the truth incarnate, and San Diego is very conservative. But it was like--so we had these huge masks. I was George Bush. We had a George Bush and [Al] Gore mask, and we were talking about Nader and how he's a horrible person, and people being very upset that we were making fun of his lazy eye. Like this is at a--we're doing a show, a guerilla-theater show at his rally, for him, to like show that the reason why he's not doing very well is because he needs tailored suits. Because, you know, he has this whole thing about like--I love this. He says, "The only difference between Democrats and Republican is the velocity at which their knees hit the ground when big business comes in the door." Like it's this brilliant like truth serum. So anyway, so then we make this piece, just jabbing at him left and right, because we were George Bush, and saying like, "Look. How can the president not look you straight in the eye? How can he not like afford a tailored suit?" All these very important things, right? Forgetting what he's saying and the idea that straight teeth in your mouth are more important than the words that come out of them. That's what the piece was about, but people didn't necessarily like get it. Never mind that it was very bawdy. You know, we had pictures of like--people took issue with this. It was like an immigration thing, so we had a rabbit with a big phallus painted like the American flag, but I forgot what the piece was. It was some kind of eating meat. It's like we did so many like off-the-wall things that it was pretty crazy.

COLLINGS

So where was this impulse to do all these off-the-wall things coming from? Was it coming out of what you were doing with your program there? Because it sounded like that kind of was happening at UCSD when you were there.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I have to say--

COLLINGS

You've mentioned a few examples of all these kind of guerilla things.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, but those weren't from the theater department. Those were from the like political science and music.

COLLINGS

So you were picking up on what was going on in these other departments.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Or collaborating with them, and it's like, "Sure. Of course we'll do that. Hey, why don't you come over here and do this?" So it was that, but not the theater program, although the theater program never got in the way. For example, they did a show, the theater department did a show called--it

was called "Life is a Dream," and in one of the scenes the character is in a cage, so it was like an eight by four cage that they built. When they were getting ready to throw it out, I asked for it, and we put wheels on it, and we rolled it around campus doing theater on it. And so the theater department could have said no, like, "We don't want to--." But they didn't. And so now that cage is still at the Che Cafe, being used like for different things. We used it for a show called "Prisons and the Global Economy," in which we sort of had prisoners, both literal prisoners and characters that were imprisoned through philosophy or through other things, and the audience--it was site specific--the audience traveled from show to show. And I wrote it and directed it and starred in it. But the guides were two musicians called the Prince Mishkins, and they played as the audience walked from station to station. And the head of the Prince Mishkins, his name is Rick Burkhardt, this year he won an Obie Award for a show that he has called "Three Pianos." So this is the caliber of people who are at UCSD when I'm there, people who, when you say, "Hey, why don't we do this?" it's like, "Yes, and--," yes, and, and everything just got, you know, the scale of things just got escalated, and I think it was cutting your teeth doing that sort of work has informed everything that I've done since. And a lot of people--the show that I did at L.A. Mission College, where I work, it was a show based at a cemetery, site specific. The site-specific thing keeps coming up for me. But in the show, we did real life reenactments of the lives of these people in the cemetery, and one of my colleagues came and saw the show and said, "You know, some people would call this political." And I said, "What are you talking about? These are the lives of people who lived a hundred years ago. What's political about them?" And it turns out that the one example is that one of the characters, who's Latina, says, "You know, a lot of these people are salt-of-the-earth people who came from other countries and were the best kind of immigrants." And then she says, "Well, back when being an immigrant was a good thing." Like she says that, and that, like, jarred people. That was like, whoa, because it was true and because they weren't able to say, "But those people came here legally," which is not true for all of them, but the idea--

COLLINGS

The concept didn't really even exist.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, exactly. And in my mind I thought, you think that's political? Wait till I get my next show. You're going to be like floored. Not that--here's the thing about my work. It's--I think I pride because I've seen the extremes--I pride myself on an even sort of balanced approach that, if you want to do a spectrum, the Left gets just as much as the Right. Minorities in my show, in my next show, it's about immigration, and it gives it--just when people are laughing hysterically at how racist people are, they turn and have to deal with the fact that minorities are empowering the enemy just as much, if not more so, by internalizing this inferiority. And people are like, "I don't like that part of the play." But ultimately, I think it's important to shake both sides so that the character who says, like, "You know, people are killing us with this horrible food that they have, fast food," or whatever, as he's drinking like a two-liter of Coke, and he has diabetes, and he doesn't care. It's like, because I know people who smoke out of their neck. It's like, why don't we see that in theater? Yes, of course the tobacco companies are at fault, but where is the play that balances that out with the person who's dragging out of their neck? Like that's important, because

it makes it imperative that you make a decision as opposed to like black and white, bad guys, good guys. Everybody's in black who's negative and bad. Good guys are in white. Good, finish, move on. There's a sort of discomfort that the audience has to--it's not discomfort for everybody. It's just discomfort for people who don't like to question their points of view. And so I pride myself in the work being--and I think it ties into this idea of listening to all these like right-wing classmates saying things like, "Well, you know, yeah, Cuba--." Because I went to Cuba--

COLLINGS

Right-wing classmates at Utah or UC?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, mostly UCSD. Because my classmates at Utah were in their twenties, eighteen, nineteen, twenties. We had like one person, Monarch was his name, who was from Africa. He was in his thirties. He was like the old guy of the group. But even he was, like, young. And so politically, I didn't feel it as much, or maybe I wasn't as in tune, because I was too worried about like other things. But UCSD, I had people like just proclaiming like nonsense about like how clear things were, and like they weren't clear to me, and sort of giving a balance. When I went to Cuba, people were like, "What are you going to do there?" And so it was a very conservative group that we had.

COLLINGS

In the theater department?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, at UCSD. I mean, they let in another Latina. Her name was Jennifer de Castroverde. She was Cuban. Now, I don't know if you know that dynamic, but they're some of the most conservative people. Like if right-wingers are right, these guys are like--so talking to her about politically, you know. And so it was interesting, because the whole class was in that like, "Yeah, yeah, so people are dying, okay. But look. This is the important thing here."

COLLINGS

How did people respond to September eleventh? You were there at that time.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. 2001 I was in Cuba.

COLLINGS

Oh, you were.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

The day I got back, it was in the summer. We weren't in school at the time. I got back on September eleventh, and I was in Mexico City when it was on the TV. I had touched down, and I couldn't fly into--I flew from Tijuana, but I couldn't cross the border. The borders were sealed on September eleventh. And so I remember like this guy with a rifle like saying, "You can't come in." I said, "Sir, like I'm not trying to cross the border. I'm trying to figure out where we're supposed to go." He says, "I can't help you with that. You just can't come in." And then as I--I'm not moving. The gun is coming down and getting sort of like--it's like, "Hey, you know what? I'm out. I'll see you." It's like, "I'm not trying to like get shot. I'm just trying to figure out how to get to the United States. I'm a citizen." And so everybody--I remember shock. It was like everybody was reeling, and it was 2001, so it was my second year. So, yes, there was that aspect of it. And, you know, let me tell you, I was very, very careful to say nothing when people were calling for blood. Like because I kept my own counsel, I knew that--even back then, people were like floating like "Arab terrorist" and all this. But I knew like the history of Bin Laden. Like I knew from before this, I knew that the United States had been funding him and all the other rebels against Russia, and so I knew that if that was the case, it was a case of the United States' policy sort of coming back to--and so but there wasn't a time to like talk about that and to bring that up. Now people feel more like, how did we get into this mess? And so there's more of that honest exploration of it. But then the attitude--again, UCSD is like that, shock. And in South L.A. it was like, "That's not us." It's like, "None of my people can even work at the White House," or you know, whatever, at the World Trade. And so they weren't aiming at us, right? Because it was like, that's unfortunate, too, like the divorcing from that sort of, not unity but sort of that empathy for that. And then the idea that those people are not innocent. Like we talked about those people are not military, but their thing was, they voted for those people who are killing innocent people in other countries, so that was a very like antagonistic view. But then we also had the UCSD view of like an ultimate tragedy, you know, which it was. And so I didn't perform any political interpretations of that.

COLLINGS

So were you getting your like sort of political views when you were at UCSD from contacts with like student groups? Or did it have more to do with the fact that you were now back in touch with your Watts community, because you were back in California?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

You know, where did that come from? I think it happened way before that. I think my political views were shaped in my early middle-school and high-school education. That's where like the root, the seed, and it was just confirmed in having people, again--I think I talked about this last week, but hearing a Jamaican like third-grade teacher, Miss Mack, she was like, "You feel ashamed that you're on welfare? The world's greatest welfare recipients are the royal family, and what do they do?" and sort of questioning. Sister Olivia O'Yoke talking about the Protestant-Catholic Irish, you know, and so knowing that things are not simple, even though people are trying to make them. It's like, so I understood that that idea that these people had it coming is too simple. But so is the idea that these people are totally devoid of any sort of contact to any sort of

oppressive--you know. So the truth is somewhere in the middle, or simultaneously in both. And so my political, like right now if you ask so politically, I said it last week, I said it every week to my students. We need a third party in this country like we need air, because unfortunately, right now we have one political party. Okay? There's a myth that we have choice in America, but we don't have choice. And so that's not something I can articulate in a debate as well as I can in a play. It's like, ha, you think you have choice? Here. Here's these seven pop flavors, you know? That's what you get. Look at all this. No, it's just one choice.

COLLINGS

But all this like guerilla stuff on the campus, that wasn't coming out of the theater department at all, it sounds like.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, no, no. But it wasn't stifled. So in a way it's like they get credit, because I have professionals going to my guerilla theater performances. That I do. So in a way it's like, one of the professors, Ted Shank, like bless his soul, he's retired now, but he wrote a play called "The Global Economy," which is a street vendor talking about how the global economy is connected, and if you buy this watch, you're really helping somebody in China eat some chow mein, because it's all connected, right? The butterfly flapping his wings causes a storm. And so he gave me this play, and it's like, I've got to perform this play. And so I did it for him, and he was just like, he was floored at what I did with it, because where he had written it years before, I had updated it to today and put a spin on it that was racial and that was complex, because this guy was written like a victim of the system, and I made him an active participant. You know why? Because I was helping my friend with a documentary of vendors in Tijuana, because Tijuana's like a trolley ride from San Diego, and everybody's like, "Oh, look at this oppressive thing, making people work out in the sun." Well, when I went to interview these people, they were the happiest clams. They were like, "I can make my own hours, you know, business is pretty good. What helps is like if you have a woman selling it, it's like they'll buy more, and it costs us like ten cents per thing, but we can get a dollar on the--." Now, does that mean that I'm encouraging this sort of like salesman, like this poverty-level like trinketry? No. But it's like it's reality, and it humanizes these vendors who are not victims. And the thing is, and I spoke to these people, they're like, "I'm not going to be here my whole life doing this. I'm going to save money, and then I'm going to build a little thing, and I'm going to sell churros in an establishment." So I wanted to say that to my Left-leaning friends, but I also wanted them to know that there's no insurance, there's no protection for these vendors to my Right-wing friends. And so right now I'm sort of in this political--I have a very ambivalent, very passionate about things that I feel are true, but very ambivalent about, and I don't know where that ambivalence comes from, or that like balance, because there are, like, ultimate truths, yes, but again, things are complicated, and humans have both divine and monstrous things, and so how does that coexist? And I refuse to demonize people. I mean, I can get myself in trouble for like defending people, but I really think, again, to go back to the historical, the only person that we could really call evil is Adolf Hitler, right? But I'm telling you, the evilness that happened amongst the faceless bureaucrats who organized the trains, who made the schedules, that is like infinitely more horrible than anything that he did in particular. It's like the evil was like--but it's not like centralized, so it's hard, because they were

real people who all they did is one little bad thing. But you put those little bad things, and it equals six million. But in the future of things, you can't find the Hitlers early enough, but you can find the bureaucratic, or you can find the individuals' hatred and bile early enough, and you can help individuals so that we don't have this like conflagration of everything coming together in this--and so I guess that's not a very easy thing to communicate with people, without them feeling like, "Oh, so you're defending Hitler now." You know? But I have no fear. Like I've gotten called to task for saying horrible things to people who, they don't know me. They don't know I grew up in Watts, and they sort of dismiss it as, "He's just a sellout," or whatever, whatever they want to say. But I do it to both sides. You know, my friends who are very militant, I say, like, "Well, do you speak Spanish?" Like the real revolution for me, if you want revolution, is to sit yourself in a class and learn Spanish, and then to study the history of Mexico, because if you're calling for Mexico to take back this land, like a lot of people do, then you don't know your history, because Mexico is the most corrupt country. Fourth-largest concentration of millionaires in Mexico; like a lot of people don't know that. Richest man in the world is Mexican. Fourth-largest concentration, and yet it's the poorest country, so what's that all about? If you know, you don't want Mexico to come back and take this land, because they're not ready for it, if you know your history. And then if you know the history, you'll see that a lot of the horrible things--because the United States has done horrible things, but it's done very amazing things as well, very like important things. And so I always say that--Churchill said this about democracy, right, but I say this about the United States. It is the most horrible country in the world, except for all the others. That's my way of thinking of the United States. Of course it has flaws. What country doesn't? But by and large, America tries, and that's a lot more than a lot of places. And so the approach politically, theatrically, is one of balance, and you'll never see my shows and leave with like a shrug. You'll always be either like very upset that I dared to make fun of poor people, or very upset that I didn't hit the rich people hard enough, you know? But that's just what theater is. It's truth. And the thing is that whether you like it or not, it's true. And so that's my approach, and it's been influenced, I guess, by all these experiences that I've had up till now.

COLLINGS

Okay, so you're graduating from UCSD, and some people, presumably, are going to go into the industry. Did you ever think about trying to get some industry roles, if for no other reason than the pay?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Absolutely. No, definitely. I auditioned for films. I auditioned for commercials. I was a very, very successful commercial actor up till the hiring process. I would be like in the final callback for a few. I got a national commercial, like six months after I graduated. I was on my way. Then I had done independent films. Then I was faced with the decision of, do I continue this role and hope to get more commercials? Forty-thousand-dollar checks once a year can't sustain me. And for the choice of--I had always been teaching--whether or not I was going to make the leap, because my wife and I got pregnant, and the decision came up, like, "Do you want to gamble not being able to pay for this birth, or do you want something more sustainable?" And so I jumped both feet into the teaching world because of Sofija. And I was offered full-time positions at

nonprofits, and I refused them because I thought LAUSD was more stable, which goes to show you, because I got laid off--it's funny because the organization The Unusual Suspects, that does work with incarcerated youth, offered me this full-time position, and I remember the conversation with Sally, who's still the director. I said, "Sally, like I would love to, but I need stability and security," and in the nonprofit world--and so fast forward, two years ago when I got laid off, they got the Coming Up Taller Award, where they flew to Washington, D.C., and, you know, Michele--oh, no, it was during Bush's reign. So the first lady gives them the award, and they get all this money, right while I'm getting laid off. And I had to email Sally, and I had to say, "Sally, you know, it's like perfect. Who would have thought that this would happen?" And so it just goes to show you that--you know, no way to foresee that. But it's the irony of it. That's another thing in my work. I feel like it drips irony. Like my aesthetic is very ironic, and it's like, some people would say, sarcastic, but there's that real--behind it all, it's that call to action, it's the call to improve. We've recognized that we have this in our community. What do we do about it? You can sit back and complain, or you can do. What do we do? What action is injected into the picture? And so I feel like that's what makes my work very unique and just my aesthetic different, and I think it's led to work that represents the future of what theater is, will be, because of all those ingredients.

