

Ran First of all, could you introduce yourself? Just very briefly, how would you call yourself and what name do you go by?

Narrator Yes. My name is Iris Viveros Avendaño. I use she her pronouns. And I go by Iris.

Ran Iris.

Narrator Yeah.

Ran Is it okay I call you Iris?

Narrator Yes. Yes. Call me Iris.

Ran I did some research about you before the interview.

Narrator Oh.

Ran I saw you grew up in Mexico Veracruz.

Narrator Yeah.

Ran What was it like growing up there?

Narrator I grew up in two parts. First, before I was 10 years old, I grew up in Mexico City in an area that is called Iztapalapa. It is a low income area with a lot of people who work in the informal economies. You know, street vendors, mostly street vendors. So myself, I come from a family of street vendors. I grew up just helping my parents with the family business, which were multiple, but mostly food or orange juice or, you know, whatever we could sell. And then that led to opening a business of a public restroom. I don't know if in your country, there's boroughs in Mexico, there are public restrooms and Mexico city where people pay like two pesos and 50 cent. My mom still has the business. Yeah, I grew up, you know, helping that family business, I would go to school and during the time that I wasn't going to school, I would take care of the public restrooms, wake up early wash them, and you know, cut pieces of paper and a certain amount of this paper just given to the people who came into the restroom. So I grew up doing that and going to school. And then I moved to Veracruz where I went to middle school. I was a teenager. I was probably like, I don't know 11 years old twelve years old or something when I moved to Veracruz. My dad was from the state of Veracruz.

Ran Was Veracruz any different from where you grew up?

Narrator Oh yeah, super different. I was very, it was a shock for me to grow up in Veracruz because the city, I grew up in Iztapalapa, to move to Veracruz because as I said, the neighborhood where I grew up in Iztapalapa was a low income neighborhood. And the public services like schools were in very bad condition. I had to... when I

went to school one of the things that I remember is that I had to buy my own, my parents had to buy me my own desk to take to school because the school didn't have the resources. And these are public schools. So they didn't have desks, I had to buy my own. I had to buy my own desk so that I had a place to sit, you know, one of those desks with a chair and table. I don't know how they were called. I think they might have a specific name, but I remember going to the market and I bought this desk. And yeah, you know, didn't have resources. I always went to public schools.

So the schools even though they were also public, they were much nicer. They had more resources. The city was also nicer. The state of Veracruz reminds me so much of Seattle, it rains a lot. So in Mexico City, there's a lot of pollution and more in areas such as

Ran Air pollution?

Narrator Air pollution, but also, you know, garbage and, you know, all kinds of pollution. And then that's the city in general. But that exacerbates, is bigger, is more visible in neighborhoods, such as the one that I grew up.

Ran How have the experiences of your early years influenced what you do now? And what you are as a person?

Narrator Oh, I think they, it's everything. You know, I, everything influenced me. My mom is an Indigenous woman from Oaxaca. And she always taught me to not only think of myself, but to, to think about how to become better, but with other people together. She's someone I would call an organic intellectual. She didn't go to school. I mean, she went to school. But it's a very sad story. She went to school, but she was the best in her class. But there was a lot of violence in her household. And, you know, one time the house where she was living, burned, you know.

Ran Was it an accident?

Narrator It wasn't an accident. You know, it was something related to violence, right in the family. But then all the things that were inside the house burnt with it. Anyways I'm not going to make the story long because that's not the point of what I'm going to tell you. But, you know, my mom faced violence which led to her having to leave school when she was very little. She didn't finish elementary school. And my dad also didn't know how to read or write. But they were incredibly smart people. And I think what I do right now is precisely I tried to bring visibility to knowledges that are often overlooked in institutions such as universities. And I try to do that with the intention to dignify those knowledges. I think my parents are the first people that I knew that held these knowledges and throughout my life, I've met other people, you know, Indigenous movements. My mom introduced me to the Zapatista movement in Mexico, and she took me to protests when I was very little. And I think that impacted me a lot. And that taught me about protest. It

taught me about social justice and taught me about all of these things that are really central to collectivity. Right, just by being there in that protest at such a young age as a teenager. And I think that really has been sort of like a seed to other knowledge that I've been able to know, as I continue on with my life, even in the university, when I learned about women of color feminism, right? I think that's the same. That's what they're doing. And when I learned about Chicana, when I learned about black feminists that write about knowledge that hold this world together, right, and often get overlooked, or not considered as valuable.

