

Superwoman Chicana Transcript

Author: Gloria Velásquez (GV)

Conversation Partner: Robert Inchausti (RI)

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Description: Transcript of a podcast of the discussion of the works of Gloria Velásquez of modern languages and literatures between herself and Robert Inchausti of English.

[Music]

Brett Bodemer (Moderator): Welcome to Conversations with Cal Poly Authors. This episode was recorded on Friday, May 20, 2016 at the Robert E. Kennedy Library at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. This conversation features Gloria Velásquez and Robert Inchausti, discussing Gloria's work since the 1970s, as a Chicano poet novelist and activist. Dr. Gloria Velásquez, professor in Cal Poly's modern languages and literatures department received her B.A. from the University of Northern Colorado and an M.A. and doctorate in Spanish from Stanford University. Gloria's awards and honors include the Chicano Literary Prize, the University of North Colorado's Hall of Fame award, and inclusion in *Who's Who Among Hispanic Americans*. Her experiences as the daughter of a farm worker family in the 1950s and 60s have been a major influence in her work and her *Roosevelt High School* novels are considered to be the first Latino, Latina young adult series. Each novel in the series addresses social issues, such as, racism, domestic violence and homophobia and one of these, *Tommy Stands Alone*, made national headlines when it was banded in 1995. Gloria participated in the Chicano Art Renaissance in 1970s and was also a member of M.E.S.A. and Corky Gonzalez's Crusade for Justice. Dr. Robert Inchausti, Gloria's conversation partner, is a professor in Cal Poly's English department. Robert attended Sacramento State University and obtained a PhD at the University of Chicago. He is the author of six books and the editor of the pocket Thomas Merton, published by Shambhala Books. His first book, *The Ignorant Perfection of Ordinary People*, was nominated for a national book award and his book on classroom teaching, *Spitwad Sutras* is taught in teacher education programs across the country.

[Music]

[Applause]

GV: I want to begin by thanking Brett for inviting me and thanking Lori for coming. Lori's my compadre. And one more before I get to Cal Poly and I want to thank the students that are here, especially the high school students that came from Morro Bay High School, students from Cal Poly, compadre, sister compadres that are in the audience. I'm going to speak from the heart today. They want me to talk about my development as a writer. And I always say, there's different thoughts that I have and I put them in my biographies, because there've been different biographies, but one of those was that I always say *mi vida es un milagro*, my life is a

miracle. And I like to say that especially to the young people here, because I believe you can make your dreams come true. Why do I say *mi vida es un milagro*, my life is a miracle? I come from a very humble, humble farm worker background. We were so poor, it's ironic that I became a writer because I didn't have books, access to books, or even pencil and paper of my own until I was 13 years old. My parents were very uneducated, you know, they were born in the United States, but as was the case in Colorado and in much of the Midwest and Southwest, Mexicanos and Chicanos became part of the cheap labor, migrant background for us there in the Southwest. So my mother went to maybe one year in high school. She was born here in California. My father went to the seventh grade and like many Chicanos of that time period, had to drop out of school to work in the fields. We were so poor, I was born on a hill called Derby Hill in Loveland, Colorado. A little farm worker shack. We always tell, especially the young people here, we had no electricity, no running water, we had outhouses, we didn't even have toilet paper. That always freaks the students out. We used to get newspapers and crumple them up. And then being migrant children, you know, we were constantly moving around. I never stay at the same school very long. We were always moving around in Colorado. Sometimes we would go to Texas to pick cotton. So I grew up feeling very terrified, scared, because it was always a new school. And then the structural discrimination at the schools at that time was very direct. You know, I remember, you know, I came out in one documentary where they, they quote me saying, "I remember how they would humiliate us, they would line us up, because we were farm worker children and they would search our head for lice in front of the other students going there." You can imagine what that does to a child, a young child's self-esteem. We were very much segregated. No one every—we were invisible as children, as people of color. And states like Colorado and much of the Midwest they had a push out rate at that time. Most of my dad's and my mom's compadres, you know, my aunts, uncles, they all dropped out of school. Why? Because there was a push out rate. They weren't encouraged to stay in school. And, so, that's why I said *mi vida es un milagro*. Because it truly is, you know, coming from that background. And they want me to talk about my memories of being a writer and I don't have anything from my childhood years because we were constantly moving around. Many of my poems that I later wrote cover those themes. But I have an aunt that tells me as a little girl I was already repeating silly little rhymes and creating little rhymes. And then something that I remember that I can link to my, you know, starting to feel creative was my first *guitarra*, my first guitar. I was about 7 or 8 years old and students that are here know how much I love my guitars, right? You even know the names of my guitars. I was about 7 or 8 years old when my parents had gone across the border to Mexico and they came back with a small guitar, it's called a *Requinto*, it's not a—different type of guitar, very small. And I remember that I taught myself to play the guitar and I started to write songs. I don't have, I don't have any of those songs in my memory or anything, but that was my earliest memory in my childhood years. And I always say that writing saved my life, because it did. And I also say that writing is a gift that was given to me and that I honor God when I write. And I truly wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for my writing. And I'm always writing and I, you know, that's why it's so ironic that I became a writer, because given my background. So that was my first memory, my first guitar. And then it wasn't until I arrived at the actual Roosevelt High School, I named my series after Roosevelt High School, sort of the [speaking in Spanish], slap in the face, because no one at the high school ever encouraged me to become a writer or told me I had any talent. But in ninth

