

PROYECTO MISSION MURALS
Oral History Audio Transcripts

**XOCHITL NEVEL-GUERRERO ORAL
HISTORY**

Oakland, California, July 23, 2021

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This is an oral history of muralist, artist, and educator Xochitl Nevel-Guerrero for the *Mission Murals Project*. I'm Camilo Garzón. It was recorded on July 23, 2021, in Xochitl's home in Oakland, California. The voices you'll hear will be Xochitl's and my own.

Before we began talking, she used sage in and around her house in the same way she sages the walls she works on to create murals. Around us were her jaguar masks, her working desk, as well as a series of painted canvases, mainly of women, with natural elements including water, plants, the sun, and the moon. She offered me some tea and pan dulce as I set up the recording gear.

This oral history delves into Xochitl's personal life, artwork, and upbringing in the [East Bay]. We discuss her work in the *Nosotros venceremos* mural and the significance of recurrent images of corn and iconography like trees and jaguars. The themes of separated dualities and dual depictions add another layer to her work. We also talk about the importance of dreams and of inward exploration. She shares memories of her teacher at the Chicano Art Center, muralist Ray Patlán, with whom she worked in PLACA, and about her memories of Fran Valesco at UC Berkeley. She talks about her work with the Mujeres Muralistas and how her friend Ester Hernández invited her to help paint the *Latino America* mural with muralist Patricia Rodriguez, who became her teacher too.

We discuss Xochitl's personal and working relationship with her father, muralist Raymundo Salatiel Nevel; her work on the *MaestraPeace* mural in San Francisco's Women's Building; and about her role in helping preserve and amplify Chicana and Latinx heritage in Oakland, the San Francisco Mission District, and beyond.

Here is the oral history.

Esta es una historia oral de la muralista, artista y educadora Xochitl Nevel-Guerrero para el Mission Murals Project. Soy Camilo Garzón. Se grabó el 23 de julio de 2021, en la casa de Xochitl en Oakland (California). Las voces que oirás serán las de Xochitl y la mía.

Antes de que comenzáramos a charlar, ella uso salvia por toda su casa de la misma manera en que aplica la salvia en los muros que va a trabajar para crear murales. A nuestro alrededor estaban sus máscaras de jaguar, su escritorio de trabajo, así como una serie de lienzos pintados, principalmente de mujeres, con elementos naturales incluyendo el agua, plantas, el sol y la luna. Me ofreció un poco de té y pan dulce mientras yo preparaba el equipo de grabación.

*Esta historia oral ahonda en la vida personal, las obras de arte y la crianza de Xochitl en el área del Este de la Bahía. Hablamos sobre su trabajo en el mural *Nosotros venceremos* y el significado de imágenes recurrentes del maíz e iconografía como los árboles y los jaguares. Los temas de dualidades separadas y de representaciones duales agregan otra capa a sus obras. También hablamos de la importancia de los sueños y de la exploración interna. Comparte recuerdos de su maestra en el Chicano Art Center, del muralista Ray Patlán, con quien trabajó en PLACA, y de sus recuerdos de Fran Valesco en la UC Berkeley. Habla de su trabajo con las Mujeres Muralistas y cómo su amiga Ester Hernández la invitó*

a que ayudara a pintar el mural/Latinoamérica con la muralista Patricia Rodriguez, quien también llegó a ser su maestra.

Hablamos acerca de la relación personal y laboral de Xochitl con su padre, el muralista Raymundo Salatiel Nevel, y su trabajo en el mural MaestraPeace en el Women's Building de San Francisco, y sobre su papel en ayudar a conservar y divulgar la herencia chicana y latina en Oakland, el barrio de la Mission de San Francisco y más allá.

Aquí está la historia oral.

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

CAMILO GARZÓN: OK. So today is July 23, and I'm here with Xochitl Nevel-Guerrero. And I'm talking to her in her home in Oakland, California, on behalf of the *Mission Murals Project*. If you can just now say your full name and where were you born.

XOCHITL NEVEL-GUERRERO: My name's Xochitl Nevel-Guerrero, and I was born in Berkeley, California. However, I was raised in Oakland.

CG: So East Bay?

XN-G: Yes, East Bay.

CG: When you think of your upbringing, and just the interesting context of that, what do you remember when you were growing up—about your parents, about your family, about your neighborhood? What are some of the memories that come to mind?

XN-G: Good question. [*laughs*] Let's see. I remember growing up, I was the youngest of six. And I remember growing up, having our grandparents with us. My parents were working, so we stayed with our grandparents some of the time. And I had a grandfather—he was a healer, so he did a lot of things to help us. . . . My grandmother worked in the cannery, and my grandfather worked in the Southern Pacific trains in West Oakland.

And my parents—my father's name was Raymundo "Zala" Nevel. He came from Mexico, Mexico City. And from what I understand, he came as a young man. He was like maybe seventeen, eighteen, and he came during the Bracero Program. However, he didn't stick with the program, and he traveled [by train] around the United States but he eventually ended up in Oakland—West Oakland—where he met my mom. And she was very young, still in high school.

