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De La Luz, Caridad

De La Luz, Caridad. Bronx African American History Project
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Oneka LaBennett (OL): One, two, three, four, five. This is the La Bruja interview.

OL: Today is October 23rd, and we are interviewing Caridad de la Luz, a.k.a. La Bruja, for the Bronx African American History Project. And, I would just like to begin by asking you when you were born.

Caridad de la Luz, a.k.a. La Bruja (LB): I was born January 21, 1973 here in the Bronx at Albert Einstein Hospital.

OL: And did your family always live in the Bronx, or where did your family live before moving to the Bronx?

LB: My parents were both born in Puerto Rico and then came to New York City at the age of three or four. My father was raised in Brooklyn, my mother was raised in the Bronx, and I have lived in the Bronx, and still live in the Bronx, all my life.

OL: All your life. Where did you grow up? Tell me exactly the street you moved to after you were born and where you were born.

LB: I grew up on Commonwealth Avenue, 733 Commonwealth Avenue, between Seward and Lafayette, I guess. And then, at the age of five, we moved a long five blocks away [laughter] to be really close, right? So, my grandmother, it was my grandmother's house, we lived upstairs, and my mom lived in the basement. Now, my grandpa's still there, my uncle's basement, now my uncle lives there. And we moved to 633 Leland Avenue, between Seward and Randall.

OL: So the house where your grandmother lived, upstairs and all the really main house, what kind of a house was it? Was it like a, free standing house? Was it one that connected?

LB: It's a connected house, with three floors, and a garage in the back, like a yard garage in the back. It has the stoop, with a gate, and she has her garden, a little garden there. And she's still,

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

she's still there, our tradition is to go there every year for every holiday, and we still do it. And, yes- -

OL: Did your grandmother or your mom own that house?

LB: Yes, they owned the house. I don't exactly know how my grandmother got the house, like I don't know, I know that it was maybe, I'm guessing \$20,000 or something. But, with my grandfather, they put their moneys together and - - and my mother helped actually! They all helped put the, purchase the house before I was born and she had first gotten married I think that's how it was. Before that they lived like, on, I want to say, Saint, St. John's Street or something more in the South Bronx. A little closer to Hunt's Point, because she was raised over there. And then moved over to Commonwealth, in the Soundview section.

OL: Right, and when they, when you were growing up, what was the neighborhood like there? Were there other Puerto Rican families living near by? Were you guys the only ones? What was the neighborhood like?

LB: No, it was a mix, there was a lot of, actually we had Cubans across the street, we had a Haitian family right next door, in the attached house so I was always playing with Alexis, and we had, it was different Latinos actually. South Americans and African Americans it was always a mix. Only now do I see the more Indian community, like Muslim communities and Asians, but back in the day it was Latinos and Africans.

OL: So tell me about your household when you were growing up. How many siblings did you have? Who was in the house besides your mom, your grandmother, and your dad, right?

LB: Yes

OL: So who else was in the house?

LB: I was the only child, for ten years.

OL: Wow

LB: [Laughs] And it was my mother, my father, and myself on the top floor. It was my grandmother and my grandfather on the middle floor. And then it was my Aunt who lived in the basement. She was single, when I was little. And I think that's it, like in the house. But every, everyone would always come. Like that was the center—my grandma's house—like everyone kind of came there. That's where actually my great-grandmother lived, I'm forgetting that. My great-grandmother lived downstairs and she was the one who taught me how to do poetry. So she was my grandmother's mother, so on my maternal side—my mother's mother's mother.

OL: Got it.

LB: She lived down there too, because they were taking care of her because she's older and you know, she her health was failing, she was diabetic, and you know, those things. So yes, I grew up with her.

OL: Oh that's great. I want to come back to her, I don't want to forget about her.

LB: Yes, we can't.

OL: Yes, that's important. [Laughs] What did your parent do for a living when you were growing up?

LB: My father was a mechanic for Volkswagen. Before that, actually, he worked as a daycare, he worked in a daycare with little kids, and he used to take me with him. So that was always cool, and my mother was a teacher, [inaudible] a high school teacher at Murry Bergtraum High School where I attended actually and had my mother three times—as a teacher, yes, yes, it was really cool. It was difficult but [laughter] it's cool now. Looking back at the time it was a little crazy, but - -

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

OL: That's interesting; it's all kind of making sense now. Your great-grandmother was a poet and your mother was a teacher.

LB: Yes

OL: We can see those influences.

LB: Absolutely! My mother always talked about how teaching was the noblest profession because you really care and you get to teach and you impact so many lives.

OL: Now, so, you went to Murry Bergtraum High School. Where did you go to elementary and junior high school?

LB: I went to PS 100, which is right there, right in the same area. My children go there now. And then from there I went to PS 71, because it only went up to the fourth grade, so for fifth and sixth I went to the Rosie Scholar School, PS 71, kind of in the Throgs Neck area, and there was where there was a lot more Irish and Italian, like it wasn't a predominantly black and Latina area. So, so went to fifth and sixth there, and then seventh and eighth I went to IS 192, the Piagentini-Jones School, and then from there I went to Bergtraum.

OL: Right

LB: So I had a couple of good- -my mother, after PS 100 she didn't want me to stay in the area. She wanted me to get out of the area.

OL: Right, that's interesting.

LB: Yes.

OL: What language did you speak at home? Did you speak English, Spanish? Both?

LB: Both. Spanish first, Spanish was first because my family and my grandmother and everyone, that's all that they spoke. But once I went to Kindergarten, I, my Spanish got really bad because I was so involved and invested in learning English, that- - and I forgot a lot of, I

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

forgot my grandmother's, my great-grandmother's poems, actually. Once I went to school, you know I knew them when I was little, when she would have me perform for family—that was my first audience—on every Holiday [laughs]. I like to say “[Spanish Phrase]”—that's how they say it.

OL: [laughs]

LB: In the living room that was it. I was holding open mic's in my living room since the age of like, three. I have like pictures me of with a ponga and a mic, and I still do open mic's to this day.

OL: So did your grandmother write the poems or did she recite them to you and then you memorized them?

LB: She recited them. She didn't know how to read or write, and she had a memory of gold. She had like eleven children, you know she was, and she never did poetry as a mother. Once she was older and wasn't in the kitchen anymore and she said, that's when her memory she just, it clicked and she started sharing all these poems, like. She started sharing and my grandmother's like, this never, we never heard you do this. So, it came to her later on and it was great.