grade, for the first time, at the age of 13, we stayed in the same city, town, it was a town, Johnstown, Colorado. Remember, I had been moving around my entire childhood, but at the age of 13 in ninth grade I was so excited. Not only did we stay in Johnstown, Colorado, and I was able to stay at the same school for four years and graduate from Roosevelt High School, but we had a house that had electricity and running water. It was the first time. We rented a house, it was a green house, rectangular and I've turned it into a metaphor in some of my writing, it's called the "Green House" or the "Green Boxcar". But I was excited because I had my own bedroom, we had running water, we had an indoor bathroom. It was just very exciting for me. And so then in Roosevelt High School in ninth grade, you know, as I said, with people of color and especially states like the Midwest, you know, the Southwest, many of them, we had to make ourselves visible, because we were deemed invisible. So I decided I would make myself visible at Roosevelt High School. We weren't encouraged to join any of the clubs, or to, you know, write for the newspaper. And what did I do? I created my own underground newspaper. And so I, together with another friend, Chicano friend of mine from Narravo who was an artist, I would put together every month a newspaper and I would write poems about all of my Chicano friends and then he would draw pictures and draw the artwork. And I wish I had a copy of those, but I don't. My mother threw them out a long time ago. But that was when I think I see that I was really thinking about being visible through my writing. Also I remember clearly, and I do have a copy of the story, I wrote this creative story, for the high school students that are here, and I think it was ninth grade for an English class about a turkey. And the turkey is sitting in the freezer waiting to be cooked for Thanksgiving and so she's reflecting on her life. I have, actually it's at my archives at Stanford I have a copy of that story. But I thought it was a great story, but there weren't any English teachers that ever encouraged me. You know, no one ever said, you know, you have talent, you're smart, you could be a writer. So I just sort of, you know, put it behind me and focused on my underground newspaper. So that was my first experience. But I graduated from high school and because we were poor and there weren't any junior colleges at the time, I couldn't go to the university. So, you know, I remember—they put in my biographies, I say that I cried when I graduated from high school because I couldn't go to the university. My father was working in the sugar factory, my mother worked as a nurse's aide, but we still didn't have enough money. So it took me a long time, I worked, I graduated from high school, I worked as a motel maid, I worked in the fields sometimes. I worked as a teacher aide, and finally in the 1970s I was able to get to the University of Northern Colorado. And so the 1970s the University of Northern Colorado, the university years were very important in making myself more visible. And myself empowerment. And I think that's what people of color in the United States, especially young people, need more self-empowerment. So, what I did when I got to the University of Northern Colorado I started to look for places to publish my poetry. I started publishing in newspapers. There was a magazine in Denver that I would send some of my earliest poems, like, "Who Am I?" Many of the poems from, *I Used to be a Superwoman*, were published in different newspapers or journals. And there were two pivotal moments when I arrived at the university that shaped who I am today, because everything I do, and those of you who have been my students know this, everything that I do is about social justice. Okay, everything. That's who I am. I haven't changed. I want change. There were two pivotal moments at the University of Northern Colorado. The first one was that I became involved, directly involved with the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. Now, I dare to say that I'm the only

professor, the first professor and the only professor at Cal Poly who has been involved directly in a Chicano Civil Rights Movement. I became empowered. I joined the crusade for justice. Here in California we had Caesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, right? There were different facets of the Chicano Movement. In Colorado it was Corky Gonzalez. Corky Gonzalez was the leader and his organization was the Crusade for Justice. So I joined the chapter in Greenleaf, Colorado, where UNC was at, and I became actively engaged in boycotts, protests, protesting—we were protesting everything back then, but segregation, discrimination in the schools. So I became empowered. And what I've tried to bring to Cal Poly for 30 years and those of you who are here that are my students know that, that I want to raise your social awareness. I always tell students at the University, you're not here simply to be an engineer, or to be, you know—I'm trying to think of another discipline.