Session 3
March 29, 2011

COLLINGS

Here we are on March 29, 2011, Jane Collings interviewing Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez in his office. As we were saying just a little bit off tape, we were going to just get right in with your first involvement with Watts Village Theater Company. You'd been at UCSC. What year did you graduate from there?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

UCSD, 2001.

COLLINGS

Okay, so Watts Village Theater Company was already up and running--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Definitely.

COLLINGS

--founded in 1996. How did you come in?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, '95, '96, I was approached by Quentin Drew.

COLLINGS

When you were still at Utah?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, yes, definitely. I came back and helping out with a reading of Lynn [Manning]'s, "The Caucasian Chalk Circle."

COLLINGS

Oh, right, right. Yes, because that was the--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Bridge show.

COLLINGS

--bridge show, exactly.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

But what happened was, Quentin approached me about founding the company, and this is right after I got accepted to the University of Utah. So I said, "I'm going off to Utah, but I can't help found it, but I would love to." And he said to me, "Well, when you come back." And so that was before I headed off. I headed off, came back during breaks to help out and to do whatever I could. Immediately, thinking that when I graduated from the University of Utah, that I was going to immediately go back to Watts Village Theater Company and help out.

COLLINGS

Oh, you did.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. But I had auditioned for graduate school, and I got into UCSD, so that put three years on the time, so I was gone for seven. And so when I got back, I looked up Quentin and I said--and the choice, in my mind, was, you either start a theater company in Watts, or you work with Watts Village Theater Company if they'll have you. And I remember writing a formal letter to the board, and Quentin laughing, saying, "What is this? What do you think you are, a foreigner? This is family. If you're willing to work with us, you're in." And so immediately they had a contract with Yo Watts, the youth opportunity program, to do theater, so I was the person who was made an education coordinator. So I had a baptism of fire, going to Jordan [Downs]--

COLLINGS

Oh, yes, and I wanted to ask you about that.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Sure.

COLLINGS

I mean, tell me in specific about one of the productions that you did at Jordan Downs, and there was another housing complex, right?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, the Nickerson Gardens. But by the time I got there, we had access to the Jordan auditorium, David Starr Jordan's auditorium, and that's where we worked with the students. How did we get there? Because Quentin graduated from Jordan, so he knew the principal at the time, and he

gained access to the space, and so that's how we were able to sort of move from the housing projects into a more, like, theatrical environment. So I was heading those classes, and it was twice a week with an English teacher's class. We were doing texts, dramatic texts come to life. But after a year or so of that, a year and a half, I was approached by the English teacher, who said, "Look. You've been here nearly two years. The kids know you. You should think about subbing." And so that's when I made the leap. I was still working for Watts Village Theater Company as a theater instructor, but now I was sort of absorbed into the sub pool. So when I got the job, I went to the principal, and they basically--they shouldn't have done this, but they did--treated me with all the bells and whistles of a teacher, so I had to show up to faculty meetings and assign grades, things that a sub really, a day-to-day sub doesn't do. But my day-to-day assignment became a long-term commitment. After a year of this, my acting career was not at the forefront of my goals. I went back to school to get my credential, so I was doing that, and it took me two years of sort of wish-washing of what am I going to do? Finally, I went back to school just in time to have them lay me off.

COLLINGS

Right, all the layoffs come along.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And so I went off and I got--I should go back to District 7, which is where Jordan, Locke, all these schools that I worked in. Thing about that is that a day-to-day sub can really become a long-term sub at the drop of a hat, because these kids are just very, very adept at running the subs through the wringer. So a sub can't really sustain that, so it's hard to find. But I had grown up in the neighborhood, and I just gave as good as I got, and I was able to survive, and not only survive but thrive and actually produce. To go back to your original question of like, how did theater sort of bloom there when you were there--

COLLINGS

Yes, because you talked about the home visits and everything.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, yes, yes. Those were things that I felt like--again, I'll say it's not altruistic of me trying to help the disadvantaged. It was really a survival mechanism of me trying to make sure that they knew if they made trouble for me, it was going to be trouble for them. But with all that, we were able to produce a full-length play called "Simply Maria." At Jordan High School, they had not seen theater in fifteen years, more. And so they hadn't produced a play, they hadn't had theater classes really to speak of. So I was able to bring the writer, Josefina Lopez, to speak to the students, and I remember--this is not sort of a--I mention it because it just illustrates how difficult it was to legitimize. But she had just finished her film "Real Women Have Curves." It had just come out, and she was sort of very popular and didn't really need to come and slum, however you want to frame it, because she was big time at the time. And so I was able to make the connection with her, and when I went to my principal about it, he was like, "Who's that?" and

very little sort of priority on the arts when the math and science are falling apart. That was their priority. So I remember having to pay her out of pocket to do this and then sort of just eat that cost, because the benefit of our students being exposed to this woman, who, by the way, wrote that play when she was eighteen--

COLLINGS

Wow.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

A lot of my students were eighteen when they were in the play. You know, they were seniors. And she's Latina, and she's a female role model, and it was just a wonderful opportunity that I just couldn't let pass up because people didn't see the value of it at the time. So I was able to really make an impact, because they didn't know quite what to do with me. I showed up every day on time, early. I ran a tight ship classroom-wise, and the word got out pretty quickly that you didn't come to that class--because I also taught English--to mess around, and so I was able to--they were like, "As long as that's going on, let him do his little theater after school thing." I think that was the reason.

COLLINGS

Have you had any feedback from any of these students since then?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, I've kept in touch. And actually, I feel like one of the real jewels of that time was that we were able to identify students with proclivities for art, and we started--independent of my time at Jordan, we sort of identified a need to take these youth to the next level. And we were able to establish the Quentin Drew Memorial Internship, where youth don't come to us to learn how to be actors and performers, they come to us to learn how to run the box office--

COLLINGS

Oh, great.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--crew, lighting board, and those are marketable skills. The scale of that is very small. In the last four years that we've established it--it was like the second year of my tenure that we started this program--we have been able to offer this to five students. I mean, on the scale of things, that's like--

COLLINGS

Yes, but that's five kids.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Exactly. And not only that, but they have continued that. So, for example, one of the students--Rigoberto is his name, de la Cruz--he was in our show, ended up making the comment to me at the end, "You get paid to do this?" All he did was move the curtains and move wagons. And for me it was a telling moment, because it illustrated that in their mind, in his mind, art was a cute sort of nice thing, but to work I really need to be mowing lawns or doing construction. And it was a wonderful opportunity for us to say, "Yes, you can make money, and not only that, you can make a living if you're serious about what you're doing, and if you're focused." So he went on to do another internship with us on a show called "Always and Forever" at the Ford Amphitheater, and so for that show he also did crew, but now he's doing crew with people who are professional designers, working with them, a professional stage manager, so it just opened up a really sort of another option. Not that that's his livelihood now, it's not. He's still working as a machinist, but we still keep in touch, and he does come out and work freelance. So that's the jewel about being close to those people. And then we have other students who didn't go into the arts, but who are now at college. Not to make the tie that had they not been in the show they wouldn't be there, but there's just something about that.

COLLINGS

Well, there's some self-esteem.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. To me, there was a self-empowerment, because these students put on a show with nothing. And the thing is, like, was it flawless? I mean, we have tape on it. I was like, "Oh, this is--the transitions are longer than the scenes." But it was theirs, and they had never--and I always say this, and I don't mean to be ironic, but, unfortunately, for many of our students--and we had twenty students in that cast--that will be the highlight of their high school career. That was the highlight.

COLLINGS

Well, everyone's got to have a highlight, you know, so--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. But, you know, you think about on the scale of things, it's like one show? It's like, but that was enough. That was always a given. And so in the course of that, we were able to offer those. I went on to be promoted to more affluent districts for more affluent schools, and I saw that difference between the opportunities.

COLLINGS

You're talking about Eagle Rock.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, absolutely. And I always go back to that when people say, like, equality or opportunities. I was the same teacher. I was the same person, but I was getting opportunities landing on my plate without asking, because of where I was. Whereas if I could have had that at Jordan, I could have totally gotten them the best of the best of Jordan, because they were in my class. So anyway, I just share that, because all of that goes into the mix of why Watts Village Theater Company is running the way that it is, as far as their youth philosophy.

COLLINGS

Right. Well, I want to ask you, because when I talk to some of the Cornerstone members, I get a really strong sense that for them, some of the highlights coming out of the shows are like moments of proof that a sense of community has been developed, that people have developed like a new awareness or a new tolerance for someone who's not like them in some way or another. Is that something that Watts Village Theater is concerned with, or do you feel like community is a given, given that it's in Watts, and that you're working on something else?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, that is a key element in our work. I should say we're very influenced by Cornerstone's methodology, philosophy, obviously, very strong bonds to them. And our take, our interpretation of that is just sort of scaling it and tailoring it to fit this community. So where they approach entering as foreign entities into a community they don't know and getting to know the community and working, we can shortcut that, because we are Watts, and so we don't need to sort of focus on that aspect. But what we do need to focus on is the flipside of that, is how does this community relate to outside communities?

COLLINGS

Oh, very interesting, yes.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So it's not even a reversal in the sense of the opposite. It's just that it's a lot like, again, the image of the mirror. You know, you hold up your right hand, but us as a reflection of the situation, and our reality is that our left hand is up. But it's the manifestation of the same. And so the company is now, because of that, I think, head and shoulders above the sort of fray, or the mainstream theater, as far as strategies to reach out to communities. So I guess I would frame it that Watts Village Theater has taken this philosophy of outreach and just made it in-reach. So it's like it's the same principle, but a very different approach. And why? Because the traditional model is not as effective if you're living in the community and now it's about sort of letting other people know from the outside that they're welcome and that they're safe, if they want to experience our--

COLLINGS

And who are the audiences for the shows?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So our key target demographic is Watts residents. We have numbers. I can just tell you that to get one Watts resident, you have to go into their house, knock on their door, and say, "Hey, we have this show, and you should come see it." It's very labor intensive, and so the numbers aren't there.

COLLINGS

And why do you have to do that?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I think there's a cultural--they just don't--theater is not at the forefront of their reality. It's more of like a two jobs, going from one thing to the other. It's more of a, "I have priorities and obligations that are independent of art." And so we've discovered that.

COLLINGS

When people come, do they have a pleasurable experience?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Absolutely, and they come back. But again, it's sort of a--that's a blessing. All challenges in Watts are a blessing to us. That's how we approach them, because then it's like then you'd better make sure that the shows that they come and see are absolutely amazing, because once they come out, because they're tired and they just got off work, you'd better catch them. And so that's--we've sort of refined--and because of it, our work, I feel--and we only produce one main stage, average one main stage show a year. But it is, because of this hypervigilance of quality, it is worthy of the community, and people do come back, and that's how we've sort of grown from--when I was here, we had no mailing list. Now we have sixteen hundred people, so it's like--and that's by doing guerilla theater on the corner and partnering up with organizations like the census, so it's all been a partner of the strategic partnership. But also, I feel, the product of a quality show and having people who don't know Watts, as the first time coming, to say, "This was such great production values, I didn't expect--." Not a backhand comment, just a real surprise that the quality was such that they didn't expect it from a Watts show, mostly because they just don't know Watts. They don't know our history. They don't know that we've produced, you know, people who have shaped the world. But nobody knows, and so our job is to really let them know that we're in that tradition of Seeborg, and we're in the tradition of Joyner and so all those people grew up in Watts, Mingus and on and on, that have made their brand, but never has it been acknowledged that they came from very humble beginnings, or if it is acknowledged, it's very sort of cursory. But there's something about Watts that with all its history, it's an incubator, a very difficult sort of place to grow up and to work, but it does something to you when you're out in the sort of outside. It's like you have this [laughs]--antibodies have developed that if you

could produce a show in Watts, shows, you could produce shows anywhere. And I don't know what it is. I haven't sort of quantified it yet, but it has to do with that community and the fact that it's so closely knit, and it's constantly battling adversity, especially from the outside people coming in to save it, you know, to help it, but really just trying to milk it for whatever they can. I mean, that's the narrative that a lot of people have in Watts. So, yes, wearing these scars like medals is something that I feel Watts is very characteristic of that community, and so it brings that confidence to function. And so only a kid from Watts, who has produced and lived in Watts, can sit there and believe that he can go to a bureaucracy and make it produce art, a bureaucracy that's not worried about art, it's worried about trains running on time in this like behemoth digestive system that nothing gets done. And so it's sort of like, it makes sense, you know, only that sort of community could breed, and, again, that community can also breed violence and this burning of itself, so good and bad all mixed in.

COLLINGS

I just wanted to ask you, so how did you get involved in the company once you got out of UCSD? Because you're the artistic director now, so how did that take place?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Right. So Quentin, I looked him up, and I approached him about, "Do you have a place for me?" And he's like, "Well, we have this education program. Why don't you become education director." Said, "But Quentin, like I've taught in classrooms. I don't know how to run a program." He's like, "Baptism of fire," picked me up and threw me in the pool, and it was like a fish to water. I took to it. And the guidance that he gave was in protecting me from--legitimizing me. Like, for example, at that time--this was five years ago--the beginnings of these Afro-Latino tensions in the schools--

COLLINGS

Yes, and you did a three-year project on that.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Right. Exactly. But the genesis of that was this tension that I was like, "Wait a minute. I have to like legitimize myself? I grew up in Watts. I'm not an interloper." And Quentin helped to smooth that out, because Quentin would sit there and talk to the teacher whose class is black, most of the students, which I always tell people, like, "I don't know. You thought Brown v. Board of Education took care of segregation? You're wrong," because, like, I don't know. Nobody really deals with that fact that we're more segregated today, because if you go to Jordan, it's like there's no white students.

COLLINGS

Yes, exactly.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So anyway, so Quentin and I sort of went back and forth about that.

COLLINGS

The magnet schools are the most racially balanced, because that's what--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, right, right, yes, because it's like mechanical. You have to do it or else you get yourself into--

COLLINGS

And the whole point of them was to redress that harm, and it turns out to be--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, yes, isn't that crazy?

COLLINGS

It turns out to be the place that white people send their kids, because that's where you get a preponderance of whites.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, because it's societal. Yes, yes, it's like it's societal. But I don't think--you know what? My wife is white. I don't think that it's a color thing. I think it's that the best teachers, the most resources, are concentrated in these magnets.

