AURORA FORUM AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY
7 December 2006

AN EVENING WITH THE KITCHEN SISTERS

Davia Nelson
Nikki Silva,
Alan Acosta, moderator

Mark Gonnerman: Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I'm Mark Gonnerman, the Forum's director, and tonight we're together for "An Evening with the Kitchen Sisters." The Kitchen Sisters—Davia Nelson and Nikki Silva—will soon be introduced by Alan Acosta, our moderator, though I'll say a few words about their work here at the start.

With Jay Alison, the Kitchen Sisters are the creators of two Peabody Award-winning series on National Public Radio: Lost and Found Sound and The Sonic Memorial Project. I know we'll hear more about these outstanding projects later. Their new critically acclaimed series, Hidden Kitchens: Stories, Recipes, and More, features interviews with amateur cooks who use unconventional methods to prepare strange food in surprising places throughout the United States. In her foreword to the book, produced out of Hidden Kitchens, former Aurora Forum guest Alice Waters writes, “The genius of the Kitchen Sisters has been to discover a nation of stories filled with humor, imagination, and passion. The stories the sisters have gathered are exhilarating, accessible, and real, and they give me a lot of hope. They capture the authentic connections between people and food and the culture that’s created around it. They remind us that we Americans have a real food culture, and not just a fast-food culture.”

So tonight we anticipate a conversation that deepens our appreciation for radio, collaboration, creativity, community, and clandestine cooking.

Tonight, we will follow our typical Aurora Forum program format of 45 minutes of on-stage conversation followed by another 45 minutes of audience conversation. When we get to that portion of the evening, if you have a question or a comment to contribute, please line up behind one of the two aisle microphones and our moderator will recognize you.

Tonight’s program is being recorded for later broadcast on KQED Public Radio. We don’t yet know the broadcast schedule, so please check our Web site, auroraforum.org, for details concerning that.

It is with great pleasure that I introduce Alan Acosta to you once again, for this is his third appearance as an Aurora Forum moderator. He is, as many of you know, Associate Vice President and Director of University Communications here at Stanford, and I’m very fortunate to work closely with him on Aurora Forum program planning. Prior to Stanford, he was the Deputy City Editor at the Los Angeles Times, where he and his team of reporters received two Pulitzer prizes for local news coverage. He is currently co-chair of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Foundation and has served on a
number of other national executive boards, including that of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists and the UC-Santa Cruz Alumni Association, which, if I am not mistaken, has arranged a chapter meeting on our stage tonight. [Laughter] So please join me in welcoming Alan Acosta and the Kitchen Sisters to the Aurora Forum stage. [Applause]

Alan Acosta: Well, it’s a pleasure to be here with the queens of old media, Davia and Nikki. We’ve known each other for years and years. As Mark noted, we all went to UC-Santa Cruz many years ago, and so we’ve stayed in touch.

Tonight, we’re going to start a little differently. We’re going to do some listening before we do some talking. I was informed earlier today by Nikki and Davia that this is called “close listening,” or listening that you do as a group. So we have to work very hard. Well, you’ll settle into it. We’re not going to set this piece up, but we’re going to listen to a segment of a Hidden Kitchens piece. Then we’ll dive right into some conversation.


Thank you for your close listening. You did a very good job.

That’s a tour de force of the type of work that you two do. Before we start, and you can talk a little bit about that piece, I want to clear up some basics here. You are neither sisters nor does the kitchen refer to a place where the refrigerator is. Is that correct?

Davia Nelson: We took our name from two stonemasons in Santa Cruz in the 1940s. We started doing radio in Santa Cruz and we had just started working together. Nikki had joined a commune, and we were cooking dinner for everybody and we were preparing this radio show that we did on a local station, KUSP, for our Tuesday interview show, and we found out about these stonemasons because we were reading a book about Santa Cruz architecture. They were Kenneth and Robert Kitchen, these wacky stonemasons from the 1940s. As we were cooking this salmon dinner and it was falling apart and we weren’t really focused on it…

Nikki: We were really blowing it, actually, and everyone was quite upset.

Davia: We just started calling ourselves the Kitchen Sisters. And then it was the era of Free the Soledad Brothers and all that, and we got on the radio that week and asked the author to tell us about the Kitchen brothers, not to be confused with the Kitchen Sisters. We did a lot of oral histories with older people and they were always confusing us and saying, “Davia and Nikki Silva,” or “Nikki and Sylvania.” Our names were getting destroyed. But it’s the room in the house that smells the best and where the best stories are told and where the parties begin and end, and it just ultimately felt right.

Nikki: Also, in our radio shows we were very eclectic. We played all different kinds of music and we had people come in and guests come in all the time. It did feel very much like sitting around a kitchen table. I think that live show that we did in Santa Cruz—this was way back in the late 70s and early 80s—was kind of the basis for a lot of this stuff that we began and we’re still doing now.
Acosta: So full circle, 20 to 25 years later, all of a sudden kitchens are a different part of your life. They are essential to your work. Do you want to talk about this piece a little bit to start out with and then we’ll go back to how you began and how you evolved into what I would say is a unique presence on radio today? Why don’t we start with the George Foreman piece.

Nikki: When we started to do the Hidden Kitchen series, we’d never done anything about food before. We worked for 20 years in radio and never did a thing about food even though we were called the Kitchen Sisters. Then it sort of emerged—this idea of doing a series about hidden kitchens. It came about through a series of events. When we thought of the idea, we said, How do communities come together through food and what kinds of kitchens would we explore? We thought we had figured out every kind of kitchen: test kitchen, and on and on and on. And it wasn’t until a phone call from a woman who brought up the George Foreman grill, an appliance, as a kitchen…. We’d never really considered an appliance as a kitchen, and it really opened a door for the whole series to look at things like hunger and homelessness in a different way and to tell those stories in new ways through unexpected characters like George Foreman and a homeless man who uses a grill under Wacker Drive in Chicago.

