

PROYECTO MISSION MURALS
Oral History Audio Transcripts

AMALIA MESA-BAINS ORAL HISTORY

San Juan Bautista, California, July 16, 2021

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This is an oral history of curator, critic, author, visual artist, and educator Amalia Mesa-Bains for the *Mission Murals Project*. I'm Camilo Garzón. It was recorded on July 16, 2021, outside of Amalia's home in San Juan Bautista, California.

As we sat outside of where Amalia is working on organizing her archive, which is going to be housed at Stanford University, the sun was shining on her and her flowery dress. The voices you'll hear will be those of Amalia and me.

This oral history delves into the facets of Amalia's early life, her upbringing in Santa Clara, California, her relationship with her parents, her name, and the way she refers to herself and how it has changed and evolved over the years, her work as a scholar, her travels, and her traveling exhibitions. We also talked about her MacArthur Foundation fellowship, about her partnership and life with her husband, Richard, about the influence of her friendships with Luis Valdez and Ralph Maradiaga. She also told me about when she met the Mujeres Muralistas, about her life when she moved to San Francisco after the Summer of Love, the decades she lived with Richard there, her work as arts commissioner, how she left San Francisco to go to San Juan Bautista mostly due to her health, as well as her resilience in the face of cardiopulmonary disease and a car accident. And we also talked about her role in preserving and amplifying Chicana and Latina heritage in San Francisco's Mission District and beyond.

Here is the oral history.

Esta es una historia oral de la curadora de exposiciones, crítica, autora, artista visual y educadora Amalia Mesa-Bains para el Mission Murals Project. Soy Camilo Garzón. Se grabó el 16 de julio de 2021, afuera de la casa de Amalia en San Juan Bautista (California).

Al sentarnos afuera de donde Amalia está trabajando en organizar su archivo —el cual estará resguardado en Stanford— el sol brillaba sobre ella y su vestido floreado. Las voces que oirás serán las de Amalia y la mía.

Esta historia oral ahonda en las facetas de las primeras etapas de la vida de Amalia; su crianza en Santa Clara; su relación con sus padres; su nombre y la manera en que se refiere a sí misma y cómo ha cambiado y evolucionado a través de los años; su trabajo como académica; sus viajes y sus exposiciones itinerantes. También hablamos acerca de su beca MacArthur Foundation, acerca de su relación y su vida con su esposo, Richard, acerca de la influencia de sus amistades con Luis Valdez y Ralph Maradiaga. También me contó de cuando conoció a las Mujeres Muralistas, de su vida cuando se mudó a San Francisco después del Verano del Amor, las décadas que vivió allí con Richard, su labor como comisionada de las artes, de cómo salió de San Francisco para irse a San Juan

Bautista principalmente debido a su salud, así como su aguante ante una enfermedad cardiopulmonar y un accidente automovilístico. Y también hablamos de su papel en conservar y divulgar la herencia chicana y latina en el barrio de la Mission de San Francisco y más allá.

Aquí está la historia oral.

This transcript has been edited and condensed for clarity.
Esta entrevista ha sido editada y abreviada para mayor claridad.

CAMILO GARZÓN: OK, so today is July 16. And I'm here with Amalia Mesa-Bains. And I'm talking to her on behalf of the *Mission Murals Project*. She welcomed me with her family in San Juan Bautista. And we're currently overlooking the front part of her house with some alpacas and some beautiful scenery.

Amalia, thank you so much for having me here and for letting us just have the space with you. One of the first things that I ask, and this is just a very interesting thing that we do throughout time, is especially with names like ours and with the connotations that sometimes these names have, how are you currently named? Or how do you say your name now? And how did it diverge from the past?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, good question. My name that I use—and I have for probably the last fifty years or so—is Amalia Mesa-Bains, Bains being my husband's last name, Mesa being my family name.

But when I was born, my mother gave me the name Maxine. I asked her [about it] many times, because the only Maxines I met in my age range were Chinese. So I said, "Mother, why did you give me the name Maxine?" She goes, "Oh, because Maxine Mesa sounded like a movie star's name." And I did television but—and of course, I've been in documentaries—but not a movie star.

Over the years, I found it quite difficult when I traveled to Mexico, and even in Latino communities. Maxine is not a name that comes easily. So I dropped it and went to Amalia, which was my middle name. But my mother was upset because Amalia was her mother. And my grandmother, Amalia, died at the age of thirty-six of a very severe pulmonary disease.

My mother lived very little with her—only a few years in her early, early life. And they would see each other because Amalia would go back and forth between Mexico and the US. And my mother got brought into the US when she was probably about—I don't know—three or four, and she only saw Amalia once in a while.

And her sense of the name “Amalia” is that it’s a name associated with illness and death. And when I was almost fifty, I did develop a very serious pulmonary disease, which might be related to hers. I don’t know. It’s cardiopulmonary. And my mother was very upset. “I told you, don’t use that name.” I said, “It’s too late, Mother. Everyone knows me by that name.”

So yes, although in the Medicare world, I am Maxine Amalia Mesa-Bains—again because, unless I legally change my name, they go by your first name. But Amalia is just—I’ve been Amalia so long. And I was saying to Richard the other day, it’s almost kind of like a brand because I’m so ubiquitous that people say it as [if] it’s one word: Amaliamesabains. And I think it’s really funny because it took so many years for me to get people to pronounce it correctly—Amelia, Amaylia. Now, finally, they know it’s Amalia.

CG: That’s just so interesting that you’re referring to [yourself] in this conversation with your husband, Richard, because when you think of even the artist’s name and even your name, as you’re saying, it sometimes does sound like one word, one brand. And at the same time, it has all of these connotations that you just provided—about even Maxine Amalia Mesa and now Bains and everything in between—legal name. So I appreciate you just explaining that a little bit further.

When you think of your upbringing, Santa Clara, your parents, what are some of those memories that you have of those times, especially when you were just a kid, when you were starting to just go to school, just understanding yourself as a growing human? What were some of those memories that you have of those times?

AM-B: The first is primarily being in a very large extended family. My father had many brothers and sisters. And we all live near each other. And up until I went to school and even partway into school, I never socialized with anyone but my relatives, because there were so many. And many of my cousins, we were in the same age range.

But the other thing I remember, and I didn’t have a word for it, was anxiety and a bit of fear. My parents were undocumented. My father came in the Mexican Revolution. He was born in 1913. So he came across around 1917 with my grandmother and his infant brother, Luis, and three uncles, José, Jesús, and Rosendo.

And unfortunately, my grandfather, Rafael, my grandmother’s, husband—was on the wrong side of the revolution because he worked for the army in the commissary getting goods. He was executed before they came across. And consequently, my grandmother erased that family history because it was so traumatic. And they burned the family papers. And at one point, she had somewhat of an emotional breakdown. Her brothers were in a military school.

And finally, as the revolution sort of roared up by 2017, they left the school and they found her. And she was cleaning houses, which was an aghast kind of feeling for them, because they were middle-class. Her father was a pharmacist. I don't know what her mother did.

Their whole lives changed, and she brought them all here. She was twenty years old. And they made their way. Their first posting during the work program, which the US government was doing then, was in Pueblo, Colorado. And so she settled there for a while.

My childhood was fraught with this feeling that I had to be so careful. And I didn't know why, because they didn't use terms like "illegal" or "undocumented," just to be careful. And I realized much later why. And my parents actually didn't even get a green card until the 1970s, I think, because my friends were making movies about the *migra* (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) making these big sweeps in San Francisco in the sewing—well, I guess they wouldn't call them businesses.

And so everything about those early years had to do with being careful, not causing trouble, and never, never having anybody official come to the house. And even as a child, when I had to fill out a form at the school, which was, I guess, how they got their money—they counted the students. You'd have to put where you were born and where your parents were born. And I knew where I was born. But I didn't want to write Mexico. So I just sit there with my pencil. And the teachers would come along: "Oh, honey, you know your mom and dad were born in America. You just put 'US.'"

I thought, "Well, I'm not lying because they told me to do it." So I put US. I remember having a conversation with my mother when I was taking a civics class. I think it was maybe the eighth grade. I don't remember when it was. And I said to her, am I American? She goes, "*Mija*, of course you're American. You were born here."

And I said, "So you're American?" She goes, "Well, no. Your father and I were Mexican." And I said, "Am I Mexican?" She said, "Of course you're Mexican." it was like, OK. And then eventually, I came to the conclusion of Mexican American. But that took a long time.

So for me, she kind of was a saving grace, because I just didn't want all the rest of it. And also, you learn really early on. Remember, I'm born in the forties, post-war, people coming back, GI forum. It's not a happy place for Mexicans or Blacks.

And I got it. I got the lesson real early that I wasn't American. And people would say, "Are you a Spanish girl?" And I'd say, "No, I'm Mexican," which to them was a bad word. They'd say, "Oh, no, honey, you're Spanish," because I was almost five feet, six inches, I was fairly light-

skinned, and they were trying to be nice to me. But in a way, it was an insult to my family. So yeah, being a Chicana was a good, good, good thing.

CG: Thank you for just introducing a lot of family history. But also, you got into something else that I wanted to ask you, which is you—not only as a critic, as a scholar, as an artist, as a teacher, but in terms of your own identity—one of the most important things that I think you’ve done in your contributions is the understanding of Chicano, the understanding of Chicana, of Latino, of what this has meant and continues to mean and why we’re still in the same conversation.

