10 SHARING QUEER AUTHORITIES

Collaborating for Transgender Latina and Gay Latino Historical Meanings

Horacio N. Roque Ramírez

Oral history by Horacio N. Roque Ramírez with Alberta Nevaeres (aka Teresita la Campesina), San Francisco, California, 1996

On April 19, 1996, the male-to-female (MTF) transgender performer Alberta Nevaeres (1940–2002), better known in San Francisco and especially in the city's Latino Mission district as Teresita la Campesina, met me to continue recording her life history, a process we had begun earlier in the month. This recording began, like our first interview earlier that month, with Teresita singing into the audio recorder as classic ranchera *song tracks played in the background. Our conversations were part of a growing project on queer Latina and Latino life in the city, which I had begun a year earlier as a small study on queer Latina and Latino activists organizing around HIV and AIDS prevention. As someone who was openly HIV+, Teresita had become a client of several Mission neighborhood health agencies. At these venues, she was known for being quite loud in her singing, joking, telling tall tales, and laughing. Through all of these actions, she contextualized queer life in the 1990s by comparing it with earlier decades.*

The following excerpt requires some explanation. In it, Teresita recalls her arrest for being "found out" as a "drag queen" (the word of the day), somebody having outed her for not being a "real woman" when she was working in Stockton, California, a semirural town ninety miles east of San Francisco. She then details the intricacies of gender identity, queering both the English and Spanish languages, back and forth, as she describes the drag queens and gay men of the 1960s. In "queering" language, Teresita spoke back and forth between English and Spanish, not careful to use the proper terminology of the day in either language (say, "transgender" or "transgénero") *and instead harking back to earlier terms used to denigrate, police, and generally stigmatize queer populations, especially transgender women and men. "Drag queen" (and its Spanish-language version* "vestida"), *"sex change,"* "operada" *(literally "operated," meaning, having gone through a sex change surgically)—these and other terms used liberally but also strategically made listening to Teresita's narrative quite a multilingual, multigender, and multivalent endeavor.*[1] *Teresita and I shared such a multilingual exchange in Spanish, English, and "Spanglish," an impromptu mix of English and Spanish, in which we borrowed liberally from both linguistic codes in ways not*

discernible to listeners who are not able to move so easily back and forth between the languages. That she and I were also openly queer (I as a gay Latino) allowed us to further queer our exchange, although she did most of talking as I tried to follow along. That both of us were bilingual but, most important, spontaneously conversant in Spanglish was one of the main reasons that she and I communicated so well, something a solely English- or Spanish-speaking oral historian would not have been able to grasp in her narrative style and the subtleties of her gender play.

Alberta Nevaeres—better known in San Francisco and especially San Francisco's Latino Mission District as Teresita la Campesina—at a friend's home in the Mission around 1978. *Photograph by and courtesy of Dan Arcos*

The transcribed narrative appears first, almost verbatim. Bilingual readers, and especially those familiar with Spanglish, will appreciate the exchange. By contrast, the English-speaking, non-Spanish-speaking reader may want to go directly to the second, fully translated version of this transcript. The former will see a queer sense of Spanish and Spanglish in the ways that gender—so basic to Spanish language terminology—was queered in Teresita's recollections. In describing how she was outed for being a maricona, *for example, she is queering the Spanish* maricón—*"faggot"—by turning it female—*maricona, *to mean more generally "queer." Similarly, the common Mexican-Chicano pejorative term* joto *for "faggot" often became* jota, *but also the diminutive* jotito *or* jotita *("little faggot") as a term of relative endearment. To discuss gender identities and meanings in the*

1990s in reference to life in the 1950s and 1960s, when "drag queen" denoted what later became transsexual and transgender, further complicates terms denoting genders and sexualities and how they are understood today. This 1990s queering or regendering of nouns and pronouns from earlier decades was part of Teresita's style. Since she was an illiterate singer (she could sign her own name only with very poor penmanship), voice and language were particularly important for her. Teresita had a knack for recalling geographic details and names, but she also strategically introduced phrases, especially of the rhyming kind. For example, she described her youthful appearance as "bella como una camella"—*literally, as beautiful as a female camel. Moreover, as she clarified particular statements, her thinking was more in Spanish than in English, making it that much more complicated to mix both languages and all genders. In many ways, she was always producing a bilingual text, constantly offering phrases in both languages. Finally, the richness of her narrative derives from the challenge of following her re-creation of other voices. She often performed (reenacted) conversations she had decades earlier, and because those recollections usually involved multiple voices, she was performing a multivoiced queer history, whether in song or in oral history.*[2]

TRANSCRIPTION 1: UNTRANSLATED, BILINGUAL SPANGLISH VERSION

HORACIO N. ROQUE RAMÍREZ: What was working in the bar like?

TERESITA LA CAMPESINA: I was working there as a woman.

HORACIO: How was it?

