Helena María Viramontes

10/29/21

[00:01:13]

CTM: So, Helena, welcome.

HMV: So... *[Laughter.]*

CTM: Welcome! We are so thrilled that you are doing this conversation with us, and we are delighted to have the illustrious Helena Maria Viramontes with us this afternoon. And today is the 29th of October, 2021. And, finally it's good to get you on video.

HMV: Oh gosh!

LEC: Out of your busy schedule.

HMV: First of all, thank you. Thank the two of you for this incredible honor and invitation. The first thing I thought of is that...Why me? You know, because you have these incredible women.

CTM: Yes, and you fit right in!

HMV: That's so sweet, you're so sweet! You convinced me. *[Laughter.]*

CTM: Exactly. Exactly. Exactly.

HMV: So, yes. So here I am, but anyway, thank you so much for allowing me to be a part of this.

CTM: We are delighted. So maybe we begin, as I said, you know, we do a lot of this. We think about this as really asking you a few questions, having a conversation, kitchen table conversation. Basically, for you to be telling your own stories in your own words. So maybe we can begin with asking you sort of how you think about what brought you to political consciousness, feminist consciousness, and to the work that you essentially have done for many decades now.

HMV: Well, I think that when I'm when I'm self-reflecting, and I have been doing that these last few days and anticipation of this interview. So many things came up, came to mind. One thing that I always, always honor is growing up with six sisters at my mother. I mean, there was a family, we had a family of nine. I was sort of in the middle with two younger sisters and a brother and then three older sisters and two brothers. So I was like in the middle of it and my sisters were the most creative individuals. I come from a family where my father was very patriarchal. He was incredibly, incredibly strict with his daughters. I mean, that was the virtue, the virtue of being a virgin to be able to, to leave the house.

And the only way to leave the house was to get married. That was the custom. And I always remember my three older sisters and the way they circumvented my father's patriarchy. My father was the type of man who at nine o'clock. Everybody had to be in bed. Now we're talking about 11 people all together. We had be in bed and he would literally turn off the fuse box. So that there would be no electricity. So we wouldn't be listening to the radio or anything like that. My father would be somebody who put a lock on the phone so that my sisters couldn't call. My brothers could go out and do whatever they wanted but my sisters couldn't call. So, I mean, I would find it fascinating that my, my sisters were, were so creative in, in subverting this, and the first thing they would do is they they'd keep clicking the lock.

HMV: It was a physical lock on the phone and they'd keep clicking it and clicking it. And then the operator would come on and they would say, well, okay, can you make this call? laughs And so the operator would put it through and that's the way they would call *[Laughs.]*

CTM: Wow!

HMV: Then, you know, when my father would turn off the fuse box, they always had candles, or they always had flashlights or anything just to keep around. But I think their most remarkable, remarkable achievement was that my sisters created a language by which they could speak freely above my father so that my father would not understand. Now you have to understand that my older sisters were not even let out out of the house. I mean, they would go to school and come back.

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HMV: They were not allowed to date. And if there was a proper thing that they had to do, they always needed a chaperone. That's where I came in as the chaperone, you know, but to have that kind of suppression, there was a lot of us. And let me tell you, my sisters were creative, and I'm gonna show an example, of the language that they created. What they did is that they, they put a D syllable in front of each word, so that then they could talk...when I asked to my sister to replicate it. So as an example I told

her, I said, every time in any interview that I have, I always talk about my sisters because it was that female centered existence that made me both happy to be a woman, but also understand the type of--how patriarchy worked and how to subvert it. That you could exist and exist upon yourself in a very respectful way, but do it creatively. And this is what my sisters did on time and time again. So let me give you an example. I asked my sister, who's now 73 years old and afterwards she, she had a laugh because she said, "I can't believe I remembered this" but this is her giving you an example. This is Becky Viramontes Johns:

BVJ: "My sister, my cousin and myself invented this language. We called this the D language. It's placing the D in between sys here's an example. Are you going to the party on Saturday? *[Becky Viramontes Johns provides an example of the language that she and her sisters created.]* That's it. Thank you."