In many senses, it has changed the words and the expressions and the lexicon. But at the same time, we’re still ongoing with these conversations. So when you think of this perception of yourself but also of others and then really understanding the word Chicano, when it came, what did it mean to you as a person? Because it feels like there’s enough documented of what you’ve done about it. And I feel like that’s excellent, and I can ask you about it. But to you as a person, what did it mean to reclaim some of these things?

AM-B: Oh, I’ll try not to cry. It was like being lost and being found. I spent so many years when I was younger, before college and high school especially, trying to be white. And I was obviously not fooling anybody.

I was very, very popular. All of my friends were white. But all the Mexicanas that I knew, knew my family. We were really related through compadrazgo. But I sat in one part of the cafeteria in high school, and they sat in the other.

And when I would run for office, they would come and tell me, “It’s OK, Amalia. I’m going to vote for you.” But we all knew that I was in this privileged place and they were not, and they weren’t going to be angry at me for it because they understood it. But I was angry at myself later, when I realized that in a certain way I had kind of disrespected my upbringing by trying so hard to be white.

By the time I got to college, I was in a rage. Probably, some people would say I am still in a rage. But anyway, I did finally come to the conclusion that I couldn’t fit into a white world. And then I met Richard. Richard’s African American.

This was in the sixties. He was involved in the Congress of Racial Equality. And he can speak without a dialect. So he would call to rent rooms, and we’d be around the corner. And they’d say, “Oh, yes, come right over, Mr. Bains.” Then when he’d show up we being Black and Mexican, they’d say it was rented.

And he'd say, "Well, I called you five minutes ago, so I don't understand how that happened, because I've been watching, there's no one here." He's the person that opened the door to me that I had an option to not be white.

Luis Valdez was in school with me at the same time. And other Teatro campesinos were at San Jose State. I was also at San Jose State. They lived next door to me and I used to watch them rehearse.

So then this sort of idea came to me. Ah, what is that? Because they didn't want to look white. They didn't care to be white. And then the word Chicano started popping up. And I still didn't quite get it till we moved to San Francisco in the "Summer of Love," by then we were hippies then and Richard was a rock musician.

And I went to the Galería la Raza. I think it was probably by about '71. And I had a mentor in the Teacher Corps program, Yolanda Garfias-Woo, that I was a part of in the late sixties—'69, '71. And she was friends with Ralph Maradiaga and René Yañez at the Galería. And I met the *Mujeres Muralistas* there. And for the first time, I thought, Oh, that's it. I can be a Chicana. Then it was like everything else was OK.

And it's odd, because it's terminology that's come into favor, gone out of favor. They do shows about post-Chicano as though we're dead or something. And then it comes back again around, because every generation goes through some aspect of that Chicanization to get to the idea of justice and the self-determination. And for me, it's never been an identity that I was willing to shed. And people often ask me about it, because I negotiate my life at fairly high levels in major museums.

When Richard was working with the symphony—so very wealthy people. Sometimes they asked me, "Oh, what is your background?" I said, "Oh, I'm Chicana." And then they just kind of go, "Oh, you're Mexican?" I said, "No, no, I was born in the US." "Oh, you're American." "Nope, nope, nope."

I've come around to the idea that it's a broad enough identity for me that all the other things can fit in it. It's OK, and especially around my work, because I know that people view it as Latinx or they view it as spiritual work or feminist work. And that's fine. I'm agreeing to all of it, as long as I keep what I consider the sort of core identity.

My PhD's in clinical psych. My dissertation was on the construction of identity among a group of ten Chicana artists. I was lucky enough to be there when Erik Erikson was teaching. And a lot of his work on identity has been very, very useful to me. Identity is kind of a specialty of mine and probably because I struggled so hard to find the right one.

You have a first identity that, of course, comes from your family. But your second option on identity usually comes right around your teen years. And that's when you break from your family. And then you decide who you really are. And that was what—and I was late in that because there was no Chicano identity then. So I just sort of took Mexican American, for lack of a better terminology.

Yes it's served me well, you know? I'm kind of a difficult person sometimes, I think, in the sense that if I think something's wrong, well, I just will say that. There's a website called Chicana Chingonas. I'm so proud to be on it. Because it's probably one of the differentiating qualities.

If you look at early work on the study of Mexican women as submissive, you could never, never describe a Chicana as submissive. And Chicana doesn't necessarily mean you were born in the US, although that's sometimes part of it. [Guillermo] Gómez-Peña, [Enrique] Chagoya, both of these artists, they came here from Mexico. They were adults, and they just became Chicanos because it was the right way for them. And they still remain Mexican because that's fundamental to them.

But identity is very fluid. But there are certain basic constructs. And mine is Chicana. That's it for the end. Never going to change it.

CG: Thank you for—you connected a lot of dots because there's Luis Valdez. There's Richard. There's meeting the Mujeres, meeting René Yañez, Ralph Maradiaga. There's all of these people throughout your life that either were instrumental in being a mirror or a window to you in terms of how you perceived yourself.

And when I think of this beautiful reflection that you just gave, which not only is it something that [you] studied to the utmost degree, a dissertation, your PhD, which you got at the Wright Institute in Berkeley—the interesting aspect of it all is that identity still plays out a big role in you. And it's just beautiful to hear all of these reflections on “I am Chicana.”

And that's the basis that I am still going back to. And there's some kind of, I would say, some kind of harmony in that, some balance in having something to go back to, especially with all of the things that you were describing of even these things where sometimes, things that you had to reclaim for yourself—or even [just] claim. What does Chicana mean today to Amalia Mesa-Bains?

AM-B: Well, one, you have to remember I'm in the founding generation. I just turned seventy-eight. And so I've seen at least—let's see, how many—two, almost three more generations after me, many of whom I've taught or mentored. And so I've watched the evolution of it.

For me, it means that Chicana is sort of solid enough and broad enough to sort of take in the history that I've had, the lived history. And I am nontraditional. I never had children. Some people who know me very well would call me a sort of Francophile. Or I love British things. I do tea parties all the time.

So I don't let it limit—like I don't have to have nopales for breakfast every morning. I don't have to raise my fist. I feel like I helped make this identity and we made it big enough for me and anyone who wants to be part of it. And so I've lucked out, because the generations that have come, people like Jennifer González or—oh, my gosh—Gilbert Vicario. They are all an extension of those different values.

But in a way, each generation redefines itself. It's so wonderful. So now the Chicax Latinx—and I've been luckily involved in that because some of the young people that I've had a chance to talk with and work with are very inclusive because I have kept a really good history of things.

So I write about the history of those moments because they need to know that. They need to know they're not the first. Every time you try to kick that door in, you've got to know somebody else was there before you. And maybe they move the door a little bit, and you might be the one that'll get it all the way open. You don't know.

So I think that the capacity to follow issues of justice is so Chicana. It's just fundamental. It's put us in a room with something that's going wrong, and one of us will stand up, because that is the legacy of being a Chicana. You stand for something.

When people ask me to be in a show, my first question is What's the premise of the show? Who else is in the show? I feel like my name means something. And I'm not going to let somebody use it for purposes that are oppositional to the things that I believe in. This is a wonderful, wonderful time. I've been paying attention.

And new fellowships [are] out. Yolanda López, who's not well right now, and I think people know it, but she's near to the end of her life. She received a \$50,000 fellowship from the US [Latinx Art] Forum. And these are people like Adriana Zavala and someone I mentored, Mary Thomas, Rose Salseda. All these young women have been able to lobby the Mellon, the Ford, and gotten money to give to an intergenerational Latinx.

And see, that's the story. Our communities don't turn their back on the elders, just the same way our families rarely do. But even the communities don't do it. These young scholars that come to see me or interview me or who do dissertations on my work, they just give me such hope.

So for me to be Chicana now is even better than it was when I started—one, because I have more resources and because I can see that the end of my life will come to something. I just sold my archive to Stanford. I know the things that we've done together, and we have.

I mean, Carmen Lomas Garza and I, and Yolanda and Ester [Hernández], we've been together as friends since the seventies, almost forty years—no, more, forty-five. And we don't see each other all the time. But you can pick up the phone and call somebody. And right away it's like we're back there again.

And now we see young people not like us—because they're very different because it's a different *onda* (vibe), a different moment. It can't stay the same. I look at myself, the resources I have now. That changed everything. And that's just been a slow grind over the years and mainly because Richard's really good with that managing and I'm not.

So I just say, OK, I make the art. You figure out what we should do with it. And no, being Chicana is like a really good moment now, especially because at my age, I've had many, many illnesses and accidents, things that have stopped me for a period of time. But I get back up again. And I keep going.

And now, I am looking at a retrospective. It will happen the year I turn eighty. And so I have yet another goal that will keep me going for another few years. And it will travel, so that's another few years. So I have to say that I've probably managed my entire life based on exhibitions and production and writing.

It's sort of like people have children, and their lives go by their children. And these are the things I made. They're like my children. And that's how I keep going.

So I have a really good feeling in this time about having held on to this identity for myself. I never had any instinct to ever be anything else. Everything else is like Chicana plus. It just got added on. That's all.

CG: The way that you reflect on, I would say, Yolanda López, Ester Hernández, all of these people that I just feel fortunate that this project has taken me to talk to them, to both Yolanda just as she had just started chemo, to Ester a few weeks ago. All of them, as you're saying, you have these friendships. But sometimes they're more than friendships. And

they're lifelong human connections that happen to be so meaningful to you just even in the way that you talk about them and in the way that they also have talked about you and others.