OL: And what were her poems about? What kind of themes did she?- -

LB: [laughs] They were about family. They were about the grandmother, about the mothers, about, there was chistes, like they would choose jokes or puns, plays on words, little songs, like nursery rhymes. The only one that I remember, just a touch, was like (singing): something about something and la ca de de da. It was like, and it was like what? There's a song like that too, I'm trying to, something about going to Seville in Spain and there's, the prospero is like the little matches, getting the matchbox for like a dime, and just it's this whole little song, that my mother knows better than I do, but I yes, I forgot them all. And she died when I was ten. And that's

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

when I started writing, because I couldn't remember her chorus, and that just, I felt crushed, that I couldn't remember, you know? I was like, "Oh my god, she's gone and I don't remember!" So I think that I've been trying to recite, or reword, like reword what she taught me. Like, her messages, because a lot of my poems, especially the ones that really made me popular, were about my grandmother or about my house, the Latino experience, the Puerto Rican experience, so, yes, I've been trying to. And actually, my Spanish is really not that great, but there's this one poem, my first Spanish poem, that I recited at the Nuyorican. I was on the train, coming home from work and I was working at Bloomingdale's, and I could hear a voice saying those words, like saying the words, and it was all about Puerto Rico, about how beautiful it is, how we have to maintain it, how we have to save it from, be it salvage, and it's like, it's called "Ha Ore Siempre" and I heard all the words, you know it was just like coming to me, and I felt that was her, sharing, and that was that's been I would say my best Spanish poem.

OL: You were channeling her.

LB: Yes! Channeling her. Yes, I felt like on the train, you know that you're moving, so like molecules are hitting your spirit, your brain, and you have all these different energies, and it just, you would think that you can be quiet, it's like totally the opposite. To create, you need just energy flowing and then it just - -

OL: Wow that's incredible. So I want to ask you about what you were like growing up, and in high school were you a kid who went outside and played? Did you have friends? Or were you inside with your grandmother and your family and like, what were you like?

LB: They called me la lider, [laughter] which is the, because I was always rounding up the troops to do something! Inventing some game, and you know [laughs] I was definitely playful, not quiet, and [crosstalk] yes, I was always busy.

OL: And what kind of student were you? - -

LB: Excellent- -

OL: - -Since your mom was teacher.

LB: I was top. I have, I won the principal's award, I was valedictorian, and my mother, it came natural to me younger, as younger, as I got older it got harder.

OL: Did you think at any point in your life, when you were in school, when you were such a good student, that you had some other career that you were going to become?

LB: Yes I wanted to be a brain surgeon. [laughter] That was my goal. I was going to be a brain surgeon. And then, I became squeamish, like at the age of thirteen that was it! I was like, once I used to be fine with blood, like we had dogs, that was another thing, we always had dogs, more, two or more, all my life. So everything I learned about life—death, birth, sex—everything was from dogs. [laughter] So, they would fight, they would get hurt, I would always be the one to like tend to their wounds—and I, no problem. I don't know what happened, somewhere along the way, but then once I saw somebody like bleed, and had the eye was injured, and I wanted, I don't, I fainted. I was like, [hand clap] I can't do it anymore. [laughs]

OL: Brain surgery was out.

LB: Yes, that was out.

OL: So then, did you know at that point, that you wanted to be an artist?

LB: Did I know? I mean I was always doing it, you know it was something that I, my mother put me in piano at six, I was learning from a Jewish woman in the Bronx, right on Warden Avenue off of the 6 train. Her name is Carol Gershinson. And from six to twelve I was going to her every week. So, I was performing, doing music. And then I was like acting, in the local

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

theatre, she had me in ballet, and stuff from the age of four. Everything that my mother couldn't do she gave to me. So I was blessed—so fortunate, because of this.

OL: That's great.

LB: She actually got her master's from Fordham.

OL: Really?

LB: Yes, in education.

OL: We should interview your mom too!

LB: You should!

OL: That would be great.

LB: She's that best.

OL: So, the other thing I wanted to ask you about your childhood and your teenage years is, we know that the poetry influences came from your grandmother, but, what kind of music were you listening to when you were thirteen, fourteen, fifteen? What kind of music influenced you then and where did you listen to music? Did you go out to parties or did you listen to it at friends houses, at home?

LB: My, it was in the house it was very musical. My mother had a collection of albums that were salsa. She liked Rick James and James Brown and like, there was also the soul, Motown package she had me on. I had, I knew all the, what do you call it, the Supremes, all of those albums, all those songs- -

OL: That's great

LB: - -I was raised listening to the oldies. And then it was odd because when I first heard hip hop and stuff like that, I kind of felt like, I don't know, like—it didn't impress me when I first heard it. It had to grow on me actually. Like, I was like I could do that. You know, like I didn't

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

respect it, I mean my God. [laughs] Please, don't take any offense [crosstalk]. You know what I mean, I hope that any MC or whatever of the time, it just it didn't, I don't know. But I, so I was listening to like rock, soft rock, like I remember like, 95, channel 95 WPLJ or something like that that had soft rock hits. My god, I'm trying to think. Fleetwood Mac, Billy Joel, eiy yiy yiy! It was a mix. I listened to a lot of Cuban music, African-Cuban music. That's where I was, I first heard of my idol, Celina Gonzalez, she had these Santeria albums, and she would talk about praying to spirits and cleaning the house of bad spirits and all. And she was one of the main reasons that I call myself La Bruja. Listening to her words, her music. Because my name is Caridad, which is the patron saint of Cuba, so she had music to La Caridad. So as a little girl, she was singing to me. I'd hear my name and you never heard my name because it was rare, so that I just loved. And she had this song about praying to, like help, asking a good bruja to help me open my journey. Do this, "help me bruja, open my da da da, break all the negative chains, da da da" and I was thinking to myself, "wow, can I be a bruja? Could I be a good bruja?"

OL: When was this, that you started thinking about that name?

LB: Little, little.

OL: My goodness, really?

LB: And every Halloween—my parents got married on Halloween—so there's a very brujaesc thing right there, and then every Halloween I really liked either being a gypsy or a witch or something mystical.

OL: I noticed in the film that you talked about the influence of Santeria and the idea that you have deities that you worship that come from Africa, and I was hoping you'd talk about that a little bit. Of how you see that as part of your heritage and how it influences your art.

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

LB: I see that as my connection to Africa. I feel that a lot of African Americans haven't been able to even keep that, of their, that part of their culture, their heritage. And I guess we're fortunate because of the blending of the cultures, we were able to preserve it by giving them like Catholic names. So I think that it's, I think every African American and every Latino should, you know not to practice, but to learn it, at least just to learn, and understand what exists and demystify it, because like, or like how they make it so evil. And people make it afraid, and I think that it's because it's so powerful and because it's so beautiful that, and it would empower you, so they didn't want us to be in power, so of course they were going to strip that from us. So it's important for all of us to learn about it and understand and read the stories. And I felt that because I was named after one of them, I mean how can I not learn, how could I not respect it? It's part of me. So, we were always, it was several religions that, my parents always had we had statues of Indians—Native American Indians—and their way, we would learn about the four winds and learn about Buddha and we had all sorts of le voir, kuchum, and changó, everybody. We also, at the time, when I was younger, we would have misas, they were actual misas, and we would sing and pray Catholic prayers, mixed with the Santer de Dijos, is really what, the listas, not really Santeros, so we would have misas, and I think we would hold misas to pray to the dead and channel the dead. And try to plan, my mother is actually, I mean I'm blowing up the spot [laughs] mom! But she's a medium, she really is a medium, and I've seen her channel spirits, and I mean I have it too. I don't exercise it the way that my mother had or has in the past, but she would know what was wrong with you and she would go into a trance and she would read you and she taught me to read taro cards—I read taro cards.