TERESITA: I was working with nothing but nationals. They would pick cotton and berries. And I would work behind the bar, and I would sing to them. There was gay people that used to come there from the fields and some of them you could tell. They didn't know [about me], but [some] knew me from LA. One, a female [said], "Oh, that's a drag queen! I know her from L.A. Her name's Alberta!" And she went and told. See, and even in our own kind, you have to look out who your friends are 'cause your own kind will give you away. It was some sissy punk, lowlife, working in the fields, didn't have shit going. And I'm working there with falsies, looking *gorgeous* , like a sunset, bella como una camella, trabajando como una hembra con todos los machos, chupando verga, engañando a los hombres—pos claro que le hiba a dar [celos] al joto—era flamboyant—le hiba dar coraje. Y me conocía. Y jué y les dijo a todos que yo era maricona. Entonces yo tenía una amiga que se llamaba Carmen—se llama Johnny. Him and his old man are still together. They've been together twenty years. So I got *him* a job in the field. And I says, "Este es mi amigo Juan. Le dicen Carmen." He was tall but looked effeminate, con la mano caida pero

grandote. And so I got him a job there and she always loved me. I haven't seen her in years. So anyway, when I went to jail, when I got busted, she got that fucking queen that told on me, she says, "You motherfucker, Margie [Margarita; Teresita] is good people. Why did you do that to her? She's a sister. Como eres gacho." They beat the *shit* out of him.

HORACIO: Really?

TERESITA: *Yeah*, that's what I was told. That Carmen—he beat the fuck out of that queer. Lo golpió ' cause she went and told that I was a drag queen. *I* was never no angel 'cause nobody is, nobody is perfect. But you know when the bar owner wasn't there I would give Carmen beers and my friends, the little whores. They would come in and I would give them free drinks on the house y todo. And I was just in my young youth, twenty-five years old. I was there when Kennedy died. What year did Kennedy die?

HORACIO: Mmhh … I forget…. '63? Maybe I'm wrong.

TERESITA: Okay, well around there. I want you to hear this story. So that, I used to look at myself and feel sorry for the prostitutes and all that. There was a black lady there; they used to call her "Tomato." And after a while I used to see these women *cry* and all that, how hard it's for women and selling their vagina and everything.

HORACIO: In Stockton, at the bar.

TERESITA: Yeah and I—

HORACIO: What was the bar called?

TERESITA: La Ocua. And I would give her drinks. So one day—everything in this world ends; it's got the beginning and its ending. I saw this real tall man, named Chita, and he used to do Greta Garbo. That's what he told me. And I'm working in drag, okay; he doesn't know I'm a drag queen. But I noticed. I could tell he was gay as a fruitcake: big eyes and all that—very, la mano caida, hand down, very swinging [at] the hand. And I didn't say nothing. And she was working in the fields. [lowering her voice] And then, I was alone with her and she would *looook* at me, and we started talking. And she *looooked* at me and everything. So she came up real close, y dijo, "¿Cómo te llamas?" Dije, "Me llamo Alberta pero me dicen Margarita." Dije, [whispering] "Ven par acá; I'm a drag queen." Y dijo, "¡Ay, eres manita!" Dije, "Sí, siéntate. Tómate un trago. ¿Quieres un wine?" Dijo, "Me caes *bien*. Pareces *mujer*. Estás bella." Digo, "¿Y tú, cómo?"—Dijo, "Pués a mí me decían La Chita. Yo me vestía de mujer y hacía drag como la Greta Garbo!" Y él ya era grande, señor, se razuraba y todo pero tenía razgos muy femeninos, that I could tell, like that. Entonces yo … como siguiendo mi carrera en la vida de homosexual y lo que llaman

ahora transgender, me ponía muy sad. Y me enseñó retratos. Jué a su cuarto. She lived in a room. Showed me—this fucking bitch looked *fantastic*! Drag has been here since day one! ¡Se miraba como una *hembra*! ¡He was in *show* business! ¡Hacía la Greta Garbo! Entonces dije, "Híjola."

Entonces me decía la Carmen, Johnny, "Oh Marge, you got a good heart." I said, "Girl, that's not it, it's just that, you never know en qué pachos vamos a quedar." Y yo le regalaba tragos y me decía, "Yes," decía la Carmen, "you have a good heart, girl." Y yo le decía, "Sabes que, this person, this man y me enseñó retratos de él y todo." Y me pongo a estudiar. Y yo estaba joven todavía, fíjate, veinticinco años, y él ya pasaba los cuarentas. Dijo, "Hay que ser buena con él. Es jota, es jotito pero es buena gente." Y so. Y ella le gustaba tomar Burgundy wine. It was only twenty-five cents. Y Vermouth. [whispers briefly] Dije, "Porque mira, vamos hablando claro." Y es que yo me entiendo mas … hablando en español porque yo pienso español. And I could speak both languages. Dije, pos esta jota me enseñó sus drag pictures, y ponte a pensar, "No sabemos, girl. Hay que ser bueno con él." Fíjate y yo ya era así. "Que tú te vas a ver como ella some day. Mira que bella era. And I'm a drag queen, girl. [her voice breaking, emotionally] Y yo estoy vestido de mujer. Y él es mi clase. Y es jotita y sufrida y tal. But I like her." "¡Uuuu, como eres! Como te quiero, Margarita" y todo. No, no pues que yo me miraba como ella así. She went and looked like the way I—she probably already passed away. God rest her soul in peace. We have lost a lot of brothers and sisters. Tal vez ya falleció. Pero siquiera tuve ese corazón, reconocer que todo se acaba. Uuu, la jota me gloriaba, me daba cosas del fil y todo. [I said] "You don't have to do that." Y le decía a las otras jotas, "Look out for her, *cuídala*. Es buena gente. She's good people." [raising her voice] ¡'Pa que veas! So that carries me.

