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**Oral History Interview with Elizabeth Velazquez**
**Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.024**
**Interview conducted by Nadia Williams at the NARS Foundation on March 27th, 2012 in Sunset Park, Brooklyn.**

NADIA WILLIAMS: My name is Nadia Williams, and I am interviewing Elizabeth Velazquez for the Brooklyn Historical Society, the "Crossing Borders Bridging Generations" project. So, can you introduce yourself, tell me your name, and tell me a little bit about where you're from.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:My name, again, is Elizabeth Velazquez, and I was actually born in upstate New York, in Sullivan County. And my parents are from -- I guess, my dad is Puerto Rican, and my mom was Peruvian. And then I came to Queens to live in Queens, about seven years ago, because I found work in Brooklyn as an art teacher.

NADIA WILLIAMS: And can you tell me a little bit about working as an art teacher.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Oh, man. Well, I've been working as an art teacher for ten years. And it is a very difficult -- and also, um, it's, uh, I mean, I love -- I love it, um, because I get to see so many, um, kids being creative. And, it's difficult because I come to realize that, um, uh, you know, I see, like, the suffering that children can go through sometimes, um, and I started out, I guess, very ideal. Um, so that's a little bit about my experience of teaching.

NADIA WILLIAMS: Can you expand a little bit on the -- on the kind of suffering that you see?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Um, well, uh, I guess I could start -- it's just so, kind of, overwhelming to think about because I -- I tend to think about all of history, I guess, uh, when I start to think about it, and see them, or actually reflect on it a little more. But, um, I mean, ch -- children, um, being abused, or children not, um, being neglected by, like, adults, like, not spending time with them. Um, kids just falling asleep in class, because they stay up for various reasons. Um, I mean, all of the things that, uh, I guess, things like abuse, and neglect, and other things. Just, parents working all of the time because they have to be able to pay the -- the bills, and coming from Latin American backgrounds, they, um, usually have to -- or they don't usually come with, um, I guess,

legal papers, and don't have, uh, the education that this country requires for them to get jobs that, you know, would allow them the chance to spend time with their family. So, I see a lot of, um, parents, um, that have -- are going through that. And so, it trickles down to their family life. And the kids that we get in our school are -- I can see that effect, how it affects them.

(pause)

NADIA WILLIAMS: So, you had mentioned that the students, or that the parents are from Latin America. Can you tell me a little bit about the school that you -- that you work in?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Um, yeah, it's a dual language school. And, um, primarily, we get students that are coming from the Dominican Republic. We have, um, kids that are coming from Puerto Rico, and, uh, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, Honduras. [5:00] Um, yeah, some kids have been born here, some kids are, like, coming right from there, like, um, yesterday, I got, like, a few new students. So, we're always getting, um, new arrivals, they call them, new arrivals. And, uh, hmm, I feel really connected to them, because I feel like even though I was brought up in a country setting, um, I -- I can relate with their experience, um, because I have, like, a Latin American -- what I feel, is a Latin American experience, I guess, in America. Um, I can understand their family life, that kind of suffering. Um, my parents worked, uh, my dad was a chef. He came to America from Puerto Rico, um, when -- when he was 18, I think. And, I guess, he worked his way up, there was, uh, in that time, when he came, and my mom came, was a big influx of immigrant workers to work at ho -- upstate hotels. Um, so that's how my mom and my dad came to meet. And my mom was a cham -- chambermaid, she made beds, and cleaned the rooms. And, um, so I kind of understand the kind of life, maybe, that the kids that I'm teaching have. And I'm also, um, coming from a bilingual background. My parents spoke Spanish in -- at home, and I learned English at school. Um, yeah, I feel like, you know, uh, the stress of trying to pay the bills. You know, my -- my, uh, parents -- my dad was a -- kind of like a very strong character. Um, and just certain experiences, I think, like, I can relate to the -- to the students that I have.

NADIA WILLIAMS: Do you remember the experience of -- you mentioned that you learned English when you were in school. Do you remember that experience of learning English?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Um, actually, when you say that, um, I remember going into kindergarten, I think, or maybe it was for screening, I don't know, I have a vivid memory of the first day I came into school. Uh, I was scared, um, there was this test that I had to take. And I don't know, I must've been four or five, there were these folders up on the tables. Um, I guess, now thinking about that, it was so that we wouldn't see each other's work. Um, I also was put into an ESL, even though I -- I kind of knew English. I didn't know why I was in ESL, um, but I knew that it was kind of fun, and easy. Um, and, I don't know, experiences with school, I guess, uh -- I guess, I can remember the good things, and then I tend to remember the -- the bad experiences. Um, and, uh, it just makes me think, like, there's lots of teacher bashing going on, but I guess, I don't -- I do have some bad experiences, like, in, um, high school, uh, one teacher thought I didn't do, um, my writing assignment. It was a -- it was a 12th grade, uh, advanced English course, and he thought I presented the best answer to the question in the whole class, and then he, um, he wrote something that said that he couldn't, like, believe that he -- uh, if I had gotten help with it or something. He just didn't -- it felt like he didn't believe that I can do that kind of work. Um, which stayed with me for a long time, still. But, I did have some good teachers. [10:00] Um, one teacher was a social studies teacher, Mr. Shaw, who made, um, actually, history very exciting and fun. And I remember he mentioning something about the testing that he wishes that he could spend more time on Latin America. And, you know, that's the one place where I felt like, wow, OK, Latin America, they're going to, you know, we're going to learn some more about, you know, where my family came from. But, really, um, I -- I can't remember exactly what he taught about that, because it was, uh, really, kind of, not, uh, paid attention to. Because he did emphasize that we had to -- he had to prepare us for the test. And he said it with, um, kind of, like, a disappointment, like, he didn't want it to be so. And being a teacher now, I can -- I can understand. So, I'm not sure where that question, like, went -- where -- what -- the question, um...

