



Diane Guerrero

20Q

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KELIA ANNE

What makes a superhero? A voice, a cause and a will to change the world. The actress-activist, who headlines the HBO Max premiere of DC's *Doom Patrol*, has all three and isn't backing down

BY SAMANTA HELOU HERNANDEZ

Q1: *Orange Is the New Black* gave you your most notable role to date—Maritza Ramos, one of Litchfield Penitentiary's original inmates. On the show's final season, which debuted on Netflix in July, Ramos is deported to Colombia, mirroring what happened to your parents nearly two decades ago, when you were 14 years old. How did you prepare for those scenes?

GUERRERO: I didn't have to look far to understand what it would be like for my character to be in jail once again, to be taken away. I know what that's like. My mom was taken in handcuffs to the airport and loaded up on a plane. It's something I've lived with my entire life. It's desperate; it's lonely. So I tried to go back to that time. Honestly, because of the work I'm doing today, I'm back there all the time. It was cathartic.

Q2: So it wasn't retraumatizing?

GUERRERO: No, no, no. What's retraumatizing is knowing that some fucking guy went to a Walmart and shot up people because he thought there was an invasion of Mexicans, because of what our president has said. *That's* retraumatizing. That instills fear in me that my life can be taken away at any time. Portraying it artistically, or even retelling my story, as hard as that is at times, is a

means to an end. That's not retraumatizing.

Q3: You revealed your parents' deportation in a 2014 op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times*, and in 2016 you released a memoir, *In the Country We Love*, about growing up in the U.S. without them. What motivated you to share your story and become an activist for immigration reform?

GUERRERO: My career was moving very fast, but I felt I wasn't being honest. I felt deceitful not speaking about something that was very real to me. The issue of immigration was being tossed around inaccurately, and Trump was using the immigrant community as a scapegoat. What do you do when your community is flat-out labeled as rapists and murderers, and people run with that narrative? I couldn't offer a general response as a person of color, as a brown woman. I had to be like, "Yo, as a child of a separated family, as a child coming from a marginalized community that often experiences incarceration...I'm speaking to you as a child who lived all of this." I wanted people to look at me, see me and know what the fuck I'm about.

Q4: How did you find a space to inhabit in this country?

GUERRERO: If your circumstances bring you to a place where someone has to be charitable to you, you develop a habit of wanting to be invincible out of needing to appease folks. I got to the point of wanting to kill myself; that's how invincible I wanted to get. I had to see a therapist, who told me that it was okay to want things and to have dreams. I had to change the way I was programmed by reciting affirmations that I was worthy. That's how I began, little by little, to take up space again. But it's a work in progress. I work every day to not shrink myself, to allow myself to speak freely in places I'm scared to speak.

Q5: In August you told *Vanity Fair* that you feared becoming a

"poster child of deportation." Do you feel that you have?

GUERRERO: No, I don't. I thought people were trying to pigeonhole me. In reality, only you can pigeonhole yourself. Only you can allow people to put you in a box. I am who I am. I care about what I care about. I'm strong in my convictions. I dictate my future. I dictate my outcome. Deportation, what happened to my family, is a sliver of who I am and what has happened to me. I have much more to say, much more to contribute.

Q6: In 2015 you were named to the Obama administration's inaugural class of Presidential Ambassadors for Citizenship and Naturalization, which aimed to promote naturalization among some 8 million qualified people. But some immigration groups have called Barack Obama the "deporter in chief." How is what's happening now under President Donald Trump different from what happened under the previous administration?

GUERRERO: The rhetoric isn't the same. Look, the Obama administration deported



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a lot of families, but Obama also tried to implement immigration reform, and he was shut down. He didn't have the Senate and the House. He tried to enact an executive order and it was blocked by the courts. He was on his own. I understand that. I'm not at all saying that separating families is okay. He just didn't have the support.

Q7: *Your advocacy includes volunteering with the Immigrant Legal Resource Center and sitting on the board of directors of Mi Familia Vota, an organization that promotes civic engagement. What does common-sense immigration reform look like to you?*

GUERRERO: We update the visa system. Have we tried to set up a path to citizenship for people who are here, who have been here for years and who have supported the economy? No. Reform involves repealing laws that are hurting people. It means coming up with ways to keep our borders secure but which also create a new way forward. It does not mean deporting 11 million people and collapsing our economy. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is a relatively new thing. We don't need ICE. We don't need another agency going after families, putting them in jail solely to have higher body counts in these centers. We don't need to be putting money into this agency. Immigration is not a crime.

A lot of immigrant families are taken advantage of because we don't know our rights. I joined the Immigrant Legal Resource Center because it focuses on education. As soon as I educated myself, I felt more powerful. I could give information to folks and direct them in a healthier way. Compare that to my parents, who hired the first bozo who offered to help them with their visas. The immigration system is convoluted and made for people to misunderstand. I just try to be a portal for information and get it out there to the folks who need it.

Q8: *Speaking of ICE, in August, on the first day of school, authori-*



ties arrested 680 people suspected of working in the country illegally across seven Mississippi food-processing plants. Videos of children crying made the rounds online and sparked debates about coverage of this issue. Some argue that it's important for the public to see this kind of imagery. Others deem it exploitative and a form of trauma porn. What's your take?