RI: A mathematician.

GV: A mathematician. You're here because you want to give back to your community. You want to do something to make this a better world. So that being a part of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement was very important for me. The other thing in the 1970s is that we created Chicano Literary history. As I said, we were invisible, our literature was not considered—it wasn't even considered literature. And, so, I joined, or became a part of flower and song festivals, the Chicano renaissance periods. Some of you have read about the Harlem Renaissance, right? The Chicano renaissance was like the Harlem renaissance. We, muralists, painters, musicians, theater people, Luis Valdez, we would gather in different parts of the country and hold what we called *Flor y Canto*. And that's where I met some of the elders, some of the most esteemed artists, like, José Montoya. I think I'm supposed to be having this conversation with you.

RI: No, no. [inaudible].

GV: I met José Montoya, I met Luis Valdez, I met many of the elders that were already, you know, creating their art. And as a young Chicanita, how did that impact me and empower me as a writer? I was able to make a direct connection between my creative writing and my community. My creative writing and social change, because I saw José Montoya, I saw Abelardo Delgado, I saw Luis Valdez, and I saw what they were doing. They weren't just writing for themselves. They were writing for their community, they were writing to speak out about social injustices. So those two moments were very important to me. Also at one of those *Flor y Cantos* and I think Lori will ask me about it, I joined the R.C.A.F., you know, and we'll talk about that later. But that was very important. The R.C.A.F., some of you who are in my class, know that they were one of the most important visual artist collectives in the country and the United States. So, you know, here I was, this young Chicanita and here I was in the back of a van with all these artists who were silk screening, you know, poster art for the Chicano movement. And so that was, you know, something very important for me in the 70s. Two important moments. And in the 70s I wrote many of those early poems. My "Superwoman Chicana" poem is a classic, I wrote it in 1976. That was one of my earliest poems. I wrote poems protesting the war in Vietnam. That art is one of the earliest poems that I wrote. And then I came to Stanford University. I came to California, okay, in the 1980s. and the Stanford years were very important

for me, because not only did I take my social—my perspective about social awareness, I was able to broaden it and look at it globally, because now all of a sudden I was surrounded by people from all parts of the world, Afghanistan, Iran, India. So I interacted with them and was able to broaden my perspective and that's what I have tried to bring to Cal Poly. Another very important thing about being at Stanford was that I began to develop my short fiction. Prior to that I was writing mostly poetry. But at Stanford University, I wrote some of my most important short stories. And I only mention one of them and then maybe Lori will ask about some other ones, but "Fugitive", "Fugitive" is a classic in Chicano literature. I wrote "Fugitive" at Stanford when the AIDS outbreak occurred. And people were making the nastiest remarks about anyone that was gay. Take them all and put them on an island, get rid of them. So I wrote in protest of that, because I had family members who—you know, socially equality, I'm a humanitarian above all things, so I don't like anyone that discriminates against anybody. So wrote "Fugitive" and that's now—that's an important piece that's become very important in Chicano literature. I wrote many other pieces. I wrote, "El Louie" a short story and I asked José Montoya if I could borrow the title of his famous poem, "El Louie" and use it for my short story. And that story, again, is protesting the disproportionate numbers of Chicanos and men of color, African Americans, Latinos that died during the War in Vietnam. My only brother was killed in Vietnam. And that was something that truly impacted my life and that of my family. So Stanford, very important in developing as a writer. Also I have professors from all over the world. One of them, Professor Fernando Alegría was from Chile. He was a renowned poet and scholar in Chile. And he was the first professor that ever praised my fiction. I had a story about that green house that's in my forthcoming novel, and it includes my brother's actual letters from Vietnam and he was just always praising the fact that was very original at that time. I never published it, I can't publish it now so that people have done that already. And I continued at Stanford. I continued to write more poetry and, you know, one of the first collections that I remember that came out at Stanford was *From the Midwest to the West* that included my poetry, Sandra Cisneros, that I'm sure you've heard of, and Patricia Montenegro and Marjorie Agosin, who's probably the foremost Chilean American poet in the United States, so, you know, we put together that little anthology and just a little paper thing like that. So then that was the 80s. And then I come into the 90s and here I am in San Luis Obispo. The 1990s were very important also equally important in my development as a writer and I'm not keeping track of the time.