Davia: The whole series sort of opened up to us taking….I don’t like to drive and I’d take a lot of cabs in San Francisco, and we started noticing that every time we would get in a Yellow Cab, the driver was from Brazil, and not just from Brazil but the same town in Brazil—Goiânia. It turns out that 436 drivers are from the same town, and it turns out that outside the Yellow Cab yard….What do you talk about with people? You talk about food, you talk about music, and we had done some other stories in Brazil before that so we spoke some Portuguese. The drivers started telling us about a woman who would come every night at seven o’clock and stay until dawn, and she was from their same hometown. She would set up this little makeshift rolling night kitchen and she’d cook Brazilian food outside on this abandoned industrial street. So when we went there, we said, Wait a minute: if Jeannette is on this corner cooking, who else is out there? That was sort of the Hidden Kitchen epiphany. And then, just to make sense of the piece, we opened up a phone line on NPR, which we have done for other series, too, and asked the nation: Who’s cooking on your street corner? What kitchen traditions are endangered? Who were your neighborhood kitchen heroes and visionaries? That’s why that woman called in, and that’s part of our process. We start looking, but then we say—and we’ll probably ask you all tonight, too, during the “We ask the audience” portion of the program—what is your hidden kitchen?

Acosta: I sense that one of the hallmarks of your work is that you seem to find stories in very strange places, and it’s a sign of you being very close listeners to life around you. Does it ever feel overwhelming that there’s a story everywhere and how do you begin to narrow this down into what becomes a highly produced piece like we heard tonight?

Nikki: That’s a hard question. We collaborate. There are two of us for a lot of reasons. For one thing, it’s a lot more fun to do something like travel around and record and tell stories when there’s someone else to bounce things off of, but a lot of times I think the stories kind of rise to the top. Davia is extremely social—has lots of friends—and comes home with those stories. And she’ll tell me or I’ll tell her a story. I live two hours away
in Santa Cruz, so we’re kind of telling each other stories back and forth. We try to entertain each other. It’s almost like the stories that grab both of us….If we can convince the other one that this is a really good one, we’ll sort of go for it. Also, if there’s a good storyteller, that’s key. We think in terms of the teller—what kind of archival sound, what kind of music. All those things begin to build. They’re the ingredients for the story. Some pieces just really rise to the top as having a lot of elements that are going to create a good story.

Davia: Or someone’s on their deathbed or the holidays are about to happen. There are so many reasons. Or you just can’t get that person’s story out of your head. All those things are always ticking away—all those voices—and it’s just like whose voice is loudest that day.

Acosta: Let’s talk about collaboration. It’s great, but is it difficult at times? Do you argue? Do you have different artistic visions or narrative lines in your heads sometimes so that you have to kind of duke it out?

Nikki: We argue a lot—constantly.

Davia: The way we cut each other to the quick and say, “Oh, that’s so literal.” If you just really want to hurt the other person, you call her “literal.” [Laughter]

Acosta: I’ll remember that this evening.

Nikki: Or, “I guess if you want to do a piece without a sense of humor in it….” [Laughter]

Davia: Nikki has this thing that she always says where we become the lawyers for the piece, and usually one of us takes the case for a piece of tape, a song, a joke…

Nikki: …a character…

Davia: …someone. And one of us gets very attached. So, “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury: if that piece isn’t in…”

Nikki: “I’m not working on this anymore; this is not going to happen.”

Davia: Then you’ve argued it so much that you almost get it out of your system, and somehow the other person—because of the friendship and because we trust each other and because the other person kind of listened—they then take their case on and you’ve let go of it by then.

Nikki: “Oh, I gave that up a long time ago.”

Davia: And the other person says, “I’m trying to get this in there for you.”

Nikki: We don’t narrate in our pieces. They’re all made up of interviews and archival audio and music and field recordings, so it’s not as though we can just write our way from piece of tape to piece of tape. We have to have connective tissue, so it’s constantly one more element and keeping your ear to the ground to find one more thing. There’s no right or wrong. It’s so subjective.
Acosta: Let’s talk about that a little bit. Even though you don’t narrate, you really do narrate. Your point of view is very much a part of your work; it’s really what defines it and why you can actually say, “Well, that’s a Kitchen Sisters’ story.” Do you ever use that phrase with each other: “This is one of our stories”?

Nikki: We say, “It’s got Kitchen Sisters written all over it.”

Acosta: I guess what I’m getting at here is that, in a sense, by using all this disparate material, you are narrating the story, aren’t you?

Nikki: I think our pieces are highly narrated. In my mind—although we’re constantly accused of having no narration—I think we generally have a character or a series of characters who pass the story one to the next. The music is critical in terms of the feel of it. It’s usually not literal to the piece, but sometimes it is if it’s funny or if it makes sense. But there’s something about the mood of the music that really propels it and acts as the connective tissue, and the archival sound…. Actually, it’s great to be here at Stanford because in the very early days when we were working at KUSP, we used the Stanford Archive of Recorded Sound. It was just like a candy store. It had so much stuff that no one was even going through and it wasn’t transcribed and everything was like a discovery. And the first pieces we were working on that had archival sound in them—we were doing a lot of World War II stories—we used the news and the music and everything. It was perfect. We had our narrator all the way through and it was sort of the voice of the radio just carrying through. So I think our pieces are very narrated, and they can go a million different ways, too, into tributaries.

Acosta: It’s hard, though, isn’t it, to find….When you’re writing a piece, for instance, the narrator is silent. He or she is there and provides the connective tissue between quotes and color and all that, and yet you can’t be the silent kind of hand. You have to find somebody who provides the connective tissue. It takes a long time.

Davia: Yes. We usually try about fifteen ideas within each story before we hit the right one. Sometimes it’s bingo—magic. We have this idea. I don’t know if we have it tonight, but we have a piece called “French Manicure: Tales from Vietnamese Nail Salons in America.” That came because I like to get manicures, and after a while I started realizing that the woman who was doing my nails, who I really liked, Shirley, came from Vietnam, and why on earth was her name Shirley? It suddenly was like, Wait a minute, what’s going on? Nikki and I were doing Lost and Found Sound, and she told us the story of her family’s escape from Vietnam. She got separated as a twelve-year-old from her parents and she wound up in America by herself. In the course of it, she basically had a breakdown and she wound up in hospitalized in San Francisco and then with a foster family. And she would watch TV all day, and she would see this little girl who was happy and dancing and she was in America, and she said, I have to be happy. And this little girl was Shirley Temple. And she took her name from that. That opened this whole world to us. So looking for the narrator of this story, we wound up finding language tapes by going into Vietnamese bookstores and teaching English—Vietnamese-English language tapes—and the language tapes became the narrative through-line as we told all these stories.
Nikki:  And the most amazing thing about that, that I loved….You know, when you have a language tape and there’s a beep that tells you you’re out of time and it goes “Bong.” That “Bong” was exactly in tune with all the Vietnamese music that we were using. And a lot of the stuff we do, too, is like writing a piece of music because it is so subjective and it does have an order, but you could do a lot of different things with it. So it is this building process, like a piece of music.