GUERRERO: People need to see it. Honestly, it was the first time I saw an image of what I felt like the day I came home and my folks weren't there. I don't know if I felt validated, because it's difficult

saying that; I know these kids are suffering. But I felt like that's what I've been trying to tell people. That's what it feels like. It's your first day of school. You love your parents. You wish they were there with you. We need to continue sharing images like those. I go through a lot not having my parents here. They're getting older. I'm getting older. I'm missing a lot of their milestones, and they're missing mine. That stunts your growth, in a way. People need each other. They need their families. That's what the fucking American dream is all about.

Q9: *Do you still believe in the American dream?*

GUERRERO: Of course. There are so many great things about this country and so many opportunities to be had. Equality for all and justice for all: That's the American dream I want to live, where everyone is treated fairly, where families are able to stay together, where this country provides what it promises for all families—not just white families and the families at the top. That's what I'm working toward. I mean, what else am I going to do?

Q10: *Is it possible for your parents to come back to the U.S. legally?*

GUERRERO: I would love for them to. This is where it all began. This is where our life started, and I would like to finish it here with them.

Q11: *You play Crazy Jane on DC's TV series Doom Patrol, whose second season premieres on HBO Max this spring. Crazy Jane experiences childhood trauma and develops superpowers as a result. What superpowers have you developed?*

GUERRERO: Becoming someone else. Here's an example: In college, I told someone that my parents were business owners, that they were in Colombia on a business venture and I was just here studying political science because I was interested in social justice and wanted to become a lawyer. The real reason I wanted to become a lawyer was so I could bring my parents back. In terms of relating to Jane, when she allows herself to work with others and surrender to community, she finds light in that. It's similar to when I surrender to my feelings and working with others and my community.

Q12: *Have you ever felt tokenized in your career?*

GUERRERO: Yeah, in auditions for "Drug Dealer Girlfriend Number One" and "Maid Number Two." That still happens. That's why being on *Doom Patrol* and getting the role of Crazy Jane has meant so much to me. To have a Latinx land a role normally reserved for a white person?





Latinxs aren't allowed to be superheroes. It's the strangest thing that we can't be seen in fantasy situations. Only white people can be in fantasies? Only white people can be superheroes? That's fucking preposterous.

Q13: *Crazy Jane also has dissociative identity disorder. There aren't many pop-culture representations of mental health issues in Latinx communities. You've struggled with depression, right?*

GUERRERO: Hey, we have mental health issues. This happens in our community. This needs to be looked at. If that goes overlooked, that person is going to spend a long time trying to figure it out. Who knows where they may or may not end up? What if my parents had seen a show or movie where they talked about that? We are so informed by what we watch and what's out there and available to us. That's why we have to fight to be in these spaces.

Q14: *Describe a moment when you realized what it means to be Latinx in Hollywood.*

GUERRERO: I mean, just go out there and try to get a job. Get a job, and then try to get paid as much as your counterparts. That's when you realize you're not on the same playing field. Or you think you have an opportunity to work with a producer who says they're interested in your story, or interested in telling more immigration stories or stories that impact the Latinx community, and then you get an e-mail from this person and it starts with, "Hey, babe." That's when you realize, "Oh, I am a woman. I am a brown woman." This is still going on, and that's still something I have to fight.

Q15: *Singing, not acting, was your introduction to performing. What does music signify to you?*

GUERRERO: It's how I stay alive, man. I love singing. I haven't done it in a professional setting yet, but it's coming. Music has saved me. It's the way I connect to my ancestry, to my family. Every Sunday, my family used to put on music, clear out the furniture and dance in the living room. What those songs were saying meant something.

Q16: *Like many Latinx people born in the 1980s, you listened to a lot of Selena growing up. What does she represent to you?*

GUERRERO: She represented the new Latin American, right? A person who was connected to her culture and could express herself so deeply but could also be very American—a mash-up of two beautiful things. It's what I've always considered myself: a mash-up of everything wonderful. I could speak Spanish. I could enjoy all these beauties that my culture offered, like music, dance, food and language. But I could also enjoy American music, American food and American customs. I could fucking bring those all together and just be a superhero.

Q17: *What's your favorite Selena song?*

GUERRERO: "No Me Queda Más," of course. The most intense, just mad emo song.

Q18: *You've said that growing up you tried to be the good girl to the point of harming yourself if you thought you were sinning. You're now perceived to be a sex symbol. When did you embrace your sexuality?*

GUERRERO: It wasn't until very recently. I've always been sexual, but it was once something I tried to hide because I was afraid of falling into the stereotype of the sexualized Latina who thought she could get anywhere with her sexuality or fuck



her way out of any situation. I have been able to fuck myself out of a couple of situations, but that is not my go-to. My go-to is my brain and my heart and what I've learned from my family and community. That is how I've gotten ahead.

Q19: *Do you feel your activism has ever been discounted because of your sex appeal?*

GUERRERO: Latinas especially are not allowed to be sexual and smart at the same time. It wasn't until after I wrote my book that I allowed myself to feel sexy and say, "Fuck it. I don't care what you say about my breasts. I don't care about what you say about how I look." Being comfortable with my sexuality is a part of me and in the message I want to give to people about loving themselves. It all goes into how I felt about my brown skin growing up, feeling that it was ugly or less than. "A wide nose—your indigenous nose—is ugly. Your brown eyes aren't as interesting as blue ones." Shut off the noise that tells you you're not good enough or white enough, that your sexy is bad, that your sexy is crass in some way.

Q20: *When do you feel most alive?*

GUERRERO: When I'm singing or dancing. When I'm experiencing music through my veins. When I'm eating my mother's food. When those beans hit my mouth and just, I know what that is. It's life, you know? A life force for the heart. 