And I am just at awe, in awe of you saying these things about not only how you perceive your own Chicana identity and their identity as well, but how you're paving the way for a lot of people even to this day. And you have this retrospective that you're saying that it's going to come out once you're eighty. And it's going to be traveling.

I'm glad that you have that as well, because I feel like one of the most interesting things that I've seen about your work is not only that it's work that is exhibited. It's always a gift. And the gift concept—because that's an interesting thing that I feel is very important to say about someone like Yolanda López, like Amalia Mesa-Bains and Ester Hernández, is you all are very conceptual artists.

And when I think of very specific gifts that you've given are your *ofrendas*, your *ofrendas* are a gift. And at the same time, they bring people in to give back to the piece as well, to an extent, which is a very complicated thing to do unless you have this kind of very interconnected artistry that you have.

When I think of this retrospective that is coming up, I also think of your many, many exhibitions, including at the Smithsonian Museum of Art currently. You have that *ofrenda* for Dolores del Río that is fascinating as a piece that they chose. And it's fascinating also because I feel like it speaks a lot about that Chicana that you just described and many more things that you just connected.

So I guess I'll just leave it at that. Other places that your exhibitions have happened, my home country of Colombia, for example. And you have others like, for example, Ireland, Sweden, and just Scandinavia and just Europe and England, France, Spain, Venezuela, which happens to be right next to my home country.

When you think of all of these—we can call them achievements. I also just would see them as you just saw it, just like your babies are going places.

AM-B: Yes, they do.

CG: And not only do they go places, they engage with each population. And they bring something new to those places, sometimes places that might have the same skewed perception media has had in the United States, perceived around the world, of even those identities.

You're combating that by just being present in these ways. How do you think of these babies, as you were referring to [them], or as these exhibitions that travel with your ideas and your work?

AM-B: Well, the funniest part of it all is my babies take me with them. They don't go without mama, because nobody else puts it up but me. So somewhere along the line, I didn't have this plan or anything, because I never have had a plan for almost anything. I find things and things happen, and then I go, oh, that looks like a really good opportunity. Let me do that. But what happened with them is because I installed them myself—and I'm not a Sol LeWitt or somebody who has a numbered thing and you follow this and that. No one can do them but me. On a rare occasion, when I was so ill, one of the pieces that went to Copenhagen someone else installed.

But generally speaking—I've gone to all those places except for the Bogotá one, because I was ill with the pulmonary disease then. I think that was '92. And I got sick around '91. And that was Carolina Ponce de León [who] was at the Biblioteca [Nacional] there. And she's somebody that I knew. We had met in New York. So she talked to me on the phone. And she said—and there were only, I think there were only two Chicanos in the whole show. It was Chagoya and myself. And I think all the rest were Latin Americans. And that has been an issue for me not of my choosing.

For example, that show traveled to Venezuela. And they were going to do a conference. And because I'm a scholar, I was invited. Then I was uninvited because one of the other scholars felt that I was a North American and I had no reason—there was no reason for me to be there.

Whatever you say, I'm not going there. And several years later, it happened to me two times in a row with the ARCO Fair that is usually in Spain. And one year, they were doing North Americans. And the curator put me in. And then somebody who was reviewing it, said, "No, she's a Latina." So out I went.

And then the second year, they were doing Latin Americans. And they even used my image on the cover of their little brochure or whatever it was. And then at the last minute: "No, she's North American." And then I didn't go there, either. So these other places are places where—and it's interesting. Spain, France, Turkey, oh, no, Turkey was—that was another disaster. Yeah, England. We're very popular in England, very popular in France, the Chicanos or Mexicamericans. And there were never any problems there.

And in fact, those are some of the best times. Oh, Ireland. I was in a show that was a Mexican-Irish show called *Distant Relations*. I did a month's residency at the [Irish Museum

of] Modern Art in Dublin. So those places I find are very receptive because, in certain countries, they've shared a very similar experience.

When I was in Dublin, I did a piece called *Circle of Ancestors*. And they had Coyolxauhqui and Sor Juana. But they were all chairs. And their mirrored backs have an image in it. And so they set up my chairs. And then they invited a group of older seniors—because I like to, I always say, “Well, if I’m going to be there, will you set me up some sort of community project?”

So I had two, one with unwed mothers and the other with the—and the seniors sat with their chairs in between my chairs. And as I explained to them each age—the colonial age, the revolutionary age, the immigration to US—they had similar stories from their families and some, of course, because of their age that they had experienced.

And I knew that this work was not foreign to them. They have all gone through—I mean, the Irish revolution is far, well, as profound as the Mexican. And where I was staying, ironically, was just a stone’s throw from the jail where, in 1922 [during] the uprising, the revolutionaries were executed. And [in] the place that I stayed I kept having these terrible nightmares. And so I told the women at the museum, which had been originally an old person’s home for British soldiers when they occupied. So I said, “Is there something about the place I’m staying in?” She said, “Well, they’re converted stables.” And I said, “Oh.”

And she said, “When the troubles happened and things blew up, they caught on fire. And many of the horses burned.” Because I told her, “I have these dreams of fire, sometimes a boat sinking—really traumatic things. And I don’t understand.” So she said, “Oh, you were probably just sensing the turmoil that’s basically within the context of that place.”

And I’m a big follower of Edward Soja and Michael Deere and many of the other theorists on space because as Chicanos, we’re always displaced. And I’m always trying to figure out where are we? Soja says, “No place is empty when you reach it through the ghosts of those who came before.”

And I knew it then. I thought, oh, that’s why I feel this way. And I was very lucky. They took a group of us to Belfast. And I got to stand at the grave of Bobby Sands. And I had followed those hunger strikes all that time because to them, to me, they were like the Palestinians. They were like us. They were like the Native Americans. They were people who fought and fought and fought for independence. And they died for it.

And then I got to see the murals that were there. And there was one for San Patricio’s [Battalion]. So yes, all these places that I’ve gone to have taught me things not just about

myself, but about the world and that the things that we as Chicanos have faced is not so different than what happens in other places of the world.

It made me much more—I wouldn't use the word cosmopolitan, almost the opposite—much more provincial, thinking, Ah, so we are not alone. This is the battle that goes on around the world. We're doing it again now. And sometimes it's like self-determination. And sometimes it's civil war. And sometimes I think it's greed on the part of society.

But whatever it is, we are not alone. You know that old saying that Chicanos love? I didn't cross the border; the border crossed me. Many, many Chicanos that I know, especially [in] places like New Mexico, their families have been there generations. I'm fairly new. My family came in during the Mexican Revolution. But oh, no, I know people who go way back. My partner for a long time, my writing partner, and he did installations, Victor Zamudio-Taylor. He was part of a tribe that—[after] the Mexican-American War and the annexation—was given in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo special permission of free travel back and forth on the border.

But of course, that was all undone within years after the treaty. But for a long time, they still held with that. So we're like an internal colonial in many respects, because our ancestors were here when others came. And you just sort of get used to thinking about it in that way.

And that goes back to the earlier idea about what does it mean to be Chicano? It means to hold to these perceptions that were so well-defined. Juan Gómez-Quiñones, Tomás Almaguer, these people, they wrote stories theoretically years and years ago in the sixties and seventies.

Juan Gómez-Quiñones once said, and I think he was talking about Chicanos in California, "The people who are most interested in the issues of identity are those who are most risk of losing it." In other words, furthest away from the core. The whole Chicano movement was organized around really resistance and affirmation. And dead in the center was cultural reclamation.

It was our job to go back and get the things we either willingly gave up or were taken from us and make them part of our everyday lives, whether that was maintaining our altars or doing *limpias* (cleanups). I kept those traditions, which had been partly in my family to begin with. So it wasn't really that they were completely lost. But I wasn't interested in them when I was young. I only got interested in them after the fact.

CG: I think one of the most important things you've brought up is these ideas on sense of place. Edward Soja and a lot of these very important theorists on postmodern geography

have really made us understand spaces and places in ways that keep changing and that are as important as history itself is. If anything, [they] have made us understand how history is or has been the predominant way of looking at things when geography sometimes can be even more insidious, even more important, in the ways that it reclaims or claims power.

And among those is where are we from? What are the things that we are attached to in these places? Speaking of that specifically, and we were talking a little bit about this just before we started this conversation, you lived in a very specific urban area for a few decades. And that kind of place and its changes also change you.

You were saying the saying of Chicanos of “I didn’t cross the border; the border crossed me.” This kind of thing also happens with places that we live in, not only these experiences. When you think of your time in San Francisco, the Greater Bay Area, what do you think of the place these days? And of course, I’ll ask you more about the Mission after this. But what specifically do you remember of these changes in you and you changing the place?

AM-B: I go all the way back to [when] we arrived there in San Francisco. Richard was born there. So he had a much better sense of it. And I’d never lived in a city. I was born in Santa Clara, but that was where the hospital was. We lived—my father was a farmworker then. And we lived on a ranch. And I really had never really much ever been in a city. San Jose was the biggest place, and it was tiny then. So San Francisco was a revelation to me. And we went there during what is now lovingly called the Summer of Love. And I would say we were hippies in the sense that he was a musician, and I was an artisan.

And we lived a very bohemian in our lifestyle. I think the first house we lived in was condemned. And so we hooked everything back up and stayed there for a while. And then over the years, we went from being these kind of young—we didn’t call [ourselves] radicals. But we were outside the norm.