So like I said, I was in a family of six, and I was the youngest. And my father, I believe when he was—he taught himself how to paint, to draw and paint. And he would go into nightclubs and do portraits of people. And he would always say the first hundred, or first ninety-nine, were the worst, but then the hundredth was the best. And so with that, meaning to practice—[it] meant you got better with your work.

So how I could say I got started was I saw my dad drawing and painting. And somehow he said that I scribbled on the floor, and then he put the paper underneath and that was my first works of art. That's what he tells me—that story. But I remember in elementary school, I was drawing a lot. . . . My dad had paintings by then all over the house, and I saw them.

So I was drawing and painting in class, and the teacher would get mad. They said, well, why is this child sitting here at the table drawing when she should be playing with the other kids or playing with the blocks, or the little kitchenette, or little kitchen, in the play area? She's sitting there drawing. And I did detailed works of art. I'd do like a big house with a fence and the curtains, the door—everything. I do all the details on there.

And one day my mom came to pick me up—this was kindergarten—and [the teacher] said to my mom, “Why is she drawing all the time? She doesn't get along with the other children.” [My mom] says, “Because her father's an artist. So she sits there with him and draws and paints or whatever. So that's why.” She goes, “OK.” So she kind of left me alone after that.

But I do remember like age four also—maybe before I was in kindergarten—I remember hearing that I was going to be an artist and possibly a teacher. I remember hearing “an artist.” It was like in the wind or something, or a voice, because I was very sensitive to color and stuff. I could see auras and all that, but I didn't really talk about it because I didn't really think about it then, at that age.

And so sometimes traumatic experiences happen at different ages, and it hit me at eleven. So I think with all that pain and all that stuff that happened to me, I got into art more. My colors were bright and colorful, and so that was my—how would you say? Whatever you experience, it transforms and goes into your creativity. . . . So it wasn't just creating art, but it was also healing for me. . . . Because we were in the house of creativity, because my father, he being a painter, he also liked to hear music and dance and all that. So he and my mom, they both had us take *baile folklórico* dancing.

I also took [up the] flute in school. I had two sisters and a brother, and one sister took violin classes at school. And my brother took [up the] drums. He became a drummer. I took up the flute, but I actually wanted to play saxophone. But my mother said that wasn't very ladylike, so I stuck with the flute. But I played the flute for myself. And as a teenager, I used to go to the park and play while other people, in the seventies, while other people were playing congas and other instruments. I'd take my flute sometimes and play.

Also, as I got older, probably because I was born in the fifties. I grew up in the sixties, seventies, and so forth. But I remember being involved in the, well, with my father, because my father was very active in the movement, the various movements that were coming up.

So there was the Chicano art movement that was happening. And well before, of course, they had the Black Panther movement, so it inspired all these other people of different ethnicities to also rebel. I mean, we were being so messed over. It was like the Man versus the people, right? I think the farmworkers' movement really helped in opening a lot of the

doors, too. Because a lot of people were going to meetings and fighting for human and political rights.

However, the artists at this point, it was also good for them too, because they were making [graphic] posters. And then the *teatro* people, they were doing skits. If not in the farms, they were doing it in a lot of the communities, a lot of the cities, and all that.

I, myself, got in a theater group. It was called El Teatro Triste. And I was so shy, but then when I got on stage, they couldn't get me off. Because I was like, just got into it. I let it all out then. But I came out in this skit. It was about, against the Vietnam War. And I was a mother, and a friend of mine was the grandmother. And it was very dramatic. And we had some humorous and comedy skits . . . it made a lot of people come together to see us perform.

And throughout the whole Bay Area, there was a lot of other people performing, other groups. It started with El Teatro Campesino. They're a big group here in California, and they inspired a lot of us to perform. . . . And that helped me get out, because sometimes I can't talk, but I'm observing. I'm taking everything in. I'm listening. I write poetry—because in school I wasn't very good with that, writing, but I do write poetically.

And then after getting into theater, I was—my dad wasn't into that, but he was, yeah, actually, he wrote a few skits for us [that] some people performed. He sort of emceed sometimes when we had programs and all that for the community.

But then there were so many things going on. It's like you couldn't keep up, but you had to because you sort of missed out with some things, so. But there was also demonstrations and things going on. And everybody knew each other. It's so different now . . . But anyway, let's see. After theater group, I was in another one. It was called El Teatro Calceñín, and that was while I was in college. I went to junior college—Laney College—and I was performing with the other people. And it was sort of a continuation of being involved in a community, working with the community.

So then from there, I went to—it was like I was in all these different things. Well, my family were having children, although I never had children. So my husband and I never had children, so that's why we were able to get involved in a lot of these different forms of art. My husband, Roberto, was mainly a painter, and he also works on murals with me. I still work on murals today. It's not as easy as it was, but I still—my brain is still intact there, so I try to do what I can do now.

And let's see. Back to the seventies and eighties—let me see. Some of the murals that I've done, let's see, in Fruitvale in Oakland was Clínica de la Raza. I worked on that one about three times.

CG: With your dad?

XN-G: Hmm?

