

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

ChiChi

Interviewer: Tamara Oyola Santiago

Date of Interview: August 21, 2017

Location of Interview: Make the Road New York, Queens, New York

Transcribed by Rosa Chiprenez (volunteer)

NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #151

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Tamara Oyola Santiago: Hello, my name is Tamara Oyola Santiago, and I am here with—

ChiChi: ChiChi Couture.

Santiago: We're here at Make the Road in Queens holding an interview for the trans history project, um, in New York City. So, ChiChi if you could start by telling me about yourself, your name, where you come from, your pronouns, and your country of origin.

ChiChi: Well, good afternoon, my name is. . . I am from Lima, Peru. I arrived in New York City in 1990. I came alone. I came by bus. I crossed so many countries. I was discriminated against, or discriminated against because I was gay. I was treated badly on the trip. Practically, how should I—but I'm going to tell you—I came by bus, I traveled for a month where I had to hide who I was. I had to be . . . until I got to New York City. When I got to New York, I became who I wanted to be—as ChiChi Couture. My life changed in New York as ChiChi Couture. I had a lot of ups and downs before, but I'm here in New York.

Santiago: If you were to compare . . . to ChiChi, in what sense have you changed besides your name?

ChiChi: Apart from my name, I have matured. I believe that the journey also made me think, and I have seen life differently. And—Well I'm here, and should move forward always with my goal in mind, right?

Santiago: How did you choose the name ChiChi Couture?

ChiChi: Because when I started dressing many years ago I had another name: I was called Ivana Lima. So, until a movie came out in which appeared—Wong Foo Tong, I think it was called a mov—about a black woman, a white man, and a gay person. So, my friends told me I looked like

her when I worked on the street with them, and I stayed with ChiChi. I liked ChiChi ,and I stayed with ChiChi. [laughter] Sounds funny, but it's—

Santiago: [laughter] You liked it.

ChiChi: I liked it.

Santiago: [laughter] Tell me about your life in Lima.

ChiChi: In my—

Santiago: About your childhood.

ChiChi: In my childhood, well, my parents never hit me. They never—I was never abused liked that because I had, um, my parents didn't—They knew I was gay or they didn't know I was gay. I don't know. I think they did, but they never hit me. They never discriminated against me. Nothing at all for being gay. But, yes, in Lima I used to go out a lot to gay bars, discos. I went everywhere with friends. Yes.

Santiago: At what age did you know you were gay? Or, eventually, also, that you were trans?

ChiChi: Well, at seven or eight years old, I felt different. Until I was about fifteen, fourteen, that's when I realized who I was going to be, or who I am. So, from there on, my life began to change. I began to—to study in different schools. Then, when I started to meet more people, I—I had a teacher—who was also gay—who once we met at the same nightclub when I was fifteen. And he said, I remember, "You have to get out of this area, you have to study somewhere else." It was not that the area where I lived was bad, but he led me to understand that I have to be somewhere else. The environment wasn't —where I was—it wasn't for me. [inaudible] Through him I met my partner, who had already lived in Miami, here in New York,

and in Venezuela. Thanks to him he took me elsewhere with many people who had, ah, had money or an education. Then, they began to guide me. They took me to school to study English. They took me to another school. The thing is, I would be asked, “Why do you study there? This is just for cops, or this is only for lawyers and doctors. How did you get in here?” Because of them, the gay friends that I had, they were the ones who—Since they were—many of them were lawyers, they worked as bankers—they put me in so that I didn’t, I didn’t go another way.

Santiago: That is to say, you had, uh, you had role models, you had people—

ChiChi: Yes.

Santiago: In a way, then, they’re your angels, aren’t they?

ChiChi: Sure.

Santiago: I mean, they’re the ones that—

ChiChi: They guided me.

Santiago: Those who guided you—

ChiChi: They guided me. Yes.

Santiago: From the transition from childhood to who ChiChi is today. Tell me about the transition from being gay to being trans.

ChiChi: That was already here in New York because I met some friends when I first arrived. At three, four months, I met them. And, I had no friends. And, I remember that I lived half a block away from them. So, I would come out of work and stand in the corner to see where they lived.

