PROYECTO MISSION MURALS

Oral History Audio Transcripts

YOLANDA LÓPEZ ORAL HISTORY

San Francisco, March 31, 2021

SFMOMA

This is an oral history of Chicana artist and activist Yolanda López for the *Mission Murals Project*. I'm Camilo Garzón. It was recorded on March 31, 2021, in Yolanda López's home in the Mission District of San Francisco. The voices you'll hear will be those of filmmaker Javier Briones, me, and Yolanda. When we sat down to talk, and because it was getting cold, Yolanda was wearing a Mexican curling hoodie sweater.

This oral history delves into the facets of Yolanda's personal life and her work as an activist, especially related to Chicano Park and Los Siete, and what led to her career as an artist, detailing her foray into visual and conceptual art and her documentation of the Mission's murals and the Mujeres Muralistas. Yolanda takes us on a journey through the expanse of public art she generated throughout the years. The oral history also shows her role in preserving and amplifying Chicanx heritage and her legacy.

Here is the oral history.

Esta es una historia oral de la artista y activista chicana Yolanda López para el Mission Murals Project*. Soy Camilo Garzón. Se grabó el 31 de marzo de 2021, en la casa de Yolanda López en el barrio de la Mission de San Francisco. Las voces que oirás serán las del cineasta Javier Briones, la de Yolanda y la mía. Cuando nos sentamos para charlar, y debido a que empezaba a hacer frío, Yolanda tenía puesta una sudadera de jerga mexicana.*

Esta historia oral ahonda en las facetas de la vida personal de Yolanda y de su labor como activista —especialmente con respecto a Chicano Park y Los Siete— y qué la condujo a su profesión como artista, además de puntualizar su incursión al arte visual y conceptual y su documentación de los murales y las Mujeres Muralistas de la Mission. Yolanda nos lleva de viaje por la extensión del arte público que generó a lo largo de los años. La historia oral también devela su papel en conservar y divulgar la herencia chicana así como su propio legado. Aquí está la historia oral.

CAMILO GARZÓN: OK. So, Yolanda López, today is March 31, 2021, and I'm very pleased that you invited me and filmmaker Javier Briones to your house. And I am interviewing you on behalf of the *Mission Murals Project*. Is the volume that I'm speaking to you good?

YOLANDA LÓPEZ: Yeah.

CG: Perfect. We will begin with your family background. If you can just say your full name, and where were you born.

YL: My name is—the one I use is Yolanda Margarita López.

CG: Why do you use that name?

YL: Because my real name is too long, and—

CG: Do you mind me asking what your real—long name is?

YL: Well, do you want all the Catholic names?
CG: If you want to give them, yeah. Sure.

YL: My confirmation name, baptismal name, it's Yolanda Margarita—jeez. I can't remember. Listen, this is senior-moment time, so I can't remember it. But it's actually two names that were given to me by my biological father. And then López at the end—that was his name as well. And I don't use it, because he was an abusive man and I think a predator, in many ways.

My son tells a story that—he gave [it to] me last Christmas—about ancestry.com. And my son and I only have—or we are the only blood relatives around us. We have distant cousins who are related by blood. And so my son—when he got the notes back from ancestry.com—he said, "Mom, Mom, you have twenty-eight brothers and sisters. And they're coming." So there's more than that now.

And anyhow, he was not a good man. He served time, and he was some sort of a correspondent or something, he said, in Tijuana. And he was just a very smart man, obviously, like all sociopaths. And so I don't use his name.

CG: That makes sense.

YL: But that's the name. Nowadays, I just use Yolanda López as my official name, because before—I used the M. because all the way through college, there were at least two or three other Yolanda Lópezes that followed me through. So now I just use Yolanda López.

CG: Thank you for sharing that.

YL: And with a mark or without a mark. It doesn't even matter. [*inaudible*] I don't know what it is anymore. Yeah.

CG: Yeah, like the tilde on the O.

YL: Si. Yeah.

CG: Thank you for sharing that. I'm really sorry to hear that that happened with your dad.