COLLINGS

Well, they are, because they want to attract, yes.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Exactly. So anyway, but I saw that ridiculous, sort of like a farcical manifestation of that at Jordan, and at Fremont, where I taught. But okay, so, Quentin would get up and say, "No. We're going to be kind--," in not so many words, "We're going to Mr. Aviles-Rodriguez. Yes, he's Latino, but he's bringing some juice, because he just graduated." You know, it's sort of a weird legitimizing that Quentin had to do with the power structure, which was African American, the principal at the time, the teachers who are leading the programs. There was a program called Great Beginnings For Black Babies. We were working with them, doing theater shows to support abstinence, right, and it was just nobody--the irony of it all, that all these students are Latino, and

the ones getting pregnant, too, but it's Great Beginnings For Black Babies, which was a very interesting sort of a word play there. But anyway, so then Quentin did that. Once he got me started, it was like off and running, and I was doing more than a lot to make sure that these students were getting what they needed, and to make sure that there was sort of rigorous exposure to the arts. I'm talking about like where people would say, "Oh, they're not ready to do Greek theater. That's not in their--." I got that a lot from the teachers. "That's not," they said, "their experience." And I said, "Well, if they go to college and they don't know 'Oedipus Rex,' like they're at a--." "They're not going to go to college. These kids, you think they're going to--?" You know? So it was like, it was the curse of low expectations, that because I had grown up there, I had seen it, people saying, "No, you know what? Maybe you shouldn't go to college." Like people had told me, "Maybe you should do this," like a man works in the fields, and that's how you support your family. So I fought that, and Quentin was there peripherally, not sort of building sets and props, but sort of bringing the key people to see this, witness this birth. And my jaw just dropped when Lithgow, her name is Robin Lithgow, the sister--her claim to fame is that she's the head of the arts branch at LAUSD right now. She sort of rose and survived all the cuts. But her brother, John Lithgow, just did a show at the Taper, and so she showed up to Watts to watch this show. It was like, I had to--even today when I see her, I say, like, "Let me tell you, like forever will you be--if you become like a mass murderer--,"

COLLINGS

I'll forgive you.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, "You will be just seared in my heart," because it was the only, I think first and only time that I saw the district, in the form of this woman, manifesting support or presence for this community, and I haven't seen it since. You know, I did four years at Jordan. So anyway, she's been promoted, and she's like, "No, I was just very interested in seeing new programs develop." That was her, like, impetus to go. But like Quentin was very well connected. He was the head of the Watts Community Council, and he made sure that people came and--and in a way, it's like the faith--it was, to me, artistically, it was like a bloody mess. This play is like in its preview right now, if that. But that wasn't the point. It was like happening, and it was being judged, to me, by the process of even getting up here. I'm talking about if you saw a video on this thing, it's like the lights were borrowed, begged, stolen costumes. It was like me making calls to every single favor I had ever--but it got done, and the kids saw that it was a process, and they had ownership over it.

COLLINGS

So were you suggesting that the black-Latino tension in the schools had something to do with what you were describing as the African American administration and power structure and the Latino student body?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I'm not suggesting, I'm saying definitely. By the way, this is like stoking nothing. This is just stating fact that at that time, all the administrators were African American, and yet your student body is 80-plus Latino, and your teachers, interestingly enough, are white. There were more white teachers at Jordan than there were Latino teachers back then. So that's just like, it was no secret. It was just like nobody wanted to cause trouble. I wasn't there to like, you know, bring it up, but I just noticed that, and like, what is that? And I think it comes from fear. "We can't let go of this flagship high school in Watts, because it is a symbol. It's a symbol of our identity of the sixties, a battle for equality." I think that's changing now. Demographically, it's unsustainable. And if you look at the principals at Jordan in my tenure, they have gone from African American to a Samoan to African American to African--so it's like, there has not been a Latino principal from the first, from the nineties when I was there, to now. Now, there's been assistant principals that are Latino. The assistant principals are there as support. But as far as like the symbolic nature of who's leading this, it's always been African American. Is that a bad thing? If they're qualified, no. It's just you start seeing this pattern of like demographically that doesn't make sense. How is that sustainable, and why is it so? So anyway, the power structure reflected that. There's still, I feel, in that community a refusal to let go, and it's manifested in the Watts Community Council. There's twelve seats? There's twelve to fifteen--I forget the number of seats. But of all of them, there's one Latino on the seat, and all the rest are African American. This is a community that is 90 percent Latino now.

COLLINGS

So how are they voted onto this council?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Very carefully. I mean--

COLLINGS

You're saying it's not popular vote?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, no. It's a one person, one vote. Let's just say that the way it's advertised and that the way it's run is very particular. There's been instances of people voting multiple times, and there's been instances of the information not being bilingual. So how it happens, is it stupidity on the part of the organizers, or is it willful? That I'm not in a position to delve into. I'm just very mathematically, forensically, looking at the manifestation of the numbers. It doesn't make sense. And so the fact that Imani Fey, which is a low-income housing on Central, with their units has 85 percent African Americans, tells me that the people for that housing project are not coming from the community in which the subsidized housing is located. Now, the next step? The next step would be a class-action lawsuit. But it's funny, because nobody's going to do that, because who would it be against? The African American power structure. Like, why go there? Our community--I feel like the Latino community is not litigious, and they know that not today, not tomorrow, but the day after, it's going to be unsustainable. There is no way you can ship in

African American people to live in this community when the community is 100 percent Latino, which it will be eventually. I mean, we're in the 90s. L.A.--the census hasn't come out. But we're talking about the high 80s, and it's going to be high 90s before you blink. So, anyway, that's the natural progression. But again, I've spoken to leaders in the Latino community, and it's very much of like, "Listen. You're talking about weeks. We're talking about decades. We've waited this much. Demographically, we can wait another few years, ten years, for it to happen." So, anyway, that. Again, Quentin saw that, and Quentin was African American, obviously. And Quentin would get up, like when we did 9/11, we did a talent show to sort of highlight and help the effort, the one-year anniversary, I believe. I got up and I was the emcee, not the emcee but one of the sort of people there, and Quentin--and this is on tape--didn't like the reception I got from the majority African American community there. And so he--

COLLINGS

What kind of reception was it?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Less than enthusiastic. I mean, think about it. These--

COLLINGS

Did they boo you?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No. But the smiles didn't reach quite the eyes, and they didn't clap quite as--

COLLINGS

What didn't they like about it?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I think it was because they had African American emcees, African American performers, and here comes this only--like I was the only Latino--not in the room; up onstage sort of prominent--and they didn't know quite what to do with that.

COLLINGS

And this was 2002, you're saying.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, Quentin hadn't passed away, so, yes, yes, thereabouts. And so he's like, "Aw, come on now." Again, legitimizing me, or in reality, legitimizing the Latino community. But it wasn't

chiding, it was like, "Well, you know we can do better than that. We can show more love to our--." What did he call me? "He's like you. He's from here. He's not like an outsider." I'd have to look at the tape, but it was a very heartening--he was way ahead of his time as far as like race relations. He saw like, we're not going to get anywhere sort of dividing ourselves. Unfortunately, we're still there. We're still fighting over crumbs when there's quite a large pie up on the top of the table there.

COLLINGS

Has anybody been able to step in and fill his role?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, no, it's impossible. I mean, the existence of Quentin and his philosophy could only exist at that time and in that place. I'll give you an example. When Quentin passed away, he had used--this is how, like, imposing he was, like he had the use of the auditorium for us. So he had moved out of his house, and he put his furniture and his clothing and all that in storage in the auditorium, in this storage. And so when he passed, they started cleaning it out, and I got my hands on one of his shoes. This is like fourteen, size fourteen shoe. This is before like he approached me about taking over the company, so it was quite the metaphor--

COLLINGS

Yes, fill his shoes.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--for me. I'm five-foot-six on a good day, so the sense was, like, I would be insane to try and do that. But I grew up in Watts, as he did, and I knew a lot about the direction he was going. And so with my own shoes, I walked in that direction, so I made that my goal. To be clear, like there's no way. Like he was the face, heart, soul of this company. And, again, we almost like didn't exist, and I still haven't quite figured out how it was that we pulled that hat trick of like no money, no budget, only the direction to continue. It was like with that--

COLLINGS

After Quentin died.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. It's like, what? And we only has his threat, because he said, "I will send thunderbolts on your head if after I'm dead you don't continue this." So we took it to heart and now we're still going, but that transition. So the nature of just embracing that you can't replace, because you sort of like cobble together the things that he brought, and we started from scratch. Those contacts that he had with the people in the community went away because it was tied to him, and then we sort of tried to cobble it together and make our own connections. So then back to how I took

over. Then Quentin sort of--all these events happened--became ill, started saying to me, like, "What do you want to do next?" "Well, I want to direct. I want to produce. I want to--," all these things, and making that possible for us, and then only producing every two years or whatever. Like the cycle was like fundraise for three, produce for one. And so we got into that, and then when we took over, Damian and I took over, it was all about taking the new sort of direction, Watts Village Theater in this new direction of developing what it had been doing, new work, never-published work, but reaching out to thematically tie them in.

COLLINGS

That's what it had been doing with Quentin?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, new work with Quentin, it was developing work by Lynn Manning, original work, yes, like mostly adaptations of classics. Under our leadership, it was reaching out to outside playwrights and writing about themes. Like Afro-Latino relations was the first thing that we said, "We're going to identify that. It's an issue. Let's attack that."

COLLINGS

And was that conceived as a three-year cycle?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Right. Yes, absolutely, because, again, the Cornerstone influence. By this time, Cornerstone had figured out that thematically, we could do residencies around a theme, and so they had done different themes, but never a theme sort of attached to a community. It was like, "So we have this whole theme. Let's look for communities."

COLLINGS

Right. They had the justice cycle, etc., etc.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Exactly, right. And so we have a community, and our themes come out of the community, and so Afro-Latino relations was a big thing. You know, at around this time, my first year as artistic director, we had Michael Ritchie, who's the artistic director of the Center Theater Group--which is funny. Michael Ritchie, John [Michael] Garces, and I, all started the same year, our artistic directorship. And one of the first steps is he cut out the labs, the labs for black--

COLLINGS

Are you talking about L.A., at--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

At Center Theater Group, cut all the labs that they had developed for Asian playwrights, Latino playwrights, black playwrights, and there was a big uproar. And so this was Damian and I sitting there and being like, this is not controversial now, but it was like nobody wanted to say the truth. The truth was that those labs needed to get dissolved. That's the truth. And we knew this. We didn't say it. What we did is we acted accordingly, which is, "How can Center Theater Group do a better job at identifying black and Latino playwrights than us? They can't." So we started our own play-development lab, and we called it Black Words on White Pages. And our first inaugural year, we went after many of the playwrights that had been released from the Center Theater Group labs. So we hired Alice Twan, who wrote "Black Flight" for us. She's an Asian playwright who's now the head of playwriting at CalArts. We hired Luis Alfaro to direct one of the pieces at Black Words on White Pages, and he's now a USC professor. So we said with action, not with like sitting around bemoaning this, no. It's like, what are we going to do? And so we did that. We started our own lab, and we're still going, and I have to tell you, our labs make it to main stage. Whereas these labs, they were sort of like tipping a hat to the minority community, but those shows never made it to the main stage. That's a fact. And so, what, you're just going to develop stuff for what, for the fun of it? No. And so that question wasn't asked, it was just answered by our actions. And so that's what separates, I feel, like if you're asking me ever, what separates Watts Village Theater Company from every other company, ultimately I feel that it's the fact that we're rooted in this community, and every decision that comes out for the company is, how does that effect and how does that relate and how does that jibe with the Watts community and Watts Village?

COLLINGS

So what particular sort of black-Latino issues were you dealing with in the three-year cycle? I mean, Cornerstone was invited to come in 1996 was it? No--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, for the Watts--

COLLINGS

Yes, yes, to deal with this, and now here we are, what, you started this cycle in like 2007 or something?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, something like that.

COLLINGS

So it's like ten years' difference, and now a theater company is going to address this again. What were you looking at in particular, and how did you decide to address it in terms of theater?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Now, what we did is very different than what Cornerstone did, because Cornerstone came in with this play, ready-made play, and it was a wonderful thing. We interviewed--what it is is it's called a joint-stock model, joint stock, and it was developed in England by the Joint Stock Theater Company, and I was privileged to study under one of the founding members.

COLLINGS

At Utah, or at San Diego?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, UC San Diego. And then I understudied in a production of one of their, the founding--so, Max Safford Clark is the head. Les Waters, who I studied under--oh, Caroline Churchill, a playwright, very famous British playwright. So long and short of it is they go into a community, they interview people, the actors do, and then they come and perform the interviews for the playwright. The playwright--and then they write it too. The playwright cobbles that together, and then she shows the script to the actors, and then they decide if it's consistent with what they want. It's a collaborative process. That model is key to empowering the community and engaging the community. There are a few theater companies that use that technique, but none consistently, as consistently as us, and none in L.A. It's another manifestation of what separates us, because think about it. You bring in a ready-made play, that's great, it's important, dealing with race issues. How much more powerful if the people in the community are writing that play with you and seeing themselves?

COLLINGS

Right. Now, what's the difference between that and the story-circle model?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Great. That in the story-circle model, you're in a circle. Maybe your story gets highlighted and other things fall apart. And in the joint-stock model, every interview gets put into this pot and then sorted out. And I think from my experience with the story circle, which is newer than the joint-stock model, it's just a more--it's a way to expedite the narrative. But you lose--I was just going to say, the depth is not the same, because you spend an hour with me in the joint-stock model--

COLLINGS

I was just going to say, it's one on one, right?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Exactly. And then not only that, but I perform you. I don't like relay and report. I perform. That adds a whole 'nother layer of interpretation and of like emotion, and so--

COLLINGS

Oh, that's really interesting.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

--you know, nine actors interviewing people about the Watts riots, which is our next project, it's called the "Riot Rebellion," and we're losing all these people who have firsthand accounts of the Watts rebellion, and so we're going to interview--that's our next project--interview those people, bring it to the playwright, and then perform it at the riot intersections. That's the next project.

COLLINGS

Oh, that sounds great.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So they'll get to see themselves. It's like a narrative that hasn't been really explored, because it's always about a big chance to loot. Anyways, but so the model I studied under is like, how do I manifest that in Watts and make it so that people see themselves and are invested in themselves, and so the scale of the joint-stock model, I feel, is like much more denser and much more broader. And we use it because it works. The first show we did it in is "Black Flight." Alice Twan wrote it, and we developed it, and we didn't produce it, because we produced another play, called "Always and Forever" that I directed. That was much closer to being ready, and so that's what happened.

COLLINGS

One of the things that Lynn said was that he had been doing some interviews with people in a food-distribution center, and that he was feeling a little frustrated, because there were some people with great stories, but they didn't have the skills to really tell the story, and so he was having a hard time kind of getting to the heart of it. It almost sounds like this joint-stock model tries to make that leap, that the actor is able to bring out some of the narrative that might have been missing with the original person.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Absolutely. And not only that, but look at it like this. You're one playwright. I'm ten actors. So that really, really gives you sort of a pool of material. And in a way it's like, it's intimate. It much more intimate, less communal but much more intimate. Like I'm talking about somebody dedicating their time. Usually you do multiple--you can do multiple interviews and then just watch mannerisms, and so you get to play that person in the show, and it's not like, "That's what I said, and that's me." It's like, "That is me onstage." And so the Watts community has really

embraced that, and we haven't really had anybody saying, "Oh, you're misrepresenting what I said," in the times that we've done it.

COLLINGS

Have people said things about this? Like someone whose story is up there?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Let's see. Yes, there's been feedback, but there's been no--everything has been overwhelmingly positive, because when it's not, we hear about it. It's like, "That's not the way it is." But no, as far as personally, like, "I didn't like the way you performed me," no. I think people understand the limits of--it's not like film, like, "That person didn't look anything like me, the actor who played me." And again, it's not that the character is always represented exclusively with what they said. Sometimes we put other elements of what, you know.

COLLINGS

So what are the actual friction areas for black-Latino versus Latino or/and Latino or whatever, residents in Watts, and how do you get those into the performances? And are the frictions resolved, like sort of on the theatrical level, or things left hanging?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Always.

COLLINGS

Conflict?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Always. In our pieces, you will definitely see the questions being thrown and left unanswered.

COLLINGS

And what are the questions that people are dealing with?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

That depends. I mean, power, the distribution of resources, the manifestation of contributions in the community. You know, like who are our heroes in the community, who's doing work? Well, it varies.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Distribution of resource--those are the issues that we explored, violence, black on brown, in our pieces.

COLLINGS

Were there particular like incidents--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

There were.