And, always at eight, nine o'clock, on Fridays and Saturdays, and I would see that many came out all dressed up. I want to. How can I do this? I didn't know how to contact them. Then, I lived with my siblings, and my brother made my life impossible, and my sister beat me. So, I came to New York when I was twenty. So, finally, one time my—I bumped into one of them. From there on, I began to speak to them. And, from there on, it was as though no one could fuck with me. I remember, there was no one that could stop me. I began; I began; I began. I was the youngest one until they took me to work, dressed me, and took me to work on Fourteenth Street. First on Forty-second Street—when Forty-second Street wasn't worth much—and after that I was taken to Fourteenth Street. I remember, once I left with a client—a man on Forty-second Street—and that I didn't know anything about this. A friend took me there. I was still young. I was—

Santiago: Transitioning.

ChiChi: Transitioning. So, um, the man took me to a room somewhere, and I felt so bad because he took the bills, a little bit of bills in—I think it was like sixty dollars, between five, one, and ten or forty dollars—he threw them in my face and spit on me, there on the floor. After we had done it already, that's the way that he paid me. And I felt so bad. "Oh, my God, what am I doing?" But as I saw the money, which was more than what I earned at my job . . . [inaudible] [laughter] And, from there on, I liked it, and I began; I began; I began; I began.

Santiago: In other words, this transition—when you got to New York—is in terms of economic power and the kind of work you also start doing.

ChiChi: Right. Or, work in factories, and then they made me work like an animal.

Santiago: For little pay.

ChiChi: With little pay, and they would give me three days, four days, six days, three days. So, I didn't have much money. So, I don't know, [inaudible] I met these people. And, this person— [inaudible] Make—I made more money than when I worked at the factory. Yes.

Santiago: Yes.

ChiChi: [laughter] That's how ChiChi Couture was born.

Santiago: Well. So, ChiChi Couture, in a way, it's not just about gender identity, but it's also a change in terms of who you live with because you move away from your home, from your family. There are geographical changes—

ChiChi: Right.

Santiago: There are changes in who you are living with, in terms of family—from parents to friends—

ChiChi: Yes.

Santiago: And, also, um, the change in terms of what you do for a living. There are many different things.

ChiChi: Yes, ah, a lot of change, um—There's times—I'm almost forty-nine years old. I turned— Sometimes, I can feel the years weighing me down. So, I kind of regret a few things, but sometimes I say, "Well, it's over now. I didn't do it because I was being crazy, but I should have." But, I don't care. But, sometimes many close friends would tell me not to get breasts, that I shouldn't get silicone, that only—since I am thin— "So, only place some small sponges on your sides, and you will fill-up. And you are going to look very"—And, honestly, I'm not trying to speak ill, since I am thin, it looked good on me. Then, they would tell me, "Don't do anything to yourself." And, over time, through my friends that used silicone, I have seen the consequences.

Their skin is damaged, stained; they can't fold their legs, ah, it stings, and the silicone has drooped. The silicone in their faces has drooped. A lot of times they wanted to gift me silicone injections to fill-up my face. I—They would tell me, "Don't get any, don't get any." I—thanks to those few friends—never did it. My friends, who I knew, who I worked with and hung around with, they also used it. They looked great [inaudible] but now I see them, but, they have cancer. They are not well because silicone damaged them: their face, their bodies.

Santiago: I find it interesting that you have—within your community of friends—you have those that use injections and those that make more permanent changes to their bodies. But, again you had many angels, you had many guardians who protected you ChiChi—

ChiChi: Yes. Yes.

Santiago: Who told you, "Do this. Don't do this. Come with us. Don't do"—And that's a very important part of who you are.

ChiChi: Sure. All I had done is my nose. Nothing more. Nothing more. The nose, and that's it. But, um, but yes . . . How can I tell you? Life has brought me so many surprises and so much pain as well. But the pain stays behind. Right? And, you have to move on. We have to move on.

Santiago: You mentioned that you lived with your sister and your brothers—

ChiChi: Yes.

Santiago: When you first arrived in New York City.

ChiChi: Yes.

Santiago: Let's talk a little bit more about your family. How many brothers? How many sisters? Are they still in New York? How are those relationships?