[Laughter.]

CTM: Amazing!

HMV: And I just thought they were the most incredible individuals for doing this and of course at that time, I did not know, you know, I knew that we were very oppressed in the household because of course my sisters were not allowed out. My brothers could do whatever they want. And so to a certain extent, I understood from a very young age, sort of the gender inequalities but I also knew that you needed some type of creativity, some type of a imaginative way of actually, you know, resisting it so that you could be yourself, who you were. And that's where I looked up to my sisters. Now that was one aspect. The other aspect was of course still dealing with my oldest sister.

And this is a more painful experience, but, you know, my father was an abusive man. I come from a household where domestic violence was...it happened. And I'll explain in my own theory why my father did that because I think that my father's rage was such that the way he was treated outside the home...he brought the rage back to the house. And so I'll explain that later. And I say this as a prelude, because I don't wanna fully condemn my father for that type of assault. I mean he used to do some terrible thing is to my mother. So as kids, you know, we would, we would watch that and of course we were petrified. We were petrified of this thing and we would run out go under the bed, hide under the bed. I remember one time actually running to my aunt's house and my uncle and telling them my father was hitting my mother, come, please stop it. And my, I remember my aunt telling my uncle, go see, go see. And my uncle, they were both in bed and my uncle got up, got dressed, went to the house and then stood outside and did nothing. And I was so disappointed, I was so disappointed. So then that showed me that you couldn't depend on adults with these type of situations. You sort of have to...once you read the situation, it's like you it's up to you to do

something about it. So later on in another incident where my father was beating my mother, my oldest sister Maria got between them. Now, remember that my oldest brother, the oldest of the family, he was learning to be a boxer. And he was so petrified of my father that he couldn't stop this. But my sister, she got between him and just ripped his shirt off, just ripped it off like this and said, don't ever hit my mother again. Well, all of us were stunned. We were stunned that she should do this.

[00:12:09]

CTM:

Oh, how old was she?

HMV: She was about 18, 17 or 18. And interesting thing is that she doesn't remember this. She doesn't, but we do the kids we all do because we were just stunned...and he was stunned too. My father was stunned and then just turned around and left the room. And I always remember that because I thought this was the first time that there was this real intervention on something. And it stopped because somebody spoke up. I mean, my father was crazy, but he saved the shirt and he put it in the third drawer of his clothes. And I knew it was the third drawer because I was fascinated with the shirt after all, I would go and open it up and touch it, because I couldn't believe--

CTM: --that she did that.

HMV: --that she did that! And so, but there was that object, there was the t-shirt *[Laughs.]* And so I would touch it and touch it and touch it and then close it. And then couple, the days later...go back to see if it was there.

HMV: And, you know, that think that I was not making this stuff.

CTM: So how old were you?

HMV: I must have been about, maybe about six or seven years old.

CTM: Wow.

HMV: I was fairly young. I was, well...maybe not, maybe a little bit older because let's see the ages range for about, about 17 years between, between my oldest brother and my youngest sister. So I was somewhere in between, so I could have been older or my sister could have been younger, younger. Right. You know, so but I but I, it always, I mean, I always remember that because it was later on in my reflection, I came to realize how important that was for my mother, for my sister. And then for all of us that we were, you know, she was just so sick of that.

HMV: She was not gonna have it anymore. My sister. And it's interesting that she, that she forgot about it. She doesn't even remember it. Cause I ask her, I always go

back and ask her, but in any event, I'm, I'm gonna go back to my father too, because I never forgave father. I was always it didn't get until I was until I was a little bit older and I began reflecting again on the role of patriarchy and capitalism and began imagining my father's life outside of the house and outside of the house. I mean, he had a third-grade education, his English wasn't too good. He could barely read and write, and he was a laborer. I mean he was a hot carrier. He carried pounds of cement on a big shovel that he would put the wet cement--and he would hold it and carry it up the stairs and put it down to the, to the PLAs.