And then eventually, you have to get a job. I went into Teacher Corps because I thought I would open one of those little *escuelas en la comunidad*, an open-air art one. And I went and talked to some people who ran art schools. And they said, “Well, you should really look at public schools first to learn what not to do.”

And so I went into Teacher Corps, which is a two-year program. And you get a master’s in education, interdisciplinary education, and a lifetime teaching credential. And I hit the jackpot. My team leader who became my mentor and my lifelong friend is Yolanda Garfias Woo.

Yolanda Garfias Woo, really, there's someone everyone should interview once in their life, because she is like—there's no one in the world like her. She's a little older than me. So she's in her eighties now. I think she's eighty-three. But she was from a Oaxacan family. So she's a very accomplished person. She did backstrap loom. She introduced me to the world of Mesoamerican culture. She introduced me to Indigenous craft and folk art. She introduced me to the Galería. She introduced me to so many things that I think on my own—I don't know if I would have found it. So next to my parents and Richard, she is the most transformative person in my life. And she's aging now, and life is hard for her. But we talk. I check on her. She introduced me to the Mission. And that's sort of how I found the Mission.

After finishing the MA in education, I ended up really teaching in the public system, SFUSD. I taught there from '69 to '89. So I taught twenty years. And I taught everything from preschool—when I was in graduate school, I took the preschool because they could change the hours for you. You could take different shifts. I taught elementary. And I was a demonstration teacher for middle school and high school because I ran the court-ordered desegregation program, which meant that I had to write curriculum and do teacher training to very, very resistant and recalcitrant teachers who were mostly white, mostly over fifty, and mostly never ever had to teach kids of color. And because of the busing and everybody moving around, their whole lives changed overnight. And they had no real tools or skills for doing that. So that was our job. And in those years, I became very engaged in the sort of workings of the larger city.

I was an arts commissioner for a number of years. I was on the board of the Mexican Museum, the Center for the Yerba Buena Gardens, the Galería de la Raza, and a few smaller ones. And so over that time, we went to live in [the Mission by that] time, [and] that was the first house we ever bought. We went to live in the Mission. On the same block at the school was my first student teaching. And [back] then, it was called LeConte when I taught there. But Leonard Flynn, the principal, had died very young and they renamed the school for him.

It was wonderful to live in the Mission. We were just a few blocks from the Galería. Richard and I were on the board of the Galería for eighteen years. Richard was the president for that long. If anything happened, like a *borrachito* (a drunk) fell against the window that was wired and the alarm went off, the police would call us, and we would run over and see what was going [on]. Because we lived closest to it of anybody at the Galería.

Those were golden days. There were no rules. You did whatever you wanted. It was like a home place for artists. The Galería was like the safe haven. bell hooks writes about it sometimes. She talks about home place. And it's kind of—I'm paraphrasing it badly—but it's like a place where the people you need to help you and take care of you will always be.

And the Galería was like that. You could go there any Saturday. Gerardo Mosquera from Cuba might be there. Felipe Ehrenberg from Mexico might be there. People from the Southwest—everybody passed through there. ASCO would come in from LA. And then later when Guillermo Gómez-Peña started, the Border Arts Workshop, they would come there. People stayed with us all the time, Patssi [Valdez] and Gronk and GGP, Felipe, all of them, because we had a house by then. We were the only ones that had a house. And so we were famous because we had a downstairs room with a fireplace. And everybody went there. It was a wonderful time and we grew up there.

When I became arts commissioner, it became more difficult for me because people had expectations of me. And I'd worked primarily for the Galería and the Mexican Museum. And sometimes we would make alliances with the Mission Cultural Center. Because our Day of the Dead took—they started at Mission Cultural Center and went down Mission, up 24th, and ended at the Galería de la Raza.

And when we started it, it was just a little processional. The Galería did it in, I think, the park on Harrison. And then it kept getting bigger. And then we went through this period where Anglos, people not within the culture, loved it. And at first, they came being really respectful.

And then before we knew it, they turned it into Halloween. And we finally stopped doing it. And that was before I left. That was in the eighties when, maybe it was close to the nineties, when there were four thousand people. And we had to hire security patrols. And it just wasn't the same Day of the Dead anymore.

And those are the parts of it that I loved. I loved it being so central for everyone. And everybody knew everybody. But I also knew that in time, it would change. And it did.

We left before the gentrification began. And I remember Ester gave me a tape with cars backfir[ing], guns, sirens. And she said, "Look, miija, you take this because that place you're going to, they've got no sounds at all." She was right. It was quiet as, not here, but on campus. So I used to play my tape at night. And then she would say, "So now are you coming home?" And every year, "So now are you coming home?" And finally, I said, "You know what? We're not coming home. We changed homes."

It was hard not going back. But that's the joy of a long, long life—you keep changing. And once I went to the university and started the art program there, I rarely had a chance to do as many exhibits as I had done before. But the days in San Francisco, I think of them as glory days.

I can still drive around and point at buildings I know I helped build, you know, this center, that museum. Because when I was on the commission, we were the ones they went to for money. And I was involved in lots of fundraising.

Richard was at the symphony then. Richard was the Director of the Education Programs and Youth Orchestra. So he too traveled around the world. He traveled to Europe, all over Europe, Asia, and so sometimes we would meet in other countries. I had a biennial in Turkey, and we met there. Then we went to Rome and to Florence.

We've had a very—a wider arc than we could have ever imagined. We both came from working-class families. His mother and my mother were both maids. His father and my father were both gardeners.

I think he faced more direct racism than I could have withstood, but he's a very calm person. So he takes everything in stride. And over the years—when we started, we had no money at all. I mean, really, like they say, [we didn't have] two nickels to rub together. We would do things like buy a couch and then sell it later for double. And then we would buy something else, sell. And eventually, we had enough money to put down on a house. And Richard's brother, who's a very great entrepreneur, helped us. And those years seem far to me [compared to] where we are now—not just by age but by experience.

But they're also those times when you're becoming who you will be. And the relationships I made then, my comadres and compadres, they will stay with me forever. And I was very grown. I was over fifty when I came to the university. And I have many dear friends there that I still see. But it's not the same because the process of development as a human being—by the time you're fifty, many things are set. But when you're twenty and twenty-five, they're not. And those years at the Galería were really like a very large extended family, because it wasn't a museum or a gallery, really, not at all.

It was just—not like the Mexican Museum was. They would not let you hang out there. At the Galería, we'd wear out a couch and get a new couch. Well, it was a secondhand couch. And babies grew up there—Maria Pindo, who ran the store had her first child and we had a playpen in the back for the baby.

Eva García, who's Lorraine García's sister—the García sisters were there often because they were great friends of René's. And Eva became our resident billboard artist. She was this fabulous, sexy, petite, tough gal. She looked like a chola—big hair, big eyebrows. And she passed away. And after she died—she died very young. I don't even think she was forty. We hung up her leopard coat and put her little *chanclas* (slippers) on a shelf. So that was the shrine to her.

And then Ralph died. That was like—it felt like the end of the world because Ralph was really the leader of the Galería. And we had close relationships between the Galería and the Mexican Museum because Peter Rodríguez had been one of the founders of the Galería. And we were there when he founded the Mexican Museum in 1975.

Mission Cultural Center—I had an association with it because as an arts commissioner, I managed it. So the Bayview Hunters Point, the one in Western addition, and the one in the Mission were all kind of white elephants. They pretended they were giving it to the community, but basically it was just giving you an empty building you couldn't afford to run. If the elevator broke, it might be three years before the elevator would [be fixed]. Heating—forget it. It was always cold because we couldn't afford the heating bills. So I learned about municipal politics.

We started the first Democratic Arts Political Club. Yeah, there were times where things were all possible and gentrification hadn't come, nor had Silicon Valley. And so when Silicon Valley came and those people moved into the Mission, that was it. You saw those big Google buses going by. And they would buy two or three houses so they wouldn't have any neighbors. And then they would just make these gigantic sort of palaces. Now I hear they've landed in Austin and they're doing the same thing.

So those years in San Francisco were very defining for Richard and I, in terms of our professional life, our personal life. Juan Fuentes and his wife, Michelle, they come often to see us. And we see a lot of people who want to get out of the city for a week in the country. And they just stay. This house is very huge. It has three bedrooms downstairs. So people can come and stay. And that's nice because then I don't get lonely here because I like the quiet of it. That changes.

But I think that's as much age as place. I was one of those FOMO people—fear of missing out. If there was anything, I would drag myself there. My entire career can be explained by that, the fear of missing out. I went everywhere because I always thought, What are they doing? Wait a minute. I want to find out what that is. And so I did. And I was lucky because lots of people helped me. That's the thing nobody ever knows. Your life is a combination of opportunities and angels, people who step in and help you. And you don't even know they do it until years later.

When I got the MacArthur, I found out at least three years later how many people recommended me that I had no idea. One told me, [and] he wasn't supposed to. But all the rest, nobody said a word. I found out way, way, way later.

CG: One of the things that I want to ask you [about] is the MacArthur. But before I ask you about the MacArthur and these other honors and at the same time opportunities, there's a couple of things that I want to ask you regarding people you've mentioned and people that you've mentioned even before in other interviews or you've said have been instrumental in your life.

One of them was Ralph Maradiaga and your time in the Galería de la Raza together. And you mentioned Luis Valdez earlier, too. And I feel like these are two people that are very important for you as a person and in the way that you also remember your time with them. What are some of those anecdotes or things that come to mind when you think of Luis Valdez and Ralph Maradiaga?