Acosta: So I think the lesson here is that if you have the happenstance of stumbling into Davia’s life, you’re going to have a big story one way or the other.

Davia: Well, Mark, who we just met today, who introduced us—we’re working on a piece now called—I kind of feel like people in this crowd….I’m going to say this aloud because I think people in this crowd will have material: “Cry Me a River.” It’s about three river activists. We started telling Mark about this story and he started telling us about a Gary Snyder poem, “Mountains and Rivers Without End.” There was a class done on this poem for a year here on Gary Snyder and rivers, and within thirty seconds, Nikki and I looked at each other and went, There’s the narrative through-line of these Mark DuBois, Ken Slight, and Katie Lee….I don’t know if people are river rafters in this crowd, but now hopefully that’s a brilliant idea. It might be a bust…

Nikki: It sounded good tonight.

Davia: …but it gave us confidence. You know what you do: you look for confidence, even if it’s false hope, just to have the courage to do the next little piece of it that probably doesn’t work either, but you just keep trying.

Acosta: The percentages are with you.

Davia: May I say one thing? I was just thinking so much about that George Foreman piece because I was just gone for two months and I came back and my refrigerator wasn’t working. So I’ve been living without a refrigerator for a few days, and I just started thinking about all our Hidden Kitchens. And I thought, Now, I know all these people; what have they done? So the coldest place I found was my car, so I moved all my food from my house to my car for the last few days, so I’ve just been thinking about that piece. I think I learned that from Pat Sherman—using the bowl with the ice. It works if you need a hidden kitchen. A hidden refrigerator: your Volvo.

Nikki: So here’s a tiny segment of “French Manicure.”

[Go here for “French Manicure”:
http://www.npr.org/programs/lfsound/stories/000428.stories.html]

Davia: I think we learned the power of public radio from that story that May just told about the boy who had been a car mechanic in Vietnam and then couldn’t practice in America and became a manicurist. He works at Fancy Nails in Berkeley, and all these Berkeley women who go to Fancy Nails heard this story on KQED, and they started bringing their cars. [Laughter]

Acosta: It’s a miracle.
Nikki: This was a really pivotal piece for me. But we had a lot of trouble with this piece because there was resistance at NPR in terms of playing it because the accents were difficult to understand and I don’t think manicures are quite the PC thing with a lot of people. I’m not sure exactly what the reasons were; I think a lot of it was the accents. But I think it was kind of the first time for me that I just knew it was the right thing to do. These voices, these people, that are so seldom heard on public radio—these voices that are harder to understand—that’s what America is right now. And I think it made a pretty big impact, too.

Acosta: Your pieces are really imbued with your sense of values. I think that’s one thing that distinguishes the pieces that you produce. It really goes back to why you got into doing this in the first place, I think, and maybe you could talk about what it means to have a vocation as opposed to a career. I don’t think you really probably talk about this very often as your career. It’s something you are driven to do, in a way, rather than, “Oh, it’s because I can make money,” because you certainly in radio don’t make a lot of money. We know that. Maybe you could talk about that because it is a really good example of… we hadn’t talked about that before, but…that you had a sense that this was an important story to do, so regardless of the pushback you might have been getting, you did it anyway. So, talk a little bit about why you do what you do.

Nikki: We do talk about this, actually, and I think it comes back for both of us in different ways to storytelling and how important that is in our personal lives and what we think is important in the world. I came from this really tight-knit Portuguese family in Oakland and didn’t really have a big world at all, but there was so much storytelling and interpersonal gossip in that family that I just absorbed. My mother was a great storyteller and a very dramatic storyteller. We would come home from the family parties and I was an only child so I was her audience, and she would tell me all the connections and why, and it really made me this listener and watcher and observer. I loved that, and I think it’s really an important thing that a lot of culture is losing, in a way. So people don’t come to the table much anymore and talk, they don’t have family gatherings, and families are spread so far, so I think in some ways what we do is we’re trying to build that little fire that we all gather around with these stories and tell each other stories because it seems critical.

Davia: I’m listening to Nikki and I’m thinking, Well, my parents were New Yorkers; they moved to L.A., they always meant to move to San Francisco. I think they really were displaced in L.A. and I think my father was always looking for that New York-y kind of thing, and L.A. was like a science experiment to him. He would take my sister and me, when we were really little, to the place that felt the most like New York, which was this Italian restaurant and café…

Acosta: Sarno’s.

Davia: …Sarno’s, exactly, where they sang opera. And he’d take us not to the front of the house but to the back of the house into the kitchen so that we could see how things were made. Or he’d take us to the rodeo in Agora. Who was doing that? It was like Woody Allen taking you to the rodeo. It was so absurd. But we wouldn’t just go watch in the stands; we’d go behind and see where the horses….And his whole thing was: Talk to strangers. I feel so sad for kids now; everyone is saying, Don’t talk to strangers;
strangers are dangerous. I had this childhood where it was like, Let’s go talk to more strangers; let’s get up at dawn and go see where flowers are brought into the docks in downtown L.A. or the out-of-town newsstand or, how do they make hot fudge? And then there were big secrets in my family and people were sort of the opposite of Nikki’s family; they were sitting on the story. But I always knew something was going on but I didn’t know what it was and then there was no one to ask. I think I got obsessed with asking everybody else their stories because I couldn’t figure out my own. I think there was some of that. And then also, for me the other piece of it was that I was just obsessed; I was writing love letters to disc jockeys playing music from the time I was about ten. I just loved transistor radios and music, music, music, and the voices talking and rhyming patterns, and I just wanted to be one. I wanted to get into radio. Like all these podcasts and computers and all the other mediums everyone’s so excited about—just give me radio. I think the mystery and the beauty of it is so perfect.