NADIA WILLIAMS: Well, we started out talking about...

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:I think I went on, like, a little tangent --

NADIA WILLIAMS: You're allowed.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:-- I don't know if I did or not. (laughter)

NADIA WILLIAMS: You're allowed to go on tangents.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:OK.

NADIA WILLIAMS: We originally started talking about what your experience was like, um, learning English once you went to school.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Oh yeah, English. (pause) All right, yeah, that's -- OK. Yeah, I ended up being in the -- um -- an honors -- honors track, I guess, since, like, in middle school, I think it was for seventh grade. So, I learned English pretty well, I think.

NADIA WILLIAMS: Mmhmm. Did you ever -- do you remember ever speaking English with your parents?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Uh, I can't remember. I think we only spoke Spanish. I think my dad always said, you speak Spanish at home, and he always -- that's one thing about him that was really good that I remember is that he -- I remember that the emphasis on language, like, you learn English at school, and you speak Spanish at home. Um, and you go to college, you're going to college, you know, education was important to him. I think he went to, like, vocational school after high school. Um, so he always kind of emphasized the importance, and that we were all going, all three of us, to college. And, um -- and I'm very grateful for that, because I know that in that time, or maybe younger, a lot of, um -- or maybe younger generations, it was that when parents came to this country, um, they wanted their kids only to learn English. So, my father was not like that.

NADIA WILLIAMS: Did your parents do anything, in addition to speaking Spanish at home, that you felt exposed you to their culture?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Well, one thing I do have to say is, uh, um, we were raised Pentecostal, which is, like, an Evangelical Christian religion, I guess. And, one thing about that, that I kind of -- positive that I take from it, is that there was, like, many Latin American and Caribbean at the church that I went to, so there was -- when we sang, um,

songs, you know, we had the conga, and the cowbell, and the -- you know, drums, and all of the music going, tambourines. Um, guiros, or is it called güira? I always get it confused. Maracas, so it was -- I loved that part of it. Um, and also, when we had, uh, like, lunches, or dinners, or holidays, people would bring their food, and I remember, I'd love these taquitos that somebody from Guatemala used to make. And, you know, there was all kinds of foods, and music. It was all a learning [15:00] experience that I appreciate now. What else was the -- what was the question again?

NADIA WILLIAMS: If you remembered that your parents did to introduce you to their cultures?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Yeah, well, my dad brought us to Puerto Rico. Um, I think that first time was in middle school, and they took us all around the island. What else, my dad also would make it -- I also, uh, observed a lot from him. Like, he would call his parents every Sunday, um, he would be working outside, all of the time working. And, um, just kind of building all of his own things, and fixing his own way. Um, which later on, when I came to read things about, um, about, like, Puerto Rican history, you know, like, I saw that it reflects in my dad. So, like, him working out in the -- outside in the backyard, digging little channels that he would call zanjas or zanjitas. Just digging. I remember my grandfather used to do that too, and in Puerto Rico, they have -- it's, um, a tropical climate, and it -- and it rains a lot, so you have to build these channels for the water to kind of go away from the field. And so, I know that my dad grew up very poor in the, like, western part of the island. So, he brought, like, just he's an embodiment of, you know, um, where he grew up. And, I guess, Puerto Rican culture, and traditions that his family had. So, my mom was kind of silent. I would have to really think a little bit more. I know that, maybe, in her mannerisms, in her tranquil way, she passed down part of her culture, and, like, her goodness. Always, kind of, um, giving to others. And from my readings about, um, I guess, ancient -- or Peruv – Andean culture, um, I can see a reflection of that in her, I guess. Um, I don't know, I'm always, kind of, looking for those kind of clues for identity of, like, you know, what makes me who I am. Excuse me. So that's why I think they taught me a culture, things about culture.

NADIA WILLIAMS: Did you ever travel to Peru with your mom?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:When I was, I think, one. But then I went later on afterwards, like, uh, it might be, like, eight or nine years ago, and then again I went, like, four years ago. So I went twice afterwards. Um, beautiful land. Um...

NADIA WILLIAMS: What was beautiful about it?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Um, the way that the land looks so ancient, like, there -- the mountains, they're so, kind of, immense. Um, kind of feel -- I feel, like, a connection with that land, like, how some people say, like, I don't know, my aunt says she's been -- like, she loves France. Like, that's her -- like, she's been there before in another life. So I feel like that about Peru. The land, that energy, that it just, um, has something special for me. It's so mysterious too, because it's the -- the land of [20:00] my grandparents, my ancestors, and, uh, I feel like I want to know more about them, and, um -- and the culture, you know, I think that being born here in America, it's like some of that is lost, or at least, if it's passed down, you don't exactly -- you're not sure that it's of that. Um, yeah, I don't know if it has to do with being first generation born. It's kind of, like, kind of floating in between lands, or, like, identities, kind of. At least for me, it's always been, um, a difficult thing, that makes me feel kind of lost. And always thinking about identity, and not, kind of, fitting in anywhere.