ChiChi: Now, everyone accepts me. I still have a brother who kind of does, kind of doesn't. Everyone accepts me; everyone treats me well. Everyone treats me as a brother, as a family member. They accept me. For that reason, I'm glad, ah, because they accept me. My mother, she knows about me. She knows that I would dress up. I didn't tell her myself, but they found a lot of pictures of me once. I was dressed up. So—Wow, a two-piece outfit! I, uh, didn't even know what to do. [laughter]

Santiago: And how did they find that photo?

ChiChi: A friend, by chance, um, my ex-partner, by chance, had gone, and he was taking some photos that I had stashed away in a notebook. And, my sister saw it and took it. And, my sister saw it, and, "Wow, who is this?" "It was ChiChi, your sister," they told her. "In a two-piece outfit!" [laughter] [inaudible] "Wow, she looks nice!" "Yeah, right?" And, it's me. Wow, so—And they know about me, ah . . . And that's it. My sister—the one who hit me—changed. My brother still has ways to go. But, I'm not interested. It's your life. If you don't like me, you don't like me. I'm happy. I'm not interested in you. But, he is still my brother. We keep talking, having conversations, but, whatever. I'm not, not, not interested. But, my mother, yes.

Santiago: Your mother is here or is she—

ChiChi: My mother is here. My mother comes and goes. My mother also knows that I have dressed as a woman; she knows that I have worn heels, walked in heels. She knows—a mother can't be fooled. You can't fool her. But. . . [inaudible]

Santiago: Um-hm. Um, right now how's ChiChi? Right now, today, August 21st, eclipse day. Tell me about yourself. What are your interests, your passions?

ChiChi: I am very well. I am happy with the life I have. Although, as I say again, um, there are times I regret not studying, going to school. Because very often-I would've liked to have studied English or a career, or have done something else. I didn't do it because of my craziness, because I had no papers. I've only recently obtained my documents, almost eight, nine years, ten years ago. They were rejected because of the arrests I had. And thank God, as you call them, the angels, ah, a gentleman obtained the documents, my documents. He magically arrived, and he took them from within, from immigration, and he handed them to me. Although no one believes me, but I have the documents for that reason, and, also, that this gentleman obtained my immigration papers. "Take your residency." I was left like, "Wow." In six months, they had rejected my documents twice. They had rejected them. [inaudible]. They didn't give them to me. I went to interviews and everything with immigration. I was told that, yes, there is no problem. After [inaudible], they told me that I was denied because my arrests. I have two arrest, but, that's why they didn't give me—But, thank God I met a person, an American gentleman, a doctor, whom I was working for—because I clean apartments as a housekeeper—and he always made comments, until he asked me, "How are your documents coming along?" I told him I didn't know why they were rejected. I didn't know why. I never told him why. He said, "Give me all your information, and I will help you. In fifteen days, you will be called by a woman." The woman called me. I couldn't believe it. The woman said to me, "I will call you back in three months or two. If I don't call you, after three months, you call me." The lady was, I don't know, [inaudible] a lady from Colorado calling me. She would tell me, "Your documents are processing." "Thank you so much." "Did you get your social?" "Yes." "Did you get the job one?" "Yes." "Did you get your fingerprints done?" "Yeah." "Wait two more months, the green card will come to you." When I saw the man, doctor, he says to me, "Sit down," I went to his house one day, "sit down I want to talk to you." I got scared. I said, "Well, I didn't, I didn't tell either of you that I had two arrests." [inaudible] I said, well, he's going to tell me. "Why did you deceive me," he said. "I didn't deceive you. I'm sorry." "You have prostitution arrests," he told me. He didn't say it quite like that, but in other words he told me. "You didn't ask me," I said. [laughter] [claps] This—"You made me look bad. Why didn't you tell me? Why?" I said. "I'm sorry. I don't know what to do," I said, "I'm sorry."

“Look at me. She told me that she won’t do it for me. She won’t do it for me. And, I’ll do it for you.”

Santiago: So, despite that lack of information, you had a—what we call—a champion in your corner, a person who advocated for you.

ChiChi: Yes.

Santiago: Excellent.