Acosta: Let’s talk about that because it seems that I was joking, in a way, when I said, “queens of the old media,” but, really, newspapers, television, a lot of broadcasts, more or less everybody says, “gone.” And yet there’s been this renaissance in radio, particularly with National Public Radio, but elsewhere, too. Is that about the storytelling part of it, or why is that happening? I was going to say, after 25 years, you’re an overnight success, right? You’ve been doing this so long, and yet now the wave is kind of catching you—you’re not catching the wave. Why is it you’re so successful now when a lot of this other “old media” is experiencing such hard times?

Davia: Why do you think so?

Acosta: The rule is that I ask the questions. [Laughter]

Davia: I think people are hungry for something about the voice. There’s just something so basic about just hearing someone interesting tell you a good story. I think it’s what Nikki said: a story that’s as basic as food. I think that with the radio you can be doing other things. You have to read a newspaper or watch a TV, although a lot of people just keep screens on. I want to do a radio story on why there are so many screens—why we’re addicted to screens, putting them in elevators and cabs and everywhere. I think Ira Glass really helped that. I think there are certain people who have come along who have just broken through. I think 9/11 really expanded the listenership for public radio. I think as it got angrier and angrier on the air, public radio has meant more to people—that kind of open place.

Nikki: Well, I think people really want the truth and they want depth and they want other sides of the story, and that’s not happening in a lot of television and it’s not happening in a lot of radio, either. But I’m thinking now of public radio, and there is an effort to be a little bit fair. Regardless of what people say, or what conservatives say, or whatever, I think that there is this effort. In fact, I think they bend over backwards sometimes—way too far—to give voice to all the sides. And I think people are hungry for that. And it’s not expensive, relative to other mediums, to produce radio. It’s so accessible, and anyone with a microphone and a computer can do it, so it’s an available medium to people.
Acosta: It ties in a little bit to what you were saying about narration. There’s a lack of filter on that, whereas in most media now there are huge filters. The producers of it are putting on filters or creating a bias in it, and you are allowing people to have their own say without really mediating it too much.

You know, when Calvin Trillin was here at the Aurora Forum, he said that he used food, and he doesn’t say food—he writes about eating. He can’t cook, he knows nothing about food, so he writes about eating. He said that he uses eating as an excuse to write about place and places. Let me try this on you. When the Kitchen Sisters do a story, they use food as an excuse to talk about … fill in the blank.

Nikki: I think, community, story. There’s a line in our book: It’s about the food, but really it’s about the fellowship, it’s about the coming together over food, it’s about the breaking of bread, the oldest thing around. I think the whole Hidden Kitchen series, like Lost and Found Sound, was this umbrella—this way to open a conversation really. In fact, when we interview people, we start every interview with the classic radio thing. To get your levels when you’re fiddling with the knobs, you ask the person, What did you have for breakfast? And they tell you. And often people just relax. They know they can answer that question; it’s not a trick question. Even if they didn’t have any breakfast, it’s not tricky. But you get the most amazing answers. And for years we’ve gotten the amazing answers. The homeless guy in the George Foreman piece: instantly, the first question was, What did you have for breakfast? He said, “I didn’t have any breakfast. I’m homeless.” Whoa, that’s a showstopper; that’s the opening of a conversation. And I think so much of the time food is that for people. It’s memory, regardless of whether you’re eating frozen pizzas and frozen tacos, there is this searing food memory that people have. With older people, too, it’s like music. It’s a way to stimulate conversation and memory. If you find yourself in a really hard place in an interview, ask them about food: What did you eat? What did your mother cook? What do you remember? What were the smells? People really open up in this new way.

Acosta: Davia, you told me a sweet story the other day on the phone about a woman who called in to say that her mother was in full-time care and she was having trouble eating, and it related to the George Foreman grill.

Davia: Yes. This woman heard this story, and her mother was in a home and had stopped eating because the food was so horrible. She heard the George Foreman piece and she went out and bought a George Foreman grill and some hot dogs and brought them to the nursing home and started grilling in her mother’s room. Just the smell of this brought her mother back and her mother started eating hot dogs. Then she sent us a picture of her mother—a little grey-haired woman in a bed with a George Foreman grill next to her. She said she started cooking for the whole floor. [Laughter] Some people are really doing big exposé work and changing lives; ours are small.

Acosta: That’s a really beautiful story.

Davia: It is. It is about change. It is about small steps.

Acosta: I was interested to hear you say that maybe one of the reasons radio has come back a little bit is with 9/11. Maybe you can talk about the impact that had on you and particularly how this Sonic Memorial Project came about because, like many of us,
probably, in the days right after 9/11, you were in a haze. How did that coalesce into this idea?

Nikki: It’s so weird. On 9/11, we were working on a piece called “The Acoustics of Crime: Privacy? Get Over It.” And it was all about audio forensics and people who solve crime with sound. And we had this whole premise underneath the piece that everywhere you went, you were being recorded, and people could solve crimes with sound. On 9/11, we looked at every bit of material we had and realized that now, all people want is that invasion of privacy, is to be able to find the recordings, is to be able to solve these crimes with sound. We were sort of paralyzed and we were also thinking, like everybody here, What do we do? Do you give blood? What’s your role? We’d been doing this Lost and Found Sound series about how sound shapes history and how history shapes sound, and we had opened up a phone line and people had been calling us by the thousands with their recordings. We did a lot with answering machine messages for that series. About four days after 9/11, we suddenly thought about the voice mails—not just people’s last words. We thought, those buildings went down, but voice mail usually isn’t in the same building as the telephones. We thought, all those people’s voice mailboxes are still there, and we knew from our work what it meant to have recordings of people and their voices—not just photographs, but their voices. So we called Verizon in New York (by the time we got through it was about ten days later). We asked them if the voice mail was still in existence. Yes, it was, but they had this term, “janitoring it.” They had begun to janitor it—you know how, after ten days, your messages go away. We said, Could you put a stop to that and would you work with us on finding those people so that you can at least give them the content of those voice mailboxes because it may be the last time they hear those people’s voices. So we began first with the idea of just trying to get these little boxes of sound back to people and it led to this whole idea of opening up the phone lines on NPR and asking the nation to call in, saying, Do you have any recorded sound from the history of lower Manhattan? We wound up with thousands of people calling and 100 years’ worth of sound of that, and that became what we called the Sonic Memorial Project, which continues to live pretty actively online with this Web site. We partnered with these really creative Web site folks, Picture Projects, and they created an entire archive online of this material. And it’s become a repository. George Mason University is in charge of it now. People can add to it, teachers can use it, lots of people use it in their classrooms. They have a whole teachers’ curriculum to go with it. For the fifth-year anniversary, we were just inundated with people from all over the world trying to use particular material from that archive. I think it was incredibly important to do that at that moment. And doing Lost and Found Sound, we were in the perfect position to mobilize the troops and get people gathering that material before it was lost.