RI: No, don't keep—you're doing great.

GV: I don't want to go over 20 minutes.

RI: No.

GV: In the 1990s, as an author I was invited to be a part of the Pen Program. And the pen program, you know, what they did is they set up tours for me as a writer at different Native American reservations. That was very important for me, because for the first time I was touring, along with many other writers, like Sherman Alexie and Louise Erdrich, we were at different Native American reservations and I was able to—many of them I was able to make the connection with my Navajo Diné identity. And you know when you're colonized, colonization,

what that does, it sort of negates who you are. You know, I think we're conditioned to not really embrace who we are as a result of colonization in the United States. So, being on the Navajo reservations I was able to, you know, I would see—interact with Navajo high school students, okay, and I was able to see myself in them and see my grandfather, on my father's side, were Navajo Diné. And, so, I began to write many poems about being a Diné Chicano. One of my earliest poems about embracing my Navajo identity was “Self-Portrait 1990”. “I am the old Navajo woman who bore you that day in a covered wagon *en La Tierra del Encanto*. I am the old Navajo woman who rocked your mother to sleep and chanted prayers to the spirits in that old Toas reservation.” So the poem goes on and on and it embraces the voices of my Diné grandmother, great grandmother, my Diné grandfather, and that was one of the earliest poems. And then in the second book of poetry, *Xicana on the Run*, which I didn't bring, don't you like the title, *Xicana on the Run*? [Laughter]. That collection I have many poems about my Diné identity. I have “A de la Mujer” is one of them. I wrote—actually I brought my CD. I wrote a poem that I turned into a song, which I do a lot, the American West is as a result of touring on the Kayenta Navajo Reservation. And seeing the tourism and contrasting the conditions of Native Americans and the fact that they're perceived as, you know, like, right, symbols of art or something, so I wrote a poem called, “The American West” and I turned it into a song. It was a protest poem. So the 1990s, that pen program, is important because I now had embraced my Diné identity. And then also the 1990s—I have to look at my notes—in the 1990s, 1994, here in San Luis Obispo, I developed and created, as Brett mentioned, the Roosevelt High School series, which features nine novels to date. But that's why I haven't published another book of poetry, *por creando coma loca*, I'm always writing a new novel. I should say I have the opposite of writers block. The opposite of writers block. They recently interviewed me and they asked me, “Where do you get your ideas for writing?” And I tell them, “it's like a falling star, it falls from the sky, you never know when it's going to fall, you just have to be ready to catch it.” And there's falling stars constantly. If I'm not writing a novel I'm writing a poem or I'm writing a song or working on an essay, so it's that way. But in the 1990s, I created this Roosevelt High School series, modeling it after Jesse Jackson's concept of the Rainbow Coalition. I often refer to it as my rainbow series. And I want to tell you, as Brett said, it's the first Latino Chicano, young adult series. And I want to tell you the true story about why I wrote it or what the falling star, I guess, I'll tell you about the falling star. It was 1994, I was on sabbatical from Cal Poly, I was lying on the couch, tired, depressed and fed up, which is a light from my Superwoman poem. I was exhausted, I was leaning back and I was channel surfing, watching television and I stopped it on a Joan Rivers talk show. Why did I stop it on the Joan Rivers talk show? She was interviewing the famous author Judy Bloom. How many of you have read Judy Bloom? Okay, I had never read Judy Bloom, but my daughter read Judy Bloom and I'm always fascinated by authors, so I was listening to her interview, but I started to get [speaking in Spanish], frustrated, because none of her characters were Chicanos, African Americans or Puerto Ricans. And, so, being the dreamer that I said, I said to myself, “Somebody needs to write about teenagers of different ethnic backgrounds, Chicanos, African Americans, Puerto Ricans and I, Gloria Velasquez being a dreamer that I am, I'm going to do it.” So the falling star came down. True story, true story. I reached down on the floor, picked up my little note book and sketched out the three books in the Roosevelt High School series. The first novel, *Juanita Fights the School Board*, actually I wrote it that year. I was supposed to be working on my sabbatical project and I didn't. I wrote,