NADIA WILLIAMS: Can you tell me more about that, not fitting in?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Um, yeah, I mean, like, oh -- I remember, like, growing up in Sullivan County, just, you know, having people ask me, you know, what are you, um, and me answering them, you know, like, duh, a person, a human being. Um, I don't know, they just didn't know how to ask, you know, where is your -- you know, what's your background, or where is your family from, or, um -- can you tell -- tell me again that, um, question that you just asked?

NADIA WILLIAMS: Yeah, I just wanted to know more about what you meant by feeling, like, feeling like you weren't fitting in.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Mmhmm.

NADIA WILLIAMS: Or those identity issues that you mentioned. And you can feel free to stray.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Oh, OK. (laughter)

NADIA WILLIAMS: Yeah, you're definitely allowed to do that.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Oh, yeah, no, I think that because I -- it's -- I feel like that because, like, in America, there is so much, um, history, um, with slavery and colonialism, and me being born here, um, of, like, Caribbean and Latin American decent, it kind of, um, you know, I start to want to identify, like, where's my place in this country, in this history, of this country. And then, if I go to Puerto Rico, you know, I feel like I can't say that I'm Puerto Rican, you know, and if I go to Peru, I'm also, I don't -- I feel like I don't really fit in over there either. Um, because they can, like, pinpoint, like, what I -- you know, what I look -- what I look like. (laughter) You know, um, people are -- you know, that's what you have in the world is, like, your face, your eyes, your nose, your hair, your skin tone. So, people observe that, and -- and sometimes they wonder, you know, they want to place you. And I guess we all kind of want to place ourselves too. Because, um, in my -- like, I'm also an artist, and I also like to think about that as well. Um...

NADIA WILLIAMS: So, I'm wondering about, when you're talking about this feeling of not fitting in, or just questioning your identity, from a young age, and then also talking about it now, is there -- do you feel a difference between how you, kind of, responded to that sense of feeling like you didn't fit in when you were a kid, and now?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Hmm. Well, I guess, um, I always, um, I don't know if I looked around my classroom, I know that I definitely did that in high school, [25:00] I would look around. Maybe middle school. I wonder if I looked around in elementary school, but I remember that I did look around to see how, you know, um, like, how -- how many, um, uh, Latino or black kids there were in my classroom. Which there wasn't really many. Um, especially in the -- in the upper levels, because I was, like, in track for, like, honors. So, um, and then, I guess, in my first job, like, I just remember certain things, like, you know, I would feel -- I was always counting to see, or trying to, kind of, identify with something in my surroundings, someone in my surroundings to see who was like me. And, I know that when I got to college, like, when I found out more about history, and it really kind of traumatized me a lot. And now, I think I -- I -- I still have some kind of, um, feelings of, uh, anger mixed with, like, kind of, I want to be at peace already, but it's, like, the more I learn, um, the more it kind of, um, is wanting to defeat me, I have a

feeling that, like, it defeats me. Like, I -- I want to fight something, but I can't fight anything because it's, like, a phantom that I'm fighting against. And, like, I can't blame, really, anyone for, like, the loss of my ancestral knowledge. Um, and then I'm trying to, like, catch up with all of that, trying to, um, piece together a family history from, um, parents, aunts, like, books. You know, and then, while I'm trying to catch up on all of that, I have to, you know, prepare my lessons for, you know, work, and then daily activities like cooking, and just a lot of things get in the way. So, I guess, the difference is now, I guess I -- I feel -- I do feel angry, but I feel, kind of, worn down. I felt more like I had more of a fight when I was younger. Um, and I was a little oblivious when I was even younger, in, like, elementary school. Um, so now I feel like my role as an educator is important because at least, maybe, the -- the kids that I teach can see -- can identify -- find someone that they identify with in a -- in a position of, um, some kind of, um, what would I call it? Not, like, a position of power, but some position that's other than a maid. Other than a clerk behind a deli counter. Um, so I feel that if I can hang on, and not feel defeated, and not be defeated. If I can hang on for 20 more years, then I'm doing some good. Um, so I guess I still have sort of a -- a fight left in me. Uh, it's -- I'm weary. (laughter)

NADIA WILLIAMS: So thinking about everything that's made you angry, and that's made you feel worn down, what kind of change would you like to see happen in the future, either with your students, or with your son, or just in the future?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Wow. (laughter) The future is a whole another, um, huge thing to wonder about. Um, [30:00] there's so many things that can happen with life -- and technologically, or, um -- hmm. Um, let's see. I need to, um, -- I guess, scale down my frame of thinking. (laughter) Because that's, like, very overwhelming to think about the direction of the future. Because I would like to live longer -- longer to see, you know -- but I think, ultimately, I think all of us would like for the future to be a good one for our -- our descendants. Um, I think, uh, I see capitalism as a huge problem, but if, um -- I guess if I could just think about one thing that -- the hope for the future with, um, I guess, my students, and my -- my son, and nieces, and my nephews, and it's all of the young people, is that they hold on to their goodness. Yeah, that's -- that's it. Because I think

that, um, whatever comes in the future is how -- is just what is how -- um, things are rolling out, or just how they're going to be. I wouldn't -- I guess, if they -- if they can keep their goodness, and somehow put that out into the world, maybe, um -- um, it could help to change the bigger part of the world in a better way. And I don't know what that -- what that is. Like -- and like, when I think about my students, I think, like, you know, the families, um -- one thing that I see that I don't like is that, um, there's an emphasis on material things, and not so much on, like, you know, their education. So, if they could somehow, um, I don't -- I'm -- I'm -- it's a hard thing. I think I'm ready for, uh, the next -- like, idea or something. (laughter)

NADIA WILLIAMS: (laughter) Um, well, we can shift gears a little bit, and move back to the present.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:OK.