ChiChi: [inaudible] “Okay, I’m going to call you, and I don’t want to see you for a while. Disappear,” he said. “Okay.” [laughter] I left. When, [snaps fingers] a month and a half later, he calls me. He says, “Did you get your documents yet?” “Um, I don’t know.” “Check the mailbox.” [laughter] I went and checked the mailbox, there was nothing. He called me on the third day. “Do you have your documents yet?” [inaudible] He had had a change of heart. Then, nothing came. Two, three days went by. I open the mailbox, and there’s the green card. I called him, and said, “Look, thanks for everything.” “Yes. Come tomorrow we’ll celebrate.”

Santiago: Oh, how nice—

ChiChi: He changed. We hugged. We kissed, and I thanked him. And, honestly, I am very grateful to that gentleman. Who is gone now. Departed. He has passed into the afterlife.

Santiago: To the afterlife.

ChiChi: Thank you very much . . . Arturo. Wherever you are. We shared the same name.

Santiago: Your namesake. [laughter]

ChiChi: Yes. He gave me the documents. Thanks to him, I have the documents. Wow! So many good things. I can't complain. So many good things. And, I keep them all with me.

Santiago: Tell me a little bit about your economic situation and, and how you left, right? You left prostitution. You left sex work, um, because of safety, other reasons. And why, why is that, and how has it changed?

ChiChi: I quit because I wanted to. Sometimes—Honestly, I felt sort of dirty, right? I felt sort of dirty. I had the money, but I felt dirty at the same time. So, um, my friends—we all worked together—sometimes when we went out for drinks, they'd say, "I want to cut my hair." They said to me, "I want to work, I don't want this life anymore." Many said to me. "I don't want this life," they said to me. And I said, "Wow, what I didn't do, I'm glad I didn't do anything." So, I think, um. . . I'm happy with what I've done. I feel, at this age, I feel happy about what I didn't do to myself. I quit prostitution. . . because I had seen so many negative things. Apar—

Santiago: Violence.

ChiChi: Violence. Aside from the two arrests that I had—and since I was working on my documents—um, the lawyers had told me, "You have to stop because they won't give you your documents papers, or there will be problems and they will be expensive." And said and done: I stopped, and it has been about fourteen years since I stopped because the documents were—Since they had previously rejected them, I stopped there. I said, "No more."

Santiago: The reason why many people resort to sex work is because of transphobia and homophobia; because there are no other types of jobs available to people in the trans community.

ChiChi: Yes. They have told me themselves, "ChiChi, I want to work, but they won't hire me because my—because this, because my breasts. I don't have any problem with my hips, I can just

wear large pants, but my breasts, the long hair. I want to work.” They would tell me, “I want to work as a waiter, anything else. I’m sick of this life.” They would tell me. I, sometimes—I have heard many of them. Many of them. Although [inaudible] they don’t, they don’t, but when they are drunk they tell me they want to quit.

Santiago: Sure. In private conversation.

ChiChi: Yes. Yes.

Santiago: You are part of a group that meets here at Make the Road.

ChiChi: Yes.

Santiago: Tell me a little bit about that group.

ChiChi: This group—I don’t come often to because I work late on Mondays: I leave work at seven. When I leave early I come. They talk a lot about. . . The girls get together—They talk a lot about the, about the marches, about the gay community. They protest. They talk about, um— [smacks lips] To prevent disease. They talk about how to take care of themselves. They talk about arrests by the police. About abuse on the streets. About discrimination against the trans women community. They talk about all that. And, for me, it’s very interesting because they talk about a lot of things, a lot of topics that I haven’t heard about, and . . . and they interest me. And, other than that, they invite other people in order to be able, um, to inform us better, right? See other paths. Although, I also hear that they offer jobs. They’re offering jobs. They’re offering classes like English, education. They were giving these talks. It’s good for the girls, right? Or, also, for me because thanks to these talks I have also learned many things that I previously ignored. So, um. . . I like it there. I come every time I can, and I try to be supportive. We even, uh, recently had an outing to the Seven Lakes—they call it over there—around New Jersey. And we were like twelve

and fourteen girls that—And we did really well. We had fun; we talked. We were there. It was really fun. The outing was a lot of fun, and so was the group. The group does a lot, right?