OL: Did you ever go to Puerto Rico with your family?

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

LB: Every summer. So that was where the Puerto Rico world came in. So every summer they would send me over there, whether by myself or with them, if they could go, but I would go every summer and be with my father's family—because all of my mother's family was already here, in the Bronx. So I had the balance of both, which was awesome.

OL: What's interesting is you're reclaiming things that like you said, that have been given negative connotations—not only of you being a witch and being able to channel spirits—but also the feminine aspect of that. And it sounds like you got that from your grandmother, but what about your mom and what was the relationship like between your parents growing up? Did your father see you as a strong young woman and kind of allow you to be that way or did he want you to be more traditional?

LB: No, actually they were very free spirited. They were both, they were both very spiritual. He had, has medium powers also, but my mother would say she is the dominant power, and they were always encouraging me to be strong. I mean, even if we went to a restaurant, he would tell me, "you go and pay the bill. Here's the money, you go talk." You know what I mean? He would always have me talking to people, and he would always introduce me, and he still does it. "This is my daughter and she does this," and you know, he's just he's very outgoing. He's always been, and he'll tell me, "it's time for your show you should say this, [OL: laughs] you should open up with this and your song," he's very, he critiques, and-

OL: So were your parents supportive when you started emerging more as an artist and the brain surgery was out of the picture?

LB: [Laughs] I think they knew early, we knew that the signs of brain surgery thing was out by high school, that was gone. But they knew that I loved English, like I was doing Shakespeare

plays and English was where I was thriving and in my writing. I'm sorry wait, I lost track of the question, what was the last question?

OL: I was asking about- -

LB: Whether they what?

OL: Whether they were supportive of you becoming an artist.

LB: Yes, they were always supportive of me becoming an artist. Actually we have an artist in the family, his name is Eddie Montalgo, and he is a Compiero, and he played for Celia Cruz after the whole, in the Fana era. If you look at the Fana picture, he's right in there, in the middle. He actually came out with a movie recently with the whole Mark Anthony, the El Cantante DVD, because of him, I met Hector Lavoe and Celia Cruz when I was a little girl. I actually flew in the same plane to Puerto Rico as Hector Lavoe at the time, and I had to be, I don't know, five?

OL: Wow, incredible, we can interview him too.

LB: You should.

OL: Your whole family [laughter].

LB: So he was the star of the family, you know he was the star, the musical star.

OL: So you have a lot of creative genes, a lot of creative energy in your family.

LB: Yes! Actually the first time I ever played the conga and sang at the same time was just, not easy—was when his father was sitting next to me. Eddie Montalgo's father, Theo Naline, my grandmother's brother, that's when it first clicked. I used to try and it never worked and then we were in the backyard and I was trying and trying and he was sitting there, and then, there it was! It just came and I was singing and playing, I was so happy, it was so cool.

OL: That's amazing. So- -

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

LB: There's energy there. There's definitely energy there. His spirit, he has definite African spirit, because when he plays that drum, you are gone. He, it's I can't even explain it, but it's like a horse, it really takes you, and you can—the energy that he emits when he is playing is just undeniable. And I feel like that's his African spirit with him, because that's, that was the first instrument, really, that was the predominant, the heartbeat of music, is African.

OL: Definitely, yes. It sounds like all of these different mediums—the poetry and the music—were always connected for you growing up. Did you first think of yourself as a poet and then later an MC? How did that evolve?

LB: Yes, I would say I was a poet first. I mean, even though I was like rapping at the age of fourteen, I had these two girlfriends and we called ourselves “Vogue,” before Madonna came out, and before there was En Vogue we were “Vogue!” [Laughter] I was like “yes!” because I love Madonna, I was like, “Wow, see we're there! We are Madonna man!” [laughter]. Yes, we, I was rapping, I remember my first rap was called “Square Pegs,” I was like, I was like, it was a dis rap about girls who went to either dis me and the whole thing. It was “Square Pegs,” it was funny. The hook was (singing): “Square Pegs” and it was just like a lot of did the same thing.

OL: That's great. So- -

LB: On a little Casio.

OL: [Laughs]

LB: So it was good [laughs].

OL: Did you guys perform anywhere or go anywhere?

LB: No, hell no! [Laughter] I would have done it but they were way shy. They tell me now, they're like, “Man, you know you always wanted to perform and everything.”

OL: How many of you were there?

LB: Three, it was me, Graciella, and Maleen.

OL: Were they also Puerto Rican, do you know?

LB: She was Puerto Rican and she was Dominican. Grace was Puerto Rican and Maleen was Dominican.

OL: And how old were you then?

LB: I was thirteen, fourteen.

OL: So who else were you listening to then? One thing I'd love to hear about is when you started paying attention to hip hop, when it started meaning something to you, and who were the artists you first remembered listening to?

LB: I mean, I loved Salt-n-Peppa when they came out because they were girls and their whole flow, I remember that. I would say that the person that made me want to become an MC was Nas. When he came out with his album, *Illmatic*, that was in, like '92 or '93, around that time, that was it. I was like, "I have to do this." That was the most, I think, impressive you know, flow, the "One Love" joint and, just his story telling; and I was already doing poetry, but I saw the connection then. I was just like, "Oh, my god, I have to do this."

OL: So Nas is a particular type of hip hop artist though. I notice in the film that Felix Rodriguez made, that you said something like, you weren't going to write any songs about Coochie's, [laughter] rape, drugs, or ever, I forget what the other thing was now- -

LB: Well, you know, I probably have made songs now, I mean, at the time I felt that way, being a new mother and, you know it's a way that, like what I've been trying to do is find a middle ground where I can do what everybody—do it—but with sensibility with like, heart. And also, there's certain topics like that, I do or I've made like sexy songs or whatever, basically to show people that you can be sexy without being old, or without being outright, you know you don't

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

want to steal the innocence from a child. So I feel like, instead of just saying “no I’m never going to do it,” I’m going to do it in another way to show people that, “Oh, you see, you can- - less.” Sometimes less is more. So- -

OL: And definitely those people who you said influenced, who influence you—like Madonna and Salt-n-Peppa—talk about sexuality and how do you think, what do you think is different when a female artist talks about those topics as opposed to male artists?

LB: Well it’s how she does it. Instead of being, like I say Reggaetón, the reason that I even started doing Reggaetón was because of the women, and the way that they were presented and the voice that they had. They were just a “Eiey” girls, [laughter] that’s all they do, that’s the girl. We make jokes about it, like if you met the girl who do you have to talk to her, when she just respond to you like, “eiey.” [Laughter] So I wanted to have voice. Like when you can talk about sex as a woman, but as empowerment—because that is one of our powers. I mean, we give life, we create life. And it’s a beautiful thing. There’s nothing wrong with sex. Sex is amazing. It’s one of our treasures, if anything, but to do it in a way that it’s, to glorify it or celebrate it, but without taking away from yourself, without cheapening yourself really. I mean, I don’t know, I think you know what I mean.