YL: Yeah. So the only memory I have of him is when he went to visit my mother when I was about—living at my mother, living at my grandparents 'house. And I was about maybe two and a half, three years old. He lifted me up and put me in the backyard on a barrel—a box. And he demanded that I kiss him because he was my father. And he was a total stranger to me. And he threatened to slap me if I didn't kiss him. Whether he did or not, I don't remember. My mother was nearby. So there's no good memories. No.

CG: What was your relationship with your mother?

YL: My mother was twenty-two when she had me. She was born in Shreveport, Louisiana. My grandparents came in about 1918, escaping the pandemic—the Spanish flu—as well as the revolution, or the aftermath of the revolution, because my grandfather was a tailor, and the money kept changing. So his money would be fine one day and worthless the next day.

And they had five children, eventually. And the last one was five years old. And when she died, my grandfather said, "I can't do this anymore." They were living in Mexico City. He was from Guadalajara. And so that's when they left—just the two of them. They left Mexico City to go to the United States.

Very elegant. They were a little bit behind because they looked more Victorian than, say—because the flapper era happened in, I think, the twenties. And they were not quite there. But my grandmother looked absolutely elegant. And my grandfather—because he was a tailor, they were always immaculately dressed. And they took the train up from—through Veracruz, which my grandfather loved. And I heard a lot of music from Veracruz. And I ended up loving it quite a lot, even [to] this day.

CG: Do you still remember any examples of that music?

YL: No. I was so small—because this was all in my elementary school days. And the onset of mariachi music also was emerging at that time. And my grandparents ended up moving into Logan Heights, which is in San Diego. And we ended up between a *tortilleria*, where they made tortillas, and then a bar—a cantina. I just knew it as La Cantina. But there was a jukebox, so I heard a lot of mariachi music.

And the unfortunate—bad—part about that is that the bathroom for the cantina was in the back. So you'd go out the side door, and then there was my grandmother's fence and then the wall of the cantina. And a lot of times, men did not make it to the bathroom, and they ended up pissing in my grandmother's garden. And to this day, I have a hard time liking mariachi music.

But the two kids who lived there, Juan and—God, I can't remember her name—Esther Santos were friends. We were all about the same age. And we played in the backyard. We played in the storage unit of the—with the empty boxes of empty beer bottles and whatnot in the backyard. So it was good, but it was—

And then in Logan Heights, there was this whole—just beyond were the train tracks. It's so utterly, completely stereotypic, classic stuff. I call it classic. It's no longer stereotypes, I guess, if you live it. And then beyond the train tracks were more military installations as well as what they call the graveyard fleet for the big ships that were no longer used after World War II. I was born in 1942.

But at night, when I was older, actually, and we had moved to what we call—anyhow, I forget what it's called. But anyhow, we went to a different neighborhood. And it was also a Chicano neighborhood. But I could hear "Taps." And to this day, I love "Taps." It's such a mournful, beautiful music. But they played it [*vocalizing*] every night at ten o'clock, I think, or something

like that. Again, I remember that more with a lot of affection and joy than I remember the mariachi music that I heard.

CG: As you kept growing up, did the relationship to the mariachi music change, or did it stay—

YL: A little bit. When Linda Ronstadt came out, who's not to like what Linda Ronstadt does? She's fabulous anyway. But it's not my first choice of music. I'm a rocker. And I like metal. [*laughs*] So I like hard metal, rock. In the sixties, I grew up with Eric Clapton and the Beatles, of course, who were not metal.

But here, in San Fran—I had moved to San Francisco. And so that was really my—and my mother, believe it or not, actually loved Dixieland jazz. And I think that was her ID—as far as being born in Shreveport, Louisiana—that it was her way of identifying who she was.

We grew up Mexican in San Diego. There's no doubt about it. And we were working class. But my grandfather and my grandmother were quite sophisticated. Especially if you're a tailor, and you're sitting with a Jewish Italian, a Jewish Russian, a French guy—there's a lot of opera. So he grew up with a lot of opera. And he learned a lot of languages.

It was just quite wonderful because it was—I think within the—there aren't that many stores, I think, right now, that actually make handmade suits. There are, but they're at a different economic level. And so the tailors within that little cohort were probably the most sophisticated little conglomeration of people in San Diego at the time. They were totally cosmopolitan.