Davia: We did a series of stories that ran on All Things Considered in the year after 9/11, and we did a big hour-long special that Paul Auster narrated. One of the stories is called “Walking High Steel: Mohawk Ironworkers at the Trade Towers.” People probably know that the Mohawk tribe from Canada does a lot of the high steel work and bridges on skyscrapers, and they were responsible for building a lot of the Trade Towers, and then their relatives—their grandsons and nephews and sons—came and dismantled it. So this is a little fragment:
Acosta: We’re going to wrap up soon on this part of the evening and go from the essay portion of the exam to the short-answer part of the exam, so you have to give very quick answers to the following questions:

Your favorite story?

Nikki: This is painful. “WHER”: the story of the first all-girl radio station in the nation. That’s not really true that it’s my favorite story, but it just came to mind.

Davia: Tennessee Williams. Isn’t that odd that I would say that? I don’t know that that really is true, but there’s something about it. There were these little paper recordings that Tennessee made in a penny arcade in 1946 with his lover Poncho in New Orleans. They were in an archive in New York and we were led to them by the archivist. From these little recordings we built this entire story. Tennessee was clowning around and having fun with his lover, but also reciting poetry and reading from a streetcar.

Acosta: Craziest character?

Nikki: Sam Phillips.

And my best Sam Phillips was the Sam Phillips who recorded Elvis Presley, Sun Studios, Memphis Recording Service, Roy Orbison, Howlin’ Wolf, Ruth Thomas, Johnny Cash. He sold Elvis’s contract and started the all-girl station. Sam was one of the first people we interviewed for Lost and Found Sound. When Sam died, we went to his memorial and I counted: there were 186 standing wreaths and bouquets, mostly in the shape of Sun Studios’s labels, and Ike Turner’s guitar, and you name it. Sam had wanted a closed casket, but they decided that Sam looked so good—they put on his aviator shades and his “Taking Care of Business” Elvis Presley necklace and they kept the casket open because Sam would have wanted it that way.

Acosta: Craziest character?

Davia: I would have gone with Sam, too. It’s just so undeniable. We just met somebody who was great in Texas who is a real character—David Close—who makes traveling barbeque pits and he’s just wild. He’s one of my favorites.

Acosta: Story that went south most quickly?

Davia: Help! Next question? An awful lot of them.

Acosta: Worst interview?

Nikki: I was going to say that Sam Phillips was the best interview and it was the worst interview. We didn’t even ask a question. We said hi, and he took off. He never stopped, and he spoke in circles. He always ended up … it was always a complete story, but it was everywhere—all over that tape. It was the best and the worst.

Davia: It was the second interview we ever did. The first one was with a blind man, and that really helped because he couldn’t see how nervous we were. The second one was with some father-son lumberjacks in Santa Cruz. We wanted to do the traditions and
rituals of Santa Cruz and they couldn’t have cared less about lumberjacking; what they cared about were their trained and tamed 36 rattlesnakes that they dressed in señorita gowns and they pulled Conestoga wagons. I kid you not. [Laughter] It’s on the tape. You can hear us saying, “Can we touch these rattlesnakes?”

**Nikki:** And this was our second time out together interviewing, and we went at night because these guys worked during the day. It was summer so it was late at night—nine o’clock before it got dark. And we had not told anyone where we were going. What were we thinking of? We were way up in the Santa Cruz Mountains with all these rattlesnakes and these weird guys.

**Davia:** That was weird.

**Nikki:** You *want* to see a rattlesnake in a señorita gown. Trust us, you do. [Laughter]

**Acosta:** I need a moment. [Laughter]

**Davia:** Yeah, so did we.

**Acosta:** It’s been a great blessing to have this whole food thing going on, but do you feel as though you might be saddled with this for the rest of your lives or are you ever going to move on and go to some other place on the radio?

**Davia:** We have about 20 other ideas. We’re thinking about a project called “The Secret Life of Girls Around the World,” a big idea, and “Cry Me a River,” and we’re just watching the world go to kablooie—the environment. We keep trying to think about what stories we can do that might matter in that way. Our “WHER” story may become a Broadway musical; we’re working on a Broadway musical now.

**Nikki:** Keep your fingers crossed for that one.

**Davia:** We’re working on a radio drama series with Francis Coppola, plus our *Hidden Kitchens*, plus we still like *Lost and Found Sound*, plus what we teach at the Graduate School of Journalism at UC-Berkeley. There’s a lot to do.

**Acosta:** Many more stories. Let’s finish with the “bling-bling,” as you’ve been calling it all day.

**Davia:** We have an hour-long special coming up—it’s going to air in the spring—and Willie Nelson is the narrator. It’s called “Hidden Kitchens Texas.” So many people who called the *Hidden Kitchens* hotline...about half of them were from Texas, so we decided: OK, you get your own hour, you Texans, you. And Nikki just got back from NASA doing “The Space Kitchens of NASA.” This is a sneak preview:

| “Go here for information on “Hidden Kitchens Texas”:
http://www.kitchensisters.org/hk_texas-call.htm |

**Acosta:** I think you could say we finished with some real radio magic. [Applause]

Now, our favorite part of the evening at the Aurora Forum. You get to ask the Kitchen Sisters your questions. They get to be on the other side of the radio this time.
**Question from the Audience:** I’m part of the iPod generation, but I started to love the radio, although I do stream it over the Internet, and I’m Ira Glass’s biggest fan. You contrasted your work with people who do big exposé work, and I was curious if there was any kind of particular activist impact that you intend your work on the radio to have.