COLLINGS

--sort of infamous incidents in the community that you felt you had to address?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Not directly. The inspiration came early on. There was a stabbing at a middle school, not in Watts, it was in South L.A., and the media--because the young man who was stabbed was black, and the young man who stabbed him was Latino, and it was automatically framed as black on brown. Well, we knew otherwise. We knew that it was a gang issue, that the fact was that--because it's interesting. This is just a side note. Gangs are more integrated, because of the reality of demographics, than a lot of places.

COLLINGS

More integrated than the school, you might be suggesting.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Right, yes. I mean, in schools they do, but no, absolutely. Like gang members, you have gangs that are black and Latino gangs. You have gangs that started Latino and are now African American. You have that; very interesting. So we knew this to be true, and so we explored theater that said, "What about this? Like what about this possibility of it not being racial?" And so the work--it was just, for us, a--I was upset. I was angry. I know Damian, who is African American, was like, "Why don't they show that we get along fine?" You know, the amount of interracial couples that I saw when I was at Jordan, you know, it was like, yes, that's us, like we get along fine. But in the media, I felt like it's always highlighting the race, because it's sensational. There was a riot at Jordan over some stupid--it's just a manifestation of when a student body runs the school. That's what happens. You have like altercations and riots. So helicopters come in, and it was like, it was a battle over stupid tagging-crew things, not gangs, not race, but you saw it on the news as a race riot.

COLLINGS

Yes, definitely.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So that's what happened. That was a manifestation of that. And then the final sort of that tipped the scale was a young man who--it was in the paper--his cousin was shot. He was an athlete, and he was shot by a Latino--

COLLINGS

Oh, I remember this case. This was very famous. Yes.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, yes. Yes, his cousin was a student at Jordan, like a freshman. So I--

COLLINGS

The cousin of the assailant?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, the cousin of the victim. And I don't know, divine--I don't know how this happened, but the kid was like crying and like heaving, so it was my conference, and then I said, "Come here. What's going on?" So it's this black student telling me how these Latinos just shot his cousin. It was like the aftermath of it. And so in the conversation, I saw how he knew that it was something more than the fact that he was black and they were Latino, and in the course of sort of the conversation, it came out that he was like, it's not--to be officially in a gang, you know, you get courted in, and his cousin hadn't, but you can also associate and hang with, and so that's what he was saying. The kid was telling me this, like his parents didn't know that he was sort of doing that on the side, and then these Latino people, and--so anyway. So I was just like, "What--," and I told my, "What are the chances of a Latino teacher being the one to like decompress this young man?"

COLLINGS

Debrief.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Debrief, because it's like, what? Like that kid grows up like forever sort of assuming that we're all the same, like we're all going to be like murdering, or we all hate. Anyway, so I took him, after a while of this, I took him to the counseling--

COLLINGS

So you were talking about how sort of the nuance of this very media-frenzied crime was coming out.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Look, yes. I mean, but again, it's a necessary evil. I understand the media has to report, and they're trying to have people tune in. But anyway, but this young man, my thing is had I not been there, who knows what that becomes? And then it affected me in like, we have to do theater that this guy could come and see, because if he doesn't, that'll be the only narrative.

COLLINGS

So it almost sounds like what you're doing with that cycle of theater is to sort of bring nuance, bring some of the subterranean levels to light, to counter the monolithic stereotype offered up by these media images.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

You know what? On the scale of things, I used to frame it like that, I'm going to counterbalance. No way you can counterbalance. It's like the massiveness of like the mainstream. But what happens is, you can force people to deal with that, okay, and it's you're compelled and you have to deal with the fact that x happened historically. Like Langston Hughes, whether you like it or not, taught himself Spanish. So what does that mean, that he hated Latinos? You have to deal with that. Yes, this violence that's happening, you know, it's true. But what about the instances of us working together for a common cause? So, yes, it's only raising your hand slightly and asking a question in hopes that that'll cause something, but as far as like counterbalancing, I'm telling you, there's like people in Watts who have internalized it, and it's like a truth to us. And it's funny. I'll confess, like I, as a child growing up and going to black people's homes, was very sort of like, this is how they live? It was very much the foreign, like, going into--by the end of my high school I was like, my girlfriend was black. I almost married her. But I remember that. I remember that, like where is that coming from, this distrust or this--when we're all like in the same screwed-up situation financially and all the rest.

COLLINGS

Do you ever deal with immigration issues? Because that's one of the bones of contention, right?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, yes, yes. Theatrically, we haven't tackled that, because cycle-wise there's more pressing things, like the violence between African Americans. But--

COLLINGS

But I mean the notion within the African American community that the jobs are being taken away--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, yes, yes, yes. No, we haven't dealt with that concretely, theatrically. That is on the radar. That's a very difficult sort of situation, because--and rightfully so--the black community gets very, very--bristles at the comparison between the Civil Rights Movement to anything else, so casting the immigration issue as a civil rights, casting the gay-marriage issue as a civil rights, they just like say, "No way. This is ours. Can you just get your hands off of this one thing that is us?" You know? I mean, that's my interpretation of it. And so to come at that, it has to be a very, very sort of watertight situation before we can delve into that. Like the story has to be legitimate, justified, and so that's why we haven't really, because if we go at it, we're going to go at it strong. We're not going to go at it like peripherally. You know, for example, I mean this is just--the last immigration show I saw was Cornerstone Theater Company's "Los Illegales," and that was framed in a historical context through a play called the "Sheep's Well." So it was like sort of the abuse of the immigrants in their journey. When Watts Village Theater Company does it, you bet it's going to be African American people exploring why this Latino community is trying to sort of attach themselves to the Civil Rights Movement, and it's going to be hard for people to stomach, and that's the point. I mean, our work has never endeared us to the community. But I guess it's while we're seeking acceptance and embracing, it's like, as long as they understand the message and the trajectory of our work, they don't have to like it. We'll adjust as much as we can, but ultimately, we're trying to rattle. You have to.

COLLINGS

So you're seeing it more as an agitprop than as something celebratory?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, I see what you're saying. No. Actually, it's funny, because my exposure to agitprop theater comes from the mother country. Like the Cuban agitprop model is embedded in celebration. You know, it's not--the binary here, yes, it's like either you're hitting somebody over the head, or you're like, "Hey, look at us. We're the best," and excluding. No. Our work is very much a hybrid, partially because of the fact that I believe at my core that you cannot have one--you can't call people to better themselves while simultaneously like poking them with a stick. It's very much about getting them on your side, usually through comedy, if it's a comedy, and then turning it on them.

COLLINGS

So you do usually have comedies?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, yes. I mean, our work is comic. I mean, look. The main stage has been mostly dramatic. But the shows that I've written, the staged readings, we do spoofs on--it's sort of like, it's the irony. It's like Watts Village Theater Company like drips irony in its work.

COLLINGS

Really?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, because think about it. It's like here you have like this--we have a show that we did, "What Happened in Aztlan," and it's about the immigration issues. So the guy, the head honcho, is like very abusive with the servants, and he's like going off to Tijuana, right? And in the course of this sort of bleeding-heart moment of these put-upon people, they break into a box of sugar. This is set in like when sugar was valuable, and it's like it's a metaphor for drugs, but whatever. They're like in the emotion of putting mouthfuls of sugar in their mouth, everything stops, and they say, "Wait. I wonder what this is going to do to my diabetes problem. Aah, who cares?" And then they start eating again. And so that moment synthesizes the fact that if you have them, if you are on our side, you can laugh at the fact that a lot of our problems are self-inflicted. And that's a tough sell for the choir to be telling them that, that we have issues, that the chains that we're making for ourselves are a lot tighter and stronger than the chains that are coming at us from outside. Thematically, it's like you can't do that unless you're celebrating with them. And it's like then it's laughing at ourselves, like, "Look how funny we are." The metaphor for me, when people say like, "Oh, you've got to be careful," it's like, "Look. I knew people who smoked out of their esophagus."

COLLINGS

Oh, gosh.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

You just have cancer. You just got your neck opened, and you're smoking out of your esophagus. To me, that's like humanity in a nutshell, but also Watts in a nutshell. It's like so many of our, quote, unquote, "health problems" can be solved by our behavior. Just stop smoking. That's half of your--you can drink all the pomegranate juice you want. You're like smoking. And people who love us, like they'll take issue with that. They'll be like, "Come on, like you should be highlighting the corporations that are selling cigarettes to the inner-city, targeting young people." Yes, yes, you should. But then you should also--that's why our work is so rich--talk about the man who like knows it's bad for him, knows it's killing him, and is still smoking out of his esophagus. So very celebratory work that we in Watts Village Theater Company approach it. And also, you know why? Because I cut my teeth doing political theater that was just like bam, bam, like to the exclusion of people who were there to like explore and learn. They felt themselves being like demonized.

COLLINGS

And where was that, where you did that?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, I did a lot of political theater at the University of Utah and at UCSD too.

COLLINGS

Okay, so you felt like that was the model.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I think that's the traditional model. It's agitation and propaganda, right? You can't agitate somebody without like really sort of demonizing them. But then at the same time, you're like wanting to convert? I mean, to me it's like you're trying to convert. So when we did guerilla theater for [Ralph] Nader, we made more fun of Nader than we did of Bush and Gore. His election rally, he came to UC San Diego, and we were doing that. Why? Because it wasn't about we're like taking sides and--of course we're taking sides. We're there for Ralph Nader. But sort of those people on the fence, you know, highlighting his defects, it's like, yes, that is silly, because one of the big criticisms is that he didn't wear tailored suits. It's like those are things that we have to like poke fun and highlight, because you see how ridiculous it is, how ridiculous those things are. Like what does that have to do with him running the country? So, absolutely, any time we get an opportunity. We don't want our work to be didactic, because that's one of the problems with political theater is that it becomes didactic and preaching. It's like, even the people on your side are like, "Okay, yes, I know, I know." And so you have to keep them off balance and throw something that they're not expecting. They are not expecting for you to call them to task simultaneously. Not call them to task, but just highlight the sort of follies of existence, of your political realities. So, yes, so our work is definitely a hybrid between those two.

COLLINGS

Well, it sounds like that's kind of what you're going to be bringing to these street-corner performances. Do you want to talk a little bit about what's coming up with that?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Absolutely. So the big contribution of this "Riot Rebellion" is that we're going to interview people who are now in their eighties and bring their story to life through the joint-stock process, but then it's going to be performed at the intersections where the riots happened. We're going to deal with the Watts' riots, deal with the zoot-suit riots, with the L.A. riots.

COLLINGS

So will these performances be simultaneous?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No.

COLLINGS

Or will it be kind of a rolling--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Exactly. Every week we shut down an intersection, and people come to the intersection. So, I mean, the meta-commentary is that twenty-five, forty-five years ago, everything stopped for violence and burning, but, but in 2013, '12, when we do it, everything will stop for art and the self-examination of the events that occurred, in the place where they occurred. So we're going to--ideas like Reginald Denny took a brick to his skull. We're going to do a show that deals with what leads people to do that to--

COLLINGS

Now, will you shut down the intersections yourselves, or will it be like a permit thing?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, no, no, definitely. It has to be permitted, because the only real--it won't be sustainable unless we go through the proper channels, going to like the community council meetings and the supervisor over that. It's like all that has to happen, because only they can do it. I mean, they shut--

COLLINGS

I'm just wondering what the impulse was behind this, like how it was going to be run.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, I see, yes. I mean, guerilla--we could do it. We could just shut down the street, but then we'd get arrested, and we wouldn't be able to do the next three weeks, which is another model that I've used. But the sense about this is that the community is to get behind exploring this very important seminal time, times in L.A. history, at the place where they happened.

COLLINGS

Yes, that's a terrific idea.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

And so we're going to seek help with that. But then all our work, again, is, "What's a social aspect to it?" We're not there to--really, really, we're not there to entertain, primarily. I mean our shows are entertaining, I would think, but that's not the major--

COLLINGS

But before, you did say that when you go out and knock on doors and try to get people from the community to come to the show, that they have a good time, so it must be very difficult to strike that balance.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, to me, if it's solid, if it's well crafted, it'll be entertaining. I mean, the way that it's written and the way it's--I hear what you're saying, priorities. No, priority is always the quality of the work. I mean, if the work is not entertaining, it's not effective. So, yes, it's a very tricky balance, but if you have a choice between the show being social, political, relevant, and being entertaining, you always want it to be socially relevant and politically inspired, and then it'll be entertaining.

COLLINGS

Okay. In the time that we have left before--I know you have to run off to your class--do you want to talk about what's coming up with the second annual Meet Me At the Metro event?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Absolutely. So we're in fierce negotiations. No, right now we're in talks, and we thought it would be easier this time around, but--

COLLINGS

Oh, really.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, but it's actually been more difficult. We discovered through conversations with the point person that last year, Meet Me at Metro was a pilot. "Let's see what it is. No strings attached." They're saying that now, they're actually saying, "This is sustainable and this is doable. It's not a pilot anymore." So what that has done is slowed everything down, because they are dotting their i's and crossing their t's and making sure that whatever sort of problems there might be, they've got them addressed, and they're going back and forth with us about, "We're concerned--."

COLLINGS

And who is they?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Okay, so Metro, Metro is coming to us through our point person. Her name is Fran Carballo. She's the head of special events. She was our champion last year. She took the reins, and this year she's like, "Look. Because of Expo opening--," which we're going to be working with them on, she's retreating from that and sort of bringing in people from real estate, people from, they call it operations, and having them sort of talk to us about the concerns. And there's concerns that are always going to be safety, logistical, artistic things, like a hundred people moving through the space, what is that going to do? And then the dates, obviously. Like we asked for four weeks this time, so we went from two shows one day. We want eight shows, four weeks. So they're very

sort of concerned, and they're doing cost analysis of, "How much is that going to cost us?" And the last figure was $50,000 for four weeks. So at that point we're like, "Well, maybe we can do two weeks."

COLLINGS

Now, when they say sustainable, they mean it's going to be like every year for how many years?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, here's the thing. Sustainable in the sense of like, "These people are going to come at us every year. So what do we have to do infrastructurally to accommodate that? And are we capable of doing it every year?"

COLLINGS

And do they look at the content at all?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

They do look at the content towards the end of the--I think we had a meeting a month before, or we sat there and we said, "This theater company is going to do this here, and then they're going to go here," the route, literally, "and here are the--." I want to say we shared the scripts with them, but, luckily, they didn't read them, because there was so, so much sort like pseudo--again, very, very sort of inside jabs at not dignitaries, but just people, icons of the community, in this show. And so we did that. For example, one of the pieces was, we had to study the area where the show was taking place, and you know Union Station is built on top of Chinatown.

COLLINGS

On top of it, yes.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes. And so the whole story of how the Chinese got booted out of there. So in our piece we say that, like, historically, and we had like Asians in our cast, so we'd do a triangle, a pyramid with these people who are like, sad. They're the Chinese. And then one of the characters comes and kicks them across the way while saying, you know, "But the Asian community was gently asked to move across this," so we go, bam.

COLLINGS

Make way for progress.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, right, exactly. "They were invited to seek more opportunities in a different place." And so but we see this visual of like, clearly, those people were just like, "Get up and leave." So had they like gone through it, they'll see like these moments where they're like, "How's that going to fly?" You know, we have a moment when there's a bus driver driving, and he's texting. And I know that you know from the paper like many accidents on the Blue Line, it's like texts were sent like seconds before.

COLLINGS

Well, you're talking about that catastrophic accident.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, yes, yes. And so it's like not demonizing, but saying, like, those things happened. It's a satirical angle, but it's like, "Let's better ourselves. Let's like prioritize." So little things like that that were all just missed, people missed it. Like nobody caught it, but a lot of people might have sort of looked at that. So then that was the first year. This year we didn't--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

I was going to say that this year we haven't had to show art. You know why?