NADIA WILLIAMS: Out of the future. (laughter)

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Oh, present! Is there any present? There's only the past and the future!

NADIA WILLIAMS: (laughter) Well, I was going to ask how you ended up at your current job teaching. I actually didn't even ask you the name of your school, and where it is, so let's start there.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Oh, OK.

NADIA WILLIAMS: Why don't you tell me the name of your school, and where it is.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Yeah, it's PS 89 in Brooklyn. It's, like, Cypress Hills, uh, East New York area. And, my principal, actually, asked me that question, why did you come to the school, and I remember the answer. (laughter) That I gave her in my very, you know, seven years ago, in my ideal -- more ideal self, you know? I said the -- the universe brought me, simply. Um, but I -- I still do, kind of believe that. Um, I'm kind of, um -- I like to think that, you know, my life is, kind of, in the hands of -- of, like, a force, as long as I'm doing what I need to do, that I am where I am because I'm meant to be there. Like, it's for good. And, um, so I ended up at this job, because I also feel like I -- ever since college, when I decided I wanted to be an art teacher, I always, kind of, wrote about a school [35:00] like my school where I am, and, you know, nowhere is

perfect. It does have, um, difficult times, but I think that ultimately, it's a really great place to be, and we all have good intentions. And, I think that I feel like I will be there, um, longer if something else doesn't come up.

NADIA WILLIAMS: So you mentioned that it's a great place to be, what about it makes it a great place to be for you?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ: Well, I love the kids, um, again, I love the fact that I -- I feel connected to them, and I think that they feel connected to me. Um, and they are just so creative, and, um, the staff are very, kind of, energetic, and awesome staff. Like, they're good friends as well as, like, coworkers. So...

NADIA WILLIAMS: Can you just repeat that last...[outside noise]

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ: So, it's, uh, (And here?) OK. So you were saying what makes it a great place, and -- and I -- I was saying that my students make it a great place. Um, and a difficult place. (laughter) Woo!

NADIA WILLIAMS: (laughter)

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ: They keep it interesting. I always say that I, you know, I could not work in an office, like, a cubicle because -- or that my students are, like, keep the day so exciting day to day, because they're not really, um, the same, you know? Um, although I think that the more years I -- I -- I have teaching, similar behaviors start to show up year after year, so then, you know, but my school is a great place also because my co-workers, I'm friends with -- with some of them, and they are, like, really intelligent staff, and just very collaborative. And just kind of a warm place when we're all not like under the stress of testing or just other things. It's a great place.

NADIA WILLIAMS: And what about the parents of your students, how would you describe them and your relationship with them?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ: Well, um, I think, for the most part, I've had great experiences with the parents. Um, you know, that everybody has their lives, and I, you know, the children sometimes, you know, let you know what's going on, like, especially because they're so young. You know, and you can kind of see, like, the inside world their -- their, you know, personal space sometimes. So, um, I think it's, you know, we're all -- they all have -- we all have our difficulties, and I think I -- I would like to know the parents

better. I don't think that I have, um, gotten to a place where I kind of focused on parent relations. So that would actually be something for me to reflect more on. Though, I remember one parent telling me, um, during parent-teacher conferences, it becomes sort of like a -- because the -- the nature of, um, I guess, my job, is the arts, so, um, the classroom teacher is always seen as, like, you know, serious, you know, getting their child's grades, and [40:00] you know, the art teacher is, you know, you just go to talk to, to see how your kid is doing. So it becomes kind of like a -- and sometimes a counseling session, sometimes a session where you're just kind of talking about different things. And I remember one parent, one year, when my mom passed away, um, she sat there, and uh, said to me that, you know, something about trying to convert me to, like, Christianity. Like, if you want to see your mom one day, well, you know, go to church, or something like that, which is, kind of, hilarious to me right now because what, um, I don't know what I expressed in my -- my demeanor, or how I spoke, or that gave her this sense that she could kind of proselytize to me. Um, but that was kind of weird. So... (laughter) Um, I don't think I've ever had a -- uh, a parent that was angry at me. I wouldn't want to either. Um, uh, you know. I've had, for the most part, good experiences with the parents. Yeah.