Ran Yeah, I very like your phrasing, like you used organic intellectual. I think it's a very interesting way of putting it.

Narrator Why?

Ran I like. Like, because when we talk about organic things, it's always like organic foods, organic, you know, way of production, but I've never heard people using it to describe people.

Narrator Okay. You are right.

Ran My grandparents were also street vendors. Like years ago. I personally had a very deep connection with them, as well as my mother.

Narrator Yeah, so you're like, my daughter. I mean, not that you're like my daughter, but my daughter can say my grandparents were street vendors.

Ran So what made you decide to do a PhD here?

Narrator Oh, well, it's very interesting, because I think everything happened. I don't even know how to describe it. Everything happened. One thing after another, you know, as part of a sequence.

Ran Very natural?

Narrator Yes, very organically. Because I was doing my undergraduate here also at uw. And while I was doing my undergraduate, at the same time, there was this project Community Music Project from Veracruz where I grew up, right, about Fandango music, which is a music from Veracruz. And I was part of it, but I was part of it as a community member. And the people who started it were really well connected to the university, Martha Gonzalez, who also got her PhD here at uw in gender women's sexuality studies. And through that project, I met other professors in the department who... one of them being Michelle Habell-Pallán who is a Chicana scholar and I met her as a friend. And I told her, you know, in spaces of community, just like in the Fandango, I told her that I was studying at uw. And then she told me one day I remember I was at work, and then she said, she sent me an email. She was like, you have to apply to this program, which was McNair

Scholar Program. Okay, when is it due? Today, at 5pm. Okay, because back then, you have to turn in the application by hand. You know, I'm telling you, this was like, 10 years ago, which isn't that long ago, but yeah.

Ran 10 years ago?

Narrator In the McNair program, you have to turn in the application before they close the office, and I worked so hard, and I did everything I could, you know, I was like, you know, you have to propose a research. What's going to be your research? I'm a dancer. And I said my research is gonna be tarima. And I'm gonna write about it from the perspective of space, a healing space. And right, there's a healing space. That's going to be my research. And I wrote it very quickly. And I turned it in. They were literally I remember, they were closing the doors. And as they were closing the doors I came. And I wasn't the only person. There was another person. And I think she also got accepted, like, please accept my application. And then she took my application. So The McNair Scholars Program is, are you familiar with it?

Ran Not really.

Narrator So the McNair Scholars Program is a federally funded program that gives mentorship and helps undergraduate students who come from underrepresented backgrounds or low income students get to graduate school and more specifically prepares them for PhD programs, okay as an undergrad. And what they do is that they mentor you in research, undergraduate research, you know, they give you funding for applications, or they give you funding to take the GRE, the GRE is that exam that you have to take that you used to have to take to get into grad school. So they pay for all of that. And then you present at an undergraduate conference. So it's basically like a little taste of what graduate school is. And then once I was there, the next thing was okay, now I need to apply, you know, now I'm going to apply to PhD programs. I applied to a few PhD programs. I chose to stay here.

Ran It was a last minute decision. Kind of.

Narrator Yeah, I think I, you know, I've been lucky because I do like, I like research. This is what I like, I like doing this work. I like even though it's F* up at some levels, but I like the community that you can build in the intellectual space. Like there's some kind of community that you can build in an intellectual space, like Priti, or like with other scholars, like Martha Gonzalez. And, you know, there's that possibility.

Ran So what was the department like, when you were there?

Narrator Gender, Women and sexuality studies as a graduate student, because I was also here as an undergrad. But you're asking me as a graduate student?

Ran Yeah. Or just in general.

Narrator You know, as an undergrad, I took some classes in the Gender Woman's Sexuality Studies department, but that wasn't my major. But that's how I met who I later chose to be my...