OL: Yes, I do know what you mean. It’s, what’s difficult in terms of sort of teasing out, it’s—do you want to turn the AC back on? [crosstalk] It is warm in here. It’s difficult to sort of tease out and characterize your music because there’s hip hop in there, there’s salsa, there’s meringue, there are all these- -

LB: All there. And I was doing classical and piano. You know I was studying Beethoven and Bach and- -

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

OL: Have you always thought of all of those different music genres as being connected? And part of why I'm asking this is, although this is called the "Bronx African American History Project," obviously the musical traditions that have come out of the Bronx have radical influences, have all sorts of influences from the different ethnic groups that come here. So, what I'm interested in is how you see the cultural exchange between, for example, African Americans in the Bronx and Puerto Ricans. Do you, when you were growing up, did you see them as co-existing peaceably, or did you see them as antagonistic? Did you always think that those were things that went together naturally?

LB: I was fortunate to have the experience that there was a beautiful balance. Everyone got along. I've got friends that, I really, I didn't experience racism until I left for college.

OL: What were the other families around you like growing up? Was it unusual that you had your mom, your dad in the same house? Were your friends - -

LB: It was a mix. Some friends had both their parents, some had none of their parents and were being raised by their grandparents, or, so it was a huge mix. There was nothing just one way. And I've always felt that it was connected, and you know hearing the different sounds, I've always wanted to connect them, because I feel that it is related. I like to blend it in my music. I felt like in the "Brujalicious" album was my best attempt of blending the sounds. And my first attempts, I knew what I was trying to do, but it didn't come out, it didn't translate, but it was just there, I felt like it was confining. All of it's poetry designed—characteristics of hip hop and Caribbean, and the streets.

OL: I'm thinking of, I want to, before we turn to music completely, I want to ask you a few more things about your sort of background, on your family.

Dawn Russell: Can we turn that [the AC] off it's too loud, is it too loud?

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

OL: I saw in the film that Rodriguez made about you that when you went to Green Street

Productions, there's this moment where you felt like when they found out that you were married and had children, that that was something that turned them off. So, I want you to talk a little bit about your family and, I mean your children and your husband, but then also how you balance being an artist with having a family.

LB: How do I balance it? It has not been the easy road. And yes, I think that when true entertainment industry they see you, they see dollar signs, they want to have access. The moment you put children into the equation—family, husband, whatever—then it's just like, “ugh!” they can't access you, how can, I can't. You know what I mean? Then you're not accessible to me, to use and exploit. So that in itself- -

OL: Do you think it would be different if you were a man with a family?

LB: Yes, I think it might be. It might be different, maybe. I really don't know, honestly. But as far as being a woman and, you know—absolutely. It's a whole other, and the best, that's what they're going to exploit you for is your sex—it's your sexuality, and your womanhood—what sells in Hollywood. And then, all of that just doesn't mix, motherhood and whatever. Very few women can do it, and I'm actually not married anymore, and it's, we're not together. It's been a year, and it was difficult. It was difficult because I wanted to be, like I said in the documentary like the Puerto Rican Partridge Family. I wanted us to all be able to make music together or create art together, and it just wasn't happening. It just, for whatever reason, it was difficult for him to have a wife in entertainment, you know what I mean? It was just, and for as much as he said he was supportive, there was I think there was always an underlying either resentment or fear or—it just didn't work.

OL: How old are your children now?

LB: Kelson is nine, my son, and Carina is seven.

OL: And how is, Kelson's a diabetic, how's his health?

LB: He's great, he's doing so well. He knows how to check himself, give himself his own injection, he is just—and he's been doing that since the age of seven. That he can, because I wanted him to learn, because, god forbid something happen to me, then who's going to teach him if not me? And I want him to be independent and to be able to do things on his own, so even though he's still mommy's boy, he still looks to me to do it and everything, but he can do it. And he's, he's amazing, he looks very healthy—he is very healthy—they're both really, they're really great. Actually it's, it's almost like a blessing in disguise that it happened because I really wasn't aware of how important diet is at the time. I really wasn't. Now I understand it on a whole other level, I've had to, in order to maintain his diabetes and figure out how to regulate, level him out. So, and what, how many, what the portions should have and—I don't deny him anything because I don't want him to, once he's out of my world and my bubble, for him to go off and binge on food he never could have, you know what I mean? So I don't do that to him, but everything is in moderation. We balance it out. So I mean, he hates having diabetes and he says it to me all the time. I, too, have a conflict: I have Scoliosis. I have—my spine is curved—and I had surgery when I was thirteen. I have two metal rods in my spine. And they told me that I wasn't going to be able to do a lot of things like carry children, that it would hurt too much, and sports—out of the question; dancing—forget about it. They said all these things to me [laughs], and I wound up doing everything. So I try to tell him, encourage him. Everybody has their cross to bear, but it only makes you stronger. And it's for a reason and hopefully it will inspire others to be stronger. So, I'm like, “you could be the poster boy for diabetes,” you don't know.

[laughter]

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

OL: So is it still a struggle in terms of being an artist and providing for your family?

LB: Nope! Thank god, [laughter] knock on wood. I, I've gotten to a better level, as like, financially, I'm living completely from my work and I'm so glad to be able to do it. And now that I have a record deal now and I'm working on my next album, but that was after creating De La Luz Records, to make "Brujalicious," to put it out, to show that I do have a market. All the things that they told me I couldn't do. I guess, that's one thing that people tell me when I first started doing hip hop, "forget it, sing salsa, Puerto Rican women that's what they do," and I can do that, I love doing it, but that's just not just me. And that just made me go harder at it.

OL: So tell us about how the album "Brujalicious" came to be. How you sort of made the transition from being someone who was trying to perform your poetry into somebody who could actually develop this album.

LB: I think that a lot of it came from workshops. That when I would do writing workshops in the community for the youth, if I said, "work on your poetry," they looked at me like, "ugh, this is torture." And I would be like, "ok," I changed it up, I was like, "who listens to hip hop? I'm going teach you how to write rhymes." And at the end, I was teaching them the same thing with a different title, and they were like "yeah!" you know? And then, I too was like, "well their language is in rhyme, it's flow, so I have to develop my flow," so I knew that I was a poet, I knew that I was pretty good at it—at the spoken word—and I was like, now I got other things developing, and I can do it with them. We would have free style sessions or whatever, we would write our rhymes, and have ciphers; I would have instruments on beats. And I was basically sharpening my skills while teaching them what I was doing and giving to them.

OL: Where was this that you were teaching?