HORACIO: Great friendships.

TERESITA: Hm hhmm.

HORACIO: Gente que no se olvida.

TERESITA: Y yo mirando todo eso, dije, "Quién sabe si me voy a mirar así cuando yo esté vieja." Todabía no había hormonas ni implants, ni facelifts, ni de nada como ahora. Por eso les digo a muchos que quieren vivir como mujer. Aunque no te cortes abajo y quieres andar vestido de mujer con tetas—you can always remove that. Por lo menos arréglate la cara y todo. Todo se acaba. Go in style. Porque, if you are gonna live as a woman y tienes razgos de hombre y estás medio feminine, have your face done, fix your features, that's why they have doctors. That's the reason I talk to you that way because: if you're gonna do something, do it right! Don't do it half-ass.

Ya que yo no me corté abajo porque yo no creo en eso. Yo ando vestido por la vida como una mujer porque es parte—como un uniforme. Es como un hábito. Porque yo soy hombre y mujer.

Yo recibo; yo no doy. *Pero* ya que no me corté abajo porque yo creo en los Siete Sacramentos del Altar. Porque yo sé que aunque yo nací, yo nunca voy a quedar como una mujer. Yo respeto cada quien que hace eso. Si se quieren hacer—pero nunca van a quedar como una mujer perfecta. So, por eso me quedé hombre—por eso yo me nombro *hombre* y mujer. That's why I call myself a male female. Because I am *not* gonna cut that off. No way in hell am I gonna be like a perfect woman. They could adopt, they're never gonna have a period. See, when I talk to a lot of friends of mine that have the sex change—I had, not fights but we have argued, and I have offended them.

So, I *respect* them but I'd rather just not even talk about it, 'cause that is *my* feeling. See, once that feeling is gone, you know what I'm saying? And if you know you like to masturbate, like *I* do, and I like to play with my cock daily, and I like my titties sucked, and I like to jack off, honey—I'm *not* gonna make a mistake. 'Cause see, God makes no mistake. We are women of the *mind*. Though we are not women from gender, but you *are* a woman mentally, though you are a man and you got everything of a man. But your mind thinks woman. But you don't have to cut off, and cut off the feeling, if you know what I mean. That's a psychological and it's a very big step. Because once it's gone, it's off. So, knowing myself mentally, I kept the family jewels and I'm still Teresita, known as Alberto Nevaeres. I am still the man and the woman. *Thank you*! Case closed. [thunderous laughter] Soy *única. Unique*! I'd rather be unique, but no. That's part of life. Oh, I was going to do it a long time ago. I was a good candidate. When they told me that I was gonna be like a brand new Cadillac—*and no motor in it?!* I'd rather keep this old jalopy, I still have a lot of sparks. And a way of putting it in a *comical* way. But you know, I'd rather make a joke and laugh at it than insult. But to each his own…. [in a quiet voice] ¡A ver qué dice!

TRANSCRIPTION 2: TRANSLATED ENGLISH VERSION

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HORACIO: How was it?

TERESITA: I was working with nothing but nationals. They would pick cotton and berries. And I would work behind the bar, and I would sing to them. There was gay people that used to come there from the fields and some of them you could tell [they were gay]. They didn't know [about me], but [some] knew me from LA. One, a female [said], "Oh, that's a drag queen! I know her from LA. Her name's Alberta!" And she went and told. See, and even in our own kind you have to look out who your friends are 'cause your own kind will give you away. It was some sissy punk,

lowlife, working in the fields, didn't have shit going. And I'm working there with falsies, looking *gorgeous*, like a sunset, *bella como una camella*, working like a woman with all the machos, sucking dick fooling the men—of course, the faggot was—he was flamboyant—going to be angry. And he knew me. And he went and told everyone that I was a *maricona*. So then I had a friend named Carmen—his name is Johnny. Him and his old man are still together. They've been together twenty years. So I got him a job in the field. And I says, "This is my friend Juan. They call him Carmen." He was tall but looked effeminate, with a limp wrist, but really big. And so I got him a job there, and she always loved me. I haven't seen her in years. So anyway, when I went to jail, when I got busted, she got that fucking queen that told on me, she says, "You motherfucker. Margie [Margarita; Teresita] is good people. Why did you do that to her? She's a sister. You're such a fucker." They beat the *shit* out of him.

HORACIO: Really?

TERESITA: *Yeah*, that's what I was told. That Carmen—he beat the fuck out of that queer. She beat him up because she went and told that I was a drag queen. *I* was never no angel 'cause nobody is, nobody is perfect. But you know, when the bar owner wasn't there I would give Carmen beers and my friends, the little whores. They would come in, and I would give them free drinks on the house and everything. And I was just in my young youth, twenty-five years old. I was there when Kennedy died. What year did Kennedy die?

HORACIO: Mmm … I forget…. '63? Maybe I'm wrong.

TERESITA: Okay, well around there. I want you to hear this story. I used to look at myself and feel sorry for the prostitutes and all that. There was a black lady there; they used to call her "Tomato." And after a while I used to see these women *cry* and all that, how hard it's for women and selling their vagina and everything.