And I don't know, but I I'm positive he knew at some point or another that his body was being taken advantage of that his body was being, you know, discarded. I mean he worked so hard for pennies, no respect. And I always remember one day when he brought out his little helmet and they had put bean on it, somebody had put bean on it, you know? And so I began to think, well, that's why he came home with this rage. And so, there was us. Maybe he was resentful that there was so many of us...maybe he was resentful of the fact that he had to tolerate this life that was so, so cruel to his body. So that's why I can--that's why I forgive him.

HMV: Only to that extent. But he has created in all of us a certain amount of trauma because of that. If it wasn't for the fact that I, that my sisters were so loving and caring and my mother, that those were aspects of my life that I feel really contributed to at least a profound sense of love. My mother loved us very much, all of us, and especially her girls, because she saw the way my father oppressed us. And so she would allow my older sisters to have little get togethers where they could bring people and they would dance and things like that. So my sisters...this other horrific side that was happening was least was at least offset by the fact that my mother understood and my mother would be in cahoots, co-conspirator if there was a young man that came to visit or something, she would, she would make sure that my father was asleep. She would stay up like this, you know…

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CTM: It's how sisterhood works!

HMV: Yes! That's what I learned from my sisters. And that's what I learned from my mother, this whole sense of love, and that saved me. I mean, this was a very traumatic experience for all of us. And I think to this day, we are very much attuned to taking care of each other, you know? Cause we can't depend on other people. So we take care of each other on whatever we need. You know, it goes down the chain. If somebody needs something before you know it, I make a call, we call, we collect money. Boom it's there. So yeah, that's the way it works. That's my first initiation to being raised, very female, loving, centered...understanding that there is some kind of, screwy, patriarchy going on that represses us, knowing that that patriarchy affects

both men and women. It screwed my father up. It screwed him up. He became this brute. He became this brute who loved poetry, loved music, but, but certain times he just became this brute. I was thinking about all these traumatic experiences, because in a way we work them out. But in a way they always stay with us, it's like they're never go away. Like I'm right here about to cry, but I don't want to *[Laughs.]* I don't wanna cry, but...

LEC: That's so interesting. There's some empowerment that has taken place in the whole process. Self-empowerment has taken place. Because as I listen to you, that's what I'm hearing. That this must not be replicated. You're not gonna contribute to this and you are going to do what you can, your sisters and you to save each other.

HMV: That's right. Exactly. Exactly. Exactly. That's a beautiful way of saying that, absolutely.

CTM: It's interesting how you talked about creativity too, right? The creativity specifically, because that is so much a part of the work you do.

HMV: Exactly, right

CTM: That is such, so that this is the first time I'm hearing this story...It's so interesting, the choices you made.

HMV: Right. I didn't--it's funny because those types of recognitions of course are only in self-reflection.

CTM: Right, of course,

HMV: But I always think about yeah...where that creativity comes from? The first ever essay I wrote as a writer was called Nopalitos and Nopalitos is a dish where it's cacti. It's beaver cactus. And my mother used to cook for 11 people on a shoestring budget with virtually no money, you know? And so getting cacti the splinters out, cutting 'em up and boiling to take out the, the gummy thing, and then drying them up and then putting them in with some tomatoes and onions and one pork chop [*Laughs.]* for the little bit of favor. Mixing it around, making some rice and beans. And that was our dinner and that was it. And then tortillas, tortillas, tortillas, tortillas! To this day, that's the way I describe my creative process as a tortilla where you have a, where you have a dough, because I I'm a very instinctual writer. So you have a ball and then you roll it this way, and then you roll it this way, and then you turn it around, then you roll it this way and then you roll it this way. And if you're lucky, it becomes a perfect circle and it's a perfect tortilla. But if you're not your story, doesn't go *[Laughter.]* then you gotta do a revision of it.

HMV: But that is--that's the way I think about stories.

CTM: Such an interesting process.

HMV: Yeah. That's the way I think about my stories because watching my mother and the way she would cook, It was just amazing and honoring...but that was why I started writing. I started writing cause I was late in terms of reading. We didn't have books in the house and when my older brothers and sister started coming with their books then we had books, but we didn't really have any books around the house. So when I got the public library card, that's when I knew, okay, you can go there and this whole set of book belongs to you. And so I was somebody who was a listener of stories because I come from a tradition of storytelling that is very oral, but the best type of stories for me were not the bedtime stories, but those stories that women whispered to each other, and I always knew there was something there that was being said that was so important.