Juanita Fights the School Board. All of my novels are based on an actual real life incident. There was a real Juanita, there was an actual school where she was discriminated against and expelled. There were actual school board meetings. And so I fictionalized it, but it's based on that true story. Ironically when I decided, when I was working on the novel I called the school, I'm not going to name the school, I knew that had school board meetings and recordings and I said, "I'd like to, you know, have access to your recordings, I'm working on this novel." And they said, "We can't find them," they called me back, "they've disappeared." So anyway, that was, you know, the first experience as a writer with *Juanita Fights the School Board*. Every novel in the Roosevelt High School series is about a social issue that impacts teenagers. You know, I have, *Teen Angel*, is about teen pregnancy. I actually did research in Arroyo Grande at the tap program. That's where young girls that are mothers, you know, and I have a novel, *Rina's Family Secret* about domestic violence. I have *Ankiza*, I don't think I brought *Ankiza*, that's about a young African American teenager and interracial dating. So they are based on real life incidents, but I fictionalized them. And I get criticized a lot for my happy endings. I love happy endings. Because what I want to do for young adults, for teenagers, I want to present a problem, okay, but I want them to know that they can solve, they can have, you know, find a solution to their problems. And one of the novels, you know, I've received a lot of criticism, one of the novels, *Tommy Stands Alone*, that Brett mentioned, I received a lot of hate mail for that one. They were quoting the bible. *Tommy Stands Alone*, I'm always asked, which is your favorite novel, and I always say, *Tommy Stands Alone*, because it's about human dignity. It's loosely based on my cousin who lived and died with AIDS. When I wrote *Tommy Stands Alone*, there was much ado about nothing and I was touring in Colorado, in my home state of Colorado dared to ban the novel. You know. But, you know, it backfired on them, because when I was speaking at the Rocky Mountain Book Festival people were coming to purchase the book just because they saw it on television, they saw it on the news, they heard about it. And I actually had to issue a press statement, you know, the press, through Associated Press saying something about the novel. So that was the novel that I think, you know, much ado about nothing, but I did receive a lot of nasty hate mail here in San Luis, when I came back from that tour about the novel, but, you know, as my friend said, "you're doing what you should be doing when your novel is banned." So, so the Roosevelt High School series has been a big part of my life, because I continually want to, you know, address issues that are of importance to the youth. And I'm getting to the end, okay? And, so, what have I been doing after the Roosevelt High School series, what am I doing? My fourth coming novel is a bilingual novel, *Toy Soldiers and Dolls*. It's very different from the Roosevelt High School series. It's not poetry, right? But it's my autobiography in fiction. And I have a dear friend of mine who just recently passed away Ernan Castano Houron [assumed spelling] from Chile, you knew him, I'm sure, and I remember when he sat in my office and he said, "*Toy Soldiers and Dolls, es tu obra maestra*, it's your masterpiece." And, so I'm very pleased to say that I just completed it, it's at the publisher right now and it should be out sometime, you know, it usually takes them about a year. So that's what I've been devoting my times to, besides the Roosevelt High School series. Now I can hear myself. Okay. So, anyway, you know, I have many many, as I said, I'm always writing, you know, but I hope I've taken you through the trajectory of, you know, from the poverty and discrimination, not having access to books. It's very ironic that I became a writer, I never had access to books. And when we moved into that house in the ninth grade and I was able to be stable and check out books