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and we started talking. And she *looooked* at me and everything. So she came up real close. She said, "What's your name?" I said, "My name is Alberta but they call me Margarita." She said, [whispering] "Come here; I'm a drag queen." I said, "Ay, you're a girlfriend!" She said, "Yes, sit down. Have a drink. Do you want some wine?" I said, "Listen, I like you. You look like a woman. You're beautiful. And you, what is?—" She said, "Well, they used to call me La Chita. I used to dress like a woman and do drag like Greta Garbo." And he was already older, a gentleman and shaved and everything. But he had very feminine features, but I could tell. So then, I … like continuing the life profession of a homosexual and what today they call transgender, I would get very sad. And he showed me portraits. She went to his room. She lived in a room. This fucking bitch looked *fantastic*! Drag has been here since day one. She looked like a woman! She was in *show* business. She did Greta Garbo! So then I said, "Damn."

So then Carmen, Johnny, would tell me, "Oh Marge, you got a good heart." I said, "Girl, that's not it. Just that, you never know in what state we're going to end up." And I would give her drinks and she would say, "Yes." Carmen said, "You have a good heart, girl." And you know what, this person, this man who showed me portraits of himself and everything—so I study him. And I was still young, okay, twenty-five years, and she was already over forty. I said, "You have to be nice with him. She's *jota, jotito* but a nice person." And so. And she liked to drink Burgundy wine. It was only twenty-five cents. And Vermouth. [whispers briefly] I said, "Look, let's talk straight." I communicate better … speaking Spanish because I think in Spanish. And I could speak both languages. I said [to Carmen], "Well this *jota* showed me her drag pictures, and think about it, we don't know, girl. You have to be nice to him." See, I was already like that. [I said,] "And you are going to look like her some day. You know how beautiful she was. And I'm a drag queen, girl. [her voice breaking, emotionally] And I am dressed like a woman. And he is my kind. And *jotita* and suffering and such. But I like her." [Recalling Carmen speaking] "Ooo, how you are! How I love you, Margarita" and everything. No, no, it's that I already was seeing myself like her. She went and looked like the way I—she probably already passed away. God rest her soul in peace. We have lost a lot of brothers and sisters. But at least I had the heart, recognizing that everything ends. Ooo, the *jota* had me on a pedestal, she would bring me things from the fields and everything. [I said,] "You don't have to do that." And he would say to the other *jotas*, "Look out for her, *take care of her*! She's good people." [raising her voice] So there—so you can see! So that carries me.

HORACIO: Great friendships.

TERESITA: Mm hmm.

HORACIO: People you don't forget.

TERESITA: And seeing all of that, I said, "Who knows if I am going to look like that when I am old." There were still no hormones or implants, or facelifts, or nothing like today. That's why I tell many who want to live as women. Even if you don't cut off down there and you want to dress like a woman with tits—you can always remove that. But at least fix your face and everything. Everything ends. Go in style. Because, if you are gonna live as a woman and you have masculine features and you're somewhat feminine, have your face done, fix your features, that's why they have doctors. That's the reason I talk to you that way because: if you're gonna do something, do it right! Don't do it half-ass.

Since I didn't cut off down there—because I don't believe in that. I walk around life dressed like a woman because it's part—like a uniform. It's like a habit. Because I am man and woman. I receive; I don't penetrate. *But* I did not cut down there because I believe in the Seven Holy Sacraments of the Altar. Because I know that even though I was born—I am never going to look like a woman. I respect everyone who makes that decision. If they want to—but they are never going to look like a perfect woman. So, that's why I stayed as a man, that's why I name myself *man* and woman. That's why I call myself a male female. Because I am *not* gonna cut that off. No way in hell am I gonna be like a perfect woman. They could adopt—they're never gonna have a period. See, when I talk to a lot of friends of mine that have the sex change—I had, not fights but we have argued, and I have offended them.

So, I *respect* them but I'd rather just not even talk about it, 'cause that is *my* feeling. See, once that feeling is gone, you know what I'm saying? And if you know you like to masturbate, like *I* do, and I like to play with my cock daily, and I like my titties sucked, and I like to jack off, honey—I'm *not* gonna make a mistake. 'Cause see, God makes no mistake. We are women of the *mind*. Though we are not women from gender, but you *are* a woman mentally, though you are a man and you got everything of a man. But your mind thinks woman. But you don't have to cut off, and cut off the feeling, if you know what I mean. That's a psychological and it's a very big step. Because once it's gone, it's off. So, knowing myself mentally, I kept the family jewels, and I'm still Teresita, known as Alberto Nevaeres. I am still the man and the woman. *Thank you*! Case closed. [thunderous laughter] I am *única. Unique*! I'd rather be unique. But no. That's part of life. Oh, I was going to do it a long time ago. I was a good candidate. When they told me that I was gonna be like a brand new Cadillac—*and no motor in it?* I'd rather keep this old jalopy, I still

have a lot of sparks. And a way of putting it in a *comical* way. But you know, I'd rather make a joke and laugh at it than insult. But to each his own…. [in a quiet voice, excited, referring to the recording] Let's see what it says![3]

Commentary

This essay explores the multiple roles and positions Teresita and I shared in relation to one another—the shared authorities, in Michael Frisch's apt phrasing—and the specifically queer gendering of language that made that sharing particularly powerful, though not always perfect, given our different generations. That sharing began when we first met in the fall of 1994 in the lounging area of a queer Latino HIV agency (Proyecto Contra SIDA Por Vida, or simply "Proyecto"), continued at public community events, extended into simply spending time together, and later led to publications in which I considered her life, especially after her death.[4]