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It had to be whispered. And so I heard, I would go up and I would listen. So that kind of story telling morality was something that I didn't think was anything. I loved stories and then reading...once I got into reading holy smokes! That lifted me. It was like I was like standing in muddied water. And as I read it would lift me and below me was a piece of land...below me was something solid. And out of just these books, I was able to see above what these... what the structures of the house was above, over the fence, down the neighborhood, you know? And so that widened my imaginary, my sense. But it was my sisters--when I started doing all this reading and I saw that there was nobody--I mean, now it's, it almost seems like a cliche. When you think about that there was no reflection of any of us in anything that I read. The closest I came to, was reading the socialist writers of the 1930s who wrote about poor people. Like Sherwood Anderson, for example, wrote Poor White. But I found that very striking. And if it wasn't for this wonderful college that I went to--and Cherrie Moraga talks about that college--these, these nuns recused themselves, they were went to the Cardinal and said “we wanna be excused of our vows. Because we cannot do the things we need to do as nuns under you.” And so that's the kind of power that they, they came back and they created this incredible, interesting kind of educational experience for me.

CTM: Which college?

HMV: It was Immaculate Heart College. And now, and now the buildings--in many ways it was it was an experiment that failed, because it was so radical. I mean, it was so radical! But eventually they sold the buildings to the American Film Institute. That's where it's at, on Los Feliz Drive, the American Film Institute. But it was an incredible experience to go there and to be with these these primarily white, but there was a Filipina and also one Chicana who were there as ex-nuns and and taught us.

But doing all of this reading, because I really felt I had to catch up, I came to realize that I couldn't see my mother or my sisters. And I just thought, oh all the lives they lived and how they took care of us and there's gotta be something. That's when my first short story opened with my mother making tortillas, that was the first short story I ever wrote. And that was my first motivation...I wanted to honor these wonderful women who've helped me and took care of me, kept me safe...so that so that other people can understand and honor them. So that's what I wanted to do. And so that's when I began, I slowly began that kind of writing process.

LEC: So how do you see that work as it has traveled? How do you see that work in the context of the beginning to now informing and instructing and empowering other women as it has you?

HMV: Well, I think it's interesting. When we talk about success--I was just talking about this last night with Angie Cruz', marvelous, marvelous novelist. When you talk about success, what does success mean? And live for the emails, I live for the students who write to me, I live for people who write to me and, and acknowledge how the work has changed their lives. But I, you know, this is why I thought, well, wait a minute. In terms of activism, what is it that I've done in the past? That's very different than what I'm doing in my writing, but then in many ways it's not! I mean, I was just listening to the interview, with Peña…

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CTM: …Lorgia?

HMV: Lorgia Peña...listening to that particular interview and speaking about the wonderful question that you all asked about creating that solidarity...and again I don't have the language for it, you all do, but yet I'm doing it in my novel, The Cemetary Boys.

CTM: Yeah, exactly.

HMV: Instinctually, I want all of us to be together. *[Laughs.]* and we can do that! It's funny how transnational our experiences are once you start looking at the center of all of our lives. Which is; we've all been oppressed by the imperialism, the colonialism, and we've all been oppressed with the racism and the gender--where does it all come from? Okay. That's one aspect. The other aspect is that we're all in it together. I started writing about the early 1940s, right before World War II, about the Philippines, because my uncle was stationed there.

HMV: Okay? And Ken Burns had this World War II documentary. That didn't include any Latinos, and it was horrible because there was tons of Latinos that died and many of them were shipped to the Philippines--because Spanish. So I began

writing, I wanted to insert my Tio back into--and he came back so hurt. He came back...he only lived about 15, 20 years afterwards. He died very young and, and very traumatized. And, you know, it was a hardcore alcoholic. I mean, oh, it was so sad and I loved him dearly, but here I was writing, but then I realized, well, wait a minute. Okay. If I'm writing about this, this Chicano in the Philippines, what about the Filipinos in California?