CG: With your dad, specifically?

XN-G: Yes.

CG: Which is one of the things that you're the most known for, but I feel very happy that you decided to share that you also dabbled in poetry, even if it's writing for yourself, writing poetry.

XN-G: Sure.

CG: Flute. I would have loved to hear you play saxophone. That would have been amazing, Xochitl.

XN-G: So would I.

CG: And you can still learn, right? And it's just really nice to hear all of these things because when I've learned about you and what I've learned about you is, indeed, that you're a very sensitive person and sensory person—both things. I do think that you're a person that generally is more perceptive than, or at least has more of a proclivity for perception, right? Like, you like listening, and you like sensing and perceiving things—and also your understanding of yourself, right, the transformation of what has happened.

I want to ask, but I'm happy to also not to—in terms of you did say that there are some traumatic experiences. We don't have to get into anything. I think it's important to just understand that you're saying that some of these traumatic experiences influence you into needing to still express something from them. And you've created really incredible things that really speak about you, and that's very hard to do.

It's not only talented that you have that talent. It's also a matter of—that's brave to try to still do something with what happened to you. It seems like you were referring to some family things happening or something like that. Is there anything you would like to share, and if not, just say no, and we can continue with a couple of things, like from college, like Cal State and all that. That's OK too.

XN-G: Mm-hmm. Hmm. I think since it was a negative thing—I almost committed suicide at thirteen, but something told me you have your whole life ahead of you. So with that—it sort of brought me back to myself, and it sort of turned my whole life around. I can't explain it, but I just changed after that. I changed my name. I changed—I changed a lot of things, and I started working in my community more. I was maybe thirteen, fourteen. I got a summer job. And I started working with children, and I really loved that, working with children.

And I wanted to find a safe place for them to work. So working [in] the community—I was always working with children, like after-school programs or summer school programs, because I wanted to make a safe place for them to work, to be expressive.

So even though there was a negative thing that happened—or there [were] other times too—but because of that, I said, OK, I got to do the opposite. I can't let it break me down or kill me or whatever. I'm going to fight. So in a way, that made a positive. That made me try to fight back or to say, "Hey, I'm not going to let that—I'm not going to let that thing stop me. I'm going to keep going." And so that's what brought me up to fight—or to help people or to help other people protest against something—because I felt that's where the power was at, and that's where the strength was at. And it starts inside of ourselves.

Also I was getting in a lot of accidents, so I said, OK, I got to figure out a way to heal myself. So I started taking classes in healing work. Sometimes not because I wanted to and something pulled me to do that. Or I wanted to do—like say I took tai chi, and I want to do tai chi. And then I got pulled to learn how to do Reiki, which is a form of healing of the hands, and so I learned to do that. And that helped me a lot because I used to hurt my back a lot because I was working on murals, and sometimes they were portable. Sometimes I had to end up moving them myself because everybody took off and I was left by myself. I forgot about—oh, OK, how am I going to get this piece, this panel, inside the house or inside the building?

So I had to work on myself a lot because I couldn't always afford to go to the doctors or whatever, chiropractor, to work on my back.

CG: Well, I would just say it's very brave that you just want to even talk about those kinds of things, and I'm glad that you found ways of expressing yourself and of finding joy and finding light. Because I feel like you're known as the art mom for a reason by a lot of these students and kids. And I think that your influence still is, to this day, so important in so many younger artists' lives and the community.

And also it's—you've so many ways of just transforming yourself, as you were saying. And I just wanted to tell you that that's very important. All the things that you've done, including, as you said, working in yourself and finding other ways because it's not—

Yeah, thank you for sharing that because it's one of the hardest things that could ever happen in the mind of any human, so I feel fortunate that you wanted to share that. I am more than sure that because you shared that, someone listening to this, understanding all the things you've done to even overcome some of those things, as you said, will feel inspired to just find other ways and to feel that there are alternatives, and find help in different ways. So I'm glad that you told us that.

And when you think of your Cal State years, right, because Laney was, as you said, a first step.

XN-G: Yes, well, let's see. After Laney, I transferred to UC Berkeley. However, I only stayed a year. I call myself a UC Berkeley dropout. [*laughs*]

But there [were] some good points, and there [were] not-so-good points. I met a few teachers that kind of helped me stay in there a little longer, who [were] Ray Patlán and

Patricia Rodriguez. They were my art teachers at the Chicano Art Center. And I'm glad I took that class because it just kind of made me feel more at ease and at home.

And I also took art classes in the art department, which was completely opposite. But, like I said, I stuck with it for that year. And then I just said, "I've had enough. I don't need this abuse." But anyway, while I was a student there, I was still active in the community in Oakland and other areas. And I always had a sense of sticking in the community but also going to college.

I didn't think, OK, well, I'm in college. I'm going to forget about everybody, or I'm going to change completely. I just had a sense that I needed to still be in the community and also to keep active in the movement because it was still happening then too. And I was meeting a lot of different artists and people.