from the library, I remember reading, because they ask me who did you read, I read the classics. Children's classics, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Little Women*. I was just so excited about that. So, you know, it's a gift, it's a gift that I was given and I take it, you know, very seriously. And, as I said, everything I do is about social justice. I would I could be like José Antonio Burciaga the satirist who had a lot of humor in his work. But I think as a humanitarian I want to make this a better world in a very idealistic poetic way. I want to work on more poetry. I'm constantly writing. I wrote a poem the other day, sitting in my office and reflecting on something. But, anyway, that's about it. And I wanted to end with two poems. I told Lupita, who's with the sorority, the Chicana Latina Sorority that I would like to read a poem to the young girls that are here today. And I brought you copies of the poem, so don't leave without them, okay. Just for you. This is a poem called "Xicana Power Trip", from my second book of poetry and I always like to talk about what inspired the poem. I was on a gig somewhere in Texas, I think, and I had been speaking about my work and they always have Q and A at the end of my presentation so that the young people can ask questions. So when it came time for Q and A, none of the girls would raise their hand. It was only the guys that were asking questions. I couldn't believe it. The girls were shy, they wouldn't speak. So I'm flying back to California, I'm on the airplane and the falling star comes and I wrote this poem so that I could empower the young girls. And often times when I—I don't get fan mail anymore, it's usually electronically, right, but I used to get letters all the time, I would send this poem to them. "Xicana Power Trip". So I dedicate it to the young people that are here today. And you'll hear a little bit of Spanish, but I think you'll understand the message. "Speak up, *mujer! Sube la voz. Alza la mano, no dejes que te encierren en tu propio silencio*. Dare to speak out. Dare to be different. Dare to create *tu propia identidad, la de tu madre y abuelita y todas aquellas mujeres Adelitas*. Speak up, Xicana! Tell those young loverboy *vatos Chale, ese!*" [Laughter] "I've got my own sweet dreams. Don't want to get pregnant at fifteen to raise babies alone. *Quiero ser revolucionaria, mujer de valores, mujer educada, mujer Sor Juana*. So speak up, *mujer! Sube la voz. Alza la mano*. Do it right now." That's a poem for them, for all of you. [Applause] And then I was in New York—second poem and then I'll turn it over to Lori—Larry. I was in New York two years ago and of all the poems that I read, this was their favorite poem. It's a poem that's unpublished and I wanted to dedicate it to my sister, [speaking in Spanish] that are here today. The poem is -- the title is "Self Portrait 2007." When my mother died in the year 2007 and you know they always ask me who inspired me the most and I also say, "Francisca Molinar Velásquez, my mother." A very uneducated woman, but she was a strong woman. And when my mother died in 2007 I was reading Sidney Poitier's autobiography, *The Measure of a Man*. Has anyone read, *The Measure of a Man*? It's an amazing powerful book. I encourage you all to read it. And I didn't know as I was reading "The Measure of a Man" and my mother died, that he was from the same generation as my mother. And I've always admired Sidney Poitier because of his activism in the black community and in all communities at large. So I wrote "Self Portrait 2007", "The Measure of a Man, Sidney Poitier, the measure of a woman, Francisca Molinar Velásquez, proud African American, proud Mexicana Chicana, Cat Island in the Bahamas, Johnston in Colorado, two different lives, both from the same generation. One a Hollywood actor, the other a sugar beet worker. One tall dark and handsome, the other short, brown and beautiful. Both endured history, the history of being poor and depressed. Sidney and Francisca they never met, they didn't know each other, yet they are the measuring stick,

role models, mentors for our black and brown children of the sun and the moon. Two hard working souls of black and Chicano folk. My heroes, Francisca Molinar Velásquez and Sidney Poitier.” Thank you. [Applause]. Difficult to read poetry sitting down, I'm a performance artist so I'm always up. Okay, Larry, your turn.

RI: Okay, well, one thing I wanted to say, Gloria, the—Gloria says it's an accident that she's— not an accident, that it's ironic that you became a writer. And I think another way of putting it is it's no accident that she became a writer. And part of the reason that Gloria has had the impact that she did and she does and she continues to be so important to the Chicano literary renaissance and to American literature, which is now American—the Chicano literary renaissance is part of American literature and Gloria is right at the heart of it. And she took the time to document the lives of the poor and the lives of those who were struggling and the lives of her family, which, as she said, nobody previously thought to even encourage that activity. So we owe her that thanks, if nothing else. And, of course, I think part of the fact that she has the opposite of writers block is that there's so much to be said about the lives of people who never got the chance to say it. And she becomes a kind of an artist with a very large easel. So, what I wanted to ask her about is to tell me about her next works and particularly the next book in the Roosevelt High School series, what's on tap for that and what is the plot or the issue that you're going to tackle in the Roosevelt High School?