COLLINGS

Why?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Because we haven't secured the theater companies.

COLLINGS

Oh. Oh, you're not going to use the same five theater companies.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

No, no, because the whole project is about expanding, bringing new people into the fold.

COLLINGS

I see.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

But the reason why is because last year we secured the theater companies and then went to Metro, and they moved us around. Like some of the companies got moved around three times, because--

COLLINGS

What do you mean moved around?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, because we said, "We want to do the show here. We want to do the show here and here."

COLLINGS

Like in the different respective communities of those companies?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Stops, yes. No, just other--

COLLINGS

Oh, different stops, okay.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

But what happened was, is, "You can't use this stop because of this, you can't do da, da, da," and so the companies were developing work while they would hop, you know, moving around, and so--

COLLINGS

So they were trying to do like something that was sort of site specific.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Exactly, and then they get moved from one thing to the other. So we learned from that, and it turns out that we still haven't secured the venue, but now we're approaching theater companies and saying, "Hey. Here's a window of time, and you will be in one of these stops, but we don't know yet." And so it's smoother. We learned that it's like, don't go backwards, because then people feel like--they're frustrated. I mean, the theater companies that we had last year, some of them were about to quit. They were like, "Look, man. You move me and like the work is not--." And so--

COLLINGS

Yes, so now they can go and scope out a bunch of different locales and figure out what they could do.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, but we assign the stops, because logistically, that's a nightmare, people fighting over stops, and it's like, "You're going to do this stop." Anyway, so lessons learned from last year to this year. We're expanding to seven companies, but last year was from Union Station to Watts. This year it's from Watts all the way to Long Beach and back.

COLLINGS

Gosh.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

So the thing is that you stop in the same place you started, which didn't happen last year.

COLLINGS

Oh, that's going to make it better for the audience.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ

People were exhausted last year, and we did it twice in one day, so the actors were like exhausted, but this year we're only going to do one show each day. And the other thing is that we've doubled up on this connecting to the community, and we actually sought artists that are Long Beach connected. And I don't know if you know this. There's a theater at the 5th Street Metro stop, across the street. Because I don't know if you know this, but every public works, like something like 5 percent has to go to the arts, or 1 percent out of every project. So Wal-Mart wanted to build there, and they said, "Well, you have to build a theater." So they built a little theater in the back of Wal-Mart, and when you get off the Metro, across the street the theater is there, so we're going to use that theater. We met with the woman--

Session 4

July 29, 2021

COLLINGS (00:00:01):

This is Jane Collings interviewing Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez by phone, July 29th, 2021. Why don't we just get started with the very earliest days of our pandemic period. Can you think back to when you first started hearing about the virus in the earliest days and what your thoughts were at that time?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:00:35):

Yes, actually, maybe I want to say a couple of months, few months before I was having lunch with a classmate, she was a PhD student at UCLA there and she's from Taiwan. So we were talking and she's wearing this disposable blue mask. And we started talking about whether she felt all right, and she's like, no, there's this huge thing in China with a lot of infections. And I'm like, yeah, but that's in China. She's like here take this. And she gives me one, she had a stack of disposable-- And I said, okay, I'll wear it. I sort of wore it for the day and then threw it away. And so she was the first, you know anything that I had heard about this pandemic and it wasn't on the news and it wasn't, it was just something like you know, there's a, I don't know if you want to call it a stereotype of, because of SARS, because of all the things that they have had that Asian people are going to wear masks, whether they need to or not.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:01:47):

And so I sort of in the back of my mind said, oh, it's just a cultural thing that she's overreacting to this thing, you know, I'll humor her and put it on. And so that was the first, you know, later I would see her and I'd say, you know what, you were right. I didn't believe you. I thought you were a little, you know, paranoid. So, so yeah, so that was the first, first. And then, you know, you started hearing interestingly enough, people saying that it was all a hoax, you know, early, that was the first sort of reaction to it. And I remember a common question in the early days was, do you know anyone who's infected? And so that was sort of proof that this was all a government conspiracy, right. To undermine at that time that the Trump administration, who was working so hard and they were just grabbing at straws to make the great economy that Trump had created falter.

COLLINGS (00:03:01):

And who are you hearing that from?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:03:04):

So specifically the first time I remember it was somebody I did not know, they were talking in a barbecue across the street, my neighbors. So the neighbors were having a barbecue, people are still gathering and, you know, doing the things that they do. And then he was saying to them very rationally, like, yes, but do you know anyone who's infected? And that later on, that would be a question that would be asked of me. But that, that's the one I remember initially. And then my family, so luckily I've got two sisters who are in healthcare, they're both social workers. And

they were starting to see people coming to the emergency room, like a spike. And they were like, this is not a hoax. Like, this is like a real thing.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:04:12):

These people are coming in. So that's, I have two sisters who were sort of confirming at two different hospitals, one in Torrance, one-- So then that's my two sisters. The other two sisters-- So I have four sisters and the other two were very much like, yeah, but that's for, you know, rich people who are traveling the world and getting infected. Because I don't know what the chronology is about this, but like the pandemic did not reach Mexico until after. And when it did reach, it was because weekend skiers had gone to Italy on a private jet. And so they brought it back. And so the narrative changed. It was like, it doesn't exist from it's a hoax to, yes, but it's only for these people, you know, at their dinner parties. So that was the other side of the family saying, hey, if we just keep away from that we're going to be all right.

COLLINGS (00:05:35):

That's interesting because the earliest cases in LA were from people who had just been on trips to Europe. And exactly as you point out in Mexico.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:05:41):

So the narrative was, you know, I can't afford to fly to the places where the infection is, so, you know-- I'm just going to-- Also like I want to highlight, you know, so I'm Latino. And there was this like early on, I remember this sort of narrative that we don't get sick from that virus. We get the virus sick. The virus is sick of us. Because, you know let's just say that folk wisdom was like, you know, if I have a little cold is not going to affect me when I'm like, you know, dealing with true, you know, bacteria in the water I drink or whatever. So then, you know, what happened was my sisters, the other two, you know, the ones that were just trying to like, you know, go about their business, what happens is that they get sick.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:07:01):

Yeah. First one. And now these are 23, 24 year olds, like my youngest sister. So she was knocked out for two days or whatever, and then convalesced for a little bit, but nobody passed away or anything, but then it was like, no, this is for real, let's start to do things. But I was, there's so many like moments, personal moments. I was going to this baptism wedding that's happening during the pandemic. Okay. And I walked into this, you know, it was in a backyard and there's maybe like, I want to say 50, there's a tent, maybe 50, 60 people there, whatever, not one single one of them is wearing a mask. So I walk in with my mask and it was like, it was interesting because everybody looked at me like, and I felt like, oh, they think I'm going to rob the place because I'm wearing this mask.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:08:08):

And I know that the news had been running, wear your mask, wear your mask. So it was, again, there was a cultural thing that was at work. I associated it with a cultural thing of like, not us, that's not, you know? And so that was one instance when I realized we were in worse shape than you think. And then of course, fast forward jumping around, like jumping to the game. It's like what ethnic group was the most, you know, infected, highest mortality for a while, actually was

Latinos because of that early attitude. You know, there's also this, you know, very kind of, I don't know what the best way to describe--fatalistic or just, you know oh, well, too bad, so sad, kind of attitude that I pick up culturally sometimes. And, and then, so my other sister of the two sisters, she got sick, like later, deep into the to the pandemic.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:09:18):

And, you know, I don't know the contact tracing that was officially done, but the one instance that she traced it to one of my first sister traced it to helping her friends move. And then my other sister traced it to a birthday party for a kid. And because it was outdoors under tent, nobody was wearing a mask. And, you know, we sort of discovered that if you get enough people in, you know, highly concentrated, you're going to breathe it no matter what. So, yeah. So that was my personal thing. You know, my wife, it was funny, like I was speaking to her that I was going to do this and she's like, you didn't bring me up the first time you talked about-- Because I said that was the professional interview. This was personal. So I'm going to talk about you, you know, from beginning to end, what does it tell you that her brother also got it and they live in Utah.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:10:23):

So, you know, that's another state where it's like masks, who cares. You know, freedom, I should be free to kill people if I want. Oh, sorry. So, so she, I'm saying like, I'm speaking about the Latino aspect, but even my wife who happens to be Anglo, the same attitude was, you know, prevalent in. And I want to just highlight that. I think one of the reasons for that was because of the misinformation that was going around, unfortunately at the highest levels about this pandemic and, you know, I'm not politically, this is not at all a political thing. It's just what happens when people in charge send mixed messages. And I'll give you one example, because you know, historians of the future are going to want to know, like, hey, like, what's your evidence, so I'll just give you this. So [Dr. Anthony] Fauci very early on didn't know, nobody knew about the asymptomatic carriers.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:11:30):

So he says, hey, wash your hands, keep distance. You know, you can wear a mask, but you don't have to. Because if you're not exhibiting symptoms-- Fast forward, the news comes from China. Hey, like there's asymptomatic carriers. Immediately he's like, everybody needs to wear a mask in addition to everything. So what does, what does [Kayleigh] McEnany get up and say?

COLLINGS (00:11:57):

Oh, Kayleigh?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:11:58):

Yeah, exactly. She says, even Fauci said that you don't have to wear a mask. Referring back, referring to the period when nobody knew about the asymptomatic carrier. And so I felt like that was delinquent and it was irresponsible to present it in that way of like some of these people who are getting all of their news from that source are like, okay, they wouldn't lie. And technically it's not a lie.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:12:32):

It's the worst kind of untruth. Because I don't want to attribute intent, you know, nobody can really attribute intent and say, this is why they said it. But [William] Blake has a great line. He says a truth told with bad intent beats all the lies you can invent. That's the line from that came to me when they were telling people, you know, Fauci and this sort of [inaudible] they're irresponsible thing. So the decision was made at the highest levels. Hey, don't slow down this economy. A couple of people, a couple like 80 year olds are going to die. Oh, well,

COLLINGS (00:13:15):

That's right. They specifically said that in Texas.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:13:21):

It's like for the sort of archival sort of knowledge, but in the attitude. And so then what happens is people are buying into this idea of like, I'm not 80. And then they forget that their grandmother is, and that they're coming home asymptomatically and wiping out their family. So there were a lot of things, culturally, politically, that were going on that unfortunately created this perfect storm and look the first you know, the flu of the 1900s, you know, that, that was like millions of people because of the same attitude. They held a parade like right after. And then, but fast forward, the attitude is always going to be there. You know, I was thinking about the film that just came out where the meteor is coming and people are throwing a party on their roof. You're always going to have like that fatalistic, like, well, just enjoy, party whatever.

COLLINGS (00:14:29):

That's a great point. The fatalism.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:14:33):

You know what, to me, that's not the problem. It's when you fan that attitude with misinformation. And I think the motivation to me from my point of view was that very simply we put profit before people and in that equation, you know, you can, you know, the butcher's bill. The sort of, like, the willingness to accept that is, goes much higher when you have that attitude and, you know, half a million people just in America plus half a million—plus, halfway to the millions of people in the first, you know, flu. So I feel like we could have managed it very differently. Had we had the right administration at the helm. And I'm not saying that as a sort of aping, you know, democratic, you know, sort of talking points, it really is looking at it as objectively as I can, having spent the last year inside of my house on Zoom and, oh, and then, sorry to jump around, but I want to say this.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:15:58):

I'll, for the record--like, you're talking to a Latino who has a privilege of sitting in front of a screen and making money, right. Teaching.. That was not afforded to the people who bagged my groceries. Who picked the groceries. Who cleaned the homes who picked up the trash. And so there's a definite class element to this, that where the rich can say, or that the more well-off, you know, could say like, it's not that bad, and you who had to ride the bus to get to work to one of your three jobs. We're experiencing the pandemic in a very different way. And that needs to be said and registered somewhere, because I don't think that narrative is going to necessarily be

recorded as much as it needs to be. Just because those people are not necessarily able to speak on it in a certain, a formal way.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:17:05):

But I can tell you that I know of people for whom this pandemic was not like an intellectual exercise theoretical. It was like the lived experience of the decisions made at the top have just devastated people, people getting fired, if they did get sick, you know, you can't come back. So those are part of the reason why I wanted to talk to you just to flag that unfortunately we talked about the pandemic, but I think that we had pandemics--

COLLINGS (00:17:47):

Yes. That's a great point.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:17:48):

--as experienced by working class undocumented, some of them day laborers and, you know, and then of course the more professional, upper middle class you know, who could afford to fly to Greenland or wherever their bunker was-- That was another sort of--in reading the newspaper. It was like, yeah. You know that is an option for people who can experience the pandemic as an inconvenience, as opposed to life-threatening. But then all that goes away, of course, you know, when it's like supply chains are starting to go, and you do not have chlorine for your pool now.

COLLINGS (00:18:43):

Oh gosh. Horrors

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:18:48):

Yeah, exactly. Because the people whose job it is, you know, to deliver, it's like, they have all got COVID. And so there was that aspect of the pandemic that I wanted to make sure that I threw out and, you know, on a personal level, like I have to say, I don't know if it's a silver lining, but I have two kids and one of them is, you know, about to go into her senior year and the other one's about to go into into a middle school. And it was really interesting for me to--and my wife, we were talking about that, like what, what we've just lived through is what people did in 18-- Pre industrial revolution

COLLINGS (00:19:46):

Sure like for the plague or something.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:19:48):

Yeah. No, sitting down with your family, spending time with them. Just sort of having that very, very slow pace interactions that I have to tell you, like I have not had with my family since the kids were little and I took time off to--you know, when they were born. So I don't know what that, but that's sort of one of the other things that happened, it's like, hey, let's make the most of it. Cause we're probably going to be dead tomorrow because you know, there was a time when it's like food shortages are real. Because people were running into, you know Costco or

whatever, wiping off the shelves. Target had no toilet paper, which is interesting. Oh, here's a story that might illustrate something for your historians in the future.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:20:45):

So I was talking of all the things to run on, to freak out about and to load up on the one thing, it was all in the news, people can research this was toilet paper. And there was also later run on guns, but the toilet paper was fascinating to me. That's the first thing. And I'll tell you why, because I thought I associated it with the phobia or the intense fear of regressing into our basest most, you know, sort of bestial. And as long as I can maintain, you know, this control, this waste, I'm still civilized, even though people are, you know, burning and looting.

COLLINGS (00:21:46):

Right. Oh, that's great.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:21:51):

Psychologically, I don't, I'm sort of like, because I didn't have that drive, you know, to like go load up on toilet paper and I'm like, why? And it's because, oh, because I'm already a beast. So, I'm not afraid.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:22:10):

I'm not afraid that I'm going to become one. So I was in touch with that sort of that more primal. Cause I grew up, I grew up in Watts, you know, there's this, like some people call it poverty mentality when they're talking about economics, but there's a survival poverty mentality that teaches you like to live in very high stress situations. And I was talking to people about, and Latinos too, it's like, you have an instinctual knowledge of when it's time to freak out, you know? And even when it's time to freak out, it doesn't manifest in screaming and running around, it manifests like this laser sharp focus on one goal. Like one thing, you know? So it's like when there was a fight, you know, when somebody takes out a knife and they're drunk, it's like, that's when you're, you know, the sharpest, you're like at your most sort of sensitive to any shift in temperature and mood and anyhow, so you're, you don't, I don't think that I ever lost that.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:23:29):

And I don't think a lot of people lost that. So as weird as this might sound, especially in the early days of the pandemic, I was at my most familiar and most focused that I've ever been because it took me back to that like food, shelter, clothes, safety, all those like basic things that, look, I lived in a car when I was maybe like seven or eight, my mom was single mom. And so when I have conversations about people like living paycheck to paycheck, I'm sensitive to that reality. But I also, I'm sensitive to like, it could be worse. I have conversations with my wife where it's like, yeah, but we're nowhere near shitting in a bucket yet, because I know when you live in a garage and there's no plumbing, like that's what you do.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:24:39):

And we're nowhere near that. So the attitude again of the Latino community was one that came from that angle. And it wasn't until our mom or grandma our aunt started getting sick, that things started, you know, and, oh, by the way, my mom has not gotten sick. Thank God. And neither--

You know, my grandmothers on both sides have passed away. So I'm just speaking, metaphorically, you know, in general of when, you know, things became real for people about this time. So yeah. Those were the things that popped out at me about this.