**Davia:** It happens in sort of mysterious ways. We just did a piece called “Deep-Fried Fuel” and it was about bio-diesel at the *Hidden Kitchen*—fuel made from farm crops and restaurant grease, and I was amazed. We were doing it as a *Hidden Kitchen* segment and telling the story and people making it in blenders at home and all these different ways as well as big truck stops in Texas and distributing it. I don’t think we’ve ever gotten more mail on a piece than that, and it was a whole catalyst for a big discussion about bio-diesel and alternative energy around the country, and it wound up being sent all around the world. It just keeps ricocheting back to us. It was sort of provocative of conversation that way. Or what comes to mind is a piece that we did for *Hidden Kitchens* earlier called “Georgia Gilmore and the Club from Nowhere: A Secret Civil Rights Kitchen.” This was about a woman from Montgomery, Alabama, in the 1950s during the boycott of the buses. Dr. King was preaching in Montgomery at the time, and Georgia Gilmore lost her job because she supported the bus boycott and she started a secret restaurant in her home that Dr. King helped fund. It was the only integrated dining place in Montgomery, Alabama; it’s where a lot of the civil rights movement was hatched. I don’t think people go out to the battle lines from our stories, but I think they help plant some ideas or give some sense of history or a little bit of a push.

**Nikki:** We did a piece about farm aid recently, which is the Willie Nelson concert that has been going on for 21 years raising money for farms. And when we were there, we met a man who works for an organization called “Philabundance.” They go around and gather food from the farmers and from stores, and they give it out to people in the community. It’s a big operation in Philadelphia. And he uses our piece—the George Foreman piece—in the training of these people because he wants them to think about food and homelessness in a different way. It was the ultimate compliment to me. I don’t know that activists were down there picketing, but I think it is in some way.

**Davia:** I hope so.

**Nikki:** Maybe it’s something to listen to when you’re on your way to somewhere else to do something.

**Question from the Audience:** I have a question about sympathy. It seems as though a lot of the people you interview you have sympathy for and they’re interesting characters. I wonder if you’ve ever wanted to interview people you don’t have natural sympathy for—someone like Donald Rumsfeld or somebody—and then try to become sympathetic in order to get a fuller picture of how people do atrocious things.

**Acosta:** That is a very good question.

**Nikki:** I am always shocked when we go places and I think: I’m going to have nothing in common with these people. We went to the hills of Kentucky when we were doing our piece on burgoo and to these really conservatives places, and yet I’m constantly amazed at how much in common there is and how sympathetic I do feel. We recently spoke at the Dallas Women’s Club, and it was a completely different world from what we’re used
to and where we live; I live in Santa Cruz and Davia lives in San Francisco—very liberal communities, and yet there was a common ground and a way to talk with one another. It was right around the elections, and we didn’t go there, but it was interesting because we really liked those people and found a lot that we all had in common.

**Davia:** I’d like to interview Rumsfeld.

**Nikki:** Yeah, me too. What did he have for breakfast, do you think? [Laughter]

**Davia:** Iraq.

**Question from the Audience:** I’d like to know if you’d like to have a suggestion for a story on a kitchen that I know about.

**Nikki:** Always, yes.

**Question from the Audience (continued):** About two hours south of Stanford University out in the mountains of the wilderness area in a deep, deep valley is a little Buddhist center where monks are trained; it was the first training center in this country for Buddhist monks. It’s part of the San Francisco Zen Center, and in the summertime, this place makes the money for its whole year in a guest program, the centerpiece of which is fresh food. They bring as little as possible in cans and containers and as much fresh food as possible, and they have a lot of volunteers in the kitchen. I was down there for two months a couple of years ago. It’s a really wonderful place to cultivate cooking skill. Of course, it’s a vegetarian place. The amount of effort that is put into meals for the guests is totally amazing. They bring in four guest cooks every year—people who have been practicing around the area. It’s a great honor to be asked to be a guest cook at Tassajara. It might be a place that you’d like to spend some time.

**Acosta:** I’m going to tell you something that I know but very few people know of: Davia used to carry around a copy of the *Tassajara Bread Book*. When most college kids would be carrying around the *Kama Sutra* or something like that, Davia had the *Tassajara Bread Book* back in the old days. Isn’t that true?

**Davia:** Yes, it is true, and my friend and roommate from college is here, whom I haven’t seen in so long, and I was thinking, I spent so much of the time that first year just baking chocolate chip cookies to end the Vietnam War. I don’t know if you remember that, but it was as though I was obsessed: if I could just sell enough cookies, maybe we’d stop mining Haiphong Harbor.

**Question from the Audience:** I have a question about the effects the publicity of your pieces have on your subjects. You allude to this event in your story about the Vietnamese manicurist, but what other effects have the publicity provided by your pieces had on their subjects and do you worry about this when deciding what pieces to do or how to do them?

**Nikki:** You know, with the *Hidden Kitchen* series, we did worry about that, especially with things like the “Caviar Kitchen” piece that Davia described, because a lot of these places are below the radar—illegal places. So we didn’t really get deeply into where things were. We did think about that. That was with the food. I think that our pieces have had really positive effects on people. It hasn’t made them famous or anything, but I
think the “WHER” piece we did, in which Davia was describing the first all-girl radio station: these women hadn’t seen each other in years and years and years and really had gotten very little recognition for the work that they had done as pioneers, really, of women in radio. And when we did that piece, it just shed so much light on what they had done, and they received an award from the Museum of Radio and Television, and their children for the first time heard these stories and it was acknowledged, and I think that’s more the case. We are not really usually doing very famous people; these are people who have done something that is interesting to us, so it’s kind of nice within families and communities.

**Davia:** We did a story about a forager in San Francisco. It’s about Angelo Garro. He’s an iron metalsmith and he forages, and we all gathered at his forge the day that this *Hidden Kitchen* episode aired. He is just a community cook; he doesn’t have a restaurant or anything. But the piece aired on NPR and we were all there and the phone rang, and he started getting people trying to make reservations. [Laughter] Then later in the day, he started getting proposals from women who had heard him on the radio, so I feel we have a positive impact on people’s lives.

**Acosta:** Do people propose to you after stories?

**Davia:** Well, we’re not in our stories. We don’t narrate our stories.

**Acosta:** But there’s a Kitchen Sisters mystique.

**Nikki:** Oh, yeah—there’s a big Kitchen Sisters mystique. [Laughter]

**Question from the Audience:** I would like to ask a question, and it has to do with the way people receive and gather information and discuss ideas on the information that’s received, because I feel that in the last 50 years, the way that we get news has changed a great deal. We don’t have the Walter Cronkites or the hour-long newscasts that we used to have. When I was a kid growing up, we would watch the television and then go to dinner and discuss what we saw. Now, it seems like we have more information that’s coming from you 24/7, but somehow my private feeling is that people are less informed and furthermore, they don’t even care. I wonder if you have a comment on that. It seems as though people don’t eat dinner together, they don’t discuss with their children. Kids are tuned into maybe not the news but their latest game. So there’s somehow more isolation. Could you comment on that?