Santiago: The group is a community then.

ChiChi: Right. Yes. Every day they come together more like sisters—aside from that—and every day they're getting stronger. That's the important thing, isn't it? I think, right?

Santiago: What would you say are the . . . primary reasons why you are part of that community? Why are you a part of it?

ChiChi: The group? I'm a part of it because I believe that, ah. . . I believe I do it to support the group. Not only my group, but the whole gay community, right? So, one way or another, it's to be able to lend my support however I can. I've always liked being in groups and trying to help different events. Or, anything else they try to do, I try to lend a hand. Because previously I was in another group that we did, um, stuff for the gay parades. And I was part of a group that made floats in a gay bar. We made floats. We bought things. We built things. We cooked. I did a lot of cooking there. I helped with anything. And, always, I tried to help. And that's what I like to do. As long as my hands are nearby, right? Or, also, if I have time.

Santiago: Yes. Did the current group and the previous group validate you? Did they validate you in any way?

ChiChi: I believe so. I believe so. I believe so. Yes.

Santiago: I think it is part of the process of immigrating and creating new supportive communities. It's that game of how one integrates into different groups. How they validate you. How one validates others. That's why I ask you about all that.

ChiChi: Yes. Yes, yes. Because, as I told you, I have been to several groups and. . . I don't go often, but I try to go and—I like to listen to their issues. I like listening to the girls, their problems, their things because they all learn from each other, including myself. And, I think it's worth it. Don't you?

Santiago: How, how do you define gender?

ChiChi: How do I define gender?

Santiago: Yes.

ChiChi: I believe—

Santiago: As someone who started out as . . . and is now ChiChi.

ChiChi: Right.

Santiago: Is there a change in gender? Or, how do you define the concept of—

ChiChi: Between . . . and ChiChi there has been a change of gender, but like . . . stagnated at my convenience, no? To my person. Because I believe if I had continued, deep inside, I think I would have made great changes to my body. Which I did not. But yes, I did only the first stage. Because gender change is in stages. I think I only got halfway through. No? Maybe, it's because of prejudice. Perhaps, it's because of my family. Perhaps, it's because I listened to my friends more. I didn't follow through to the end, I believe. If not, right now, I would have breasts—and I had long hair, but I've already cut it twice. Three times, I've cut it. Mostly, due to the breasts—

Santiago: Do you feel happy in terms of—Or satisfied in terms . . . How do you feel? I don't want to define it for you. How do you feel?

ChiChi: I am satisfied. I'm satisfied with the way that I look right at this moment. I am satisfied. Because there are so many times, trans girls can't, they don't fit in with the families. Many times, when there is a family event like a christening, a baby shower, a marriage, an event like that, they don't fit in because people always sit on the opposite side and don't move from there. The families, the friendships, always looking at them disapprovingly. Ten approach you, but not the four that remain on the other side. So, they're always, they're singled out. They have their limit; they have a line that they can't cross. And that, that, that's like transphobia with its many problems. That's what the gay community and the group that I attend are fighting for right now. And, other groups are also fighting to try to break down that wall. But, to break down that wall, I think it's going to be like thirty more years, and they're going to keep on doing that because that's—We need to get that out at the root. Although, they've come a long way. They've fought a lot. But, I think there's a long way to go. Right? Right? I believe that's why I haven't done things to myself. Because trans women at night look different, and by day they look different—They look different. Yes.

Santiago: Yes. Yes. And, transphobia then impacts your working life.

ChiChi: Yes.

Santiago: What does femininity mean? What does masculinity mean?

ChiChi: Yeah.

Santiago: Extremely challenging. Because one lives. One has to feel secure—

ChiChi: Right.

Santiago: In this society. And, everything else. What else is important in your life to you, ChiChi?

ChiChi: My health. And, myself, inside me, that I am at peace. My mother. Also, my family, I believe. Yes.

Santiago: What do you do for your health daily?

ChiChi: Try to take care of myself. Eat healthy. Try to exercise. Well, I don't exercise, but I do yoga. Every once in a while.

Santiago: It's a type of exercise.