NADIA WILLIAMS: So, going back to when you were talking about your experience growing up in school, um, you mentioned the experience with the teacher who, kind of, insinuated that you maybe hadn't -- or he just didn't give you full credit for that assignment. And I wanted to ask more about that, and ask, um, you said it was something that you thought about later on, and I was wondering how that impacted you, or how that made you feel.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ: Yeah, no, I still, um, I still remember it. And, like, it just makes me think about the power of my own words, and my own actions, on the memory of other people. You know, my -- in my family, my students, um, how much a memory like that, you can influence, will stay with someone for the rest of their life. So, I remember this, because I feel like he didn't believe in me. And that, because he was -- he didn't understand me. Like, he -- he maybe was, you know, racist against me, that's what I -- what I thought. Like, was he treating other students like me the same? Did he, like, not believe in them either? Um, you know, and it was, like, not only that, I read the

comments, I remember other comments he would write on other papers. Like, an unbelievably, like, oh, wow, you -- you wrote this? Like, um, I can't believe you -- whatever. Um, and anyway, I wasn't -- I was really into the -- I think he had assigned something about alienation. Humanity's sense of alienation. And I had researched in the -- in the library, the college library, and I spent so much time, uh, on this paper. And, uh, he didn't recognize my work. Like, I really spent hours of research, and writing, like, I feel inspired by reading about Hagel, and, who -- I don't remember the other names. But just philosophy. And it's, in part, it was a good experience because I had this teacher that introduced me to ideas that I wouldn't have been introduced to if I hadn't been, you know, uh, a -- a good student, I guess. Um, yeah, he's the only one that I can think of that I had that feeling towards. Um, but I also remember one incident, um, just with a substitute teacher in high school. Like, when I was -- I guess it was my senior year, um, I guess, there was one Puerto Rican substitute teacher, a young girl, I guess, out of college or something, and I remember feeling so amazed [45:00] at just seeing her, kind of, happy that she was there. And, um, I had a similar experience on a professional development as an adult, a few years back, when I, um, attended a workshop on adolescent development. And there were -- there was a Puerto Rican presenter with her co-presenter, who was African-American. And I just remember feeling so inspired by the Puerto Rican lady. I think she -- she had her doctorate, or something. She worked for -- I don't know, I just saw her in, uh -- I just was very inspired, because she was in a position that I haven't experienced, um, seeing, you know, Latin American descent people being in. Uh, maybe it's also a reflection on how, I don't know, and I don't want to make it like, uh, my -- I haven't been out seeking workshops, I don't know, I'm trying to -- no. So, I guess, two -- but, two, um, positive, um, examples. Yeah.

NADIA WILLIAMS: That actually brings me back to something else that you had mentioned that I wanted to follow up on. You'd mentioned, um, just feeling positive about -- you had mentioned positive -- feeling positive about being an example for your students. Um, specifically, as someone who, you know, someone other than -- someone who works in a deli, I think you mentioned as one of your examples.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Mmhmm.

NADIA WILLIAMS: Can you tell me more about why that's important to you?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Well, I -- I actually, I felt offended when people assumed that I, like, work at a -- like, I've been -- I went on a trip to Washington, D.C., and I stayed at a campsite with my son, and, um, I remember the lady behind the counter assumed that I was working there, um, and tried to ask me about, uh, an employee discount, I don't know. So I -- I feel like, um, I guess I don't want my -- those kids to experience that kind of -- of, you know, offense, and I want them to know that they are -- like, Piri Thomas would say that you -- you know, I am -- or you are not less -- I am not less than. It just makes one feel like you're less than. Like, that word minority al -- also means less, you know, and I think that certain perceptions, and certain ways of being treated make you feel less than. And I don't like that experience, and I don't think that anyone does, so I don't want that for my children, my family, my students. So, I think that it's -- it's important to see, um, role models in different, you know, positions because, I guess, um, if I think about it, like, maybe scientifically, like, we're all kind of -- when we're young, we kind of follow habits, and, um, if you -- if kids see, again and again, that, you know, people that look like them are only -- you know, can only be in, um, behind -- you know, working at the deli, or working in cleaning, and not to say that they won't do other things, because it has been done, you know, but I think that for them to stop feeling that feeling that they're, sort of, less than, that I think it creates. I think it's important for them to, [50:00] you know, see people that, um, look -- that are like them, that look like them, or are from the same backgrounds, um, in different positions.

NADIA WILLIAMS: So that actually ties back to something else that I wanted to go back to that you had mentioned earlier. You talked about, when you were in different classes, that you would kind of count or try to identify other people that were like you?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Mmhmm.

NADIA WILLIAMS: And, I'm just wondering if you could expand on that specifically, who you felt was like you.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Um, well, anyone that was, um, brown. (laughter) Or, um, even, like, I had, like, uh, one friend that was, uh, Peru -- from a Peruvian family, another one -- there was, like, lots of groupings. That's what I, like, that was in high school. Um, you

had kids that seemed like they came from money, they had a certain way of dressing. Um, just a certain -- and they just, kind of all -- kind of looked similar. Very fair skin, maybe blond hair, blue eyes, all of the things that stereotypically, you would associate with that, like, wealth, and just popularity. And so, then there was, like, um, I guess, there would only be like one, two, three, or four -- four would be many, out of, like, a class of over 20. Um, I remember there was, like, one or two African-American kids in my, um, honors and English -- and, uh, in high school. And then, it would be me and my other friend from Peru. But then, what's kind of, um, makes me think is that there was also someone from Colombia, but it seemed to me like she sided more with those other -- the other crowd. Um, so it was not only, like, um, it was just in the way that you identified yourself, I guess. So I identified myself not as that crowd that had wealth, and you know, so I -- yeah.