AM-B: Well, Luis, he doesn't remember me from San Jose State, but I remember him because we were taking a course on the romantic literature of England. I told you I was a British fan. And so he would come in—and he was a theater person, of course. And he would come in. And he would wear these flak jackets, like army jackets. He was in his Venceremos moment then—big, black Ray-Bans.

They also live here in San Juan Bautista, and we see them at the post office and we see them at the grocery store.

And we say, every year, oh, we're going to get together. But he's always gone or we're always gone. So he was in his beginning years then. He had just formed [El] Teatro [Campesino]. I remember going to the premiere of *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*.

But the thing I remember the most—I loved Keats, Shelley, and Byron, yes. But Keats was my guy. So he would start reading [in] that sonorous voice of his, “The globed peonies . . .” I felt like I would just faint.

He scared me because I was still trailing out of the wannabe whiteness thing. And he was so *mero mero* (the greatest). He was just right in your face. And he would just—when he would come in, I would kind of turn the other way. He would just make me so nervous. And then, eventually, I got what he was doing.

He was doing the *actos* (one-act plays) then. And he just started with the Teatro Campesino. And then, over the years, of course, our lives would always intersect. We were in the Califas Conference. What was that? Like '83?

When Richard was at the symphony, Luis did the reading of *Peter and the Wolf* for us because we asked him. And we would see him and Lupe at big dinners and events and stuff,

and when we went to CSUMB [California State University Monterey Bay], he was there running teledramatic arts and technology.

And so the Teatro went through many changes over the years. And it was a sort of a grounding for many, many Latino actors and actresses and directors that went through there. So we would—since we moved here, we go every year for Christmas to the Christmas plays and sometimes for the Day of the Dead. And then when he has big events, we would go out to the Teatro.

When I see him, he always makes me laugh because he just—it's like every time, we start all over again. "Amalia, what have you been doing?" And I tell him, OK, what have I been doing? And I do this and I do that. And we sometimes are in the same award ceremonies together. And I've watched him get old. And I marvel at his talent and his ability. He's just—he's one of a kind. There'll never, never be another.

I think that we were the generation—and this is an Erikson thing, but it's really true. He says that for some people at some moments in history, the individual's life history will cross at a sort of a stage of development that's critical with the life history of the group they belong to. And when that nexus occurs, it's like an opening in the world.

And the bad examples are the Nazi youth. And the good examples are the Black Panthers or, for me, the Chicanos. And he says that when that opening occurs, a leadership will rise up who by a combination of unruliness—that's the key word—giftedness, and talent will go on to change the identity of the group. And it really is true.

I see Luis that way. I see Judy that way. La Baca is like—nobody is ever going to top that. She's a brilliant organizer, she's a brilliant artist, and she's relentless. She never stops. And she never takes a break, and I worry about her, but we all choose our paths. I started getting sick before everyone else when I got the cardiopulmonary [disease] and then later, when we had the automobile accident—really, both times [I was] very close to death. And then this last time, having to have the implant in my heart, the valve implant. And each time, I bounced back because I got my father's DNA.

But some of them have had their moments. Judy's been sick a few times, but not near death. Luis, if he is, he keeps it to himself. But of course, he's got Lupe. She watches over him. Oh, she's a wonderful woman.

So those people and Ralph—well, if I wasn't married to Richard, I would have begged Ralph to marry me. But he had a girlfriend. She was much older than him. I can't tell the story publicly, but it's a fantastic story. And she was anonymous because we weren't supposed to know

who she was. So she would call the Galería and she would say, “I would like to speak with my friend Ralph.” And we’d put the phone down. “Ralph, it’s your friend.” We would get so excited. And then we’d all try to listen in. He’d try to drag the phone—because that’s when you had [phone] cords. He’d go to the other room.

In my opinion, there would be no Galería without Ralph. Ralph was the ground. He was the ballast. He was the roots. He was the foundation. He wrote the grants. He often helped to develop the shows. And he maintained the relationships with the more traditional artists, because René was an innovator and a bit of an impresario. And he loved all the big groups, like ASCO and Border Arts Workshop and all these different groups. And he hated mariachi music.

After the mural phase was over, he was through with that. He was always moving forward into contemporary. He did our first national collaboration with—what was it called? Art de Moda or something like that [Fashion Moda]. It was in the Bronx, in New York, with Joe Lewis, who I’m still friends with.

But he would bring these groups in. And they were pretty outrageous shows. So René had that part of it. But the whole thing ran because Ralph was there every day. Ralph was always writing the grants. He’s the one that got to do Frida, because he knew Pele de Lappe. And he knew Emmy Lou Packard. And I think he knew Lucienne Dimitroff Bloch. So when we started the Frida book, which was around—he died in ’85. We started it in our run-up to the Frida show in ’78. So we must have started doing the interviews around ’77.

And we went to see Lucienne Dimitroff Bloch and her husband, Stephen, who had been [one of] Rivera’s assistants on the Detroit mural. And they’re the ones that discovered that the Rockefeller people had jackhammered the mural in New York because they found the garbage cans with the little, teeny, tiny pieces of the mural. And they went and got Diego, and he said something like, “Oh, that’s how rich people are.” Of course, he always wanted to be a rich [person], and maybe he was. I don’t know. But they were wonderful. And they told us many stories about Frida. And then Emmy Lou Packard just lived down the block from us.

She had been with Rivera since she was very young. I think her father was an agrarian advisor to Mexico, something like that. So she was taken to Rivera when she was thirteen and took her first art lessons with him. And she helped him refurbish a couple of pieces. But most of all, her relationship was with Frida, because she lived with them when they went back after they married the second time.

Ralph was the source of all of that kind of art historical interest. And he was a great dancer. The last image I have of him, it was my birthday. And I must have been forty-two. And he was

there, and he was dancing. And he died about a week later, I think. He was just jogging. And he collapsed on his front steps. And I always remember the day because the Galería was the reverse of it—was at the end. So the Galería was on the small side, and the store was on the big side. And we were in the gallery. I think it was me and maybe Katie. And René and Maria came running in. I knew the minute I saw them [that] something really bad had happened.

They explained that Ralph had died. Everybody was totally shocked. It was like the world ended. And then they rushed over there because his family had never been supportive of his artwork, even though he ran the Galería and even though he had gotten an MFA from Stanford in film, and even though he had founded Cine Acción, and even though he was just a leader in the field, there was a moment where it looked like the dumpster was coming. And they were going to throw everything out. And then René remembered that Ralph often took the files from the Galería home to work on them. So he and Maria rushed over. And they went through his whole studio and got all the files they could find and then talked to the family to tell them how important he was.

And then the opposite happened. They got really greedy and thought they could make money. And they wouldn't donate any pieces. And then, eventually, he had a younger nephew who really adored him. He talked the family into donating Ralph's work, I think, to San Francisco City College

Ralph was a leader. But most of all, he was the last of the really great gentlemen. He had that quality about him. And those people were part of my life for decades. It was very hard to leave San Francisco because then you see people, but you don't see them as often. And they go on with their lives, and you go on with yours. And it was a new stage for us.

Basically, Richard took me out of there because he said that he thought the stress that I was experiencing on the arts commission and on the Center for the Arts—everybody wants you to do something—had caused me to have this cardiopulmonary disease, which they told him I wouldn't survive if I didn't have a heart-lung transplant. But they were wrong. And I didn't have that. But I did end up with a heart implant. So anyway, that's why we left. And it wasn't like I had time to think it out or get ready to leave. Or maybe you just don't get ready to leave. Maybe you just leave. But they're still foundational.

I worked on the Ralph Maradiaga show, helped curate that. And Patricia [Rodriguez] and I and Ani worked on getting him a bench in the minipark. Because all those murals—that's the Galería. The Galería was sponsoring them as early as '71. So the ones like Horizons Unlimited, oh, the Legal Aid one, and those were the heydays of the Ríos brothers and Chuy Campusano and Gerry Concha, Spain Rodriguez. And that was the beginning of the Mujeres [Muralistas].

Later, they moved to Balmy Alley around '74. And then Ralph—they're very clear that Ralph was the person that gave them the name Mujeres Muralistas. And Ralph helped them to get the paint. So I look at that whole early flourishing of murals as really very anchored in the resources and really the vision of the Galería de la Raza. And I would say that would be Ralph, because I don't think René was ever that crazy about murals.

But Ralph felt that the sort of way in which murals circumscribe space and develop narratives of belonging was an aspect of self-determination that people could have. When they walked into a place, they knew they belonged there because those murals were there.

CG: There's so much legacy. And there's so much enactment of selfhood and enactment of who people can still be and become thanks to a lot of these actions of you, but also like Ralph and—

AM-B: No, Ralph. Ralph.

CG: I hear you. And I understand that. I'm just also saying because Ralph knew something that I think has become really clear to me. And it's that he couldn't do it alone.

AM-B: Right.

CG: And he needed people like you. And he needed people in a way that is very telling, in a way that is not a need of you are useful for this thing. No, it's you have so many talents, all of you people. And we're going to create something that really talks about who we are. And I feel like that's just such an essential part of even what you kept doing, even after you left San Francisco.