My father was still—we were still actively working together on different murals and things like that. In fact, Ray Patlán and my father and I worked on another mural after, well, after the Clínica—that was '77—we worked on another mural together. It was for the—some of the inmates in, I think they were [in] Santa Rita or San Quentin or something like that. [It was in Vacaville.] And we worked on the mural in the same community. And then we got involved in other projects and stuff, other mural projects together.

CG: I am always happy to hear that some of the people that I've been fortunate to talk to in this project—Ray Patlán, Patricia Rodriguez, Fran Valesco—which I'll ask you [about] in a second, that all of them had an influence on you, right? Like, they were teachers at first, but they became collaborators and colleagues.

And you also have done that too, right? That's the beauty of also your teaching and also just your journey through life. A lot of the things you learned from others you've taught, yourself, also to others. What are some of the most important memories that you have of people like Patricia, Ray, or even Fran Valesco, because they all have spoken highly of you?

XN-G: Well, I met Patricia before because I—when they had the Mujeres Muralistas, Patricia was one of them.

CG: And you helped them with *Latino America*.

XN-G: Yes.

CG: Which is such an important mural that no longer exists, but it was such an important thing. What do you remember of even doing that mural with them? What was it like then to be in a group of mostly women, which was, unfortunately, unheard of until that point? But after that, it was like, absolutely, we are Chicanas, we are women, and we are muralists. How did it feel?

XN-G: Well, even before that, I could say that—backtrack a little bit. My first mural was in high school in 1972. From there, I went to Laney, and they had a—what do you call it? They had a work-study program.

So there was one woman that was getting artists or people that were interested in art to get into mural painting. So we went to different neighborhoods and started painting some of the elementary and high schools. And so that gave me a little more experience in doing murals. And then I was taking art classes at Laney and I met Ester Hernández, who is also an artist, well-known artist.

And so she says, “Oh, I’m working with a group of women in San Francisco, and they call themselves the Mujeres Muralistas.” She says, “Would you like to come and help paint?” I said, “Sure. I’ll go.” So I went. And that’s when—how that connected like that.

And I was excited because there [were] other women like myself working. I was younger—I was a little younger—but I was so used to working with my father all the time that he was trying to protect me, I think. But anyway, I was working with them, and I had a good time. And it just felt good being with other women and painting.

I remember painting a lot of the corn, the maize. And I do that a lot still in my paintings I do and murals. I put corn or there’s always some kind of maize. And if you notice the one behind you, yeah, it’s a corn goddess. I do a lot of corn goddess[es]. She just comes to me in my dreams.

That’s another thing. I dream a lot, so I incorporate the visions I have in my dreams. I put that in some of my paintings. Also I meditate and sage myself. So the visions come out much stronger, I think.

And also I do inner journeying. I put [on] a drumbeat sound, and then I count from ten to one. And then I open the door; then I go in another world and pick and choose what I need to get. Or I listen, I see—all that. And then I get the information I need, and I come back out. And then I work on something. So I do that a lot because that helps me get in a deeper state, deeper information. You go more to your subconscious [mind], whatever comes out, so that’s how I work more now.

CG: What are some of those images that you see because behind me, I do see the goddess of corn and—

XN-G: Mm-hmm, yeah.

CG: For anyone familiar with Latino or Chicano agriculture, maize is just such a fundamental thing that we’ve had in most of the cultures. What are some other images or, as you were saying, visions and dreams? They are all related to also memory and things that we’ve heard or even [have] passed down onto us. What are some of those other images?

XN-G: Some have been animals, or you see butterflies, snakes, the jaguar. I did that mask over there. Oh, that's another thing. I got into mask making. So the one, the highest one up there is a jaguar, so I've worked on various—I tried to do a performance in wearing masks and making costumes, and I went through a phase of doing that.

Other images, I guess, are—I like to put the tree of life with the [*inaudible*]. I put something like that in a mural, the tree of life, but I also included people of different cultures and ethnicities. And I don't know just what—oh, also elements like the air, water, fire, earth, different elements and directions, and all that.

I really feel that we're all Indigenous, that were from this continent. My father would always say from Alaska to Argentina, we're all one people. We're all Indigenous people, or at least we started out Indigenous. We're all native people here, and so I really feel that.

And when I went to Mexico the first time—in 1969 was my first time—I saw a lot of poverty, but yet I saw a lot of beauty because the way they dress, all the flowers, the embroidered and decorative blouses, and the women, the children. I mean, I just saw so much beauty, even though there was a lot of poverty. And so I wanted to show the strength of the people. So a lot of my images, earlier images, were like that. And it just really hit me so hard that I have to show the other side.

CG: But the beauty, as you said.

XN-G: I have to show the beauty too.

CG: Yeah, and I think one of the essential things is even in your first mural, which you were working on with students and you, yourself, were learning, which was *Nosotros venceremos*—which means we will triumph, we will win—up to PLACA, which is such an important thing that Ray Patlán and you all did, there's these images. And there's these images that are not only beautiful but also are depicting these kinds of images, elemental images, agricultural images, Indigenous images, and iconography.