Frisch's concept originated as a cautionary injunction to avoid the two poles of public history: the supposedly legitimate, professional, and credentialed historian, most often working in private through her writings and teaching, and rarely coming up for air and conversation with the public outside formal institutions; and the alternative—some would say oppositional—new forms of public history evidenced in community-based studies, grassroots video and filmmaking, and popular theater, where the voices of oral history find a new legitimized role. Aiming for a relationship between the two, sharing authority encompasses "a synthesis" between them, assuming that all interested parties involved can come together in and out of institutions for a conversation about the production and consumption of public histories.[5] However, the kind of synthesis Frisch envisions might benefit from a more accurate understanding of the consumption of historical research, especially its public presentations and publications.

In my queer and academic life, I have variously shuttled between the poles that Frisch describes, however unconscious I was of the conversations and tensions between the two. In 1994, I landed at the University of California, Berkeley, through an intercampus exchange program for graduate students, my home department then being a doctoral program in Latin American history at the University of California, Los Angeles. That program was quickly losing its appeal, especially with my newfound consciousness as a gay Latino. Heading to Berkeley was also an excuse to be next door to San Francisco, that presumed gay mecca and, luckily for me, then in the midst of profound queer Latina and Latino organizing that was usually, but not always, tied to HIV and AIDS prevention work. Thus, while I was reading 400-page history texts for my studies, I was also meeting

fellow queer Latino activists and elders (those in their forties, in the context of the first waves of deaths from AIDS, and some even in their fifties). That's when Teresita, as a grassroots public historian who did not let go, pushed herself on me. Eventually, the trick was for me to find a balance and a relationship between that rich and still living oral history and the more sedate but also attractive ideas about gender, sexuality, race, and their historical intersections in the Department of Comparative Ethnic Studies, from which I eventually earned my doctorate.

In my analysis of a shared queer authority, I follow Linda Shopes's astute explication of Michael Frisch's concept but, again, with distinctly queer twists. Shopes delineates four key issues: that "collaborative oral history … is long haul work"; that "collaborative work is personally and intellectually demanding, requiring an ability—even the courage—to deal with people and situations that can be difficult"; that "because collaborative oral history projects are frequently linked to broader social goals … they inevitably raise the 'objectivity question'"; and finally, that the "biggest challenge … [is] analyzing the interviews gathered and presenting them as published scholarship."[6] Each of these four key issues is exemplified in the oral history work I conducted with Teresita.

The excerpt that accompanies this essay suggests many of the issues Teresita was committed to putting down on tape, on paper, and on video, and the wide scope of topics Teresita and I covered in our oral history work suggests a mutual commitment to the kind of "long haul" approach Shopes describes.[7] Teresita's own life was quite a long haul. She was a survivor in many senses: as a young *mexicano* queer teen disowned by his blood family to make it on his own in the racialized policed streets of Los Angeles, surviving through various forms of labor (bartending, singing, sex work) in various cities before that mythical queer historical marker of 1969, Stonewall. She survived into the 1990s and by her early sixties began to benefit somewhat from the availability of effective antiretroviral medicine.

The issues and topics we covered included queer life—but especially transgender life—in a rural, working, poor region of the United States in the 1960s and the dangerous politics of passing and of being found out or outed, which entailed jail time and forcibly regendering the guilty party to her or his "appropriate" sex, as Teresita experienced at least twice when her long hair was shaved. She also explained the close parallels between transgender and nontransgender sex-working women who shared marginalized, policed, often nonwhite, working-class spaces. In one telling instance, she recalled the joy and pride of recognizing a transgender self in the 1960s in meeting Chita ("Tomato") from an earlier, unknown, or unrecorded history of drag queens and performers who had made history, one largely unknown. She alluded to the related unknown queer future (in seeing the suffering in Chita and identifying with what may be her own future as an aging drag queen) for

transgender women like herself, who in the 1960s had no certainty about what her life would be decades later, long before any recognition of the legitimacy of their lives. Teresita was especially conscious of the experiences of bilingual, bicultural, transgender *mexicanas* and other Latinas like her, straddling two intersecting stigmatized minority positions: one racial/ethnic, the other gendered /sexual. She was aware of the politics and possibilities for sex change, based not only on individual preference but also on economic and historical possibilities. And finally, Teresita, as someone living with AIDS, stressed the importance of remembering and recording in the 1990s her history of pre–gay liberation queer/trans life to establish how radically different survival was then as compared with the possibilities for gay Latino men like me, living in a time of post–gay liberation movements and with access to health care.[8]

This last point was essential for Teresita in establishing her transgender Latina authority, that is, to force openly queer people like me in the 1990s—those in our teens, twenties, and thirties—to recognize who she was and where she had been. She referred to herself as a pioneer, an artist (recognizing that she was lucky to receive "*un don de Dios*"—a gift from God—of a naturally powerful singing voice), and a *mexicana* proud of her roots but who had to hustle to survive when faced with her blood family's homophobia, street policing, forcible institutionalization at the former Camarillo State Mental Hospital to receive electric shock "treatments," marginalization within the mainstream and largely transphobic gay and lesbian rights movements, and (later in life) HIV and AIDS. She insisted on this multipronged authority as often as she could, whether in the street, in restaurants, on the bus, or in any community setting—especially whenever she felt ignored. And she took me along for the ride, because she had found in me an interested party for the truths she was telling.