And you got the MacArthur Foundation to give you one of the most interesting fellowships that is available for working artists. And at the same time, fellowships, all of these kinds of things, are always like a damascene sword. It's like it's a big foundation. They give you a lot of money. At the same time, sometimes it comes late. You've done so many incredible things before. But it does provide a change. It does provide an interesting aspect of monetary change in people's lives, especially [for] working artists.

When you got the MacArthur Foundation fellowship, how do you remember those days after that? How did that actually change—if it did—really everything or not?

AM-B: Everything. Well, first of all, the story of how I found out is very funny. Baca was staying over. She's in the downstairs fireplace room. And there was an answering machine there. And she was having a fight with her girlfriend. She says, "I better check, I think." So-

and-so's going to give me grief if I don't answer. And so we're running it forward and backwards. Neither one of us can figure out how to do it.

And then she keeps hearing as she's going, "the MacArthur Foundation." She stops. And then she says, "Did you hear that?" I said, "No, I wasn't paying attention." She goes, "The MacArthur Foundation." I said, "Oh, Judy, they're calling me probably to go do some free work, because that's what all the foundations do. I work for Warhol, Ford, all of them. So don't get excited about it."

But she goes, "No, no, no, no. You have to do it." I said, "I'll do it later. I'll do it later." So I took her to the airport and I went to work. And I got to work and had a pile of little pink things—like MacArthur, MacArthur, MacArthur.

So my secretary comes in. And she's just jumping out of her skin because someone else there had gotten a MacArthur two or three years before. And she'd lorded it over everybody, and no one could stand her. And she was the woman I had to work with—because she couldn't get along with any of the Black or Brown teachers. They brought me in especially to help write this book and do this program.

So my secretary is another Chicana. She goes, "Amalia, Amalia, I think it's you. I think it's you." I said, "Calm down, Rosemarie. Calm down." So I said, "So what did he say?" "She just kept saying the MacArthur and it was very important for you to call."

I said, "OK." So I sat down and I called. And the man answered. And he said, "This is Dr. Hope. And I want to let you know," and then he does this whole spiel. And I'm not—like you don't get it. And so I—so it's terrible. He said everyone does it, but I was embarrassed after. I said, "OK. Is this like a joke? Did Judy Baca tell you to call me?" And he's like, "No, no." He said, "That is often the reaction we get." He said, "No." And then he tells you the whole thing and the insurance and all that. Well, I finally got it. And then I figured it out.

And Richard had said to me, because he had heard through the grapevine. He said, "If anybody calls you, don't you tell anybody till you tell me." And I couldn't help it because Rosemarie already knew. So Rosemarie went and told everyone in the entire building because she wanted to put the squeeze on the lady who was unpleasant.

CG: And that's how you found out about the MacArthur Foundation.

AM-B: Yes. But then I got—I still have a box of a hundred letters that came from everywhere—abroad, in the US—people who told me how they felt when they heard it. Because it was the

same year that they gave an award to a guy who did a book on the Roman Empire. So they said, “Chicanos are as good as the Roman Empire, Amalia!”

They were so excited. I had a friend—he had spent six months trying to get a reservation at the French Laundry in Napa. And he was there with his girlfriend. He was going to propose to her or something. And he opened the newspaper. And he jumped up and down and was telling everyone in the place, “My comadre got the MacArthur!” as though anyone was going to know what that meant. Oh, it was so funny. So the first part of it was how much everybody was happy about it.

And the second was what a *bendición* (blessing) it is. So you want to go somewhere. And you wanted people to be decent to you who have been treating you like shit forever. And you go, “Oh, did you know I got a MacArthur this year?” But I used to let Richard do it so it wouldn’t be so showy. “Richard, tell them I got a MacArthur.”

And in the end, really, there were some people it didn’t make any difference [to]. I had a PhD and a MacArthur, and they still torture me. So it’s just like—but in the academic world, I got the head of a department in the new thing without ever, ever doing tenure, full tenure, full professor.

Of course, everybody hated me after, and I didn’t even know why. Because going through the tenure process is like the baptism. And it was all because of the MacArthur, because they wanted to have one at their school. So no, it’s like, the thing that’s the best about it, it’s much less now than it was at the beginning.

My friend, Joan Abrahamson, also another MacArthur, she had a place called the Jefferson Institute. And all they did was put MacArthurs together. So when Marian Wright Edelman was doing a piece on violence against children and trying to stop the guns, she brought five of us together to New Jersey where Monseigneur had this sort of self-help center for low-income people. And everybody who came had a background either in child sociology or community development. And we would talk over a problem. So you could go anywhere. Sometimes we went to Mexico. Sometimes we went to different places. And there would be these configurations of people interested in biodiversity and cultural diversity.

And then after Sandra Cisneros got hers, she said, “Amalia, let’s make a group.” She always loves groups. I go, “Oh, Sandra, I don’t have any energy.” She says, “I’ll do it.” So we developed the MacArturos. I think that was in ’95.

And she did the first one in San Antonio. And she did it big. Oh, my God. And each of us had kind of like an *abeja* (bee)—you know, somebody who took us around. And then we did

community centers, childcare centers, universities. And at the beginning, there were about twelve of us. Now we're way, way over twenty. And we were supposed to all meet in Chicago for the fortieth anniversary. But then COVID came. And I said from the beginning, I can't go. I got this new little ticker. I am not messing it up.

So I think some of them are going to go. I'm working—that's what we're working on. I'm working on the project for there. I'm going to have an exhibit in the Mexican Museum and in a contemporary gallery. But I can't be there.

But anyway, the MacArturos have been in play—'95. What is that? I so lose track of time. No, I guess we're close to thirty.

CG: Mm-hmm.

AM-B: Yeah, twenty-five, thirty. And we meet in different places—whoever gets money. Hugo Morales, who runs Radio Bilingue, he got money from one of the health foundations. So we did radio programs for two days. And then I got money from my university, and I brought them there.

And Gómez-Peña gets money periodically. And we were dealing with the missing forty-three students in Mexico at that time. So we usually come in—oh, we were brought into Boyle Heights when the first gentrification started there. So we're brought in sometimes to listen to people, to give advice, or sometimes just to make people feel proud, because that's not something our communities always get a lot of. We get such bad press.

CG: One of the most important things about oral histories, I think, is that we get the chance to talk about things that we might have not been able to talk about before in the same way or in a way that really is truthful to many different ways. And you've been a scholar, an artist, a critic, just so many things, teacher and educator.

All of these things have informed you. With all of those varied and many experiences that you have had, is there something that you haven't been able to say before about your life so far?

AM-B: Well, it's hard to say, because I have been asked about many things over my life. I'm very vocal about issues on immigration because I feel that if my parents had stayed in Mexico, I would never [have] become the person I am.

The opportunities that my mother's family would—my mother was born out of wedlock, Casa Grande, Casa Chiquita. She would never—I would never have had an education. None of the

things that I have now could have happened for me there. There was no women's feminist movement there. Artists are usually from a different class than we were.

So immigration to me is at the core of the opportunities that we have. But it's also one of the unending dilemmas. I feel pain for it all the time. Sometimes I just can't even listen anymore because it's so horrible. And I guess what it really has taught us in these last few years is that supremacy is alive and well in America. And we haven't done a very good job of creating change for people.

I think COVID showed us the vulnerabilities of Latinos and Blacks as essential workers, as people with poor health care, if any, as people who have to work. These climate change heat waves that are happening now are killing farmworkers because there's still not legitimate health care for them. They don't put up areas for shade. They don't always provide them water or breaks or bathrooms. And in places like the San Joaquin Valley, even Oregon, because my cousins used to pick there, that's like people are dying in the fields.

I guess what I'm saying is that sometimes when you're a person who's had opportunities and had been able to develop them and you gain a certain amount of material wealth and support, you can easily forget not just where you came from but where everyone else is.

And I feel that's something I struggle [with] all the time, to be sure that I am being caring and supportive for the things that people need. It has never changed. When I was young, it was a rage. I was angry all the time. That's why I'm a good talker, because I had to defend myself and I had to defend other people. And now, as I'm older, because I have a platform in a way, I'm often asked to talk about everything from art to history. And just at the end I always say, "But you forgot to ask me one thing." And then I talk about immigration because I don't want them to think that just because I am where I am in my life that I don't care about that.

Since we moved here, everything has come back to me. When we went to the university, we did community-based work because that was the program that I developed in Salinas. And to get to Salinas from the back of the university in Monterey, you had to drive through the agricultural valley there.

And the name of the road was Blanco Road. I would make jokes about, well, I'm driving the white road today, and there's a lot of Brown people out there.

And then we moved here, San Juan Bautista. And I drive another road that goes right through the agricultural lands. And I think to myself, Will it ever change? We're home resting, and they're out there every day. And the only day they get off maybe is Sunday. And now they have to start working at three o'clock in the morning because by ten o'clock, it's not humanly

bearable for people. And it says to me that somehow we still think those people are expendable. And they bring us our food.

I read one long story about the human food chain that was the Mexican—from planting to reaping to trucking to prepping to cooking to serving and to cleaning it up, we're there at every stage of the way. That keeps people alive. And yet people don't care about our community staying alive. That is a thing that I guess is always there. Sometimes, I guess, there's a part of me that wishes I would step away and let it go. But I can't.

So I do what I can and give money where I can and talk about it where I can. And then the other side of that is my own life and risk. And I say this to people, young people like, look at us that are here today. There's no life plan. And life can change in a moment. You're riding in a car, and you're upside down. And your leg is through the window. And they take you away, and they try to fix you. And years later, ten, eleven years later, you're still having surgery. You're still—it's a moment, and it can change.