And I feel like one thing that is very important about that is that you also had a social justice bent—what we call these days social justice. Because PLACA, when you did that in '84 and later with Ray, Balmy became a very important place to oppose a lot of things that were happening in Central America, especially.

What is the thing that you remember the most from those times and even just your work to make murals that had these kinds of messages in them?

XN-G: That's a good question. At times we were all together working, and other times we were there by ourselves. But there [were] a lot of people from all over the world coming through, going through. And it was very powerful because they all saw the different murals and were saying, "Wow, look at this, look at that!" Or they would ask me, "What are you doing?"

And even though I didn't reflect Central and South America, I put—because I was working with kids at the time, and they were break dancing. So mine reflected more of kids. It was called something like *Youth of the World – Let's Create a Better World*. So I have kids coming out of a tube of paint, so there's a lot of colors.

And then on one side, some kids are break dancing. Some were actual kids that I worked with. I told them to break dance so I could take a Polaroid shot. And then they were dancing, so I put that on the wall. And then you see one corner of an explosion.

It's black and white. Like saying, we're trying to re-create a better world because this world isn't—and all these different things are happening in the world, all this war and violence and all that, and even in our neighborhoods, all that's happening. So we want to create something better to give the kids hope, and to [urge them] not [to] give up and keep—

So even a lot of murals themselves were to educate people and to make them feel good about themselves, or to see themselves, or to be proud, or different things like that. It was educational and trying to get people to think. I mean, even if it was something negative, it would make them react, or say, "I don't like this" or "I love that."

But we were hearing a lot of that as we were working, and I just felt good working there as a group. And at the end we all took a picture together, and they made a poster out of it. And so it was like, wow, we finally did it.

But there [were] times that I went by myself or I took a friend with me so I wouldn't be by myself there because there [were] some murals I've worked on that I was alone, but I always saged the wall. And there [were] sometimes when there was somebody [who] had died there because they had candles, and they had balloons there. And I said, Oh, somebody died, OK. I just said, Oh, I'm sorry, and I just hope things will be better here. That's why I sage and all that before I work in a space, especially if I know I'm going to be there a while.

I even [saw] somebody throw a bottle at me while I was working. Or I saw—I was kind of walking through with my box of paints through a playground to get to the wall, and there was a guy running. And the police [were] running after him with a gun. It was very surreal, and I had to back up and then go behind a garbage bin and wait. And there was a helicopter flying around looking for the guy.

And I'm like, oh, wow. I mean, right out there in the elements, and you just try to do the best you can. And I kind of wonder sometimes, I mean, not all the time. I just say, "Well, I got to do it. I have to do this for the people or whatever, or for somebody else. It's not always for me, but it's for somebody else." And then I wonder. I say, "Why am I doing this?" But it's almost like it's more than me. It's something that I'm supposed to do. I can't describe it, but it's just something that I'm supposed to do.

CG: Yeah, it's something that is in a sense—it doesn't even matter, the explanation. It's more as the need or the desire to, you feel compelled to do this, and that's a very surreal story. Yeah, you are, indeed, in the elements all of you, because you're in the public.

XN-G: Yeah.

CG: And it's the street, and it is the city. And it is a very important thing that also really creates an atmosphere for this work to also talk back to a community. If it wasn't in the elements, it wouldn't, right? It wouldn't talk in this level.

And I feel like a lot of the things that you're saying about even sageing, which you did even before we started this conversation. I felt very happy about it because doesn't matter who believes in what as much as what is it that is meaningful [about] it, and I think that it is meaningful. And I'm glad that you even did that when you were doing murals because it's something that brings you some sense of comfort. And I feel like—

XN-G: And protection.

CG: Protection, which is so big in the street, and I'm glad to hear that these are things that you also were doing even doing that.

Because I feel like one thing that is very clear about your decisions or even your approach to things, it very much is about healing. And as you were saying, even in your family, you had *curanderos* (healers), right? You had people that had this knowledge passed down through generations that happens to be about multiple ways of healing, and you've also healed people through art, right? Like, there's very important moments in which art can be the saving grace for someone. And do you think that you have any specific examples where that has happened for you or for someone else?

XN-G: Well, I know that I've had to work with a number of kids in the classroom and they were all over the place. Their energy was all over, and some are running around and stuff like that. I've had to, quietly, but kind of ground myself.

I say, "Excuse me." I go out the door. I ground myself. I come in, and I shot light through my eyes around the—I don't really talk about this normally, but I had to kind of bring energy around the classroom. And then somehow they calm down, so I said, "Oh, thank you." Something worked.

I've gone through moments like that or just trying to encourage people, young people, to express themselves by leaving them alone. If I knew they were really good at what they were doing and they had that—you could tell through their body movement they were saying, "Don't bug me." I said, "OK, you're doing a great job." I thought it was important to encourage them to do the work or [that] it's good work, and said—no, because I've had teachers say, "Hey, fix that up," or "That arm looks out of place." That's a more technical type of teacher, and I was thinking, well, what if I wanted to make it that way?