Indeed, the rides I took with Teresita for several years were not always easy, and I was often required to play along with her performance requirements. She controlled the situation most of the time. During our first recording session in her cramped room in the low-income Mission Hotel, she played a videotape, thus becoming the story of a story. It was a singing performance she had done at the request of a gay Latino neighbor. He asked her to sing for his gathered guests, and she acquiesced despite being exhausted from "*una noche muy fuerte, ya comprendes la pasión y la ternura y el ardor, pues me sentía que ya ni me podía levantar*"—"a very heavy night, you understand, passion, tenderness, and ardor, so that I barely could get up." Prior to this first interview, I had shared only public spaces with Teresita, but here, speaking to me from the privacy of her bed, she was probably testing me to see how comfortable I was with the subjects at hand. Teresita was probably also flirting with me, especially with her slow, suggestive, and seemingly exhausted voice.

I was still testing the waters of how to conduct oral history at this point, so my discomfort was probably visible to her, but we both went for the ride.

Shopes's second key issue points out the demanding nature of oral history work, and Teresita's oral histories demonstrate not only her queer courage to talk and listen but also my own commitment. Structured along different axes of education, gender expression, sex, sexuality, HIV status, age, and class, these interviews demonstrated that the queer authorities I shared with Teresita were not always easily determined or democratic. We each had our own intentions, motivations, and goals, yet we both wanted to historicize queer Latina and Latino desires. In looking back, I am surprised how difficult it was to get her to sit down with me in a quiet, private place to record. Teresita was clearly performing—literally and figuratively—her queer history for me, a considerably younger queer with a university affiliation but someone who took the time to be with her, allowing her to take me to the bars, homes, and restaurants frequented by some of the few remaining queer old-timers. She probably did not usually have the patience to sit down for a formal recording, preferring instead to perform her story live by taking me to places and situations where others could vouch for her life and talents. In introducing me to the many firsthand witnesses of her accomplishments, each of whom confirmed her own narration, Teresita made her authority all the more profound.

Teresita's crassness, her often foul mouth, and her direct confrontational style at times shocked me and embarrassed me, and there were times when she would not stay in a place where she did not feel comfortable, especially after getting into an argument with someone. Her sex life was also quite public—she was infamous for having been arrested more than once in Reno for soliciting, for example—but this public persona was not one I was ready to address. For instance, one day when I was driving back to my apartment in Oakland from San Francisco, as I was entering the freeway ramp I noticed "an older woman" provocatively dressed, seemingly waiting for someone to pick her up. I was embarrassed when I recognized the woman in question, and I made sure she and I did not make eye contact. I was trying to be more sex-positive then, but Teresita was quite far ahead of me.

Even though Teresita's sex life was no secret—she boasted, as the excerpt shows, that she had fooled many men into believing she was a "real woman"—at the time I was still uncomfortable with this facet of her life. Our shared queer bilingualisms were definitely our joint, shared strengths: together, we queered English and Spanish, perverting their respective uses. I was happy to share this queerly gendered Spanglish with Teresita. Part of the reason I was so attracted to her was the larger-than-life tall tales she could spin at any moment, even though I was also uncomfortable when she would boast in public about what she had done with whom and when, not always respecting the privacy of all the parties involved.

The intimacy I shared with Teresita produced a kind of queer reciprocity and a feeling of social and political responsibility suggestive of Shopes's third key point, in which she describes collaborative oral history work as a project "linked to broader social goals" and worries that "they inevitably raise the 'objectivity question.'" This was certainly true in my relationship with Teresita. For instance, both Teresita and I met in the historical context of AIDS—she as someone who was HIV-positive, and I as someone collaborating with an agency to support educational, sex-positive grassroots movements—and learn how to remain HIV-negative. Even if we came of age in different generations, we were both queers, and our politics generally matched, especially because I cared so much about her generation. She was Latina and I am Latino, Spanglish-speaking, so we had our priorities about whom to visit first and try to record—other queer Latinas and Latinos. We also both had our own criticism of the AIDS service industry—recognizing that the bulk of the funding generally provided jobs with benefits for those already better positioned by race, class, and education in society, rather than the more marginal (the homeless, the illiterate, transgender women and men of color, for example). Thus broader social goals clearly encircled our concern with HIV and AIDS, health and survival, including how neighborhood agencies could support queer homeless youth, the unemployed, those with less access to education, and queers of color of all stripes (not just Latinas and Latinos), who even in San Francisco remained isolated and at risk for different forms of substance abuse. Although I never felt the need to refer to my oral history work as "activist scholarship," any sense of objectivity in my work slowly diminished.[9]

While my larger oral history project was progressing with modest funding support, I was also trying to complete my dissertation. I began to teach during my last years of the doctoral program, and I made the decision to focus on my writing, complete my degree, and then figure out what lay next professionally. As a result, I began to see less and less of Teresita and others in the community. Teresita would still call me regularly, often leaving outrageously campy messages on my answering machine, but my visits with her grew less frequent. I did send her an invitation to my graduation, which she took very seriously, showing up on time for the program, well dressed and ready for the occasion. That night, she was also part of my extended family, accompanying my parents and the rest of my family to a Chinese restaurant where she "behaved" by not using foul language, but not before displaying her powerful singing voice in the short car ride to let them know who she really was. My late father (who died at age ninety-three in 2010) and seventy-six-year-old mother always spoke of her voice with deep affection and respect; they also understood what it meant to me when Teresita passed.