So then I began writing about the Filipinos in California while doing research on that. I found out about the Punjabi community *[Laughs.]* in Southern California. So I sort of began writing about that, you know, and, and seeing how many times, how many times we're interwoven yeah. And affected as even, even if we're separate communities, we're not! We're all in this incredible mix of oppression that we don't see, that's what I thought to myself. I don't wanna see us anymore in silos, where I'm just writing about Chicanos, where I'm just writing--I wanna see us together. I wanna see us all together and the historical context. I mean, that was another thing that I just loved about this whole idea of historical mapping, because that's what I'm doing. And the fact is that these incredible historians who have gone out there, trained by elders *[Laughs.]*

CTM: Right!

HMV: To go out there, work with archival material, work with objects, work with material things that exist and create these histories. I just finished--I had this one gay soldier and I brought him in coming from England, Arkansas. So I wanted to put him in and write about how difficult it was for queer people. But then I started doing research on Arkansas. See, I've never been, I started doing research on England, Arkansas and I picked England, Arkansas for the obvious reason. But then this, it became this incredible project. I mean, first of, all five routes of the Trail of Tears went through this particular state to go up to Oklahoma, all five routes. In 1926, there was this incredible flood called The Fatal Floof, where the Mississippi flooded. The Mississippi flooded so badly that whole towns were saturated, submerged. Well, in these towns where they were growing rice and corn and soybeans the majority, 95% of the farm workers were Black. When that happened, they tried to save as many people as they could. This was in a documentary I saw, they put them on high ground. And immediately upon putting them on high ground, they segregated them. But the worst part about this story, I mean, not that the segregation is not horrible, but that they wanted Black people to work on the levies so that they wouldn't flood, and did it by gunpoint.

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CTM: Oh, they held the gun to their heads?

HMV: To the point where they were working on the levies, stacking up for 10, 12, 14 hours. And come to find out that one man came home after working for 23 hours. And then they said, “no, you've gotta go back, it's your shift.” And he said, I've been working for twenty—"I'm gonna shoot you" and shot him. So then became this--don't know anything about all this stuff until one--because I'm doing this and I picked this random place, but how could I not include this incredible textured living history.

CTM: Also because you see what is so fascinating about how you are talking about this, and this is so profoundly for me, actually, a very radical feminist reading of how we think about history is that you are looking at the sort of interrelationships between lots of communities, right? In the same space.

HMV: Exactly.

CTM: Because the way history is written is usually from the point of view of whoever won, whatever. But when you look properly, you see the interwoven pathway.

HMV: Absolutely!

CTM: And the interdependencies between people! Which is fundamental to any kind of thinking about solidarity.

LEC: And the similarity in experiences, what happening to those people?

HMV: My first two parts of the novel have these massive swings, or sweeps, I call them, of communities. Because at that time, all of us were poor *[Laughs.]* During the Great Depression and during--right before the war...we were all poor. We all converged together to try to work, to try to just feed ourselves, and to think--that isn't the way we're presented. yeah. I didn't think that was truthful and that's why it began doing this. I mean, you're absolutely right. There was no way that I can write about this particular town without including these great, incredible stories.

CTM: Interwoven, the important aspect is the fact that you can't--the reason we hear singular stories is so that we pay no attention to all the other stories.

CTM: That in fact, made it possible for people in power to tell a singular story, I think as well. So in that sense, a lot of your writing is enormously subversive because you are actually showing realities, multiple realities.

LEC: And counter the notion of singularity. In this time, in this current historical moment in this country...those are really important because the emphasis--those are such important narratives because the emphasis is on separate.

HMV: Absolutely! This is the only reason why I haven't given up on the novel , it's the only reason--Mary Pat says my superpower is that I don't give up because I cannot

not do this. But, you gotta be careful too, because I'm a fiction writer and not necessarily a historian. So from these exciting historical facts I synthesize into story; what the story is, where the character is...I'm already thinking about the flood. I'm thinking about the drought, I'm thinking about this horrible thing--as a matter of fact, from the 26 flood to the 1931 drought, there was a famine.