So you just have, like they say, sometimes you have to just go along with what they say because you don't want to get into an argument or whatever, and then do it the way you want. I mean, I was told that too because there [were] times where I was very rebellious,

where, no, I don't want to do it like that, or I'm not coming to class. I felt like I don't want to come to class because they're trying to intimidate me, and I don't like that. But I had to learn a lot of that. I had to learn.

CG: And I think that that's a beautiful thing, that it is at the same time that you were learning by teaching. And it is the same thing that also was happening to an extent, even with your first mural, as we were mentioning the *Nosotros venceremos*. It is never just a matter of "I am the teacher. I'm doing anything." No, you were at the same time collaborating and learning at the same time that you were teaching, and I feel like—

XN-G: Another thing with the *Nosotros venceremos*—that was my first mural—and the teacher [who] showed me that [grid] technique of putting squares and then drawing the image from a piece of paper. I had to work with like three other girls who had no experience in art. I was supposed to do the mural and teach them at the same time. I was thinking about that this morning, saying, "Wow, I really had to do all these things, and I didn't even know." I was learning myself.

And I've been in situations like that before with other projects, like with mask making and then working with gourds. I've had to learn on the spot through another artist, so I've been able to just do stuff like that throughout the years.

CG: I think so.

XN-G: Sometimes that's what it takes. Sometimes, I mean, you can look at objects and things in the outside garbage or trash [that] could be treasures for others. And I could look at it and see it made into something else, right? I imagine, say, wow, this would look good to make it into something else—be pretty good. So I kind of learned to use [the] materials that were around.

CG: In multiple ways. Even in the human sense, people were around you, and then you also learned to work with them to create all of these things. And you saw something in them that maybe they didn't see in themselves too, rescuing them too. I think that that's fundamental, and when people like Ester or Fran, Ray, or even Patricia referenced the time that they worked with you, it's just very nice that all of you have such appreciation for each other in that way because that's hard to come by in a lot of creative projects.

One thing I did want to ask you about is if you have any memories, for example, with working with your dad in the mural at the Clínica de la Raza that you haven't been able to say before and—or other things because, as you said, he also was an artist or a *muralista*. Zala was well known too, and I think that it's very nice to see that there's a through line there. Are there any stories that you would like to tell about your time with your dad?

XN-G: My dad was the opposite of me. He was very verbal and liked to laugh with everybody and all that. And so actually, when we worked on the Clínica mural, he says, "You work on the design. I'll work on another one, and we'll see which one gets selected."

So his was—I loved his, but they didn't pick his because they weren't ready for it and because it was more Indigenous. It had more elements, Indigenous elements, and mine was maybe what was happening at the time. And I had the farmworkers. I had the migration of people. And I put some of my nieces and nephews in there, their faces, with the family, and then I had children. And one child was talking to the other children, showing them about his culture, and so it had a lot of different elements. It was like a collage of different things.

This time after UC Berkeley I took a year off, and then I ended up going to Cal State East Bay. I finished there. And so I was going to start going to school, I ended up working [at] the cannery but one season—so I could get money to go to school at Cal State East Bay. At the time, it was Cal State University, Hayward. That was the name of it before.

And so I would work there at night, get home, and go to sleep a few hours, and then work on the Clínica mural. So my dad knew exactly what that was like because he used to have to do that for years and working at different times, so he understood. But we worked together on developing it, outlining it. We used a [grid] method again, and so we did that. I had to get up on the scaffold and work on top, and then we just pulled it together.

But I learned a lot from him. He was very strict but loving, because that was his way. He lived very hard, so he was different with me than he was with my friends or with other people. So they saw the different side. But still, I know he meant well because he had, like I said, a hard life. And I know now that he did it all for us.

I actually talk to him more now, I think, in a calmer way. Now that he's in spirit, we talk, but I understand a lot of things that he was talking about that I didn't always want to hear. And I said, OK, now I know why he said that, or, yeah, OK, or—we have conversations. Or if I need help, I ask him for help, and he'll help me through with some things.

I don't feel like he's completely gone. It's just like a veil or something that's—or he's in another dimension or realm or whatever, but I feel him. But like I said, I learned a lot. And he would always say there's three truths. He'd always say there's your truth, my truth, and what really happened, and I hear that a lot when he says that because he would always say, "Well, observe the way people are." Or he'd say, "What did you think about so-and-so, about what they said?" Because I didn't always talk. I'm listening, and he's doing a lot of the talking and negotiating and stuff like that.

But, yeah, we were sometimes in different worlds, but then we'd have to come together and talk. So that's kind of the way we could talk to each other was with art, through art. That's what kind of got us talking and working together.

CG: And one thing that I feel is important is sometimes we are quick to say these things that our parents are, we are not that. And, Xochitl, you laugh a lot too, and you're very—the way you tell your own stories is also, I would say, probably influenced by the way he also told stories. So it is not as different as sometimes we think of it. So I'm glad that you've also been able to reconnect some of those things these days or hear things that you hadn't. I think that that's only nice.

And I only have a couple more questions because I don't really want to take that much more of your time. And one is about your collaboration with the Mujeres Muralistas as well as with the other *mujeres* that worked on the *MaestraPeace*. What are some stories that you remember about *Latino America*, for example, and the *MaestraPeace*?