**Nikki:** It’s interesting that you bring that up because I think it comes back to what is it about radio and public radio in particular right now that I think people crave: that sense of community. Even though you listen by yourself, how many times a day—especially in a community like this—do you hear, “Oh, did you hear that on NPR?” or “I just heard a great story on NPR.” It is this way that we talk to each other and something we have in common because there’s such a huge sea of stuff out there. Who’s watching the same thing at the same time? With TIVO and everything else, you don’t even watch the programs at the same time anymore. So I think maybe public radio is a reaction to that a bit.
Acosta: I think it was one of Tom Wolfe’s books where he starts out the book by saying, “I was taking that big communal bath known as the Sunday New York Times.”
[Laughter] And it is true that there is a sense of everybody getting into the same bathtub.

Davia: Frank Zappa would work all night and sleep all day, and he would get up at five o’clock and he’d say, “I’ll take a news bath.”

Question from the Audience: I used to be a field geologist, and we used to cook cans of food by putting them in the engine compartment. I wonder if you’ve covered that before? [Laughter]

Nikki: We’ve got to!

Davia: Will you give us your phone number? [Laughter]

Nikki: What’s your favorite engine recipe?

Question from the Audience (continued): Beans. [Laughter]

Davia: You know, someone told us that their father had done that. One of the messages on the line was about their father doing that with a Jeep in World War II—that they had taken cans of beans and heated them in the engine.

Davia:

What do you mean, you used to be a field geologist?

Question from the Audience (continued): Now I’m doing cancer research.

Nikki: I hope you still cook on your engine, though, for old times’ sake.

Question from the Audience: Have you done anything on food and servicemen in our wars these days?

Davia: We haven’t. We’ve talked about it.

Nikki: I want to do “Halliburton Kitchen.” [Laughter]

Acosta: You might get an answer to your question. Maybe she can interview Dick Cheney for that.

Davia: Did people see the film, The War Tapes? A woman filmmaker from New Hampshire had given all these soldiers from the New Hampshire National Guard cameras when they went to Iraq, and there’s a scene that I saw where all these soldiers were eating and Halliburton is part of what’s giving the food production, and it’s $27 a plate of food. So when the soldiers cross this dusty, sandy, windy place, they put a second plate on top, and it was $27 for that plate, too. Then they talked about how trucks were traveling in Iraq and it was all junk food: Pizza Hut—that’s what was being served to these soldiers. They were talking about one of the soldiers who was embedded in the back of a semi truck carrying cheese—that we’re fighting a war to save cheese, because they were being attacked. So ever since then, that’s been one of the Hidden Kitchens I want to do: “Halliburton Kitchens.”
**Question from the Audience:** To follow on the previous comment about cooking on a car, there’s a book on that called *Manifold Destiny* about cooking in your car. It’s a rather old book. Do you try any of the dishes when you’re interviewing for *Hidden Kitchens*, and do you have any favorites or anything you felt was really hard to swallow?

**Davia:** We eat everything. We have eaten some wild stuff in the last few years. I think that burgoo is the most intense thing that we have eaten. Someone called us from Kentucky telling us about this tradition. It starts in May and goes through September, and it’s a parish picnic tradition in Kentucky and it’s this frontier stew tradition that goes back almost 200 years. In days of yore, it was squirrel and dove and pigeon and deer and anything foraged from the garden, and the men of the community do it together in huge kettles. The line for us is, What is it about men and meat and midnight and a pit? [Laughter] When you’re into about the fourteenth hour with the guys around the grill and it’s going tribal, I think that was the wildest for us.

**Nikki:** And mutton—a lot of mutton. Mutton is a through-line. We have a lot of mutton in out stories. It’s interesting. And they mop the mutton with dip—big cotton mops.

**Davia:** It’s like a barbeque sauce…. 

**Nikki:** …like you use on your floor. I mean, not used, but…. 

**Acosta:** Was there anything that was particularly hard to eat for you in your journey?

**Davia:** For me, Cleora Butler’s fudge.

**Nikki:** Pretty intense.

**Davia:** We wrote up a little bit about it in the book about the Shoebox Kitchen. A lot of the people we asked, What was you hidden kitchen like? African-American people started telling us about traveling, especially in the South, but almost anywhere in the United States, and there were no dining places they could stop to eat. Maybe there was a woman who had a house and she would be cooking or people could stay, but if you took a trip from Atlanta to wherever else in the South, you started out with a shoebox full of fried chicken and food that you could eat along the way and then, as we were doing that research, we heard about Cleora Butler, who had a place where she fed travelers. They could travel far on this fudge. Our hat is off to her. We have the recipe in the book. My hat is off to that woman.

**Question from the Audience:** This is in continuation with your *Hidden Kitchen*. I do a lot of cooking classes, and I teach everyone how to cook and satisfy your taste buds. Once you do that, you know how your cravings also go away. So I have gotten into a kind of cooking where if you satisfy your taste buds, try to do it in an easier, quicker way. Eating all those canned foods or frozen foods or just going out to a fast-food restaurant…I tell them that by the time you go to the restaurant, pick food up, and go back home—in that duration of time, you can cook a really healthy and nutritious meal at home along with you family. Then, I also try to go into the diets of kids. Nowadays, they don’t really get a very good lunch even though the schools provides hot lunches. So I am into this kind of thing, so if you want to explore more, I would be more than happy to.
Davia: Where do you teach?

Question from the Audience (continued): I teach on the Peninsula, mostly Indian food, but all the processes can transcend into any kind of cooking. I get into ayurvedic cooking in which you should satisfy all your taste buds, and it can go into all kinds of cooking, not necessarily only Indian, but Italian, and so on. Basically, I tell them there is no recipe; you should go with your taste buds. If you like it, that’s the best recipe. In the classroom, everybody is trained to write: “Did you put half a teaspoon or a full teaspoon?” I say, “It doesn’t matter.” Only the first time you will have to worry about whether it’s a half teaspoon or a full teaspoon, but the second time around, you will know exactly what the recipe is, so don’t waste your time writing a recipe.