COLLINGS (00:25:27):

I forget whether you said it was a baptism or a wedding and it was like it was outdoors under a tent, so it sounds like there was kind of like an issue. Were they having it outdoors to take precautions at that point?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:25:51):

Oh no, no, no, no. So I went to a couple of parties that were like this, and what happens is, you know, it saves you the cost of the hall. You do it in your backyard and the tent is there for sun, to protect you.

COLLINGS (00:26:06):

I just wanted to clarify that.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:26:09):

Yeah no, no. And not only that, because I forgot to say this, like, these are 60, 50 people inside of a tent. So they're not social-- Like, by this time people told you six feet, right. People who don't live in your household, and these people are on top of each other. I guess the point of that story is like that they were looking at me like I'm crazy.

COLLINGS (00:26:32):

Was this all family? Cause I've run into situations where people who have been, who are really aware and being really careful, but once they get around family it becomes very awkward to say you could infect me, I could infect you.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:26:49):

Yeah. That is a real thing. But you know, the parties that I'm referring to is--of the other side of the family--is a wedding. The other side of the family, you don't know them from Adam, they're there on top of each other, sitting next to people intermixing your table. They had their own tables, but the tables are not distanced. And so you run in to what you had in the Rose Garden. Wait, we're all outdoors. Nobody needs to wear a mask. That's for loonies, and then people start getting sick because it's not 100 percent. The unfortunate reality is chronologically I can't tell you when this was, but there was a spike during the holidays. They were subscribing to what you just said, like, hey, it's family, everybody's been careful or thinks they have been careful.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:27:49):

And then bam, you sort of realize--Like I was asymptomatic or, you know, I thought it was allergies. I feel like that was the attitude. And by the way, like there was, Stephen King has a stand, which is, you know, sort of an apocalyptic thing. And I think of that because you read about the sort of like doomsday scenarios and you're like, come on, really, am I supposed to believe that people are going to be that irresponsible and kill humanity? And there's like five

people left at the end, so when he was writing, he was looking for a way to wipe out the planet. Stephen King was in an interview and was talking about it and you know, the doctor's like, well, a virus, that's like, that's the best way.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:28:51):

So he writes that book. This is like way, you know, before the pandemic. But it was sort of like, nobody's going to believe that if you put it in a movie, no, one's going to believe it. And yet we were living the very attitude that we're like, that's impossible. People would not, you know, endanger each other. And yeah. So I do feel like the, that, that thing you just described. Hey, we're family, we're all good. You know, this was the cause of a lot of death and illness. And it just, again, it should be noted that the pandemic affects people with chronic illness, like disproportionately, harshly, and the Latino community, you know, and diabetes is there, so that was another driving force to mortality.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:29:48):

And in my community those people who were getting it, might've gotten away with it had they not also had diabetes on top of that or high blood or whatever, whatever it was, you know, it was a definite cultural thing. And so there were people throwing parties, like just like in the plague, you know, when you got the plague, then you were either taxed with being a caretaker or like you know, sort of pick up the bodies because you had already had it and you happen to survive. So you were immune. People had gotten it throwing parties. And saying, oh, we can't get sick anymore. And then it comes out that actually you can, after three months. And so just a lot of really rough misinformation things going on.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:30:41):

That reminded me of another thing. I think is a factor that I wanted to say the next [inaudible] , the power of or the velocity of technology. So when--if I post, hey, drinking bleach will kill the bacteria. Or a hot air dryer right into your nostrils. Well, yeah, because it raises the temperature of your membranes and it kills the virus. So anyway. Which by the way, a student I was teaching in Long Beach said that to me, it's like, look, go to the party, Mr. Aviles-Rodriguez. Because just make sure when you come back, make sure you put in a towel over your head and a blow dryer on hot dry and breathe in deeply. It'll burn you a little bit, but it'll kill all the viruses. I mean, that's where we were in the early days of the-- And that I said, who told you that, a doctor? No. No. It's all over the internet. Oh, okay. Okay. So we're in a place where any sort of craziness has gotten to like hundreds of thousands of people. Immediately. You know, and people are left like, first of all, trying to confirm, like where's that coming from? And there's no consequences there's no liability for any of them because the president himself is doing it. So what are you going to do?

COLLINGS (00:32:25):

And of course you would prefer to believe what's most convenient for you because you want to go to the party.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:32:32):

Totally. A lot of that going here.

COLLINGS (00:32:35):

So you were saying that there was kind of this fatalism that you were observing, and then side by side, there was also the sense that we're taking precautions, but we're doing it kind of like to the letter of the law, not the spirit of the law type of thing. Do you think that those played out in the Latino community from what you saw along class lines? The fatalism was more like, hey, I'm going into work day in and day out anyway. Why should I not see my family? How do you see those elements breaking out?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:33:30):

To make a generalization, it's hard for me, but I do know how [inaudible] . In my family, you know, it was a spectrum of fatalism, right. Culturally, you know, it was like, yeah, you're wearing a mask and not going through all these things, but you can get hit by a bus tomorrow. And what good did that do you, you know, to do that? So there was a little bit of that, but the family aspect, you know, it was, I think it's like, I am going to go up to this line as close to it, as I can lean over my feet are still behind it. It was a little bit of that. People were looking for ways to not cancel the birthday party and my sister was like, yeah, but if we social distance and wear masks, and I said, well, then you can't invite 500 people then, because your yard is not, you know, so there was a little bit of that compromise and, you know, the cultural events, you know, my mom had a birthday in the middle of the pandemic, you know, what logistically, what do we need to do?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:35:02):

My wife works at REI [sporting goods], she's operations. She does banking. So she doesn't like have interactions with the customers, but this week, people were attacking the monitor at the store for violating their freedom,

COLLINGS (00:35:30):

The monitor?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:35:32):

The person who is at the door. They say, oh, you know, welcome, please have social distance, blah, blah, blah. I think this is before Fauci said like, hey, mask indoors now, whether you're vaccinated or not. Which is another, let me talk to you about the vaccines--and the cultural response to that.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:35:52):

So what I was going to say is here we are, you know, in what hopefully is the latter part of the pandemic. And people are still pushing, knowing that there's like County health code law. And it's interesting because look, unlike a lot of like, sort of like dyed in the wool left-leaning people

COLLINGS (00:36:21):

I'm sorry, I lost you there for a second, dyed in the wool, what?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:36:25):

You know liberals. I see myself like as a passionate centrist but I preface what I'm going to say with that, so it's not dismissed as some kind of like, I'm not judging, to me, you know, if I want to go to a store without a shirt

COLLINGS (00:36:50):

Yes, exactly.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:36:51):

That's not going to kill anybody.

COLLINGS (00:36:53):

Right. Exactly.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:36:56):

And yet I am not allowed to do that. Nobody protests me going in. Nobody's like, we should be able to go shirtless to Target. But, yet a mask. And people. My wife was like, they say they have breathing issues and, you know, severe, you know, a pulmonary condition. And I'm like, well, then they should be home and not shopping at the store. And so all of these things were, oh, I bring all this up because we were not even talking about the early days when people don't have the information or there's misinformation. We're not talking about the midpoint where things are at the peak, we're talking about, like, if you have not gotten the message by now, you're just trying to kill people. You know, it's just flat out like--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:37:54):

So there's that aspect to the pandemic that I think is important, that it's not being just like we've had multiple pandemics, but we've also had multiple peaks and valleys to each of those pandemics. It hasn't been a uniform it's by like county it's fragmented and it's like culturally, religiously, politically, you know, there were conversations about like, well, if I can go get a tattoo, why can't I go to church? If I could go to a strip club, why can't I go to church or whatever it was, you know, it was like, because the churches were closed, but to tell you the truth, I don't think anything made people more holy than making them stay at home. So in many ways you just couldn't be out and about causing mischief. So I thought that that was a very, you know, be with yourself, actually Blaise Pascal, who was this like mathematician philosopher. He said all of humanity's troubles come from man's inability to be alone by himself in a room because, you know, it's like a lot of bad thoughts come to you about like your life and the meaning of it. So you'd rather be out causing havoc

COLLINGS (00:39:16):

The group mind.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:39:19):

Yes. There's a little bit of that. It was coming from conservative religious communities, of which I belong to one, you know, we stayed away from church for a good chunk of the year and then

they started outdoor church and then we eased into that. And then of course now it's in church, it was mask optional, but we wear our masks anyway, and now it's like you have to wear a mask.

COLLINGS (00:39:46):
What church is this? What church do you belong to?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:39:46):
Holy Trinity in Atwater village.

COLLINGS (00:39:51):
How are people at the church responding to all of this?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:39:55):
Look, I'll tell you. It's funny because there's the resistance let's say, I mean, unfortunately has come primarily from the conservative, I say in my experience from the conservative sector. It's been associated first as a ploy on the left and then as an attack on people's liberties. And so I think a lot of people bought into that and they wanted to express their freedom and their trust in God. By not subscribing to this, you know, mask mandated--

COLLINGS (00:40:37):
This is kind of like a devotional act to not wear a mask?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:40:41):
Yeah. It was, it read that way in the church, but wait. So then there's your devotional act. And then there's the archdiocese saying you will not hold mass. The bishops have like the authority to dictate, you know, when and where, and they give dispensations for people. And we went to mass online every week. So then there's that aspect of the equation of people, not everybody who resists, you know, the vaccine or wearing a mask was doing it out of this, like, you know, sort of right-wing craziness. Some people were like, you know, thoughtful. I think it's wrong, still wrong, but, not coming at from the same direction as people might assume. You know, it's just more complex than that. So in the course of the pandemic, you start seeing funeral after funeral, after funeral on the weekends.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:41:50):
And the priest saying like, you know, the parking lot will be closed because we have a funeral. These meetings can not meet because we have a funeral. And so you start to say like, man, a whole lot of people are dying. Like we're hearing about it. Like more than we used to. I mean, there's obviously people dying all the time, but it was clear that these funerals were connected to the pandemic, at least to me. It's like, come on now. So you know, people started to kind of back off of this idea of masks as a you know, an imposition or an unnecessary thing. And then you see the priests and the deacons, and they're all wearing them by law, you because they have to. And so that was my experience in that parish and the parish is pretty small intimate.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:42:49):

But, oh, here's another thing about that parish. I would say like 80, 70, or 80 percent of them are Filipino. Now, why is that important? Because a large percentage of Filipinos are in the healthcare industry. They're nurses at this historical point in time. You know, it's just factual. Like that we have many, many of our parishioners who are doctors and nurses and they, you know, don't have any hesitation to say like, no, like people are like--the emergency rooms are in fact, you know, packed with COVID cases. So it was never a case for them and in our parish that this thing was a hoax or anything because enough people were close to it again, working in the healthcare industry to know like, no, this is not anything other than what people are saying, which is a full-fledged pandemic and all that. So yeah, so that was the parish and spiritual kind of life that happened.

COLLINGS (00:44:07):

But you said there was this contingent that you characterize as more conservative who thought that it was an imposition on their freedom. Were they not Filipino perhaps?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:44:21):

No. So first of all, this was in-- I know that when I speak, it was like, all this happened yesterday. No, this was like a year's worth of experiences. So the people in the early days, it varied, you know, Latino, Filipino. I don't know if I had any Anglo, you know, people sort of resisting, but so that was the early day resistance, like wearing masks. And then of course they're watching the news and they're seeing, you know, all these gatherings, anti-mask, you know gatherings happening especially in the beach cities. And so I'm sure that a lot of that sort of played into their attitude of like, you know, but like, it wasn't up to, like, you could not show up to mass without a mask in the period, you know, they were just grumbling about how it shouldn't be that, but they were still like, nobody was like, you know, not doing it when, when they were told, because they understood it's part of the being a part of the congregation and, you know, and the doors were opened.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:45:31):

There were fans blowing, you know, to circulate the air and all these precautions were being taken. I don't know if this is a great achievement, but the parish has not had COVID cases traced to it. In other words, it has been, you know, over the course of whatever the year and plus a place where people can gather and not be infected with all the things they did, they closed this church and had that outdoor mass for a good chunk of time and other precautions, you know, that they had.

COLLINGS (00:46:07):

So you've kind of pointed to a fatalism, like, I could get hit by a bus tomorrow that you heard about, and then also this maybe devotional aspect, like, I want to give myself over to God's will, and then also this notion of my freedoms. Do you think that from what you observed that the my freedoms aspect was exacerbated by the political situation in the country? Did you see a direct connection there, or was that something more generic from what you saw?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:46:54):

Historians will say what they're going to say, but we're living today. And it would be delinquent. Okay. To say that the political situation you just referred to had nothing to do with it, so, and even more delinquent. So that would just be bad. But then to say like that, what it did have to do, what it may have had to have done with the thing was not severely criminally delinquent. I think that what the political situation did was instead of trying to stop it, I think it said, let's make it burn out faster by throwing gasoline on it. And in the process they killed, you know, hundreds of thousands of people. Or people, you know, led people to kill themselves because ultimately, you know, there was a great story about a Latino man, he was like a Trumper guy and his daughter wrote an op-ed and said my father's only pre-existing condition was believing in Trump. That was the gist of her op-ed there. And I think that personal responsibility is important, but that having people say, ah, you know, you can get COVID even if you do all these things. So why do them anyway, that sort of attitude was constantly being parroted by the media, even like the media took so long to just be like, hey, we don't have to run this.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:48:56):

We can cut away from this, you know? And so we got to the point where like the networks, were like, no, now we're completely complicit in this, and it took way too long for them to do it, unfortunately. And so all of that plays. Now I'm sitting here and I'm saying it was only Trump, it was only his administration. No, but you cannot say again that a large part of the pain and suffering and death that we've experienced, wasn't a direct product of the strategy that was employed. I don't know if there's been a lot of this, like a writeup, but we've already kind of talked about it that they recorded in their actions and in their policies. They sort of prescribed a short, sharp burst for the pandemic.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:50:04):

And then we're going to get back to normal. By Easter in April it's going to be okay. And so people were like, oh shit by Easter. Oh, okay. Then, you know, I'll wear my mask till Easter or whatever it might've been. And just so you know, the Trump administration got more Latino votes the second time. Not only that actually more across the board, more votes in women, blacks, but of course, you know, except white males, who I'm reconsidering my thoughts on, I think they're smarter, at least in this case, they've proved themselves smarter than I thought. But I was going to say also that the problem, again, that the administration created was not sort of contained to one ethnic group, right. It wasn't contained to Trumpers, even people who are not registered Republicans and don't care for Trump, kind of like the idea of not having to wear a mask to the party. And so, you know, you identified as whatever's best for my personal comfort is what I'm going to subscribe to.