GV: Well, you know, after I finished *Tommy Stands Tall*, which is the ninth novel, I decided I would take a break, because I was like a loca, it takes about three years to write one of these novels actually. So I took a long break and then finally last year I began the first draft of *Forgiving Moses*, is the tenth novel in the Roosevelt High School series. *Forgiving Moses* is very important to me, because it's addressing the massive incarceration of men of color in the United States. Something that the Black Lives Matters Movement has brought to the forefront. And so I've had this novel in the back burner for quite a long time. We have a teenager named Moses whose father is in prison and I, you know, they always say there's not a Chicano family, Latino family that doesn't have a family member in prison. And so, I wanted to address the feelings that Moses has about having an absent father, but yet still having a father that he goes to visit in prison. I also wanted to address—and that's why the title, "Forgiving Moses" how he feels about his mother who has stuck by her father. You know, so I have all these levels of forgiveness. And when you think about it, forgiveness is something that's very difficult for us. And so in this novel Moses learns to forgive himself, he learns to forgive his mother for standing by her husband all these years. He learns to forgive his own father. And in the writing of this novel it's interesting, it was very cathartic for me, Larry, because I learned to forgive myself. So, *Forgiving Moses* is very important to me. And, you know, I'm now on the end, I'm on like chapter 16, I hope to have it done by September and then I've said that after *Forgiving Moses*, which is the tenth novel, I'm going to do a book of poetry, because I need to take a break from the—although, but, you know, I told you I have the opposite of writers' block, last summer in one week I had five new ideas for the Roosevelt High School series. So, it's like—and I also have a poetry music CD that I want to do and I have, you know, a band that's ready to do it with me, but I just haven't had time because I'm working on the Roosevelt High School series. So I'm going to take a break from that. But that novel is very important to me. And I always take my

novels in order. I don't know why I can't jump out of order. You know, like, *Teen Angel*, the novel on teen pregnancy, I wanted to do that for the longest time, but I couldn't—I always take them in order and in that I'm very disciplined. So that one, you know, I think it was number five on the list, but yet it was an issue that I wanted to write about for the longest time. So, that's what I'm— *Forgiving Moses*.

RI: Now, the book of poetry, the next book of poetry, you have poems you've written though, right? I mean, they're in your drawer?

GV: I have so many poems.

RI: Yeah, so it's not like you have to sit down and write them.

GV: No, it's like the one that I just read you, "Self Portrait 2007" I have many poems. I have poem journals filled with poems. I have—sometimes I type out poems, you know, that I've—"Song of Rosa", a poem that I wrote when Rosa Parks died, and every year it seems like I'm honored when they ask me to read it for Dr. King day or in local community, that poem's never been published. I have so many poems.

RI: The other thing I want to ask you about and I don't know, I have a lot of young people here today, might not know, but the Royal Chicano Air Force was one of the hippest art groups in the world.

GV: Yes.

RI: Everybody loved the Royal Chicano Air Force. When she got her wings that was, I was so jealous. Getting the wings—

GV: I'm an honorary member.

RI: —an honorary member of the Royal Chicano Air Force is kind of like being a member of the surrealist movement in the 20s in France. I mean, it's kind of like a, it's a really cutting edge group of painters, artists—it was an art collective, a Chicano art collective. Luis Valdez and all of those members. And Gloria was part of that group. So I want to ask you, what was it like -- tell me about that first experience when they threw you in the back of their van and— [laughs]

GV: It was amazing. Here I was this young poet and I was in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and everyone said, "We're going to Oshkosh to paint murals and recite poetry and to go visit the *viejitos* in the nursing homes and read poetry and stuff like that." And so I thought, "How am I going to get to Oshkosh?" And I had just met José Montoya and they said, "Oh, hop in the van." And, you know, some of you in my class heard or saw the film on the R.C.A.F. and Luis the Foot was crazy, the one that did Cortez [speaking in Spanish] in a big way way. He was reciting his poem in the van. And, so, I ended up going with them and I was just in awe of them and that

they would actually invite me to go with them. But, you know, being there and I saw that they cared about social change. José Montoya was my compadre, I just loved him and—

RI: Tell them a little bit about José.