One of the last times Teresita and I met together was at a restaurant in the Mission where mariachis—many of whom knew her—roamed for potential customers. Unlike the classic Teresita who had hustled for money for decades—sometimes mixing love with the erotic pleasure of song—this time *she* paid the mariachis to accompany her in several live songs and for a sumptuous Mexican shrimp dinner for us. She immediately became the center of attention with her unannounced performance as she sang her history. This was the homage she was giving *me*, someone who had cared to listen to the memories of her life as a bilingual queen who never quite fit into any one place. The customers were stunned by the powerful voice of this tall and big-framed singing *mujer*, but they had no sense that this moment would be one of the very last impromptu cultural performances of this queer pioneer, who was slowly dying. I played second fiddle in moments like these, the much quieter, much younger oral historian, too preoccupied with research. But Teresita was just too queer and too loud, and I was just too hungry for queer Latina and Latino history, for us not to engage in an eight-year, on-and-off dance toward the end of her life. This was also the beginning of my queer consciousness, and it was important to share the respective authorities we claimed: she, the elder, illiterate, but much more knowledgeable and thus savvier about street life for queers—and especially queens of color like herself—and me, the much younger, street-dumb intellectual committed to following her life.

Finally, to address Shopes's fourth key issue in sharing authority, the challenge of publishing the scholarship requires equal parts patience and persistence. For a recently hired tenure-track professor whose oral history–based dissertation was slowly becoming "the tenure book," I struggled to get pieces of my years-long community research into public circulation. I tried to balance professional and community-based publications, but ultimately the former won, leading to a painful and rocky tenure review process. But an uneven collaboration remained. For instance, whenever I could, I got Teresita funding to perform at the university. Even more important, and returning to Frisch's link between oral and public history, Teresita was by far the center of attention during a very successful fund-raising anniversary celebration for Proyecto, where she sang classic mariachi songs with a live mariachi on a stage in front of hundreds of community members from different agencies that rarely came together. As part of this multimedia performance, I prepared a PowerPoint presentation and projected images and brief oral history quotes behind Teresita on a large screen as she sang. Thus the collaboration and representation of queer Latina and Latino public and oral history was sung, seen, and read.

I want to believe that Teresita vested unspoken authority in me—through her constant phone calls, in taking me around the city to visit bars and restaurants to meet the elders, in sharing quite

intimate and painful memories about her family—which I claimed days after she died. I knew from our recordings and from community gossip that she had a long-standing and conflicted relationship with the owner and the manager of the one remaining (as of 2010) gay Latino bar in the Mission. She particularly disliked this place because she felt it was symbolic of gay bars that made money off transgender performers but failed to acknowledge their important history and contributions. In fact, she had been banned from this bar for at least five years, and she did not mince words about how she felt about the bar, its owner, its manager, and the illegal sexual activities she claimed took place there. In the final minutes of our oral history together, she claimed to have told the owner and manager the following during a fund-raiser at the bar:

> [Quoting herself] "Let me tell you something you two gay cocksuckers: the day that I go, because we *all* have to go sooner or later, you're not going to make no money off *my* ass … after the way you treat your own kind." I said, "You're not going to make *one* penny," I said, "and I'm going to make sure that it's in a power of attorney. So you could make money off my *bones*? After everybody that's cared or didn't care that loved me? You may not like me, but you cannot take the love away from other people that loved me, just because you feel that way and you hold a grudge. You're not going to make any money off me."

When it came time to organize the community fund-raisers for Teresita's burial and other related costs, I spent several days with other community members coordinating all the necessary pieces: where we would hold fund-raising events, what agency would handle the money, where to print the funeral and mass announcement cards, and so on. During one of these meetings, an activist commented that he had been approached by this gay bar to hold a fund-raiser in her memory. Faced with this request, I responded, "No way." I quickly grew angry at the possibility that in death Teresita's transgender body would be used yet again for other people's purposes. My sharp response surprised the activist, as I had earned a reputation as a community member and scholar who tried not to take sides (at least openly) in intracommunity conflicts. But this moment to me was different; I felt the need to stand my ground, claiming all the authority I could on Teresita's behalf.

Oral historians often have a false sense of equality in the notion of sharing authority, but some of us benefit much more than those we interview. As researchers, we do give back; many of us have devoted years, even decades, to projects with minority, marginalized, and neglected historical communities—queer, women, people of color, the working class, immigrant (especially the undocumented), those suffering from natural and unnatural disasters, and those at any of these intersections—and the commitment counts for a great deal. Although I am still confused about who

benefited the most from the authority I shared with Teresita, I do think in retrospect that I did give back to her, not in any monetary way but in time, friendship, and respect. I cannot deny that at that stage of her life I held advantages over her: health, maleness, professional status, sometimes owning a car. Despite the impossibility of a truly democratic shared authority, Frisch's notion deserves appreciation and careful application as we aim for more egalitarian projects on behalf of publicly consumed histories, especially those aiming for social change.