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

LB: At the East Harlem Tutorial Program, it was on 106th and 2nd, and I worked there for a bunch of years and did stuff at The Point—I worked at The Point Community Center—and the same thing. So, from the beginning of being La Bruja in '96 I would do hooks for people that would be like, “yo we need a girl to sing this, this is what the song is about,” so I would go. I would write a rhyme, I would drop the lyric, I would drop the rhyme drop the verse. Eight bars or whatever, and I kept doing that for this person that person, “you want a hook, you need a hook? Okay, I’ll write a hook, I’ll sing the hook.” I wouldn’t get paid, but I would build a relationship, I would build a connection, and to hone my own skills. So by the time “Brujalicious” came on, it was like ten years into, or like nine years after doing that, and I felt like all those dudes that I had paid, that “Brujalicious” was the fruit of that labor. Because then I was able to get big names with me, by having the always free projects, free things by me. While still trying to maintain it, by doing stuff with schools and community centers, like that’s where I was getting by.

OL: What was it like negotiating yourself in that new role; I mean by doing those hooks for other people, you know relating with men in the industry, what was that like?

LB: I would have to defend myself. There were certain things I would tell them I’m not going to do. If it’s a gang song I’m not going to do it, I’m not going, it’s not going to, I’m not going to do no guns, no this no that. Actually on “Brujalicious” it’s a great story because the “Olvidate.” “Olvidate” song that has all those guys on it and I’m just singing the last verse. When I first went in there, they were all talking about pigs and shooting and I was like, “hm, none of y’all live like that so don’t even try.” [laughter] I was like, this is ridiculous. I was like, “please what is it that you’re selling, like why?” I wasn’t going to get on the joint, I was like, “no.” I would have drove all the way to Brooklyn, they were all there, and they were pretty big names, you

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

know artists—Don Dinero, Chingo Bling, Joel Rotiz—and I was signed to Aftermath and stuff like that, they were all talking, and we had a whole discussion. So, at the end of it, Don Dinero was like, “why don’t you just rep you, say what you have to say, just do it your way, let us do our way, and you know, let’s just make this song here.” So, I was like, “yeah, perfect.” So I wrote up about, “I came here to celebrate to dance, I didn’t come here to fight, and I’m gonna make you forget about fighting.” So that’s what the whole “Olvidate, forget about that.” So that’s what the whole hook’s about, the whole premise of “that’s not what I’m here for, I’m living my grandma, the only thing I clap”—because they’re like gun clappers—I said “the only thing I clap is my hands, I wanna see peace throughout the land and make you understand, [de la moore de san individual].” That’s really what it was about, it was like trying to school these guys at the end of it. Like, look at what you’re doing, look at what you’re saying.

OL: Why do you think, you know you said “none of you live that way, I know you don’t live that way,” why do you think they feel that they need to represent themselves in that way in that song?

LB: Because that’s the formula. That’s what sells that’s what you see. That’s what, that’s what you see, look at 50 Cent. He had to get shot five times [laughs] to get to blow up. Tupac too, that’s really what gave him the notoriety and the infamy and the attention, it’s negative attention. You’re considered “official” if you did time or you’ve been shot or you sell drugs. Everybody says it. Jay-Z, “I used to sell rock now I’m the CEO of the Roc.” Do you know what I’m saying? It’s like- -

OL: It’s, what you just said made me think of this in an entirely different way than I’ve ever thought of it before, because it sounds like, when you went into that particular recording session where you said “I’m not going to sing about that,” because you were female, you had the

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

freedom to sing about something else, where they felt they had to present their masculine identities. But because you're a female, you had a little bit more freedom, which is interesting to think about.

LB: It is. The others think they're soft. I'm a writer woman I can be soft, you know what I mean? I can be whatever I want to be. Then I mean I've heard girls fall into the same thing and they're like talking hard. Like, don't be hard. I mean look at Remy Ma. Remy, she's got children; you know what I'm saying? I hear her in, I read something in an interview about just you know, "I'm just keeping it real." What? What are you telling your child at the end of the day? You know, Remy, she's a great MC, but it's like your message I just wish that it was deeper. I long for some, some substance and I feel they think they're the same way. Remy got caught up in that too. That they feel they have to be hard, to get respect from the dudes.

OL: Being hard or sell sex.

LB: Yes. Or be hard and sell sex, you know what I mean? It's like, "oh I'm going to be the ultimate MC." The ultimate MC is an MC that can talk about anything well—will make you think about other things, things that haven't been talked about. Tell me, rhyme about that and that will get them to think that this, instead of regurgitating the same thing over and over and over.

OL: Are there any female contemporary MCs who you listen to who you like?

LB: I mean I love Lauryn. You know Lauryn's amazing, she's very inspiring. Queen Latifa, I love what she's done with her career, like now she's singing and she's being in [inaudible]. So they're great. You know MCs are big. [crosstalk] MC Lite, would be good. Women, that I listen to? [laughter] Not many. [crosstalk]

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

OL: No, there aren't that many. One of the things I wanted to ask you about is what you think of the sort of contemporary debates around hip hop. The main critique of hip hop today is that it's misogynous and that it's violent and that it glamorizes either violence or conspicuous consumption it's all about what you can buy, what you can have, or what you're going to do to women. What do you feel about those critiques? Should we be critiquing art in that way? What are your thoughts on that?

LB: Somebody asked me like a similar question, but what I said is that, just by documenting and just by radio shows and the music that you play, everyone has a hand in it. Everyone has a hand in changing it also. So you can complain and you can critique it and that's great discuss it, but it's like what are you going to do after the critique? You're going to hold the same thing next year and the same panel next year? It's like, I've done panels up to here that are about the same thing. So, I just, I don't really sit and critique too much. I just create, and try and take it from there and make it right, make it good, make it young, make something different and challenge myself to keep pushing and evolving. I don't stay hooked on what's wrong.

OL: I would think also what comes in to play for you is, because you are trying to present yourself in a way that's a little bit different, does it, do you feel like the big labels aren't going to want you because of that? Because you're not just selling sex or you're not just trying to be, you know sort of fluff, you're trying to present yourself.

LB: No absolutely. The big labels do not want me. That's why I created my own label and I went on with a little label, but they give me my freedom and support, they give me what it is that I need and I control what I'm saying, you know what I mean, so I'm not even, I'm great, I love being with them. I've seen a lot of my friends get big deals and big record labels, and we will never hear their music because now they're bought, they're silenced, and then they're put on a

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

shelf because whatever didn't fall through, or it didn't happen or with the competition, it's another artist that they signed. Because that's basically what they're doing, they have their pawns and that whole thing, so I'm fortunate that I didn't get signed and that I was doing something different. I think that that has been a huge key to my success.

OL: So what was the process of creating the label like? What did you have to do to get your own label?

LB: Well I had dubs inc., I incorporated that, and really the label, it was just putting all the money towards making my product. Basically being the producer of my work. That's really what it was, it wasn't like an official thing where I would sign people, basically a label that I just could work under and get distribution through and get - -

OL: You said that even it's a less of a struggle for you now, for money, what was the turning point? Was it the film with Felix Rodriguez?

LB: What was the turning point? Breaking up with my husband and I think... [laughter]. I honestly, after that I don't, I really don't know why, I don't know how, but I think it also has to do with spirituality too, energy that's mildly what you can attract. And sometimes you have to make room for things to come. Like beating a dead horse, or whatever, you're blocking passages. And the hardest thing sometimes is letting go. Because you're, you have your mind set on a dream or a vision or an ideal of what you want, you know what I'm saying?