XN-G: Hmm. I don't feel like I worked enough on the one with the Mujeres Muralistas as much as I did with the *MaestraPeace* one because I was actually working on two figures with that one.

CG: And what were the two figures? And I agree. I understand what you're saying. At the same time, I feel like *muralismo* as a form is about every collaboration and every person that contributed. You still contributed to *Latino America*.

XN-G: Yeah, I think because I was younger and I was still learning, and so they were so busy working on—sometimes artists have their assigned section, right? . . . So I was just kind of filling in areas there but still working with other women. It was nice because, like I said, I was so used to working with either my father or other males, and it's a little different.

CG: How so, according to you?

XN-G: I think the guys are a little more technical, or they—they're like, "Well, that's not right. Can you fix that up?" And the women [say], "Yeah, that looks good."

CG: So it seems a little bit more encouraging.

XN-G: Yeah, it's the way they say it, I think.

CG: I feel like that's everything, and that's kind of the most special thing of the stories that I've heard of you, Patricia, Fran. It just feels like it was more of a welcoming environment for ideas, and sometimes it seems like the guys were caught up on the technicalities. Which at the same time, I am glad to see that you still took elements of both of them and incorporated it in your own. You said you did two figures for the *MaestraPeace*, right?

XN-G: Yes.

CG: What were the two figures?

XN-G: OK, I have a story behind that. I mean, it's interesting because I was working on another project, an altar project, in Oakland. It was called something like *Festival at the Lake*, I think at the time. It was in the—I think this started in the 1990s, right, the *MaestraPeace*?

CG: Yeah, it got finished in '94.

XN-G: Yeah. And so at the time, actually, I believe somebody called me and they wanted me to work on it. And I said, "I have two murals I'm working on right now. So I really can't get

involved, but I could maybe work on something.” So later on, they told me they had two figures to work on, and I said, “Sure, fine. I’ll probably go this week.”

So however, I started working on this on the weekend—or it must have been Friday—Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. I was working on this large altar with a couple other artists, and I forgot to sage. I forgot to sage the altar like I usually do, and I didn’t do it because we were kind of rushing and trying to hurry up and get things done.

And then as I was leaving, I was walking around the lake. All of a sudden, I felt like something wiggle up my spine in my back, and it just felt kind of weird, almost like an air or something. I don’t know. But anyway, [it was] a hot day, and everything was fine.

I go home. I sit down, and I tried getting up, walking, because the pain was so sharp on my back that I just couldn’t walk. And I was crawling on my hands and knees. And then my first thought is, “Well, how am I going to take the altar down on Sunday?” So I ended up putting an ice pack on my back and just trying to relax, and lying down and relaxing. And I said, OK, Saturday I was supposed to go back. And I couldn’t because I couldn’t walk still, so I ended up going to a chiropractor who helped me to be able to walk again. . . . And then I told them I can’t come back to take everything down, so I had to write everything down, give it to my husband, and he had to get all this stuff and bring it back. Roberto, my husband, said, “Let’s go look at the wall. Let’s go and look at the Women’s Building wall.” I said, “OK.” So I was able to walk by then a little bit, but it still hurt.

So we went over to the wall and he says, “OK.” I said, Oh, my God.” The wall is so big, and then I looked at the figures. I’m thinking, how am I going to get up there on the scaffold? They said, “You’re going to work on these two figures. This is María Sabina, and she’s working on this woman here.” I said, “OK.” So what I did was I put my hands on the wall. This is for real. I put my hands on the wall. I said, “If it’s meant for me to come back, I’ll be back within a week to work on the wall.”

I just blurted it out. Like, I don’t know why I said that, but it blurted out. And as I put my hands on the wall on those two [figures] it was outlined already. I just had to fill it in. And that week—that was, I think, a Sunday or Monday or something. That week, my sister was walking around the lake and met this woman that did Reiki, which is a form of healing of the hands that’s energetically—so energetic healing.

So she got me, she says, “Oh, I met this woman, and she does healing. And you’ve got to come. You can’t walk too good. You better come, and they’ll work on your back or whatever.” So I go, and three or four people [are] around me. And they’re all putting their hands on me and my back. And they’re all around me, and they’re doing that. And when I got up I said, “Gosh, I feel so good I could flip. Where do I sign? How do I get [attunements]?” Because I was thinking of all the different projects and things, accidents, car accidents that I’ve been in, and it just all went to my back.

And so I said, “If I feel this good, I need that to help me, help my body.” Because they said, “Well, you’re not only healing other people, but as you’re healing other people, you’re healing

yourself.” So I said, “Wow, I like that.” So I start working with them later, but we also had to heal other people and not charge them, just like practice. So I go back. Within the week, I started working on the mural after that. So I was able to work on it.

CG: Wow. Yeah, and what were the two figures that you made?

XN-G: It was María Sabina. She was Mexican from Oaxaca, a healer, a *curandera*. And I didn’t really know of her too well until I started doing research on her. And that woman in the middle there on that painting, that’s her—the one with the sun rays.