GV: Well, José Montoya I think—I always tell my students this—it's important to be humble. He was the most humble man. And, you know, I don't think he ever did receive the recognition he merited until after his death, because he was so humble. And he—and I think that's a sign of greatness when you can be humble. And he was just connected to people, connected to the community, connected to people, whether if it was an alcoholic, if it was a professor, if it was a, you know, it didn't matter, he just loved people. And he was very down to earth. He was my role model. He was the first one that I met and I thought to myself, I want to be like José Montoya. And I feel blessed to have met him and, you know, I wrote a poem, talking about poems that are unpublished about los greats, the great ones and he's in that poem. And what he meant to me as a role model. You know, he was one of my heroes. And, you know, we didn't know we were creating history back in those when I first met the R.C.A.F. And they were all crazy artistes, but they were for social change and they were connected to the community and that was what impacted me. Because then I knew it wasn't about autographing, it wasn't about just seeing the work published, but it was about social change and affecting the community. And José Montoya and I, you know, when he passed away, he's now in the Smithsonian, you know, which is what happens, you know, a lot of times you're not recognized. Another dear friend of mine is Juan Felipe Herrera from Sanford University, he's now the U.S.A. poet. He's very humble. Great person. And I think it was 2 weeks ago he emailed me and said, "Gloria, I'm discussing for Library of Congress, Chicano literature, can you send me, I think you're a pioneer in early poetry, can you send me some poems, can you send me a picture." So I sent him a black and white picture of me sitting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin with Tino Villanueva, another famous poet and watching them paint murals. And, so, these are the people that I was around and we were -- you know, I remember being in Paris, France with José Montoya and Estefan Vien [assumed spelling], the R.C.A.F. and we went together to the musé Picasso to see Picasso's works. And I remember having one of those moments where I thought, one day someone will be coming to see our work, José, Estefan and myself. It was a very powerful, spiritual moment that I had. So I feel blessed. I feel blessed that I've been given this gift. You know, it's, you know, it can be a curse at times because, you know, I get a lot of invitations to go out, but I'm always writing. No, I can't, I can't be bothered, I'm writing. I'm not always writing, but I'm very reclusive. I love being out with the public, but I'm very reclusive. But to be able to have a gift and I think everyone has a gift, but to be able to know that—I always say like the bible says, to who much is given, much is required. And so that's why I take it as seriously as I do.

RI: I'm going to, before we go to the group here, I'm going to share one José Montoya story, which I'll think you'll appreciate.

GV: Good, good.

RI: When I was at Sac State, José Montoya taught there and he would teach—he'd give art classes in adult ed in the evenings to the local community and the—one year they pulled the funding out of his art class. So he went to the community members and he said, "I have some bad news, we're not going to be meeting. Next week's our last week, because we no longer have any funding." And, so, his class says okay. So he shows up the next week and there on the table are all this food that all his students brought him and they said, "You're not going to be teaching anymore, so you're probably going to be hungry, so here's all some, here's some enchiladas and frijoles and stuff, take home to your family." And he had to explain to them, you know, he was a professor and he had all this other money. And when they closed down the class it wasn't that he was going to go without food, it was they weren't going to have a place to eat anymore. And he just said the generosity of the community was what kept him inspired and kept him going.

GV: Yes.

RI: Even though, you know, they didn't realize he was this international guy who didn't really have to worry about it.

GV: And that's an example I always tell my students, that people who have less give more. I say this all the time, and that's an example right there. They'll give you—you know, go to a third world country, go to a vario and, I mean, they give you the most and that's an example right there.

RI: And also his humility.

GV: His humility. You have to be humble. The other moment that I forget to mention, I think we have like three more minutes, is at Stanford University for the first time I met Ceasar Chavez, that impacted me also. A very young Caesar Chavez came to speak to a group of 15 Chicanos at the Center Chicano and he was just the kindest, most humble man and, you know, it was an amazing moment for me. It impacted me. and then, of course, I always tell students, well I say it all the time, you know, the great ones that have come, you know, we invited them, Caesar came twice to Cal Poly, Dolores Huerta has been here several times. José Montoya, Antonio Burciaga, you know, I invited all of them and students were very honored to meet them and to make that connection with them. But I think that's why role modeling is so important. Especially with underrepresented students. And I tell the university students that to be, you know, conscious of being a role model. José Montoya was a role model for many people, role model for me. I hope that I'm a role model for some of you. Lupita, for your students. Very important in underrepresented communities. You know, and that's something that I pride myself in that I've done for 30 years here at Cal Poly is to try and be a role model for my students. Someone, a humanitarian, someone who cares, someone that has human dignity, respects human dignity and I think José Montoya was an example of that.

RI: And writing out of your own experience is a way of representing.

GV: I think so. Although, you know, the Roosevelt High School series is different because, well, I guess every character has a little bit of me, like Juanita, even Tommy, a little bit of me, they all have a little bit of me. But I think it's my poetry that's been more autobiographical, you know, writing about poems about Vietnam.

RI: Yeah, this is classic.

GV: Then my novel, *Toy Soldiers and Dolls*, is very autobiographical. I did have to change some names because I thought back home, when I go home they're going to get mad at me. So, that could—the thing about being a writer, you know, everything is material. So, have to be very careful. I remember also going home for the first time after Stanford and someone said, "Oh, you're the [speaking in Spanish]," they thought I was a medical doctor.

RI: Okay, shall we open it up here?

GV: Okay, thank you, thank you very much.

[Applause]

[Music]

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