Ran Advisor?

Narrator Yeah, supervisor. And I already knew Michelle. So I have two co-advisors, Michelle, and Angela Ginorio. So I met Angela Ginorio as an undergraduate student taking her women of violence class. And, and then, you know, as a graduate student, the Department of Gender Women and Sexuality Studies is a department that is very, not very, but it's different, is different amongst the disciplines that you see, at the University of Washington.

Ran In what way?

Narrator And I say this in the sense that feminism really came from activism. Right. And I believe that the Department of gender, gender women's sexuality studies, understands that. They make an emphasis in recruiting students of color. And if you look at the graduate students list, and the people who have graduated from the department, there is a big majority of students of color. So I think that the presence of students of color, the presence of students who are queer, trans students, I think that definitely makes the department a very unique space. Then you look at the research that they're doing, and the research that they're doing is always emphasizing justice from a gender perspective. And then when you look at the classes that they offer, you also see that they're very social justice oriented. And sometimes you don't realize that, like, how social justice-centered the Department of gender women's sexuality studies is, sometimes you don't realize it until you get out of the department of gender women and sexuality studies. You start going to like, take classes like for example. ethnomusicology, like for me, right? Someone who studies music, ethnomusicology. Then you're like, why are you analyzing music like this? Music like opera like, why are you analyzing community music like this from this such an objective, right, male centered point of view when music is a social practice. Then you realize...

Ran They do things differently.

Narrator Definitely. Definitely. And I do believe that for someone who's trained as a feminist I think it's important for us to see to know how the general academia outside of feminism works. Because to me, that has been important because it's helped me value the kind of work that we do in departments such as the gender women and sexuality department.

Ran I don't know if you have taken courses in comm department. I think at least in my understanding the Communication Department also does a good job. We have a separate center for race...

Narrator Ralina Joseph.

Ran Yeah. CCDE, like equity.

Narrator Yes. Ralina Joseph. I think your department has amazing people that are connected to gender women sexuality studies, you know, like Ralina Joseph. I took a class with Ralina. I think one or two classes with Ralina. And, yeah, I do believe that. I don't want to generalize that. All departments have these like colonial blah-blah mentality or way of working. But what I want to say is that it's easier to find that way of working that is very top down and colonial. It is easier to find that in departments that are outside of the gender women and sexuality studies. And the reason why I think so is because as I said, feminism, as a discipline, was born out of activism. There is not feminism without activism. You can have ethnomusicology without activism.

Ran Yes.

Narrator Right? All of those, all of those departments, anthropology, ethnomusicology, all of those were born out of colonial projects. Right? And that's the difference with feminist studies. Feminist studies was born out of activism.

Ran Collective actions.

Narrator Yeah, out of hope for a better world. Right. Anything as next steps. Looking at Chicana Studies, Black studies, any of those.

Ran You mentioned that you took a women and violence course, what else? What other courses did you take? Are there any courses that you highly recommend?

Narrator Oh, wow, let me remember. That's a long time ago, a long time ago, and now I have a daughter and I forget things. I might not remember the exact names, but I think that the class that I took with Priti Women in economic, international economic development, that's, that's a class that I recommend highly for someone who is thinking of really thinking of their project, as part of or operating within globalization, within neoliberalism. It really gives you a really good view of the gender aspect of it. And I think transnational, I think that's something that Priti does really well which is to teach transnational feminisms. Anything has to do with transnational. Priti is a very good person to go to, to learn that. I've also taken classes that are more music-centered, particularly with Michelle Habell-Pallán. I wish I could see the list of the name of the courses but I don't remember the names. I can tell you more or less the subjects or the topics. Or if I can see the list, the chance I took, but also indigenous feminisms. As I said, those classes I

took them. I think there are some Indigenous feminism courses, the gender woman's sexuality studies department, but also there are a lot of Indigenous feminism courses that are cross-listed with Gender Women and Sexuality Studies. Right. And I think those were very important to me, because I look at decolonization movements, and I look at colonialism. But I also as I said, right, I look at transnationalism. So Priti, taking classes with Priti was helpful. And I also took a class with Chandan Reddy on globalization, or neoliberalism, I don't remember the exact name of the seminar. It was a seminar. And but that was also very important to, to set the foundations for a study on urbanization and neoliberalism. The positionality of women of color, subjects in this system, but also building resistance.