NADIA WILLIAMS: Can you explain why that was important to you?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Man, I wonder why. What -- what made me. I mean, I know that, like, um, my parents, like I said, were working a lot, um, I knew, like, I -- I didn't have everything that I wanted, you know? Like, nice shiny flashy Nike's, or whatever, I didn't have any of that. And I guess you notice, you know, what people are wearing, um, how they act. Um, and I guess it -- as a -- a student, like, body, I think that there was a separation too. Like, they -- like, I wasn't the only one who noticed that. It was, like, a consensus. So, you needed to be with one side, or you needed to be with the other side. So, and I -- and I, you know, I didn't identify with that other side, I went with what I identified with. Um, and, uh, yeah, kids would talk, and say stuff. I mean, even, like, I was part of the cheerleading team, and the basketball team, the cheerleading team of the basketball team. And we all kind of knew, I don't know how it spread, or that we were, kind of, like a mini city, because we, um, were, like, our basketball team was, like -- had the most underrepresented, like, black and Latino on the team than any other school we played against in the area. So, it was like, I don't know, other schools feared us in a way, like, and we kind of knew it, I don't know. They kind of thought we were, you know, more tough. I don't know. Um, so that I wasn't the only one that was aware of all of these differences. So I was [55:00] kind of, you know listening to things around, in my

environment. And I don't know if anything on TV, we didn't have any cable growing up. It was all PBS. I think, also, my sister being in college, kind of, um, spreading her knowledge when she came home, kind of, also, kind of awakened me. Hmm... (pause) Yeah, I'm not sure where exactly -- when I started that difference, to feel that difference. I know, like, I always, kind of, felt sad since I was in, like, kindergarten. And I don't know if that has to -- any association. But, again, like, it's probably, like, the home life, and just all of the struggles that the parents go through, and then that stress on them, and then they deal it, you know, it becomes part of the home life. So, I guess, sort of, that struggle made me relate to that group, I guess, or -- or to notice that difference when I came to school, and came of age. I noticed that difference. (pause) I don't know, just like things, um, maybe just one memory, like, on half a days when we were young, my brother and I would have to go to -- sneak into work, um, where my mom -- with my mom, and we had to stay -- maybe on -- on days when there was no school, or half a days, but we had to stay inside of her supply closet for the day, because there was no one to take care of us. Um, so it must've been, like, uh, smaller than a ten by ten, not even. We had to stay quiet, I don't know how we did it. But we were good kids. (laughter) So, just like, maybe experiences like that. I'm not sure. (pause)

NADIA WILLIAMS: And how would you, either, compare or contrast the experience of your students, so you mentioned that they go to a school that's predominantly -- that they're predominantly from Latin American backgrounds, in Brooklyn. How would you compare or contrast their experience of being surrounded by other Latinos, or other people from Latin American backgrounds, with a lot of growing up in upstate New York?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Can you, um, explain that a little to me, say that again?

NADIA WILLIAMS: Yeah, I'm just wondering if you see any similarities, or differences, thinking about your experience growing up in Sullivan County, and looking around for other brown faces in your classes, I'm wondering if you see any similarities, or differences, between that experience, and the one that your students have now in East New York, in a school where the majority of the students are from Latin American backgrounds.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ: Oh, it's kind of like, um, hmm, how can I say this? Hmm. (laughter) Uh, it's always a dilemma, I think. Um, I mean, like, in my school, there is only Latin American and Caribbean, um, people. There are no, kind of, like, um -- kind of like, only, like, European backgrounds, or -- um, so, like they experience something different than I experienced, because they're kind of not -- I guess [1:00:00] it's -- I think that it's good to experience different kind of cultures, and be exposed to different, um, people. And I know, like, we're -- they live in, like, Brooklyn, like, in close to Manhattan, but most of these kids, um, stay home. They don't get to experience outside their neighborhoods. And, um, so, um, I don't know. It's hard for me to -- kind of different than, like, I know what I -- I kind of felt separate while I was in school, like, so I'm trying to wonder what they -- how they feel, I'm not sure -- or if they see, kind of, that separation, like, maybe in the other schools, you know, this community has all kind of, so-called, like, white kids. And then, in this school, is all, like, all black kids, and then in this school is all, like, Latino kids, or Asian kids. I don't know if they see, um, those differences. Yeah. I don't know. So, I think that it's a little bit different from what I experienced. Um, also because I grew up in the country. Um... (pause)

NADIA WILLIAMS: And then, I also wanted to ask you, just because there had been all of these background sounds, I wanted to ask you if you can tell me a little bit about where we are.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Oh yeah.

NADIA WILLIAMS: Right now.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:We're at the NARS Foundation, um, it's an artist's studio in Sunset Park.

[END OF AUDIO FILE]

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:And we are in my studio, and, yeah, it's a very active place, and it's getting time to, like, for people to go here and there, and all of the rumblings of the elevators, and the doors shutting are in the background, that's what we hear. (laughter)

NADIA WILLIAMS: And can you tell me a little bit about what you do here?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:I make my work, my artwork. Um, (pause) yeah, it's a little bit of hard to say without any visuals. (laughter)

NADIA WILLIAMS: (laughter)

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Um, yeah, I just kind of -- I do, um, explore some of these ideas and feelings that I feel about, um, identity in here. Um, you know, American, and all -- identity, and just like, you know, things about existence. That's what I do in here. (laughter)

NADIA WILLIAMS: And how long have you been creating artwork?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Um, well, I've been in this studio, this is my second year. And I'm so happy that I have this space. And, before that, I was working out of my apartment. And, nope, but this works better. And I remember having art in elementary school, so I -- like, in kindergarten, I always loved to make stuff. Yeah.