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE; BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

OL: It might be quieter now than it was earlier today.

LB: How's the mic thing? Am i?

[Dawn Russell]: Only a couple of times, no it's fine actually.

OL: I was going to ask you- -

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

LB: After that was when I got my record deal, on Valentine's Day this year, 2007, when I signed the record deal and I was, you know, advanced a decent amount of money. It wasn't like major, but it was perfectly, it was just what I needed. Since that time, it's only been recently that I can say I've been okay, that I've been living well and comfortably without really like beating myself up, like working so so hard. I've really been, I mean I still work really hard, but compared to what it was that I was doing, and plus my children are older now, so there's not a big thing, even though I give them attention all the time, but they don't need to the same type of attention, the whole pamper and carriage thing is not an issue.

OL: Do you think that the sort of, the freedom that you have to sort of pursue your work now that you're single is greater and do you think that there is some sort of gender role issues with having your husband support your work as an artist and was there an issue of you becoming really successful and what was going to happen to him? Was that ever something that you have to worry about?

LB: No, it wasn't, we didn't talk about it. I think the communication, it was about, communication that was failed. I think that he was feeling things that he didn't communicate, so then that in itself just builds all these other complex issues. So, it's about the communication [laughs].

OL: And has your family been supportive? Your mother and father? In terms of being single now?

LB: At first, everyone's afraid. I was afraid, everyone's afraid, the kids were afraid. But it's been amicable, and they still mob for the children and that sort of thing. I don't sleep poorly at night, you know what I mean? There's no, it's not bitter or, so they've seen it and it is, it's meant to be that way. The big, at first warfare you miss, but my mother she was more afraid, yes

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

she was afraid for the kids, but, how they were going to take it. The kids, this was the best summer of their life was what they said, so I know it's okay, I'm able, it's okay.

OL: You live in the same place you lived in before, down the street from your parents, right?

LB: Right next door.

OL: Right next door [laughs]. Do you think that you, you're always going to live there? Can you see yourself leaving the Bronx?

LB: No I want to, really I do want to live there. I want to own the house now. [laughter] I don't want my parents as tenants anymore [laughs]. I want to own the house and have free reign and build and do, I love being there, I really do. I really love my home. And it's a beautiful home. It seems out of place, actually. The way that it is there's like this huge yard, like real estate people constantly hounding my parents to sell their property so they can build like two buildings or whatever in between the houses. We're very lucky. I want to one day make it like Frida Kahlo's house. I want to make it beautiful and artistic and when I die, have it be like a sanctuary and people come to it and see and write. You know, I've got big dreams for that space, if my father would just loosen the reigns [laughter].

OL: Do you think that, how much is being from the Bronx part of your identity as an artist? Because we talked about Puerto Rico and your family background—how much is being from the Bronx part of that identity?

LB: Big, big piece, because you know a Puerto Rican, but then Puerto Ricans from New York are Neyoricans, but Puerto Ricans from the Bronx are Boogie Ricans.

OL: [Laughs]

LB: I wrote that, I created that, I love that you know what I mean, like “Boogie Rican Boulevard”, that's my one-woman show, that's where I take people to this place. Like I could

take “Boogie Rican Boulevard” to Berlin and have them feel it and see and feel, and connect too.

For as far away as they are they’ll see something of themselves in it. That’s what I really love about doing that show.

OL: That’s great.

LB: And we just started, actually are negotiating the deal with CTV, you know they want to produce it and film it and air it and create DVDs of it, and- -

OL: Well that’s wonderful.

LB: Yes, that’s- -

OL: That’s really cool.

LB: I’m so happy [laughs].

OL: So I was going to ask you about the Bronx. One of the questions we always ask people is when this project started it was about interviewing African Americans who grew up in the Bronx in the ‘40’s and 50’s. And I’ve started this hip hop history initiative over interviewing younger people and we always ask how they think the Bronx has changed from when they were very young to now, so how do you think the Bronx has changed?

LB: The Bronx, I would say, has been a bit gentrified. There’s no trees, like I’ve seen less and less greenery. It has become more diverse, I would say, like different cultures. It’s a huge mix now that’s even bigger. There’s Starbucks now, I don’t know [laughter], it’s like it’s changed in that way, but I think that it’s remained the same—the energy, the pulse that it has. What I like to say about the Bronx is that it’s the one Borough that is not an island, so it’s part of the mainland, so the Indian had to have touched here first, before hitting any of the other Boroughs, so it has a whole other energy in that regard alone, and I just love it. I think it’s really beautiful and magical, and I don’t know what it is about it, but it’s beyond words. Obviously there’s a creative

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

force here, because for hip hop to be born here there has to be something spiritually connected—you know magnetic—and I do feel it. Like when I was working at Hunt's Point, actually, I think that that is like a huge graveyard that a lot of Indian's are buried there. A lot of slaves and Indians are buried there. And there's a small cemetery that's only around the wealthy family, the Drakes, that actually owned that- -

OL: Interesting

LB: - -But I'm sure that outside of those gates, where everything has been built on top of, there are Indians and Africans under there, that have gone unrecognized. And I think that has something to do with why it's suffering spiritually because we don't acknowledge the dead, you know what I mean? So of course there's going to be violence, of course there's going to be like a dark side to it, because spirits want to be recognized. I think the same thing the World Trade Center. Only there, it was an African burial ground. Like that was a place where the slave ships came and the bodies that were, they were either thrown in the sea or buried in large pits, and have, were built on top of. So we create a poltergeist so to speak. You're basically building on top of a graveyard and what happens, you know it's not just a movie, the towers fell. So you're going to experience the backlash of not respecting and not remembering. It's deep.

OL: Definitely. One of the things that the older people always talk about when they talk about how the Bronx has changed is they talk about how—prior to the '80s and the Crack epidemic—there were more two parent families like your family in the Bronx, and people took care of other peoples' children, they were in neighborhoods where everyone looked out for each other, and it was not the stereotype that we see in the media of the Bronx as this place of drugs, people that, you know crime ridden, gangs. All those things started really after the fact, after heroine and crack, and I'd like for you to talk a little bit about it. What it was like growing up in the '70s and

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

'80s in the Bronx when that was the image of the Bronx—it was this dangerous place. You know the other Boroughs kind of think of the Bronx as this very dangerous place and there were fires. Did you ever feel that there was this negative stereotype of the Bronx, and if- -?

LB: I never thought of it or saw it that way. It never translated in that way to me. It was just, busy, and there were characters but I loved those characters too—the crack head and bumpy that was like asking you for money, like I write poems about that because they're characters. The things that they have to say, or how they hustle to get that nickel, you know what I mean, it's like "what?!" It's amazing, I don't want to say it's entertaining but it is [laughs]! It's amazing.