Ran I think these courses they've just mentioned, will be very relevant to my own research. Yeah, I'll definitely check them out.

Narrator Yeah, yeah.

Narrator And I know that Chandan is, you know, he comes up, or I don't know who comes up, probably him, with these courses that sometimes are very relevant to what is happening at the moment. I think he was teaching I don't know, recently, I thought I saw he was teaching something relevant to to some issues happening in the world. I don't remember exactly which one but. I also looked him up in the Professor Watchlist. He's in the Professor Watchlist. You know what that is? They target or highlight professors that teach anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist and they put them in a watchlist. So they like...

Ran A bunch of very established scholars.

Narrator But it's not a good list. It's a good list, but it's not a good list, you know what I mean? It's a list that kind of like, drags them as potential instigators, you know. Look it up. It's called Professors Watchlist. For you too, later. And I think somebody I don't know, I came across some panel that spoke about it. And I was like, I wonder if Chandan is in there, and then I googled him up. Chandan yes, Chandan right here, then it says why. And then they have a quote, where he criticizes imperialism, from his book, Freedom with Violence. So anyways.

Ran Thank you for sharing. Because we were talking about, we're talking about a lot about decolonial approaches, because I had a conversation with Priti last month, and we were talking about how I feel like like women's studies was and still is a very US-centric area. I don't I wonder if you feel the same way?

Narrator I do. I do believe that. I think that's why the work of transnational feminism is important. I do think that the fact that US universities have more access to publications. Those publications are spread more widely around the world. Also the fact that English is a prioritized language. You know, I do think that it makes feminism very US centric. I agree with you. And, I do believe that you can study

something based in the US, but that criticizes or really challenges the empire. And I do believe that, for me, studying Indigenous feminists across the Americas, across Mexico, especially for someone from there, but also thinking of Indigenous feminists in the US. And also other indigenous feminists around the world. I think that is a good approach to kind of start thinking globally, for people who are not necessarily born in, you know, outside of the US because it really criticizes empire from within the US Empire. And I think US Indigenous feminists do a good job right, like foundationally. I believe that the voices of transnational feminists are important, precisely because they have a very specific way to criticize empire.

Ran I'm also trying to find ways to connect my study, which is Chinese feminist studies, to the global context. I think that is one direction that I want to go. Are there any memorable moments in your trajectory as a PhD student?

Narrator I'm having a hard time thinking of memorable moments. Can we go back to that question? Maybe it'll come up later. I can't think of those moments.

Ran Yeah, we can get back to that later. So I saw that you defended your dissertation last year? Does that mean that you have graduated by now? So, if you don't mind me asking, are you on the job market? Or are you looking for something outside of academia?

Narrator I'm in the job market. I am in the job market. I actually just sent an application on Monday. Yeah, you know, I'm applying for postdoc positions. And I'm also applying for tenure track positions. So yeah, that's what I'm doing right now. And I'm also, you know, I'm working on a book co-authored with a friend that actually captures the experiences of transnational scholars from the Global South, and their experiences studying in universities in the Global North. So people like you, for example. We're writing a book on that, my friend and I. And it's coming up soon, we have to turn in our final draft in basically a month. So a lot of work. But it's also very cool, because I've met other, you know, other scholars from different parts of the world that have studied in universities in the Global North, not only the US, but some people have studied in the UK. Some people from South Africa that have studied in the UK. So yeah, I mean, I'm in the job market.

Ran Priti mentioned it to me last month, when I had a chance to interview her. She mentioned that like studying in Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies Department can be... as a graduate student, because there are not a lot of jobs out there, especially for women of color. So I asked, what is your suggestion to students who are interested in feminist studies, she was like, think twice before you become a PhD student.

Narrator Yeah.