But the other part of it is there's a moment when you can really take hold of something that will make your life so much better. But you have to have the *ganas* (desire) for it. So these plans that people make and their MFAs and all of that—you know what? That's nice. But in the end, it's not going to do you any good if you're not in the right place when it happens and if you aren't kind enough to people so that they're willing to help you.

Kindness is highly underrated. Kindness makes everything easier for people, to be generous, to be kind. My mother and my father taught me that from day one. My father was a very interesting man. And in another world, he would have been a leader. He read the newspaper every day back to back, every single section. If you wanted to talk to him about anything, you could. He just wouldn't bring it up.

And he learned to read and write in Spanish. When I was a child, people came to our house if they were going to buy a house, because they had to look at the contract with Don Lorenzo, because he could figure it out for them. He helped people his whole life. And when I was a young girl, for whatever reasons, he told me, "Mija, you're going to have gifts. You already have some. But don't you forget that you have to help other people. Don't be selfish. It's not just for you."

And I think he knew in some way what my life would be. And my favorite story my mother told me is when I won the MacArthur—and my mother didn't know what it was. I said, "Mom, it's like the art lottery," because she played the lottery every week. She goes, "*Ay, Mija, que bueno!*" (Oh, what good news, my dear!) She was so happy. And she said, "Oh, your father's very excited." I said, "Is he?" She said, "Yes. He goes down to the grocery store every day." It

was [also] the gas station. “They have a Xerox machine there. And he makes packets. And he’s mailing these packets to all his relatives, even people he doesn’t even see.” I said, “He does that?” She goes, “Yeah. He just loves it.” And he puts a little note on it. “This is Maxine—Maxine, remember her?” Because I have the name Amalia now. And that to me was like—the MacArthur was worth all that, that I could make my parents so happy before they died. They lived with us the last ten years of their lives before they died.

And it was a gift. You sometimes don’t get to give back to your parents because life changes and you can’t. So it’s generosity, kindness, risk. And just stand your ground. Stand your ground. I tell the girls that all the time. Don’t let anybody push you around.

CG: I think that your example and all of these decisions that you’ve had to make feel like that exact lesson that you’re providing people and me listening to you is present in your actions. That kindness, that kind of understanding yourself, being generous of you in that way, it also created ripples for you and other people that have also learned from you.

And I think that before we did this, there’s always this question of legacy. And I remember your friend, Yolanda López, when we asked her this question. And it just feels like, I’m still here, totally. It’s a question that has become such a big thing that it feels like, but I’m still here. Why are you asking me these things?

I think what it’s getting at, rather than the question of legacy as it has been presented, is you’re a human being that has had an impact. And you also have endured through, as you have been describing, accidents—that accident that you were describing and all of these pains that you still have and the cardiopulmonary disease and so many things. And you’re still here. At the same time, [it makes] you look back on things differently.

So I guess that would be my last question, which is what is it that you’re still able to give, and what are the things that you would like to continue giving, hopefully, for future generations?

AM-B: And it’s funny, Yolanda had very opposing views in this. And we talk about it quite a bit. I started thinking about legacy even a little bit before the accident because of the cardiopulmonary [disease]. And by then, they had started to identify what eventually turned out to be my valve. And eventually, I had the implant in 2020. So I had it right on the cusp of COVID. So I had to think about it because I wasn’t really sure how long I would last. So I first thought about our story—because my archive is our story—sections in the Galería, the Caribbean Cultural Center.

I mean, in my lifetime, there have been a handful of women that have helped me move myself forward and for whom I have great respect and have challenged me and made me

stand my ground. And Marta Moreno Vega's one of them. Lowery Sims, who used to be at the Met, is another one. Judy Baca, for sure, and Carmen Lomas Garza. So those women represent to me part of what is my legacy. And they are in my archive. So the first thing I wanted to do was be sure that the archive was organized enough so that it would be useful. And I had been going to Stanford giving talks because my friend Yvonne [Yarbro-]Bejarano was there teaching a Chicana art class. So she'd ask me to come every semester.

And one time, I was there. And she said, "Amalia, really, you have a legacy. And you should be sure that it's archived." And I said, "Well, I save everything." She goes, "No, you have to organize." She said, "I'm going on take you to meet Roberto Trujillo." So I met Roberto. And he was like, "Yes, Amalia."

So I started that almost eighteen years ago. And it's finished. Well, the first stage of it is. And so Madison and Ali were the two people that were my archivists. And Stanford just bought it. They're picking it up Monday.

I'm going to be running behind the truck saying, "No, I changed my mind. Don't take my things!" Sometimes, I go through them. And I think, "Oh, I can't give them that." Richard says, "You have to stop pulling things out of the archive, because they bought it with a contract and it's all listed there." I said, "OK. So you take my things."

Then the second thing was really looking at how I could facilitate the careers of the next generation, because I was getting letters—and people were writing to me particularly around the essay "Domesticana," which was kind of the theory of *rasquachismo*, which is not even a theory. It's just a popular culture phenomenon. But Tomás Ybarra-Frausto wrote about it and converted it into a brilliant, brilliant sort of conceptual framework for Chicano work which is defiant and is sort of sometimes put together, as it were, to make the most from the least.

And then I thought, but that's all about men. And so I decided to write "Domesticana" from the point of view of women and how women—in their domestic life within their families and in the marriages or partnerships—how is it that they sustain themselves. So it was like the idea of the rupture of the domestic container. What is it that we do with these things? Because a lot of the women that I knew, from Sel Muñoz to Patricia Rodriguez and Patssi Valdez and others, were breaking that open and using things that would have been in the home in other ways. But because of "Domesticana," I knew there was a whole other generation.

They made a show at one of the colleges, called *Domestic Disturbances*, which was based on the writing. So I know that it exists in feminist and Chicana art history classes because I get

lots and lots of feedback from students. So I knew that there had to be a way that you could engage the next group.

So when I got my MacArthur in '91— I think it was '91. no, I got sick in '91. I got my MacArthur in '92. I decided to take the money, because it was a considerable amount of money. One of the first things is I bought a rug for the Galería, because it was such a funky little rug. And I said, “Come on. We’re going to rip it out and put a new one in.”

And then I put some of the money into a new studio. And at that studio, I started with some of the other comadres a project called ReGeneration. And ReGeneration invited the same young people that had been writing to us and writing to us to come and organize together. And they were from the ages of eighteen to, I think, thirty-four or thirty-five. And many of them now are like, years later, they’re heads of cultural affairs departments. They’re senior curators. Ondine [Chavoya] is at Williams. Gilbert [Vicario] is in Phoenix. They’re everywhere. I see them, and they write to me. So I knew that ReGeneration worked. I knew an intergenerational model worked because they basically took over the Galería, which did not make me popular with my old friends who ran the store.

But I said, “Look, we’re not going to live forever. Somebody has to take our place. Otherwise, we’re just like the dinosaurs. So we’ve got to be willing to move over.” And so that was the first one—ReGeneration.

And then from ReGeneration—because I traveled to a lot of universities, [and] I discovered the new generation. And then when Latinx came along, Teresita Fernández, who’s very close with the head of Ford Foundation, she approached me because she was another MacArthur. But she didn’t really know the MacArturos.

She invited me to New York to see her new piece. And while we were there, she told me how angry she was about how the *New York Times* had picked all the best public art in New York for that year and they didn’t pick her piece, which is an astounding piece—astounding. It was so beautiful. It took place in a park. And it was like an overhang that went for two blocks. And it was metal, but perforated. So the shadows made leaf prints on the walk. And she had Caribbean dancers and all these people—and nothing was said about it.

But what she and I ended up talking about is I told her what she didn’t know—that we’d already been through two or three generational battles with the museum world. I told her about '91, or '92—when Marcia Tucker brought us to Chicago Art Institute to talk to the Association of Art Museum Directors, who are all old men, white, old men, in their sixties. And they hated us and didn’t care a thing about what we said—and yelled at us, actually. But we published a book from it. So that was good.

I told her, “Look, you’re not the first and you won’t be the last. But you’ve got to build a group. You cannot do it alone.” So she started the Latinx movement through Ford. And now, it’s picked up through lots of different places. And at first, the *x* meant transgender fluidity. But eventually, the *x* in the art world began to stand for Latinos in the US, because when you use Latin American, then it’s just everybody outside, but never us.

So there has been a whole process of the generational knowledge that has to be passed on. And the truth of it is they have to write their own history. But they need to know what it is it takes to do it. And we’re there until we’re not anymore.

Think about Ester Hernández and Yolanda López and Carmen Lomas Garza. They made iconic work. They talked about a community, a landscape, a culture at this critical moment coming out of the fifties, going into the sixties, from very different backgrounds. But they captured that. And you’ve got to preserve that if you don’t preserve that.

So for me, it’s like, [my] legacy is not my own. My archive is the archive of the Galería de la Raza, the Center for Cultural Studies in the Caribbean, Social [and] Public Art Resource Center, the Mexican Museum, Self-Help Graphics, because I’ve worked with all of them in different ways. And all the letters that I’ve saved over the years from my trips, from their trips, of how we kept together—it’s a story of women’s lives as much as it is about art or even about me.

And I feel like all of us have to take a part in preserving that first decade—I’d say the seventies, even into the eighties—because other institutions are just beginning to get interested in it. But they’ll never find the real stuff because that real stuff is really us, what we remember, what we know.