Well, it was like a famine, but it was an uprising of the Black families, because they were not given vouchers that were given by the president to relieve the hunger. That's another thing too, in these historical moments, we don't see how many times we've actually resisted...for these families to come together, for that man with the gunshot to his head to say, I'm done, I'm tired, I need to rest. And of course be murdered for it. But those kind of stories too, are things that I wanna write about.

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CTM: It's interesting because now--think about the stories you told about your family and your sisters and both the creativity, but also the fact that you always recognized that they were able to get around the way patriarchal power controlled pretty much everything. And here you are you're now writing, you've been writing for decades, novels. Which in fact, there is this continuity that at least I'm seeing between...sort of the complexity of the lives of people and the subtle ways in which resistance, in fact, is both you both see and represent that resistance.

HMV: And I think that's so important!

CTM: Which is not necessarily always about, you know, either picking up a gun and shooting somebody, or being out on a march. Or even to vote right. Or something which is the more kinda obvious organizing way that one thinks about resistance.

HMV: We have to, and I think as writers, we have to hold the mirror to those people, like my sisters, for example. Who would've never thought that the things that they were doing were subversive. Would've never thought that the things that they were doing were creative. You know what I mean? Where in fact, for me they were the most impactful things in my life. The empowerment that it allowed me to survive in ways--just to survive in ways that I would've never have thought of if it wasn't for them. But going back to this from my work, I think I started with The Moths Right. And it was short stories about East LA .

And then with Under the Feet of Jesus, it was a family of migrant farm workers. But then I opened the lands up to Their Dogs Came With Them, where it had to do with the freeways and things like that. And, and then, and then it just, it opened up to about 25 characters. It's a big book when it comes to characters. Yeah. And then this one is now huge in terms of vision. It's huge. For me I find it interesting that I just cannot write about one person, I need to include everybody.

CTM: Yeah. Your canvas is huge!

HMV: My canvas is huge and…

CTM: ..and it's actually getting bigger, has become to get bigger and bigger.

HMV: Exactly. And it's interesting because I've been asked, how come you just, how come you have to write about a lot of people--and people have theories. I mean, I remember Paula Moya telling me that, that I was anti-bourgeois *[Laughs.]* because my storylines are so, so, so big in terms of the lens that I put forth. But the only thing I can think of is I came from a big family.

LEC: I was just about to say, your world has always been a world of inclusiveness. You know, inclusivity makes you think through these things. And you always thinking of the others.

HMV: Exactly, exactly.

LEC: You know, because it's from a family structure and this is your outlook on the world.

HMV: Yes, that's a very nice way to put it! I gotta write that down. That's so true. I mean that's why I have to open up these and I can't shut my eyes to these incredible experiences with these histories, I just can't shut my eyes. And so I have to really--now here's the pitfall though, is that then I go into dimensions that I'm not particularly a part of, so as a result I have to do a lot of work and I have to go in with a great amount of respect. Like with the Punjabi story I read. I read most of the first volume of the Sikh Bible. I read three or four are nonfiction books on Sikhs *[Laughs.]* , and doing that, and doing that, and doing that until finally, I feel comfortable enough to be able to write it. Because to just bring a character out as, as some people will do..."the Mexican", you know?

LEC: That's from a place of not knowing and…

HMV: …complete place of not knowing…

LEC: …and a place of disrespect and that's from a place of thinking, having a sense of entitlement. "It is so because I write it or I say it" You come from a place of — we— come from places of understanding and respect and following and allowing, so you have to know before you can do it.

HMV: Right, to give myself the permission after…

LEC: The permission, exactly…

HMV: Yeah. It's like knocking on my own door to say, are you ready? And then if I'm not...go back and do some more work. So...

CTM: So Helena, do you think about who you're doing the work for?