Ran Come prepared.

Narrator You know. I think that is true. It is true, we cannot forget the fact that the university is a full capitalist model. And as such, you know, there's going to be a lot of competitiveness. There's gonna be even if you do everything that you need to do to get a job, sometimes it's hard to get a job. But I believe that you know, at the center overall, you have to really ask yourself, like, what, multiple things, why are we doing this? Right? Why are we studying this? And is this the route that I want to take? Like, I want to, I want to do it. In this way, do I need to go into the job market, academic job market? There are other options. I do like academia, and I do like research. But I also think that for me, the timing was very interesting.

Ran How so?

Narrator Because, for example, when I was in the job market, I was starting to be in the job market when the pandemic hit. And I knew it was a very difficult time to be in the job market. And I did a couple of interviews, at some universities, but I didn't make it to the next cut. And then I got pregnant. And then I had my baby. And I believe that for women, if you get pregnant while you're in graduate school, you need to have a lot of support, so that you can keep doing the academic work. I had a lot of support so that I could finish my dissertation, right? My baby was months, when I was writing my dissertation and I had a lot of help. But I could not do both. I could not be in the job market and finish my dissertation. That was impossible because I also chose to be with my daughter. I didn't want to put her in daycare. I don't judge people who want to do that, you know, you do what you want, you need to do what feels comfortable. For me, I wanted to be with her and I'd rather, you know, only do one thing because I feel that you always have to prioritize your mental health. And my daughter happened to be a person, a baby, she's a person too. But she didn't, you know, for the first three years, she didn't really sleep well. She would wake up at 2am and would not go back to sleep till like 6am, like three hours awake. Not even crying, not even just like hanging out, you know. But if you think about, you know, the mental work that you have to do, when you're lacking sleep. I was also involved in an accident, you know, I had a concussion, which meant that I basically had to, you know, my mental capacity was less. It was very painful. I could not look at the screen for too long. So all of those things slowed me down somehow.

But I want to tell you something, I feel very bad. Because there's something about grad school that can make you feel really bad about your productivity, you know. That can really affect your self esteem. And I was tired of feeling that I was tired of feeling that especially when you look at the history of my family, and the history of my people, right? Like, we work hard. I'm not gonna let this institution tell me who I am. I am strong, right? I don't need to do things, to prove it to you. And I thought, I am going to finish this, this is my deadline that I put for myself. It's going to be June 2023. If I don't do it by then I'm not going to do it. Because if I don't do it by then, it's because I don't want to. And if I don't want to, It's going to be my decision. It's not going to be anybody, nobody else's decision. It's gonna

be me. And I'm gonna decide that this is not the kind of work that I do. But I'm not gonna let anybody put me down or make me feel that I'm less than for not finishing this. It's okay to walk away from something that hurts you, whatever that is. And I thought that way. Mainly, you know, I think that having a daughter made me feel that way, like, this was not the way I want my daughter to see me. Yeah, anybody. I don't know, like, I don't know, whoever you love. You think what do I want to be? Who do I want to be? For me? But like, for that person, for your parents? How do I want them to see me? And yeah, and I finished. Like, I was working so hard. Would not sleep, sleep deprivation for days. But I had to finish.

Ran It was a really difficult time of your life, but you made it.

Narrator But also it gave me, you know, like having that separation graduating, writing gave me the momentum. You know, the momentum that I needed to keep doing research or writing and now with the goal, you know, I keep writing. Now I think it has become easier to apply for jobs. My self esteem is also like, you know what, I'm gonna do it. If this is not for me, there are so many things that I can do. And I'm even paid better. Because academia doesn't even pay that well. You know, I think it's, to a certain extent, status. You can find a job in other places that are gonna pay you better than academia and you probably are gonna be less tired.

Ran I feel like it's kind of a trade-off.

Narrator Yeah.

Ran Either choose a job that pays you better or a job in academia.