ChiChi: Yes. I try to eat well. Take care of myself. Apart from working, I try to sleep as much as I can. Like that, right? And be calm with myself. I find being alone fascinating. Although, when one gets used to loneliness, sometimes I say: "Wow very late!" [laughter] I got used to loneliness. But, I live alone, and I love my loneliness. I love it. I enjoy my loneliness.

Santiago: Why? Why do you enjoy it?

ChiChi: I enjoy it because I come home, and it's quiet. I play music quietly, and nobody bothers me. No one has to tell me to get up, lie down, go out, [snap fingers] leave. No, I enjoy my loneliness. I don't turn on the television. No television. I am only with the radio. I am cleaning, cooking. I don't know. I don't know. I believe that my house, my loneliness is enough for me. Not before. I don't think, I don't know if it's because of my age, but my life has changed a lot—as it changes for many—so I enjoy my loneliness. I have about—

Santiago: Would you say that part of that is because you feel comfortable with yourself? In a way that you didn't before?

ChiChi: Yes. Yes. I think so. Well, I've been practically living alone for about fifteen years now, more or less. So, part of my life, I think, is living alone.

Santiago: If you wanted the world to remember you for something, what would it be?

ChiChi: Like I've always said, um, I've always come out in the gay parade. I've gone out like, wow, with stuff like—

Santiago: In Manhattan? In Queens?

ChiChi: In Queens once, I think. In Manhattan, and always they would—Many of my friends would tell me, "Wow, you look good, you look good, you look good."

Santiago: How did you dress? Describe your outfit.

ChiChi: Ah, as a showgirl. I came out in a two-piece outfit. I had a headpiece, and a lot of feathers, huge fuchsia boas. In high heels, I walked sixty blocks through Manhattan. So, I would say, "This is how you have to remember me the day that I die." I would say that.

Santiago: Fabulous.

ChiChi: Like this. Like this. [laughter] Like a showgirl. Like this, you have to see me. Like this. Look at me: there's no belly; there's no stomach here. Fifty years, look at me! [laughter] [claps] She would look like this—

Santiago: [laughter] ChiChi, the showgirl.

ChiChi: So, she dressed like this because she didn't have a belly. My genes from my father. [inaudible][laughter]

Santiago: Very good. Very good. Is there anything else you want to add to what you've shared so far?

ChiChi: I don't think so. I don't think so. Like what? Like what? Add, like what? Part of my life? Part of my life? Well, part of my life—Life changes, doesn't it? Life changes—Certain periods stand out in your life. I am already forty-nine years old. I am almost in my fifties, and many times—I feel happy to have lived it [tapping] by its stages. Stages. Thing is, many have not lived it like me. Although, many live it differently. But, I lived it my way, right? So, I feel very happy to be who I am. To have lived my life as I am. And, I believe, I have a lot more to give, don't I? And, my dream is to travel to Europe. I'm going to do it. I want to take a tour, and go to three, four countries. So—and, take my mother, right? Over there. Although, my mother has already visited Europe, but I want to go with her. I haven't gone yet.

Santiago: Take her. You'll go on a little trip together.

ChiChi: Yes. No, and—You move forward, right? Because we all have obstacles in life. Right? Some have bigger ones, stronger ones. It is part of life: every strike teaches you, and every strike you harden your heart. No? And they make you—

Santiago: Grow.

ChiChi: Grow and mature, right? With yourself, right?

Santiago: That's what I'm telling you: we are who we are because of everything we've been through.

ChiChi: Yes. Yes. We've done, we've done things—negative or positive ourselves—many times. Karma has made us pay. It depends on what we have done because we all have to pay something—And all the karma that we save. Right? But you have to keep moving on. We have to

laugh. What for? We have to make fun of our bodies because our bodies get old every day. We are no longer twenty years old when we our bodies were beautiful. We have to laugh at our bodies, at least. [laughter]

Santiago: My grandfather used to say, "It's a danger to be alive." But if being alive is dangerous, then we embrace that because it means we're alive.

ChiChi: My aunt used to say, "Old age doesn't kill, old age destroys." No! "Disease doesn't kill, old age destroys you." [laughter]

Santiago: Also, very true. Very true.

ChiChi: Yes. Yes.

Santiago: Thank you very much, ChiChi.

ChiChi: Okay.