In my dissertation my first interview was Judy Baca. She had just broken up with her girlfriend, Donna Deitch. She was living in Topanga Canyon, where all the hippies and rockers were. And I went there, and I said, “Well, I need to ask you some personal questions. But it’s under human subjects laws. Your name will not appear on it. It’s my clinical dissertation.” And I said, “So, it’s about the influence of culture on the development of identity. But it’s also about sexual role and occupational role and cultural role.”

And so I interviewed her. And after about the fourth hour, I said, “Maybe we should stop now.” She goes, “No, I need to get this all out.” So we went for, I don’t know, I think it was eight hours. And when I left, she took my hand. And she looked in my eyes. And she said, “You’re going to be my best friend now forever because you know more about me than my

mother does.” And it was true. She never came out to her mother until I don’t know how many—years and years later. And that was it.

I found through Yolanda, through Judy, through Judith Hernández, Virginia Jaramillo, Gloria Maya—oh my God, oh, Juanita Jaramillo, the weaver. I found out all these stories of their grandmothers, of their upbringing, and of what they had to face each time they tried to make a change, either within their family or within their own community.

And that was when I got the first idea—way back. That was ’73 I started. And I thought we were already at the top. We were just beginning. If I went back to interview them now, my God, what a different story it would be.

Judy just sold the original drawings for *The Great Wall* for a million dollars to George Lucas for his new narrative museum. Yeah, it would be a totally different story. And all of us have worked out ways. Carmen has given her archive to her alma mater in Texas. So everybody finds a different way to protect those stories.

But they’re very necessary, because the young people coming up will not find that in any institutional history in any university and rarely even in art history. So if we don’t tell it and leave it for them and engage them in the process of it—one of my archivists wrote me the other day because she’s one of the people that helped develop the fellowship that Yolanda and a whole bunch of other Latinx artists got. And she wrote me this really sweet note. And I told her congratulations. I was very proud and that [what] she’d really done something for someone else was so important. And she wrote me and said, “Well, it’s very high praise coming from you because I learned about building community and I learned about caring for people through your archive and through you.”

And that’s what I mean. If you make it available, if you make yourself available to these young people, when they hit that wall at Stanford or Princeton or any place they go or some museum or some public art review, when they hit that wall, they have to have something inside that says, Oh, I’m going to do this. And they do. Many of them by nature have that already.

There’ll be a whole new generation of Chicana Chingonas. I’m very sure of it. Yeah.

CG: There will be and there already is. And I think they—

AM-B: There already is.

CG: They will only benefit from these archives that now will be housed at Stanford, which I understand—I'm very happy to understand how much it pains you to leave those things to them. At the same time, it also reflects on how much of an ofrenda that you're doing with this specific gesture.

And the archive is, as this oral history, one more way of getting to know you and of getting to know that your legacy and who you are and have been is a person that interacts with the community, tells the stories, our stories, the stories of those to come, to themselves.

And I think that that's just one of the most beautiful things of what I've learned about you and about most of your friends and colleagues and collaborators. So Amalia, thank you so much for giving me this time and for telling your story.

AM-B: Thank you. Thank you.

CG: It was a true honor to talk to Amalia Mesa-Bains about identity formation in an exercise of self-reflection and self-creation like an oral history. Especially due to her PhD in clinical psychology and her own work on identity, which is a specialty of hers, not in spite of but because she “struggles to find the right one,” as she says.

Just as I wrapped up the oral history, Amalia was laughing, saying that she forgot to tell me the Paco's Tacos story. As soon as I heard that, I hit record, and this is that story:

CG: Paco's Tacos—what happened with Paco's Tacos?

AM-B: Well, Mujeres Muralistas pretty much started in Balmy Alley in '74. But they went on to paint really in the neighborhood. And it was a mixed group of artists. That's what makes it really, really important—there are Chicanas, Guatemaltecas, and Venezolanas. And so they come together, Patricia Rodriguez, Irene Pérez, Consuelo Méndez, and Graciela Carrillo.

And they decide—they're living on Balmy Alley, or Patricia is. And Patlán is living there too. And Ray Patlán is another one of the master muralists. So they're there. They're painting. And Ralph gives them paint. In those days, people used house paint because who could afford a bucket of acrylic?

And they eventually spread out basically down the block and around the corner to Paco's Tacos, which we all went to. And it had this sort of not—well, it was kind of a rickety fence behind it. And I think they probably primed it, but it was not ever meant to last forever. And this is the thing that—and I try to say it so I don't end up sounding sexist. But if you really look at the analysis of the murals, the earliest murals—oh, Mike Ríos, Chuy Campusano. I think

Daniel Galvez comes in a little later. He's early '71, '72. They're responses to police violence and police harassment. So they're very much resistance.

So then when the women begin to paint—first of all, they come from different backgrounds. I don't think anybody had a child then. Ester helped them. She might have had a child then. That's another characteristic of my generation—no real babies. Baca, me, Carmen, Patssi. Ester had one boy when she was very young.

But anyway, so they start painting what I think of as sort of cultural reclamation or affirmation. And they're very family-centered. And some of them look like they're in a Latin American landscape. There are rivers and banana trees. And it's so beautiful. So it gets up, and everyone loves it. But in no time—I don't know what happened to Paco's. It wasn't gentrification yet. Maybe somebody sold the—it was a little corner lot.

So I get this phone call. "Amalia, Amalia, they're painting over the mural. I'm going to grab some parts. I'll call you." So then a friend of mine shows up later with two boards from the center of one of the paintings. And I took them, thinking that maybe somebody else had all the other ones and we would all put them [together]. Well, that never happened. And for years and years, I carried that board around. And then somewhere in the move to the campus, I lost my Paco's Tacos board. But I remember it very clearly because it was so beautiful.

I used to watch the Mujeres when they painted on the side of the Mission—it was Mission housing, I think. And then it turned into a laundromat. That one's the most beautiful one. You can see Ecuadorian dancers. And there's, I think it's—they're not alpacas. I think they're the other ones. What are they? Llamas.

Anyway, I've always thought that they epitomized the best of that kind of affirmation. Now, you look at Baca's, and Baca's are a bit of both. They're both resistance and affirmation. The one she did for Carecen was great.

But I had to tell you the Paco's Tacos story because that was the period of whitewashing. And it was just the beginning of people thinking, Oh, the Mission is a wonderful place to live. It has great climate. And oh, look at all this food. And so people started moving in there. And so the murals, which were really quite temporary in their nature, began to go one at a time. And so it's really funny that I was looking through my archive for Melissa and the girls for the project and I found this little brochure that Rupert García had written about Raza murals starting from in Mexico into the Mission.

And that's when I realized that Mike Ríos's brother, Tom, painted with him. And Chuy Campusano died young, so it was good to see his. But all of those are very, very—the police as pigs, fists in the air. They're very, very aggressive. Well, because those were really difficult times in the Mission. That's when they were closing down on lowriders. We used to have lowriders on Mission. And they stopped that. Those were golden years too.

We had a show at the Galería called *Sembradores*. That's the marijuana growers. We had *Low and Slow*, which was the lowriders. We had the pachuco show. There was a [José] Montoya mounted from RCAF [Royal Chicano Air Force] and all the Day of the Dead and Frida Kahlo—and yes, because those were the firsts.

Now the culture's changed, and there's no more of those firsts. There's a different kind of first. But the Galería has changed. I would say it's much more organized around queer issues, lesbian issues, and global issues and now will be moving to the new building, where there will be—our partners will be a childcare center and a HOMEY [Homies Organizing the Mission to Empower Youth] youth group. And the nine floors above us will be low-income housing. So it's like a dream in the end. It's a dream.

CG: Speaking of llamas versus alpacas, Amalia and Richard have a few of them near the street that leads to their home. Because this is a historical record of what happened, and as the oral history recording had just finished, I of course went down to ask these alpacas a few questions.

[the sound of alpacas, or the lack thereof]

While I reached out to the alpacas for comment, their silence spoke louder.

I packed my gear and came back for a lunch that Richard and Amalia graciously provided. Melissa San Miguel, an integral part of the research and documentation behind the *Mission Murals Project*, and SFMOMA Assistant Curator Maria Castro joined us for lunch outside.

As we ate, Richard and Amalia told us the story of how they met, which involved Richard wearing a red shirt, Amalia wearing a butterfly dress, and how on a date they went to see the movie *The Collector*. [This] is also why Richard says Amalia collected him.

Amalia's generosity of spirit was present in every aspect of our conversation in the time we spent together. Before I left to try to beat traffic back to the Bay Area, they gave me some banana bread and coffee as we [listened to] the sounds of hummingbirds and the wind.

This oral history of Amalia Mesa-Bains was a collaborative effort, like murals also are. The team behind it was:

ERICA GANGSEI: Erica Gangsei

MYISA PLANCQ-GRAHAM: Myisa Plancq-Graham

CG: Who served as executive producers.

NATALIA DE LA ROSA: Natalia de la Rosa

CG: Who served as a production assistant.

The rest of the team included:

JAVIER BRIONES: Javier Briones

KEVIN CARR: Kevin Carr

CHAD COERVER: Chad Coerver

CARY CORDOVA: Cary Cordova

STEPHANIE GARCÉS: Stephanie Garcés

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Melissa San Miguel

CG: And it was produced and mixed by me, Camilo Garzón.

The *Mission Murals Project* was organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services.

Thanks for listening.