Truth is stranger than fiction. And it has, that's definitely inspired my work, seeing those people and what it is they value. They live under a highway; you know their values are in a whole other mindset, it's like over here. So I think that's fascinating, that you can right across the street you can have a two family, a married home and with a dog and it's just right across the street, you know what I'm saying? Like where we live, we live in a row of houses and right across the street are the projects. So, the cars that get broken into, you know it's just common for the things to happen. And then you go buy your piece back at Hunt's Point [laughs], they sold up and you go back to paying \$50 for it [laughs].

OL: Did you have friends who lived in the projects?

LB: Yes. My school was right across the street from the projects so I was considered the wealthier kind. I was born in the middle class and my parents always wanted us to be seen that way, it was important to my mother, how we were seen. So she had struggled really hard to keep that up, to keep on with it. Then she still manages to, she's articulate, she's just immaculate, she's amazing. I'm more laid back. If I don't wear make up she's like, "hugh!" [laughter] she puts lipstick on to take the garbage out, you know "someone might see you!" [Laughter] So, it's

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

always been a balance, I've always had that—both worlds. We had, I had a drug addict in my family also, for as good we had it we had executives—my uncle worked on Wall Street and my other was a banker—we had a balance. My other uncle was an addict, and he lived with us. He was my father's younger brother and he passed away, my Uncle Freddie, and so I saw both worlds. My first poem, when I, that I wrote when I was eleven, was "The Great Heroine," the romantic heroin, remember that? And it was about that and people just bug out, like at that age, they're like, "why are you talking about heroine, child?" And it's because it was there, I saw it. I saw what was going on.

OL: That's interesting. So you've always used your art to sort of reflect on and analyze what was going on around you.

LB: And to not forget, because that was the thing, my grandmother she couldn't write, so she couldn't preserve it. But I can, so when I die, it won't be forgotten. It's important.

OL: Will you tell us about some of the other characters in your one woman show.

LB: Yes, [laughs]

OL: Who were some of the other characters.

LB: There's the Don Jose, who's the elder, and he's the owner of the Bodega. And he has three daughters, because he always wanted sons, so that's what happens! When you don't want something that's what you get. If you're homophobic you're child is going to come out gay, that's just how it is, right?! So he came out with three daughters. One is a crack head Lola, one is a teenage—pregnant—girl who got pregnant the first time she did it with Vito, who's the rapper, but she's poet, because she fell in love with his rhymes. And then there's Mighty Mayhem who's the youngest daughter, who loves MTV, she's a virgin but she knows what she wants. She's funny, she loves the streets, she loves being in front of the Bodega, and she doesn't

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

want to wind up like her sisters. Rosa, who I've just added, she's the grandmother. I never have the wife, but now I'm bringing the wife—she's the wife's grandmother, because I do my grandmother all the time. I'm like, you know what, I don't think that has to be in this too, and just, and so does Don Jose, like Rosa, his three daughters. Vito is the one who wants to be rapper, who always hangs out in front of the Bodega, who has big dreams and he sells drugs and he wants to be a famous rapper one day. Lola buys drugs off of him sometimes, and he impregnated her sister. But they're all connected. He's not going anywhere fast, but he has a great sense of humor and he's really witty with his rhymes, so that he gets by like that. Then there is Alta, who came from Long Island. She's Puerto Rican but she was raised out there and she fell in love with Eddie, who works in the Bodega, so she's like totally displaced and she sees this world. All she wants to do is find a bag of weed and chill in the park and wait for Eddie to come out because she's in love with him and he's like a huge player, so she's [Spanish Word]-phobic. [Spanish Word]- Phobic—[Spanish Phrase], that's when they cheat on you. So she's coping with that, so she's cringle building, instead of just like crying over her, right? And [laughs], so there's like a whole outer world, like an outer looking, you know she's the one that sees it from an outside view, but she's still really in it. So I think, and then we have Little Papa, who's Lola's son, who's being raised by her parents. So that's Don Jose's boy, because he never had sons, but that's Lola's son, and since she's the crack head they don't have they don't allow her to be a mother to him, and she really can't. So, there's funny, sweet, dark, sad. It's a balance, it's life, all in one day. A day in the life on Bodega Boulevard.

OL: And it reflects your idea of the Bronx as this place that's more diverse than people usually think of it.

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

LB: Yes. I mean it's about Puerto Ricans from the Bronx, but it's showing you just, really, how we're all the same. Everybody has musicians.

OL: That's great.

LB: Yes, [laughs].

OL: So what are you working on now? What are you going to do next?

LB: I'm working on my next album, it's called "For Witch it Stands," and I'm excited about that. And I wrote a new film, called "Famers." It's about the pursuit of fame, the thinking, two guys, and I'm dying to get that out. Somebody will make this movie, but if it's me—it might be me. Depending on how this year goes, I imagine or whatever, I would love to be able to actually film it. My, my first, my debut. And that, "For Witch it Stands." and putting "Famers" out there and my "Latinas for Life," program that I've been doing in inner city schools. I mean, middle schools and high schools and it's going so well. It's basically that workshop that I was doing, it's just on a larger scale, and I talk to them about statistically what they're about to face, and as a Latina, the issues that I face. How I have overcome things and I share with them personal virtue and I share how poetry and expression heals you, and it builds you up because it helps you find your voice and it's, you see kids completely transformed. They come out of that workshop and I have an open mic at the end and I let them come up and express themselves, and share how they're dealing, what they do, what they have on their minds, in their community, and let them know that helping yourself is helping your community. Helping your community is helping yourself. It's never too late to be proud. I live in possibility not impossibility. And it's all about confidence, it's all about that. And it's called "Latinas for Life" because it's coming from a Latina perspective that it's called that. That's what I let people know. It's been my most rewarding, my most rewarding work.

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

OL: I have to ask you specifically also how you became connected with Felix Rodriguez, how did he come to make a film about you?

LB: [laughs] Well, Felix, he worked at Citibank, I worked at Bloomingdale's, we had a -

OL: When was this?

LB: This was in '95. It was right before I started doing my poetry, before I became "La Bruja."

OL: What were you doing at Bloomingdale's?

LB: I was in the catalog department, the retail marketing department, we made the catalogs for Bloomingdale's basically, so all the sample merchandise we would receive it, package it, and send it to photo houses. So whatever was going to be hot in December, I already had my hands on it [laughter] months ahead. So I enjoyed that, that was so much fun, so we became friends because we had a mutual friend named Carlos Deloso, who's a Dominican painter. Who's a muralist, who actually did work on the magazines too, like display and advertising and stuff. Not display, you know the layout on the computer and stuff. So they were friends and then Carlos Deloso, a very colorful person, and the reason I ever came onto Dominican Republic was with him. They did an exhibit of his work. So basically Carlos Deloso features was what introduced me to Felix. Felix always had dreams of filming, I always had dreams of performing, so we just clicked. We talked about the world, we talked about friends, we went dancing together, did all kinds of things. And he would salsa—I love salsa—we danced salsa really well together. And we just stayed friends, and then we saw "8 Mile" developing and then he started shooting other documentaries, and I asked him to film my wedding. And he said yes. Then once he started filming the wedding and I was printing out receipts, I was like "this is interesting we should just keep filming." And he was like, "okay," [laughter] and he followed me for like five years, four years, around.