[00:43:54]

HMV: Let me tell you, I mean again—Angie and I were talking about this this whole idea of audience—when I first started writing, I was writing for my sisters. But then I realized that my own aesthetic is such that I was experimenting with structure. It was like, Sonia Saldívar-Hull has this way of saying that the reason that I write about this, in the structures that I do, and not in a conventional sense, is that because the storylines are so, you know, of displacement, of interruption, of intervention. So therefore my structures are like this, rather than this smooth thing. Because of that then it's gotten to be a little bit more...intense as I move on because now I'm also experimenting with languages and dialects and slang and doing things like that. So at one point I was doing it for the young folk. I was doing it for my sisters. And I think at this point, the only thing I can think of is that I have to do it. I have to get this out and see who sees themselves, see who picks it up and will read it from one end to the other, and learn something from it, or get angry by it, or I don't know...

Yeah, that's a good question. Both Angie and I talked about that because I don't know, sometimes I wish that I was the more conventional writer, so that it could be easier or more accessible for people to read, but I can't do that. I don't know, I tried, but I can't do that. There's too much complexity to the human experience... and there's too much complexity to the geography by which they come from that it's like...It's impossible to do. It's impossible to do. So that's why for me, my main concern--and this is what I've talked about in the past is one of the reasons, well there's a lot of reasons why capitalism is exists, but the only way that capitalism could continue to exist is with a continuous success of dehumanization.

HMV: So, for me as a writer, I wanna humanize those people...who some people think are not human because they don't think of us as human. I can't accept that. I mean, I just won't, I won't accept that. That's why I work really hard—I'm not so much thinking about the audience, but about thinking about, am I doing justice…

CTM: How to bring to life, how to make to fully human...people who are not seen in these communities, are discarded.

HMV: And I cannot think that the dominant culture for example, will have access to my world or worlds. But I can't worry about that. No, for me if they don't see the humanity in my characters, then either I'm not doing my job right or they're fucked. You know what I mean?

CTM: Yup, absolutely.

HMV: I'm sorry *[Laughs.]*

CTM: That is completely legitimate—*[Laughter.]*—completely legitimate. So I mean, you've actually gone through a lot of our questions without us having to prompt you

[00:48:01]

HMV: That's no problem

CTM: So maybe I have a question about how you think about feminism...how would you imagine that the work you do the teaching you do--because I know how important the teaching is--and the kind of conversations you have with different communities of people. How are they--which I really think they are so I want you to talk about it--how are they feminist at heart?

HMV: Interesting. Well, in the Gloria Joseph interview, she asks; what do you think about this? And you gave a beautiful response to that. You know, about the multiplicities, about the resistance, the persistence of a resistance against the social and sexual injustice. So that's why I think--it's funny because the way I came into feminism was my love of women, my sisters, my mother--and then from there, getting educated by these nuns who empowered me. But going out into the world, I didn't think of myself as a feminist...but I knew I was doing feminist work because it was always women centered. But it wasn't until I started really feeling like yes, some of this work that I'm doing is effective in the resistance against social injustice, yes. I'm a feminist--that's when I began. I also think that the classroom is an incredible space for these types of discussions, for these types of debates. So for me--one of the things that I do when I come in, whatever class I teach, I come in and I give them a brief biography of myself. Where I come from, who I am, what I think about...and this is so that they understand that already there is a nuance to the way I'm gonna run this class. That there is a way of perception that I'm going to share with them. That has worked for the most part.

CTM: Yeah, well, nothing works with everybody all the time.

HMV: It's a difficult thing. I mean, it really is a difficult thing. In my teachings at Cornell, I have been very lucky to now have more and more students of color as people begin talking about my classes. And because when you teach creative writing--it's teaching creative writing--I'm not teaching African American literature or anything, of course I teach all of that, but it's under the rubric of creative writing. Now specifically, students are coming to my classes. you? I love that. But you know, I also, I don't know--I always feel I could, I should be doing more--I don't know if you ever feel that way...

LEC: Never

[Laughter.]