COLLINGS (00:51:30):

And then I have to build a philosophy around it.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:51:34):

Yeah, totally.

COLLINGS (00:51:37):

So looking back on everything, did anything surprise you or did your worldview coming into all of this allow for everything that you've seen?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:52:02):

I have to say that one thing that popped out at me very starkly was my godson, who, he's now a father himself. And to find out that he had subscribed to the anti-mask, him and his wife, and showing up to family gatherings without a mask. I wasn't prepared after having decided those people are crazy to have craziness in my own, I mean, I have plenty of craziness in my family. I wasn't expecting that because he's, I still think he's a very sensitive, intelligent young man. But for some reason, you know, the circles that he's in or whatever it is, led him to be like, okay. And so then what happens? He gets COVID. And look, again, nobody in my family has passed away, but if you read, the long-term effects of this thing are unknown.

COLLINGS (00:53:30):

I know, that's scary.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:53:31):

So who knows what that's going to be for him in his old age, or, you know, they're talking about like cognitive decline being another sort of a residue effect of the pandemic, of the virus. So anyway, I think that that stands out to me, you know, and granted that experience was like early on as well, maybe midpoint kind of leading up to the— so I get it that it might be attributable to that sort of, you know echo chamber. You're in this room full of mirrors and, you know, everybody's nodding along with you agreeing with everything that you say. Unfortunately, the consequences of that are real. And so I also wanted to say this perspective and that's-- The Trump administration will never call what they do postmodernism.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:54:42):

Like that's very, very like associated with the left and Marxism and all that. But I've spoken to my friends about this and it's a very unpopular and kind of like, it makes people have to grapple with the consequences of their beliefs and nobody wants to do that. And so post-modern philosophy, which I was dipped in, submerged in, in my graduate work, teaches the sort of historical location of truth and memory. There's no ultimate truth. There is no ultimate meaning, there's only these historical contingent realities that we manufacture, that we construct, okay?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:55:43):

When you join that to religious fervor, it is an atomic combination. And so not to knock-- Look, so I could get more into that, but just let me tell you that when the administration gets up and says, well, those are alternate facts, right? They're absolutely parroting the philosophy that your truth and my lie are the same. It's just if I yell mine louder and enough, it'll be the same, actually it will become true. And so yeah, you have pictures where one fourth of the lawn is empty, but I still say it's the biggest crowd ever, so deal with it. And everybody was unprepared for that much commitment to the post-modern mentality coming from the right.

COLLINGS (00:56:50):

You could almost argue that some of the impulses of post-modern thought comes out of living within a world that is run, driven by advertising. Who is better-- Trump is better at marketing than just about anybody.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:57:10):

No, completely, absolutely. That's in the mix there of manipulating reality, convincing people of untruths. And you know, I want it recorded here that I have absolutely no qualms with letting go of ultimate truth, but what I will not give up, and I refuse and cannot give up, is agreeing that there are no ultimate falsehoods. And if there are no ultimate falsehoods, we're in big trouble. As evidenced.

COLLINGS (00:57:57):

That's a really interesting distinction.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:58:00):

No, it is. But let me tell you, I thought very deeply, mostly because of getting beat over the head with a stick, whenever I questioned, you know, these dogmas, but it's important to me, that distinction is very important, because what you never hear or never dealt with, is that letting go of ultimate truth, and in some cases, even little T truth, automatically forces you to give up capital F falsehoods and smaller F falsehoods. And that is where things unravel. And so I wanted to make that note, because that is at play with how these untruths were able to be consistently, systematically turned out and to the death of hundreds. I would say, you know, it affected even outside of our country because we are the shining, you know we're the example, right? So people are looking over here and saying, hey, I want to be, you know, like Mike, let me not wear a mask.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (00:59:16):

I mean, I'm not trying to pin every single death on the United States but I'm saying there are consequences. The other thing, that was one on the left, but on the right we have this other phenomenon. I have a good friend who is a Christian fundamentalist Trumper. You know, I went to high school with him, love him to death. So I was talking to him in an unrelated conversation, he says, you know, when we speak in tongues, you need at least two people to recognize what you're saying in order for it to be officially-- And I said, well, what happens if nobody, if the person goes into a trance and no one understands them and agrees that they have become possessed by the spirit? And he's like there's no consequences. That person is not penalized or anything, it's just, they were feeling it, but it wasn't complete.

COLLINGS (01:00:15):

Yeah. They struck out, but that's it.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:00:19):

Now think about that. Think about that attitude of no consequences for in effect manufacturing a situation, a happening. If I say, well, you know, Biden got arrested, yesterday. Like, fuck, I don't know if he did, but like, cool. Like I was the first one to know, to call it if he did it. Right? But there's no consequences. Nobody's going to go after you for manufacturing lies, like flat out that

you knew you had no proof, you had a feeling. It just felt right that Obama got, like, arrested. It would serve him right. And it would be good. And so when you add that, right? Then you start getting into this, what a fusion, fission of this atomic, it's like boom! That's going to blow you-- you just blow some stuff up with that. That mixture. So I always tell people when I rant about stuff like this, I was like, if you repeat it, I'm going to deny it.

COLLINGS (01:01:44):

You know, I was thinking the other day, how the rant has become its own form, you know, like the haiku or something.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:01:55):

Yeah, totally. On Fox and on all those other networks, you can't call them news, but you can call them networks. And so, okay. So then for the pandemic wise, you know, connects again, this, like, it could be true or it's totally untrue, but who cares with this thing about the election? If all I need to do in our postmodern world, because truth doesn't exist, is get enough momentum behind the reality that I want to impose, then boom. Let's do it. And if they're doing it and they weren't able to do it, you know, but think back to our good friend Pence. If he says anything other than what he said, which was, let's continue with this certification, we have another civil war on our hands.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:02:54):

So say whatever you want about the guy. Cause he was, you know, bad news for many years under Trump. But that moment I think was definitive, because it broke this uniform fiction that Trump was, although when he declared that he had been robbed, he was alone on stage. Nobody would stand next to him. And in the Republican convention, it was only his sons and daughters and son's girlfriend who spoke other than him. So he was going to become the party. So those are all supporting evidence to my idea that there is a connection between this pandemic and how horribly we handled it for a long time, we're playing catch up. And look, Biden, it's so funny because nobody wants to admit it, but he's the best president we've had since like, I don't even know.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:03:59):

But no, it's so interesting because look, they're going at him about Israel bombing the Palestinians. So he needs to come and condemn. Okay. Somewhere, somehow Israel gets a phone call and Israel stops bombing. Nobody got on the news to shame them. I don't know what that man said. But I know that he made a call that Clinton couldn't make, Obama couldn't make, or didn't make. And so it's just that quiet kind of like competency that like, we had forgotten that that's possible to like, get things done without putting on a show. Anyway, I said digression, but it's connected to this idea that as old and senile and intellectually declining as he may be--if you listen to Fox-- he's getting things done in a very different, deliberate, thoughtful manner.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:05:08):

And I think it's because the guy's like, what are you going to do to me? You know, it's like, I'm like 80, whatever, seventy something years old. I might run again, might not, but who cares? What do I have to prove? And so he is exactly what we needed to stabilize. And he's a politician

and he's going to, you know, but he also is that type of politician that like will put his foot in his mouth every once in a while. But but in the context of what we've been through with the former administration, it's like, man, give me anything.

COLLINGS (01:05:46):

Give me an Alka-Seltzer, quick.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:05:50):

Totally. So yeah, that's my feeling about the pandemic's political aspects. And history will again, you know, sort of look back. And I have to say, look what they're trying to do to, this is another sort of rewriting of history, but you know, Tricky Dicky got his library, you know? And maybe Watergate is a room in the library. Maybe it's like, a display in the library, but it's part of the sanitizing delinquent criminal behavior, which I think will be the same for for Trump. This will become unfortunately a footnote in his— Unless you, which I don't put it past him, going even worse with with this overthrowing the government next month, which is yeah, just unfortunate, the unfortunate things that are coming out of him trying to mobilize. I don't know if you know this, he was trying to mobilize the military, you know, when he was robbed quote-unquote robbed. So, you know, that's real and that's what happens when you produce, oh, sorry, just to be clear, this is not a conversation about one man. To me, Trump is a symptom, he's not a disease. There's going to be many more Trumps if we don't get this thing cleaned up.

COLLINGS (01:07:24):

Definitely. And it's interesting, Trump and Pence, now that I think about it are actually that combination that you pointed to, the postmodern and the religion.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:07:35):

Yeah. Actually, it's funny. I didn't think of that, but you're right. He brought a blind devotion to his job, Pence did. And then of course, Trump sort of, I think stumbled upon, you know, this postmodern way of thinking via Giuliani and his little cohort, because they were like, because he's a lawyer. And he's like, Hmm, what is justice? It's like, whoever wins is true. But of course he over did it with his allegiance to that idea because now he's, you know, disbarred at least in a couple of states. So it's interesting what saved us—.

COLLINGS (01:08:17):

So he was speaking in tongues, but there did turn out to be a penalty.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:08:22):

Yeah, exactly. And your penalty came from the most maligned, like the court system, like the one institution, nobody cares for. It doesn't work. And it's like, totally, the wheels grind slowly. Well, what we found out is they also grind thinly down to powder because it was the only thing that stopped this juggernaut. And why did it stop it? Because in the court of law, there's still facts. And so it's funny, like nobody really registers the true, it wasn't like a bunch of judges, because most of them were appointed by Trump anyway. And so what was it then? It was just the fact that while this manufacturing of truth works, the moment that you ask it for evidence, it

falls apart and it wasn't the type of evidence that you can give from outside of a nursery store in front of a, you know, dildo shop.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:09:29):

Like, if you wrote that, nobody would believe it. Like in that movie, why would you put him in a nursery? Come on like, it's like, anyway, but history's going to hopefully have a field day with that. Okay. So, the courts ask you for verifiable truth. You didn't have it. And then things stopped. And as I laugh, I was talking to my friend, as I laughed at this administration, I remember Ken Follet's novel, he has like a three-part series that goes from like World War I to the sixties. And in the end of the first installment he has a German-British married couple who are sitting there, and he's reading the newspaper, he's talking, he says, ugh, these crazy brown shirts stormed one of the annexes, hahaha idiots. So that's the end of the first book. And then the beginning of the second book is, of course, World War II and the crazy brown shirts are running Germany now. I'm cognizant that this is no joke as I laugh at the particulars, you know, his hair dye you know sort of dripping down his face. It's like, that is true danger, you know, embodied if we don't take this seriously. Because the last thing we need is for somebody to harness the audience that Trump is going to leave us. Because they're going to be around. The Tea Party became the Trump party, can become something else. And you know, this small government idea is great until you get a national problem, like a pandemic and have to vaccinate people, which by the way there's a lot of fear about this vaccine.

COLLINGS (01:11:35):

Yeah. Let's-- If you have time, I don't want to prolong the time if you don't have it, but how have you seen the vaccine rollout?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:11:45):

Yeah, so I'm vaccinated. And my wife is, and my kids aren't. It's not approved. I think one of them is going to be for youth under 16. So we have had conversations about, like, how are we going to manage this as a family? My daughter is two months away from becoming eighteen. So she'll be able to get the Johnson and Johnson, which has the benefit of being one dose. And then my son is the question mark because he's about to be 14. And there's going to be a conversation about, like, because it's still called, I think it's classification of like emergency use, they can't require it yet. So we were thinking about, do we wait until they mandate it and then we just get it to him? Or, you know, do we to try and get him the vaccine, get a jump on it and have it done. And so we're debating that as we speak right now. But there's some concerns about both the Pfizer and the Moderna and that is that they there are a type of a vaccine that goes into your DNA. The Johnson Johnson is like classic-

COLLINGS (01:13:25):

It's the traditional--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:13:28):

Traditional. The others go into your DNA and reprogram it. And so there is the—

COLLINGS (01:13:39):

Which vaccine did you have by the way?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:13:41):

Oh, no, I did the Johnson and Johnson. And what decided for my wife and I was that it was one shot. Now, it's not as effective. I think it was like 70 or 80 percent versus, you know, 90, but because we were always masking regardless and we've been staying away from, you know, all the social distancing and all the rest of it, we thought, okay, well that will be enough to, this was all before, like Northridge requires it now. It's mandated. You have to. So what is that going to mean? It's been decreed safe. So now it's like, there's a group of people saying, what are the long term effects of this? You know? And then religiously, just to bring it back to the faith element, like because of the use of stem cells in these vaccines, there were the-- Because of the belief of life itself starting at conception, people were hesitant. And then the church came out thankfully and said, look, the benefits of having this lifesaving intervention outweigh that element of them using human cells.

COLLINGS (01:15:13):

So was that a discussion at your church?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:15:16):

Yeah. So it was, no. Well, that discussion didn't happen at my church. It happened in the Vatican.

COLLINGS (01:15:23):

No, no. I mean, among the people that you knew there.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:15:25):

Yes, yes. So there is resistance to using vaccines in my parish by people who are like, it has, you know, human cells in it. And so there's no like judgment, except that more and more, what you're starting to see is that there's going to be consequences for that choice. It's going to be very, very difficult for you to function normally. Like, for example, there's people like right now in the paper talking about like, okay, if you don't get vaccinated, we will not cover any COVID related costs. So you can exercise your freedom, yeah exercise it. But you pay for it.

COLLINGS (01:16:16):

I see. Well, that's very American as well. Isn't it?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:16:20):

Yeah exactly. Which, look, I'm all about it. If the freedom to exercise your choices is paramount, then so are the consequences, because what happens is you want to ride a motorcycle without a helmet. You don't like this law, but when you get brain damage, I'm not going to pay for it because you made a choice and assumed the risks. So there's that aspect.

COLLINGS (01:16:46):

When you mention it, I'm kind of surprised this hasn't come up already.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:16:50):

Oh, because it was in the paper today. Or yesterday. My wife and I were talking about this either yesterday's LA Times or today's. No, no, it was yesterday, the 28th or the 27th. That's the conversation that we had. You know, she read, it, told me about it and I was like, oh, okay. There's going to be more of that because there should be, because again, your freedom ends where my freedom begins. We both have freedoms and I should have a freedom not to get killed because you want to cough up the room that we're in and you don't know you're sick. And so that's been a development that I think is completely consistent with— If in fact, freedom is the idea then, except these consequences, because, you know, we're trying to get back to school. We're trying to get back to the movies, to get back to some normalcy and having people— I think it's selfish.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:18:02):

There's a selfishness aspect to it. That's just me though. I don't want to judge people's, you know, personal strongly held beliefs. But at the same time you have to balance that with the needs of the whole. And yeah that's why I come down— Like, I'm very ambivalent about trying to mandate things to people. But when it comes to issues of health and safety, your personal freedom is secondary. I think. And it has to be because then what we have is like 25 Guillermos in the room. Who each have a set of values and they're like killing everybody. As opposed to just saying, Hey, we're going to all stop on red. I know it sucks, but let's just all do it so that we don't kill each other.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:18:58):

And so, yeah, that's my experience with the vaccine that there's resistance, but it's starting to get more and more difficult to just rationalize, you know? And then the other thing I wanted to say was that a lot of this hand-wringing that I'm talking about, like, why don't people understand? You know,don't they see? All of that. And all of my hand-wringing didn't do as much as my sister's nephew getting sick. That did more for them to be like, oh shit. Not only is this real, but it sucks. So all these people who are not masking, it's going to take care of itself one way or the other. There's people who are like, oh, I got sick, but I'm still not going to wear a mask. But those are just sort of like the people who are not going to listen, whether or not, there's nothing that's going to you know— and that's a very small number of people.