OL: Wow that was a long time.

LB: Yes it was a long time. I felt so bad for him because he had all this footage. After four years he was just like, “ugh.” I’m like, “edit!” you know he went through a lot.

OL: It’s interesting to know that he filmed your wedding, because when I was watching the film, I thought, “Oh that’s interesting that the footage from her wedding fits so evenly [laughter] because he shot the footage.

LB: [laughs] Yes, because he shot it, that was how it was born.

OL: That makes sense.

LB: I mean my children, my daughter was two months, at that time. Because I had my children first, and everybody was like, “you got to get married,” so [laughs] so Kelson’s only two, and it’s, they’re get older you think about getting older, you see them now, you just - -

OL: Well, I think we should, I mean, unless there’s something else you wanted to share that I haven’t asked you about, I think we should end this talking about your grandmother.

Grandmother or great-grandmother?

LB: Great-grandmother.

OL: Great-grandmother. When you mentioned that that she was from Saint Croix, it made me think of an Haitian writer, Edwidge Danticat, who writes, she’s a writer and writes about “Kitchen Poets.” Women who have to plan, and secretly they were writing because they’re not supposed to be writing. They’re supposed to be cooking or raising children, or doing things that women are supposed to do. And it’s interesting that you trace your art to your mother’s side, right? And you think of yourself as this female artist who’s doing things that you aren’t supposed to do. So I was hoping you’d talk a little bit more about whether you saw that reflected

in your grandmother's poetry, where that comes from. That idea that you can do things that weren't supposed to be.

LB: Where does that come from? I think that it comes from a rebellion seed that all my women in my family genes have and were supposed to do and, that, you know what I mean? When I complained about my marriage problems my grandma was like, "Oh please!" you know, "52 years I was with him," [laughter] [crosstalk] you know, whatever. Just bare with it, that's just how it is anymore. I think it came from that, although I have to give credit to my father's mother, my other grandmother, who was very independent. She is a nurse, she's like the town nurse. She's the [Spanish Word] really, of the town, and she's she suffered a very difficult marriage to my father's real father. He was abusive. He hit her, he was a gambler, he was from a rich family where they had nothing, and she really suffered, that she had three boys. So she divorced him, which was something no one did at the time, and she did it, and she went and she studied her law, I mean studied her medical, studied her trade, what she wants to do she pursued a dream. She followed her dreams, and then she met my grandfather, the grandfather that I love, and he raised us all as he, that's our, that's my grandfather. That's my father's father, that's my father, that's love. You know what I mean? And she was always proud and always outspoken, very funny, never, like she was always so completely honest about everything. I could ask her anything, about the body, about anything, and she'll tell you. She's a gem. She's a real gem, very, very strong. All the women in my family are strong, but they're strong in another way, they hold it down, sacrificial lamb, the whole thing you know. And I would say that, I would, I just, I was raised as the only child and I was always independent, they always encouraged me to have a voice and really be honest and be out there, so I think it comes from everybody.

Everybody helped me, building me up, and supporting me. Mama, that's what we called her, Adelaida Cataquet Montalvo—my great-grandmother.

OL: Say her name again, because the transcriber is going to hate me.

LB: [Laughter] It's actually the first name on my "MySpace."

OL: Right

LB: Adelaida Cataquet Montalvo. Even Cataquet is French, so there's some influence, there's all these different influences. That's another thing that reminds me of how much we're all the same, even the next few years, to deny and to be, even imagine that we have a, but she was sweet, soft spoken, and she had the most beautiful laugh, I think I laugh like her. I don't think my laugh is beautiful, but it's beautiful because I laugh alone. I make myself laugh, from my laugh, and she used to say it's like contagious, just like a cackle, which I enjoy very much.

[crosstalk] [laughter] She would just, she had a very "who-ha" laugh, and they all gave me love all my life.

OL: Thank you!

LB: Thank you!

OL: Thank you so much. [laughter]

[Dawn Russell]: Where do you see yourself in the future? Whether you're a poet or, what do you want to become?

OL: That's a great question.

LB: I think that I am going to be teaching children, helping children. I may create a special place for people to come and maybe not just to read, but definitely other word expression, and just to share that magic. That's what I do, what I do now, going out into different places

wherever I can, I think that by that age I would have a place to be, where I can still do the same type of feeling and sharing that I love.

OL: Anne do you want to ask a question?

LB: [laughs] Thank you.

[break in tape]

LB: It's to address that issue, actually, and I share this in my "Latina's for Life" program, about the denial that Latinos are in about their African influence.

OL: That's what I was trying to ask you about before, but you, it seems so seamless to you that I didn't want to place my own idea of it on you. That the idea that it is something that's often denied, I was sort of like, "if I think of it that way and she doesn't I don't want to put words in her mouth."

LB: No, no.

OL: But I'm glad we're talking and- -

LB: It's so true. [crosstalk] To address it, I mean because there's this, even music that says "y tu abuela donde està" right? Where in your, abuela she, and they're saying that because she's black they keep her in the house, so that you don't see really who she is and who they are, in denial of their African-ness. So I was also inspired by Langston Hughes, who's this, because of his poem, "I too sing America," and how they talk of "you can't eat here because you're black, you can't be here because you're black," but, [poetry]: "although you may find me fair with medium brown eyes and not too curly hair, of mixed heritage too many to name, one thing was the same, we've all shared despair believe it or not in fact, I too am black. I have been stabbed in the back for being too much of this and not enough of that; have been compared to what exists and been told how much I lack. You may not know it now, but it's a fact, I too am black. Color

Interviewee: Caridad de la Luz

Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett

Date: 23 October 2007

lines run deep in my veins, behind covered mouths I've been called many names. Instead of hope they taught me shame, but I chose to play another game. With ears I hear but heart unchained, you can keep it or take it all back. You have eyes but are blind to the fact that I too am black. Black, like the Ebony tree, the deeper you carve into me you can easily see the beauty, the strength shape me, shine me, in the finest homes you'll find me, while strange fruit still hangs inside me, with all the love I can muster, my face blows with luster. It took more than the slave trade to make us cry, but let me break it to you with truth and tact. I am proud of the fact that I too am black.”

OL: Wow

LB: [laughs]

OL: Thank you so much for meeting with us!

LB: Thank you [laughs]

OL: That's exactly what we were talking about. [crosstalk] and [clapping]

LB: I brought it too but I just got all wrapped in the convo.

OL: Thank you so much, and I was thinking about it when I saw you getting your hair done even for the film, I thought interesting that she gets her hair cut and twisted and braided because it didn't seem like you were trying to deny that or hide it at all. If anything you were playing it up more than you needed to- -

LB: Yes

OL: - -Which I thought was very interesting.

LB: Thank you.

OL: Well thank you.

LB: It's something to be proud of you know.

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[END OF TAPE ONE; END OF INTERVIEW]