CTM: Right, uh huh. You saw the irony there! *[Laughter.]*

LEC: You know, as I listen to you, Helena, I'm listening so intently, and 'm hearing so many things going on. Like when Chandra asked you about thinking of coming to feminist work, that was a great answer. It's a whole spectrum. Then you said,"yeah I am". But you know, we talk about organic feminists, and when we look back and histories and our parents and grandmothers and stuff, they were feminists. When I hear you talk about your sister and that ripping of the shirt--

CTM: That's one serious feminist! *[Laughter.]*

LEC: I'm telling you, because I have a five year old experience. My experience when I was five years old. I'll tell you after we film. So you realize, we are talking about organic feminists. And you went and looked at that shirt many times, because that was an empowerment thing that you were trying to understand in your young child's brain, in your mind.

HMV: Thinking back, I always thought, why did I keep going? Part of it was because of the disbelief, but part of it was that..

LEC: She knew something...

CTM: It was really, really symbolic. It symbolized something really important. Which is, you can speak up.

HMV: Yes, exactly. Exactly.

LEC: And that it will have an effect. It changed the man.

[00:53:00]

HMV: He never touched my mother again.

LEC: So you learn about self-empowerment.

HMV: Yeah, yeah. That's why I think for me as a writer, I’'m always thinking about objects now. The things that we touch. When I talked about history, for example, and not even alternative histories. These are our histories, where you look into letters or you look into recipes or you're looking into other kind of archival information, and create that moment, document that moment. Or witness that moment. I think that stems from the visceral touching of the ripped shirt. Laughs

CTM: And so in that sense, you know, how interesting because the whole idea of witnessing yeah. is such an important idea, I think, for feminist praxis. That's just not two ways about it.

HMV: Right, right.

CTM: It's sometimes what we say to students; when you know something, you can't unknow it.

HMV: Yeah, exactly, right!

CTM: And that is a part of witnessing, and one has to continually witness and that's a way of speaking up. Because witnessing something is and taking it seriously…

LEC: …takes you to the next step, which is action...doing something which for you is writing and teaching, I think now as well. Which is such a crucial...

HMV: I think if it wasn't for this huge novel--my mother always had the concept of body as work because we used to, in the summers, we worked in the field. My sisters, we were always cleaning the house, doing things that we had to be doing. So for my mother, it was always--I have a little bit of that too, in the sense that I do my writing, I do my teaching. My teaching is political acts. My writing is political acts, but I also feel like it's almost like I should be out, out and about doing. Periodically I have, I've taught at Auburn, for example. I was a trustee for the public library here and things like that. But I don't know I feel--it's like I miss that as well. I miss that kind of organic grassroots, just, you know, let me stop it laughs. It's what I used to do, I used to do that all the time. Especially in college, as a part of the United Farm Workers support group, the students. We would do all kinds of boycotts, leaflets, clothes drives, things like that, you know? And so, you know, I just feel like, wow...

CTM: Maybe what you miss is just the collectivity. Or that kind of political work.

HMV: Yeah, yeah, yeah

CTM: Okay, so what that means is when this novel is done, go back. We're gonna be out doing stuff back in.

HMV: Yeah, pledge back in.

CTM: No, I mean really...because that's so much…

LEC: The community part.

CTM: Yeah. That is such a key part.

HMV: It really feeds me. It really feeds me.

CTM: You create these communities for yourself in these landscapes.

LEC: That's the sustainability and that's how it sustain yourself.

HMV: There you go, there you go.

CTM: So any final question?

LEC: Oh, this was deep. See how easy we told you it would be?

CTM: Thank you, Helena.

HMV: Thank you, oh my God. You guys are fantastic.

CTM: You know what's so amazing is all of these stories you've told to me, all of the concepts that, that we have questions about--solidarity, working across border, feminist praxis…all of these they all emerge in the way you talk about your work. Which is so wonderful.

LEC: So they end up being the origins of Helena. Like how do you come to this? Where did it start?

HMV: That's lovely. So lovely.

CTM: Thank you, my friend.

HMV: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[00:55:29 end video]

Feminist Freedom Warriors (FFW) is a first of its kind digital video archive and documentary project. Born out of an engagement in anti-capitalist, anti-racist struggles as women of color from the Global South, this project is about cross-generational histories of feminist activism addressing economic, anti-racist, social justice and anti-capitalist issues across national borders.