CG: Yeah, it has an aura.

XN-G: There’s the aura around her. That’s her. So I really feel good about her, and after I found out about her—they have a video about her. And it’s amazing how—I was thinking about it, that in the sixties, a lot of the Beatles and other musicians at the time, they went to go see her to get healing, and her people were really mad. They said, like, “Why are you healing these people? Some people are coming in limousines, and all these rich people are coming. Why are you healing them?” She goes, “Because I’m supposed to heal people.” Even though they said they saw God or they were seeing it in a different way, she says, “Well, I’m supposed to. I’m a healer. I’m supposed to heal whoever comes my way to [have me] heal [them].”

So when I found out about her, I said—you know what? I used to work [on posters], I used to see during the hippie movement, they had all these bright colors, and they were talking about LSD and this and that. Well, she inspired a lot of them because she used mushrooms for healing, and a lot of these people were seeing colors. Timothy Leary got involved in that and all these other people. They did research on the mushrooms, and not only LSD came out of that but also penicillin. So people were interested in looking her up.

CG: Yeah, and these days, especially with, here in Oakland, they’re trying to figure it out with psilocybin specifically. And that was one of the figures. And it’s only fitting because you also were being healed, and you were drawing and painting a healer. And then you also became a healer yourself. There [are] multiple levels of not only connection but resonance there. And what was the second, the other figure, do you remember? The first one was this healer from Oaxaca.

XN-G: Oh, she was working on a woman, so it was those two figures.

CG: Oh, *las dos* (both). So it was like the—

XN-G: Yeah. It’s in the book there.

CG: Wait. So it’s, yeah. It’s the healer and the one being healed then.

XN-G: Yes.

CG: Oh, my God. Yeah, OK, that makes sense.

XN-G: Yeah.

CG: Xochitl, I just have one final question, and I think this one is just, I think, the most important question, which is—it's a question that sometimes we ask only when people are gone or supposedly when people are supposedly older. And it's not fair because I think that it's a question that needs to be asked more of us even constantly throughout life, and it's a matter of how are we to be remembered, right? How do we, like, if someone speaks of us, a student—you, art mom—if a student comes and talks about Xochitl in *diez años* (ten years), like, what would you say? What is it, for you, that you would like to be remembered for, as a person, more than anything else as a person?

XN-G: That's a good question. That's sometimes the hardest one to answer, I think, because I'm still learning. You never stop learning. Wow. I guess I would tell them to—it's important to know who you are. In order to go somewhere, it's good to know who you are, your roots, your people, your ancestors. Don't take life so hard on yourself.

We all go through bad things, but you could learn to get out of it. Like, suicide is too easy, but to live, that's hard. But it's not impossible because some people go through so many more things. And they're good people, or, I mean, they've gone through their transformation. And there [are] some leaders. Some, they become leaders after that. So just try to be the best you can. Learn basic things.

I can't even say. Just learn from other people too, from observing. You don't always have to do what other people do in order to—because your outcome may be different than theirs. So learn in different ways.

You don't always have to go to—like my dad would always tell me—you don't have to go to college to be an artist, but if you want that piece of paper or you want to teach in a higher level, a higher grade, then sure. But to me, kind of experience a lot of different things before you make decisions because sometimes what you really want to do isn't what you're supposed to do.

But keep informed. Also keep informed because also our future changes. I know that for a fact because the older you live, things change even for you, and if you don't keep up with that, you get left behind. So you always have to be on your guard.

Be grounded. That's another important thing—grounding, roots, that whole thing. And also love yourself. Then you're able to love everybody and everything too and that changes as well just a lot of things.

And what I hope to—I hope people learn from this and see another side of me they might, some people think that I'm always happy or I'm quiet. But there's another side to me too. And like everybody else, I want to be respected, and people don't always understand me. But at least to respect each other, that's a good thing.

CG: I think that is the best way of finishing this because I think that that's exactly right, and I think that you made it clear with all of these stories and memories that you told me today about all of these other ways that you also are. You just are, and I'm very happy that you gave me this time to just be able to talk to you and tell me these things. So thank you so much. It was a very important conversation, and I appreciate your time and also your work, even working through memories because that's always hard. So thank you so much.

XN-G: Well, thank you for talking with me today.

CG: *Igual* (likewise).

After the oral history recording finished, Xochitl showed me a couple of photographs right next to a thousand-piece puzzle of one of Frida Kahlo's self-portraits. One photo was of her dad in front of some of his artwork and the other was of her meeting Cesar Chavez.

Dualities, as you might have come to appreciate after this oral history, are an essential part of how Xochitl sees herself and the world. While she doesn't like public speaking much, calling it "too much performance," she's also very interested in theater, sharing that once she found herself on stage, "they couldn't get me off."

Reflecting on her struggles as a teenager, she's directed her energy and talents toward healing. Working in her community with organizations like EastSide Arts Alliance and Girl Project, she was given the apt name Art Mom—healing others to heal ourselves, as she told me in our oral history. [It's] a synthesis that results in Xochitl.

This oral history of Xochitl Nevel-Guerrero 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.