NADIA WILLIAMS: And how did you decide to start working here in the studio?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Um, I was part of a -- like, an artist's -- women's artist's group. We had called it Springboard, and it was just women artists from different backgrounds. We got together, and I guess, a friend of mine, like, sent an email to her friends, and then we all came together. And one of her, um -- someone that she knew, uh, came to that meeting, and she was also a visual artist. So, we spoke about having a space, and then we made connections, and then, we made it happen, we got the space, and we've been here two years. So, that's how I came here. Mmhmm.

NADIA WILLIAMS: And can you -- can you tell me why -- why you create art?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:(laughter) Um, I decided -- I decide that I have to. I know that I have to, that's just what I have to do. Even though, like, you know, (pause) sometimes, uh, I don't want to, like, uh, you know, you can't feel inspi -- inspired all of the time. That feeling doesn't always stay. So, I think it's kind of, like, in a marriage, or in a love relationship, where you know, you feel all -- like, at the beginning, you're in, like, love, and you feel it, and you like floating on air. And then, you know, um, as you go on, you know the person a little more, you -- you know, more years pass by, it's like, you become comfort -- you know, you're more comfortable. It's just kind of like a different stage, I think. So, at the present stage, I'm making art, because I know that I have to. Um, yes. And I -- I, ultimately, I like to. It's what I like, I -- I -- I think that I'm, um, I guess I'd

want to say made for -- maybe I do want to say made for, but, like, I need to be making things, that's for sure. Like, inventing things. Yeah.

NADIA WILLIAMS: Can you explain a little bit of what you mean when you say I need to, or I have to?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:I guess it partially makes me happy, so I think that we want to be happy, um, and I also like to, um, [5:00] know about things, so I think, like, it's important, like, this -- making things makes me reflect on things, it keeps me, um, learning, I feel like I'm more productive as a person to be making things. (pause) Um, just because, maybe, that's what I'm geared more towards, and like, that's, like, an affinity that my -- that, maybe, I was born with. Um, I think everybody has their own, kind of, affinities towards things. Um, and also, like, because I had that experience with art, and at a young age, and my mom, kind of, encouraged it, that, um, it just grew with me. And so, um, because I had such -- such a long experience, now, I think, like, you know, I have to continue that. I couldn't see stopping, like, I can't see that. Well, although it felt like I almost did, when -- at one point. (laughter) It was really hard. (pause)

NADIA WILLIAMS: Do you remember in what ways your mom -- your mom encouraged you?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Yeah, she would let me paint, like, she would buy me, like, materials, like, little -- just little things, like, string for making friendship bracelets, and, um, little, uh, packages of cross-stitching. Like, anything that I would, like, my eyes would be like, oh, what's that, and like, as a little eight year old, or, however old I was, um, my mom would -- yeah, she would get it, and -- and I would, you know, be able to make things. Or even, like, letting us go play outside, like, make mud volcanoes, and build, you know, that way. Always, kind of, getting our hands dirty. She didn't really have a problem with that. Yeah. She also paid for, like, um, some -- whenever possible, like, little art classes, and when I was a little older, she took me to, um, uh, like an art contest, through, uh, one of the count -- nearby counties, which -- which I did end up I won, like, I won the -- the prize, which was good. If she hadn't, then it wouldn't, you know, I guess it's one thing that I was successful at, so, um, though I continue because I had such a good experience when I was younger, yeah. And I find words sometimes hard

to express. Um, less now, though, like, I -- I can, uh, when I was younger, I found it harder. Uh... (pause)

NADIA WILLIAMS: So, I'm wondering, you've made a couple of references to doing research, and reading, and piecing together your family history, and I'm wondering what fuels that, kind of, ongoing quest.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Um, well, um, I think (pause) I just want to make, like -- like connections to -- I want to feel, like, a continuation of something that has been alive here, um, on earth, I guess. Um, and I feel like, um, because of this, it makes me ask, like, my aunt, or anyone, my dad, all of the stories. And when I learn of some stories, if I, like -- like, for example, my aunt, [10:00] I asked her, you know, where my grandmother came from, because I'm always kind of interested in the names, and trying to figure out, OK, where she came from in Peru, and who -- you know, the last names, like, where in Spain they're from. And, um, one story that my aunt does remember, that her mother told, was that, um, when she -- when -- I guess, my grandmother was a little girl, my great grandmother would tell her that she needed to feed the birds, because if you -- when you feed the birds, they -- and when you die, those birds will help you cross the river. So, I feel like in most stories like that, I feel connected to, you know, the past, and something, like, a set of, like, traditions and rituals that have come from, you know, many generations, you know? And then, when I -- and when I see my dad telling things like, um, I remember stories -- uh, when I went to visit him once, he noticed that there was a giant moth, um, on the -- on the side of the house. And at that -- um, in that -- in those days, someone had -- in the family had passed away. Actually, his wife's, um, cousin, or brother, someone passed away, and then my dad said, like, with a firm belief, like, look, like, this is all in Spanish though. But he's like, look, look up there, you know, there's a -- there's a big moth, there's a big moth. That means somebody in the family has died. So I think that in those little things, like, if they're just affirmations for me, of my -- my past, like, that -- a connection to a past that is greater than who I am now. And I think that knowing this -- like, that's part of oral history, I think, like, just to have that connection, um, with the past, to remember things like that, is very important. You feel like, you know, connected. My -- I have, uh, actually, one experience I want to bring in from one