COLLINGS (01:20:05):

We might be going into a different landscape because this new variant apparently makes you sicker. That's what they say.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:20:11):

But it's less lethal from what I hear. Are you talking about the Delta? Yeah, so Delta, from what I understand is much much more contagious. It can make you sicker, but it's not as deadly. I mean, you look at any silver lining, but I mean we're up to Lambda. Like we're running out of Greek alphabet here. Because the longer that people stay with it, the more it mutates. And so there's that aspect to it as well. And again, I think the only thing that people react to very viscerally is, do you want to go back to a lockdown? That's it. Yes or no, because if you don't, you need to do these things. Nobody wants to go back to the lockdown.

COLLINGS (01:21:12):

With the recall election in California, for the governor happening on September 14th, there will be no lockdown.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:21:20):

Well, right. Okay. Yeah. So that's another, oh yeah. Bring it home. So this guy Newsome, like again, the most consummate politician, right? It's in his DNA, that slimy duplicitous sort of like everything political that you think of negative, you think of him, right? His kids are running around without a mask. Him running around without a mask. You know, I get it. That doesn't play very well. It plays right into the hands of these people. But you know, yeah. There's political survival and then there's human survival. And I think he's going for political because that would be the end of him if he shut down the state. Although he might not have a choice if the hospital beds— I mean, that's real. If infections get out of control. It's not going to be a matter of if it's going to be, when are you going to shut down the state?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:22:20):

It's going to turn into like, you're delinquent because you let it get this far. We still want you out. By the way, from what I see, this reelection is going to cost us hundreds of millions of dollars, whatever. And it's not going to go anywhere because they've shown their craziness, these California loonies and they don't have the votes. So yeah. Hopefully. You know, it's not like Gray Davis. Gray Davis was pissing people off at every level with his driving tax, you know, the driver's license kind of fee.

COLLINGS (01:22:58):

Yeah. Running against Arnold Schwartzenegger.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:23:01):

Yes, exactly. I mean he had a legitimate, well, he was a, what am I talking about legitimate? He had a recognizable name running against him and blah blah. So yeah. I feel like to bring it home. I have to say that California, you asked me, were you surprised? Were you not? One of the other things that surprised me on a more general level was the state's initial response versus you know, what eventually happened, which was like, the response was like, ah, this is crazy. We don't need to do anything. And then the infections skyrocketed. And then people sort of fell in line more into what I see California as, sort of like a more rational place, Practical. I mean, I don't want to say rational, but like, for me, just being practical, like, do you want to be able to sell your stuff?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:24:01):

Because if you got sick people, they're not going to go shopping, and you're not going to make any money. So yeah, that's, to me that's an angle that that surprised me initially. And then we sort of got back to what I believe is California's uniqueness. Even though we're so large and spread out, we still have that kind of like, you know, practical, nobody likes it, but we have to do it, kind of attitude. And I think that's where we are now for the most part. Hopefully we'll stay there.

COLLINGS (01:24:39):

I think we keep using the word real, like in relation to sort of the wall that one hits with the virus. Like you've slammed into this wall of reality. I've wondered if some of the outrage that people have around restrictions, masking, whatnot, is outrage against being forced to confront something real when we've been kind of living in this, as you put it, sort of postmodern, hyper real for so long. You know, with all of our streaming services and social media and this distinction that people make, IRL, I'm meeting somebody IRL in real life, versus when that becomes a distinction and then you're thrown into IRL pretty definitively, it's a bit of a shock.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:25:49):

I really resonate with that description you just gave of the non-negotiable reality of a virus. Of a virus in real life, which doesn't exist until it really does actually exist. And the other thing is to what you say is like, it's very difficult for a virus to be politicized, right? They tried it. It was, I remember early on, you know, it was like, oh, these Black Lives Matter people are coughing on people. They know they have it and they're going to spread it. And then you know, that didn't, there's no traction there because the virus doesn't care. It's just going to kill you. It's just wants to spread. It wants a host and it wants to spread, and that has nothing to do with anything political. And so in many ways— I love that.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:26:51):

I'm going to steal that idea from you because I think it's because it is an assertion of nature, right? Technology has run the show for so long. At the tune of a thousand dollar phone that costs them like 5 dollars to make. That is technology. But now nature says, actually, you can't control me and I prove it to you with forest fires, but that doesn't get it across enough. I proved it to you with earthquakes, flooding, let me show you something. And so then nature shows you the unnegotiable reality of your dependence and powerlessness to nature. And that makes people very angry and very, very anxious. And I think that that's a product of where we are because people go into the store, of course, you're going to yell at that person who's a reminder, you know? It's like, right? Oh, just really quickly too, my wife was talking about the turnover at work that's happening. And it's not because the job is hard or whatever, it's because customers are vicious. And so not only people who are like, you ask them to put up their mask, they put it up. And then when you turn your back, they pull it back down, that kind of thing. But also just like spewing just venom. Why? Because you're there. And because things are hard and because you're there to punch on as an employee. And so I think that—

COLLINGS (01:28:40):

And because Twitter doesn't have a phone number and so forth, yeah.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:28:46):

Exactly. I didn't know that cause, oh, one of the reasons why I'm as sane as I am is because I don't have Facebook. And so I think that helps me to not know how horrible things are, but it also helps me to just watch and listen to people and where they are. And I think there's a lot of anxiety, suicides have gone up. And I think it's connected to this, how do we deal with this existential truth that has been hidden from us, that we run the world. And then the way you deal with it is all these things that we talked about, like anger. But, you know, like honestly, I haven't seen it that much in religious circles.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:29:39):

Listen, I'm not at all like, I'm a practicing Catholic. I'm not at all like trying to say, believe me, every Catholic worth their salt you know, needs to deal with the child rape factories that we were running for quite a while unchecked. But I'm saying that the other side of religion is that there is a real comfort in that, giving yourself over to a higher power and realizing your powerlessness against these elements. And, you know, there's no other way to say why religious people are more at peace and they're more focused. And I think it's because they never bought into the idea that they have power over anything. Like barely yourself. So I think that the recognition of that also is important we think like bashing fundamentalists, or I'm sorry, I've been sort of pointing out the shortcomings, but inside of that, there are also a lot of beneficial and important elements that that community brings.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:30:57):

And I think one of them is that realization that what the media advertises and what the politicians say, ultimately at the end of the day, unraveled in the face of reality, which you identified as the real. And I guess the philosophical response would be that there is no reality. That would be the way to avoid having to deal with that. But again, when your aunt, uncle, sister, brother, wife is in the ICU and you can't go see them and they're on a tube, that's pretty real. That's real. And so, yeah.

COLLINGS (01:31:49):

That loops into that thing about the toilet paper, actually, that you were--

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:32:03):

Oh yeah, because what's more real?

COLLINGS (01:32:06):

Yeah. This is the last boundary.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:32:12):

Yes, exactly. I guess that would be like a sub-conscious kind of thing. Yeah. I don't know if in the through line of these interviews, you know, that that idea has come up about the role that technology has played, of course in fast paced, misinformation spreading. I mentioned that. But also in this deeper sense of the mediated world being mistaken for the actual world and it's like, we need a vocabulary.

COLLINGS (01:32:46):

Being mistaken, that's great. Being mistaken for—

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:32:50):

Yeah. It's not at all like a willful thing. I tell my students you tell me you have 500 friends, 500 friends on Facebook. And I say to you, how many of them are going to pick you up from the airport or go to your funeral? And so that's the question of the real there. Because what's a real friend? Somebody who picks you up from the airport, who puts up with you. And none of those

people fit that description. And so we are, instead of admitting it, we're redefining what a friend is. It's someone you send pictures of your food to, that's your friend. And so, yeah, there's something there in the distinction between the world that we've been living in as enlightened techno creatures, and then just basically animals.

COLLINGS (01:33:54):

Then ironically with the separation we've been thrust ever more into that technological separation with the Zoom teaching and the Zoom Thanksgivings or whatever.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:34:10):

Yeah. Which I want to say about my personal experience with it. I got to a point where I was very grateful because before the pandemic people were actually— there was a big drive to mediate all teaching and it's like, hey, teaching is just as good, even better. Students are savvy. They got their tablets. And I was grateful that we got a glimpse of what it really is. Because look, I'm not like at all condemning myself beyond saying, like I told my students, as competent or incompetent as I may be in real face to face, I know for a fact that I am not able to teach you as well in this Zoom environment. I apologize. It's the best we can do. Right? And so I recognize that not as an indictment or anything, it's just like, you are trying to recreate live-ness through a mediator and it just doesn't work.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:35:17):

There's something human, like when I see you and I'm like, oh, she just got some good news, how do I know that? Well, I don't see that on the, on the zoom. I don't know if you have good news because, maybe the pheromones don't make it through the wires, something is missing in this technological thing. We're doing an interview on the phone. So it's not like technology doesn't have its place. But what's happening is that we finally realized, it's not going to replace live contact anytime soon. Logistically most of my meetings happen right after class, students coming up to me. They can't do that on Zoom because they're exhausted from being in front of the screen, which by the way, is another good thing about this pandemic, is that you realize that there is a cost to technology, which before it was like all upside, you know? Carpal tunnel syndrome, with you're hand holding your phone at an angle to see it.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:36:22):

Exhaustion from having to stare at the screen. So all of those things in the sort of mad rush to go to online, because we didn't have a choice, are going to have to go into the mix of like, do we want to go online? Oh, and then students, I don't care what you say about students of like, they're on their phones and all that. Students know the difference between the live class they had two years ago and the Zoom class they had this year. You don't need to tell them that one, they learned a lot and the other one they learned, maybe some, you know? And so that's another sort of benefit looking towards the future. I think that we're going to be a little bit more realistic about just how limited these things that we thought were limitless were.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:37:16):

In many ways it was like the trajectory of fast food. Like we could feed the world. Well, you can feed the world with less nutrition, less filling. And so you can teach 10 times as many students,

one eighth as well. Just recognize that it's like one eighth and they're going to be hungry in an hour because there's no nutrition in what you just did. So anyway. Yeah, I feel like that's another realization of technology and I've never been like an early adopter, but I've never been like a Luddite either. I recognize the importance of technology. But what this pandemic has taught us again, is that we have to be very, very careful about the complete turnover to technology outsourcing of all the problems that it's going to solve.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:38:15):

It's going to create at least as many. Just for this thing, and then I'll let you go. It's like I knew from a mechanic friend of mine when electric cars first came out. Okay. And he says to me, first he taught me about planned obsolescence, which is the design to— for the brakes first. For the brakes. It's like, no matter if you drive your car every day, the brakes will probably run down in two years. If you don't drive your car at all, your brakes will probably run down in two years. Because the chemical compound of the brake pads is made to disintegrate on a two-year timetable. So the thing is, that's planned obsolescence because we need to get you back into this showroom. Right? Fixing your car. So, anyway that was one thing that he told me.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:39:13):

But then the other thing he said to me was, you know, Guillermo, yeah, they're saving the planet, but there's no recycling for these batteries that these electric cars run on. So when you wreck your electric car, you can't recycle that battery. And the chemicals that are needed for the batteries are in Africa. Right? And believe me, capitalism has a long track record of treating people very well when they're trying to get things out of the ground. So that is unspoken cost. So anyway, maybe like a week ago, the LA Times ran a thing about the batteries finally, right? Like what is this 25 years after everybody knew these batteries can't be, you know? So now it's a problem. Well, because you went into the game thinking this was a quick fix and it was going to solve global warming.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:40:08):

And now you have this like radioactive goop. I know we started with the pandemic, but it's all connected, because ultimately, right, this cloud, you know what the cloud is? People in the future are going to know what the cloud is, the cloud is what we call other people's computers. So all your information is on a server in Utah, in the middle of the desert using hundreds of millions of watts of power to stay cool enough to keep your information.

COLLINGS (01:40:49):

All your cat pictures.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:40:55):

Hey, that's important. People are going to need that in future. Shoot. So there you have it.

COLLINGS (01:41:11):

Okay. Well, I know you have to go-- One two-second question. Have you thought about theater around this?

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:41:23):

Yeah. I just attended a staged reading of a friend's play about the LA riot. And the technology hasn't— we'll never, I don't think catch up to the face-to-face live-ness of it. And so for what it was, it's like early on, I went to some shows and I'm like, are you kidding me? I can't sit through this thing. Because it was like the lag, somebody would say a line, it takes 0.3 whatever for them to hear it and then another— So it was like, what? People are struggling with that new mode. But fortunately what they actually came up with, it's just doing theater outdoors again. And so what happens is they just erected stages in parking lot, like at the fountain, and people are socially distanced and they're watching live.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:42:23):

So that's how they've sort of gotten around it. I don't think that-- This is my like crystal ball in the future-- I don't think that theater is going to abandon the internet soon, but film is going to embrace it. In other words, theater will go to liveliness and acting will go to the online in the form of film. So what will happen is that new and interesting and quick ways to edit and manufacture digital cinematic content is going to develop and then theater is going to end up what it was. And by the way, the early, early days of film learned it, because what movies were were--like a camera was set up and then people would do a play in front of the camera, they'll do a scene. And that was the way that it started.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:43:21):

And now I think theater is going to end up going through the same realization with technology, but not at all doing plays on camera. Even with the technology being caught up, there is no way to send the scent of an actor's sweat right, across the room to the group. And I'll put it to you like this, what I'm saying is that we will never give our iPods, iPhones a standing ovation after the last song of the album is played. Like, I don't think that is ever going to happen. And because it's never going to happen, theater's never going to live on the internet, in a way that people have tried. It has been like spectacularly failure of performance to make it onto the digital stream. Because it's the circle peg in a square hole.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:44:29):

It just, it's not the same thing, go to film if you're going to do that or live TV. I mean or TV if you're going to try that. I think people realize that. And thankfully so. And just to bring you back to the pandemic, we saw this happen with the plague, the theater, what did the theater do? It didn't go well, the internet didn't exist. It didn't go online. It didn't go internal. It went external. And so what you had was the birth of these troupes, site-specific theater, the wagons, right? And so what I think actually is going to happen, it's already happening, right? If you look at the medieval times, what happened economically, the workers were empowered because there's just so little labor. If you look at the newspaper today, they got 500 dollar signing bonus.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:45:32):

Because labor finally has found itself in a place where it's like, wait, I have power. And so people are like, Aw, man, don't let these workers, anyway so that's another thing. But then the other element to it is that they just went to the streets and they did shows where people were. And people loved it. And I think that's going to happen again. And I called it before the

pandemic. I said, we're going to go out into a new generation of site-specific work. Not because of the pandemic, but because we are reliving feudal times today. So my argument in conversations, I never wrote it down. I might put it down sometime, it's that we have technocrats who are our new feudal lords, right.

AVILES-RODRIGUEZ (01:46:25):

You work for, when you go on YouTube, whatever, when you go on Facebook, you're working for Zuckerberg because Zuckerberg sells your labor. And he keeps the money and you get the benefit of being on his land, toiling and producing. And that sort of creates this huge gap in wealth. Which we already saw. And so I was like, hey, this is feudalism all over again. And theater's going to react the way that the theater reacts in feudal times, which is boom. You're out. You're outdoors because nobody can afford to rent a theater and all the rest of it. But then when the pandemic came, then it was really medieval times. And you know, now it's like you're really going to be outside. So yeah, what I wanted to say about it is that the theater, I think, is going to go where the theater goes when all the other avenues are closed off to it, which is in the streets, to the streets.

COLLINGS (01:47:30):

Okay. Let's, let's leave it there.