Davia: Will you give us your phone number afterward?

Question from the Audience (continued): Absolutely.

Davia: Thank you.

Question from the Audience: I really wanted to know about that Italian forager. I heard it on the radio and it was a really fantastic story. I can really imagine that lots of people called you up about it. Can you talk to us a little bit more about it?

Davia: Angelo Garro is from Siracusa in Sicily. In fact, I just talked with him today and he was so happy—he had just found the first porcini of the season. He said, “Daviauza, I have just returned from hunting.” In my mind, I’m imagining ducks or boar, but it was mushrooms he had been hunting this time, and it was porcini. He leaves tomorrow to go to North Dakota to hunt pheasant. He just lives by the season. He just finished picking grapes for wine, and out of those grapes, there’s grappa being made at the forge at the moment. Then comes Christmas Eve, and that will be the Feast of Seven Fishes, which is a tradition which he brought from Sicily that he does and now shares with about 30 of his friends. There are some people who run for elected office and there are other people who elect themselves to be the keepers of their community.

Nikki: And the people who gather at his table.... It’s his food, but it’s also the way in which he lives life and how generous he is with taking people out and teaching them how. When you go to the forge, it’s a dark, wonderful place with tools everywhere and a big, long table (this is when he’s having a dinner party)...a big, long table in amongst the tools and the hanging chains and things. Then his kitchen is right there in his forge with a beautiful fig tree growing up through the roof into the sun and this great kitchen. He goes over and works at his forge and then he’ll be working on a recipe over here and he’s playing opera. It’s just magical. He really is a wonderful being.

Davia: We did a piece called “Waiting for Joe DiMaggio,” and we had to get some Sicilian translation. Someone told us about Angelo. This was ten years ago or so. I called him up out of the blue and he did the translation for me on the phone. He’d never met me, and he did the translation and he said, “I’m cooking rabbit and polenta right now. Why don’t you come over and have dinner?” We were leaving for Washington, D.C., the next day to mix this piece, so I said, “I can’t, but thank you. Some other time.” About a month later, my phone rang and it was Angelo. “I am cooking boar and pasta. You must come over for dinner.” I said, “I would love to, but I’m going somewhere and
I can’t.” A month later, my phone rang and it was Angelo. He said, “Are you coming for lunch or are you coming for dinner?” And I said, “I’m coming for lunch.” I came the next day and I had been a vegetarian for about 20 years, and he served homemade salami, homemade boar pasta, homemade prosciutto. And I said, “Yes, could I have more prosciutto, please.” Homemade olives, cured. Everything. That’s how we met Angelo.

**Question from the Audience:** I love *Hidden Kitchens*, and I also cook and have taught, but my real concern is: what is your perception of all this hysteria about food-borne illness and what will that do for hidden kitchens?

**Davia:** I think about that a lot.

**Nikki:** I worry more about big corporate unhiddened kitchens, agri-business kitchens, than I do about the hidden kitchens. The Angelos of the world, Janete, the cab yard kitchen, Georgia Gilmore: those people are so conscious they are taking care of people. They are going overboard to make sure that their community is fed, and I think when it gets so out of control—you see mad cow disease—you see it that it’s gone so out of balance. I don’t mean to be dismissive, but those are the kitchens I’m more concerned about. But I think the law will come down on the little hidden ones.

**Davia:** I think that’s why, in part, we do this series, to raise their radar a little bit to protect them by making them more heroic, in a way, so people feel the need to protect them and rally around them.

**Question from the Audience (continued):** I thank you for that. In that same vein, with the government regulations, there are some states that outlaw potlucks in churches and other non-profits.

**Davia:** You have to say that on tape. That is amazing. I mean, that’s anti-American.

**Acosta:** I think now we see the role of activism in *Hidden Kitchens*.

**Nikki:** That goes back to the same issue with me about insurance and children’s playgrounds, and how people can’t take kids on field trips, or you can’t have a merry-go-round and swings because they’re worried about insurance.

**Question from the Audience:** How much of the material is edited? What is the ratio of what you tape and what is finally aired? What is your take on bringing in the element of drama? For instance, the homeless person piece that you just played: there was pretty upbeat music in the background, and the person is telling a story that it not at all upbeat in any sense. So how do you create the sense of drama in your stories? Do you coach the storyteller to a certain extent? How do you come about that sense of drama?

**Nikki:** We do edit quite a bit and we gather quite a bit. For every story, it’s 20 or 30 hours of tape sometimes, plus archival material and news broadcasts and whatever else, so there’s quite a bit of material to pull from. I think we build the drama in the piece a lot like you do when you write a story or when you create a piece of music. There’s definitely a moment when the crescendo comes. We do it unconsciously and consciously. I think that our stories do have an arc, and we do that in selecting which tape, which voice, which piece of music. You’re right about the music in the homeless piece. I think one of the things I love about that piece is the music and the way the music
drives the voices. When I hear that music come in under George Foreman, it just makes me want to cry every time, even “Hang ‘Em High.” “Hang ‘Em High”? That is an amazingly incongruous kind of thing to select, but the sound was right. It somehow had this deep, driving, dramatic feel to it to us. I think a lot of it is through the editing and the music and placement.

Davia: We never coach people in interviews. People say their stories how they say them. If we feel that someone got tangled up and didn’t get to say it as well as they meant to—either they were intimidated by the microphone or it just came out—we’ll ask them to do it again or rephrase it. We’re there to make people be able to express themselves as strongly as they can, but we never say, “Now, just say it this way,” or “Could you say it more sadly, or with feeling.”

Gonnerman: Davia Nelson, Nikki Silva, Alan Acosta: thank you very much.
[Applause]

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In addition to her work in radio, Davia Nelson is a casting director and screenwriter who lives in San Francisco. She co-wrote and produced the feature film Imaginary Crimes, starring Harvey Keitel, and has co-directed and produced Making Tutti, a PBS documentary. She is a graduate of the University of California, Santa Cruz.

In addition to her work in broadcast journalism, Nikki Silva is a museum curator and exhibit consultant specializing in regional history for museums throughout California. She lives with her family on a commune in Santa Cruz. She is a graduate of the University of California, Santa Cruz.

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Comments?
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