Teresita's life and death have haunted me for years for the connections we had and did not have as queer subjects from different historical periods and for the differences in privilege. She repeatedly took her story back to the historical place of the drag queen, especially the nonwhite drag queen, but she also introduced me to nontransgender gay Latino men and Latina lesbians who provided me with other pieces of the history I wanted to know and share. And we both knew at some level that the queerly gendered shared authority of Spanglish brought greater equality to our relationship and our lives. My friend Ricardo A. Bracho once observed that Teresita was my method; she embodied my methodological approach to community-based oral history because oral history was so basic to Teresita's survival. Ironically, she would never be able to read anything I would write about her in any language, so my giving back continues to this day by writing about the significance of her life.[10]

For instance, I have written about Teresita as a "living archive" of queer Latina and Latino history—perhaps as an organic intellectual in the Gramscian sense. I have also written about her centrality as an artist to give voice—literally—sound, history, and visibility to all Latinos in San Francisco and as someone who forced us to keep the memory and the reality of HIV and AIDS alive.[11] I have written about Teresita as someone whose oral history is to be publicly consumed alongside portraits of a time when she was in better health and as a transgender body (male-to-female in her case) at the center of queer Latino history both in English and in Spanish. Finally, I have written about her as someone who queered the Spanish language both in songs (and very classic rancheras at that) and through her never-ending storytelling. In queering Shopes's four key issues and in consideration of Frisch's notion of sharing authority, my relationship and research with Teresita proved to be yet another example of how oral history and public history can come alive.[12]

Notes

1. A useful exposition on the relationship between gay Latino studies and mainstream (white, Eurocentric) queer theory is Michael Hames-García, "Queer Theory Revisited," in Michael Hames-García and Ernesto Javier Martínez, eds., *Gay Latino Studies: A Critical Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 19–45.

2. I would like to acknowledge the late Teresita la Campesina for allowing me to record part of her life history and for introducing me to key members of an elder generation of queer Latinas and Latinos, Nan Alamilla Boyd for her leadership and wise comments in this collaborative project, Kathy Nasstrom for sound editorial advice, and the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions. Some of the stages for the research discussed here were supported by a small research grant from University of California, Berkeley's former Chicano/Latino Policy Project; a University of California Institute for Mexico and the United States (UC MEXUS) dissertation completion grant, and a University of California, Berkeley, Graduate Humanities dissertation grant.

3. Alberta Nevaeres (Teresita la Campesina), audiotape recording, San Francisco, California, April 27, 1996. Recording and transcription in author's possession.

4. Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, "Teresita's Blood/La Sangre de Teresita," *CORPUS: An HIV Prevention Publication* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 2–9; "A Living Archive of Desire: Teresita la Campesina and the Embodiment of Queer Latino Community Histories," in Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 111–35; and "Memory and Mourning: Living Oral History with Queer Latinos in San Francisco," in Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, eds., *Oral History and Public Memories* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 165–86.

5. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), xxi.

6. Linda Shopes, "Commentary: Sharing Authority," *Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2003): 105–8.

7. San Francisco–based gay Chicano activist, videomaker, and journalist Valentín Aguirre also wrote, produced, and directed "Wanted Alive: Teresita La Campesina" (San Francisco, 20 min., video), part of the city's 1997 Tranny Fest Film Festival.

8. An earlier related discussion on the relationship between lesbians and sex workers is Joan Nestle, "Lesbians and Prostitutes: An Historical Sisterhood," in Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand, 1987), 157–77. In comparison to Teresita's marginality, it is also worth considering the one encountered by the better known, Stonewall-era MTF transgender

Venezuelan-Puerto Rican activist Sylvia Rivera (1951–2002). See "Sylvia Rivera Talk at LGMNY, June 2001 Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, New York City," *CENTRO: Journal for the Center of Puerto Rican Studies* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 116–23.

9. I was not able to reciprocate as fully as I could have—or should have, I realize in hindsight—with someone with the historical knowledge of Teresita. During our second recording, Teresita pointed out her desire to try to reconnect with her blood family in Glendale. The last time she had seen them had been during her mother's funeral in the early 1980s, and at that event, some of her family members openly welcomed her as a transgender woman, though not all, especially not an older brother who insulted her by suggesting that because she was HIV-positive, they would have to cremate her body after her death to avoid contagion. Despite her stories of family separation and reunion, Teresita still felt the desire for this trip, one that I could have facilitated financially, even with my very modest graduate student means, but I did not prioritize this trip on her behalf.

10. For an earlier discussion of a public memory and art gallery event in the Mission, months before Teresita died, which she herself could not read, even though it was based on her oral history transcripts, see my "Memory and Mourning."

11. I address some of these historical politics around AIDS in "Gay Latino Histories/Dying to Be Remembered: AIDS Obituaries, Public Memory, and the Gay Latino Archive," in Gina M. Pérez, Frank A. Guridy, and Adrian Burgos Jr., eds., *Beyond El Barrio: Everyday Life in Latina/o America* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 103–28.

12. I thank Augusto F. Espiritu for suggesting, during a presentation about Teresita's life at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, that many of her qualities and daily interventions in numerous community sites evoke the characteristics of the organic intellectual.