Narrator And you know what, I'm just remembering something. One time I did an interview to Michelle. Michelle. I don't remember what the interview was for. But in one of the questions, I don't even know which question it was, but she told me, or I think it was something like what do you need to be in academia or something. And she responded, you have to like it. You have to like it, because you have to like the research, you have to like this because if you don't like it, it is gonna be like, all the bullshit around it is going to, not gonna sustain you. And if you like it you're gonna find ways to navigate it. There is a book that I recommend. I don't know if you've heard of it, but I think you should get it now. It is called the professor is in.

Ran The professor is?

Narrator In. Yeah. How to turn your PhD into a job. I have it here.

Ran Oh really.

Narrator I'll tell you why it's important that you get it now. Because it tells you, this is what you need to do from now. And you better start early. To get a job in academia.

Ran Thank you.

Narrator It basically tells you how you need to move, like the things that you need to do. You need to publish. If you do community work, that's amazing. But you need to find a way to translate it into academia. Because academia is a capitalist model. So they don't necessarily care. Our department might care. Gender Women and Sexuality studies might care, but they might not necessarily care all the work that you're doing in community, if it's not translated into, into research, right? Or conferences, right. Like go to conferences, socialize, how you need to move, how do you need to talk to colleagues. Don't talk to them as if you're a graduate student. Talk to them as if you are a colleague, right? Like all of these things, you know, that are really good to know. Some of them I didn't know, I think the Department kind of signals my department kind of signals to that better, but they don't necessarily talk about it as crude and as clear as that.

Ran There's much to learn.

Narrator Yeah, you should. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Especially navigate, how to navigate it.

Ran It's good for me to, like, listen to someone who has been through everything.

Narrator From someone who in reality, like I don't have a job. Like, I have my PhD. But I don't have a job, right? I think we need to help each other. Like in this model of scarcity of academia, we need to say, bullshit. I'm not gonna be that. I'm not gonna operate with that. I'm gonna help all get that job. So, there are things here that she says that I'm like, Oh, I wish I would have done this. Like, I wish I would have done these, or knew about these in my first year.

Ran Yeah, I'll definitely get one.

Narrator Yeah. Because even if you're a good student, even if you have good research, it's important to know how to strategize, and move. And I think that's something that if I go back to the question, when you say, what my parents, right, our parents or grandparents. I think that being street vendors, is that mentality of navigating a world that really wants to monetize, commodify us. I don't know how it was in your case, but for my parents, choosing to be street vendors was actually a decision to have their own business, even if it's on a small scale, but these are decisions about autonomy. Because the other option was we will work in a factory where you have to put your kids in daycare. And like, you know, there are other things that are working at the factory, but I think for a lot of street vendors, choosing to be street vendors is a decision in response to exploitation in other parts of it.

Ran Do you want to go back to the question of a memorable moment? It's fine if you...

Narrator I just can't remember. I just can't think of a moment. I think defending my dissertation probably. Yeah.

Ran How did you feel?

Narrator I'll tell you, it was defending my dissertation because my mom came from Mexico. And I had my family, you know, my imposter syndrome. I didn't want to invite anybody. But then the last minute I was like, they're gonna see that my research is not good, blah blah blah... all the imposter in me. But then last minute, I think somebody my friends were like, why you're not gonna invite us? And then Michelle was like, why? Like, do you have a zoom link? And then I decided to invite people. And I invited my community, the Seattle Fandango Project, and they came and played in my dissertation.

Ran Wow.

Narrator Because my dissertation is on music. So we had music. My mom was here. My sister helped get the equipment for simultaneous translation. So she sat at the table with my committee. And my sister was translating simultaneously my presentation. I think it was, you know,

Ran Sounds interesting. I wish I was there.

Narrator Yeah, me too. I wish I had a video but yeah, it was very beautiful to have all the support.

Ran It's so helpful to have your own support system as a graduate student.

Narrator Yeah. Always.

Ran Yeah. I think it's very impressive that I feel like your life is your research. And your research is closely tied to your personal life. Like you're, you're a dancer, and you have to research about dancing.

Narrator Yeah, yeah, I grew up dancing.

Ran I think that's all for my questions. Thank you so much!

Narrator We did it.

Ran Thank you so much.

Narrator Of course. You're welcome.