of my students, a little second grader. I was, uh, talking about artists, that, you know, had passed away already. Like, I think it was Jacob Lawrence, and Romare Bearden, but, um, and so they were asking. They're always intrigued, you know, this -- are they alive? And, you know, they both happened to not be alive, and then one -- one very difficult, um, child just kind of speaks up and says, well, why -- why are we all born, or why are we all being born or alive, if we're all going to die? It kind of dawns on him, why are we alive if we're going to die? And that's why I think that stories and history is important, because, especially if it's coming from a more connected, you know, not just a general history, but, like, a really personal history, uh, a history that's, like, connected to you and who you are, um, so that you know, like -- or you have an idea for yourself of why we are alive, like, why, you know, and why we're going to die. Like, those are very important questions that, maybe, we wouldn't wonder so much about if we had more of a connection to our past. Or maybe we would, because it's like, we've been wondering about it for thousands of years, I think. So, I think that's what keeps me connected to knowing about, like, the past. Just these stories that, kind of, intrigue me. (pause)

NADIA WILLIAMS: And do you try to make those same connections for your own son?

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Um, I try. I tell him stories about -- it's funny, [15:00] when -- that makes me think of, um, my chicken story. Um, growing up, well, my dad, um, had chickens. And, um, I just feel like it's like, uh, I guess, um, I don't know, I mean, since he's Puerto Rican, and he grew up, you know, there, and with his traditions, and, um, on a -- he knows how to farm, and he knows how to raise animals, and, you know, kill them, and, you know, feather them, or whatever -- whatever process you have to do, he knows how to do that. And I think that I'm grateful that my dad passed that on to me. Um, I remember with -- with one chicken that, um, we were going to make a -- a soup, or fried chicken, or some food, and my dad, one day, told me, you know, come over here. So, we -- I follow him outside, and he grabs a -- he tells me, grab a chicken. And then I saw a -- and he's telling me, describing how to hold it down, so I -- I'm holding the chicken down, and I know he's going to -- we're going to, like, kill it to -- to have some food, but it just didn't dawn on me until the point where he actually, kind of, slits the throat, and then walks away, and leaves me with this chicken, and I never had experienced, you

know, anything like that. And, um, I just remember feeling like, oh my god, what's going on here, you know, where are you going? I was so worried about this chicken, because I let it go, and it was flapping its wings all around, it was just kind of hilarious now, to think about it. But, I tell my son this story. And then, um, he finds it very funny, and he wants to, like, experience something like that, I guess. And, um, um, I feel like, also, like, if -- uh, like, it's sort of, maybe, like a right of passage, I'm -- I'm not sure, but I guess, something close to what would've been. Like, that, for me, now, is important memory, because, um, it gives me stories, and experiences, um, to connect with things. And so I, you know, and me telling him some of these stories, I -- I hope that it can form some part of his identity, and, um, for him not to forget his ancestors. Um, yeah. I try. I -- I don't know if I'm doing a good, job, I try, you know, take him to Puerto Rico, I tell him where his -- his [off] -- his family is from, and his grandparents. Yeah. I try. (pause)

NADIA WILLIAMS: So, in wrapping up, um, (laughter) (pause) thinking about all of the reading, and research you've done in an effort to feel connected, I'm wondering, if you can imagine what it might look like for you to feel accomplished in that -- in that, kind of, search for -- for a connection.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Oh, I don't -- I don't know if I'll -- I'll feel accomplished. Because, um, we're not here forever, and we can't know everything, right now. And, um -- and some, and a lot of that past is gone, you know, like, I can't remember, or my parents, or my aunts, like, you know, they can't remember their great grandfather, or grandparents name, and, you know, if I can come to terms with that, you know [20:00] I don't know if I can come to terms with not knowing, you know, like, I don't know if I'll feel accomplished, because that part of the history is gone. Um, and I feel like it's so important to know, so, um, (pause) I don't think I'll ever feel accomplished, but maybe I can come to peace with, um, or not. Uh, (pause) or, just, kind of tone down that angry feeling, I guess, uh, of that I won't, like -- you know, I guess just coming to -- I'll feel accomplished if I can just, kind of, be a little bit more peaceful with it. Um, just let go some of that resentment, and -- and anger. Um, although not -- not ever forget, you know, a -- uh, those, kind of, lost parts of history. Hmm. (pause) So, I -- I think that,

actually, my work will just continue to keep going in its same until, maybe, I -- I don't know, I'm very, very old. I'll still wonder, I think, about it all. (pause)

NADIA WILLIAMS: So I know you have a meeting to get to, I would love to continue this conversation in the future, because we're kind of -- I feel like I'm leaving this subject hanging without asking more about this -- the concept of lost history. Um, but anyway, we can continue in the future. For now, I'd like to thank you for your time. I think that hearing about your experiences, and the -- just the effort, the ongoing effort you make, to kind of understand your identity and, um, just understand the history that you can is really inspiring, so thank you for taking the time to share it.

ELIZABETH VELAZQUEZ:Thank you for this chance.

NADIA WILLIAMS: OK.

[END OF FILE]