And so my grandfather was—he loved theater. And he and my grandmother—since I was the *consentida* (spoiled one) that they took me to everything from Broadway shows coming in at the Ford Bowl in San Diego to traveling Mexican vaudeville shows. So it was quite a variety of actual theater-theater as well. And they took me to movies with them as well.

And I was very lucky and had a broad experience of culture, which I think is really important—because I don't think a lot of Mexican Americans or Mexicans had that kind of—what I would call a sophisticated taste. We had opera at home. We had big, old 78 records. And we had radio. So there was a lot of music of different kinds on radio.

And then when I grew older—and then the sixties came, because that was all the forties and fifties. But when the sixties came, I heard Little Richard, and my life changed. [*laughs*] I said, Ah! It was like somebody slapping you in the face, and all of a sudden, you can breathe again.

The fifties were really oppressive. And I was in middle school—fourteen, fifteen years old at the time. So when I heard Little Richard and Chuck Berry, it was a revelation, truly. And I don't think I was the only one in hearing Little Richard. But I say that because it was like—I think, as an artist, you have to be open to be amazed.

And I don't think my—in my home, we never had any plaster Christian statues. We had no bleeding Christ. We didn't have a Guadalupe. I knew who she was, but it wasn't in our home.

And we didn't have little altars on things. My grandmother had a little doily and a little something or other on top of it. But it was pretty small, and it was about this size. And I can't even remember. I think it was maybe Christ on the cross—a little cross about that big. But she never went to church. We never prayed for dinner or any of that stuff.

And my grandmother grew up in Mexico City, but she grew up in the chinampas. Her family were flower vendors so that they actually went to work walking into Mexico City, even though they were—now it's considered Mexico—the thing is dried up, where she lived, where she grew up. But they walked into Mexico City, and that's how they made their living.

And I was very lucky to have her. Anything she touched grew. Cilantro, sandias, *tomates*. Everything was—carrots. Everything, she grew. We had a chicken coop. And so she provided, in many ways, what we call now organic. [*laughs*] So I grew up with organic food. It's so funny how the language changes and how we see things differently.

We were low income, but we were not wasteful. I did not grow up with a sense of being poor at all. At all. And since my mother became a seamstress, she could sew. And we had an industrial sewing machine at home because my grandfather would often bring work from the store—the department store. And he and my grandmother would finish up whatever clothing needed to be done.

So I didn't have many clothes, but whatever I had was haute couture, made to order. It fit me and all that kind of stuff. Not fancy stuff, but they were well-made clothes. [*laughs*] And so—

CG: You had a tailor grandfather.

YL: Huh?

CG: You had a tailor as a grandfather.

YL: Yeah. So it was—

CG: As you were saying, it's a very eclectic mix of things in your childhood.

YL: Yeah. Yeah.

CG: And one of the things that we were talking about before starting this interview was the recognition of the Mexicanness in the things that you learned about your own heritage—

YL: That's right.

CG: —later on in life.

YL: Right.

CG: And when you were, after middle school and high school, something happened, which was that you started getting interested in other kinds of things outside of your own family background and barrio.

YL: Yeah. The thing is, especially—there was, in San Diego, a differentiation between Chicanos—Mexican Americans living in San Diego and those living in Tijuana. And Tijuana has gone through many, many permutations. At the time, because of the military—the navy, in general—there's a lot to talk about the navy, but—as culturally and how it affected not only San Diego, but the Mexican culture as well.

But one of the things that was quite clear was that—so we had seventeen- and eighteen-year-old guys signed up for the navy, never been out of their homes. They were from all different parts of the US. Never seen a Mexican. We were kind of exotic to them, anyhow. But they went to TJ for food, being able to drink all they wanted. There was no limit to—because they weren't eighteen—to drink. And they went whoring. So they could buy prostitutes. There was a kind of liberation for these young guys. And there was always advertisements for [treatments for] VD—venereal disease—which was fairly common. But it was part of the parlance of the time.

So Tijuana had a horrible, horrible reputation. People did not go there. And my grandparents did go. But we went, and we ate, went to the bakeries, went to the movies. But that was because I traveled with two older adults. And we were obviously Mexican.

And there were a lot of clubs in Mexico—I mean, a lot of strip clubs and clubs beyond stripping, beyond that. People don't know that, see? I tell you that because why did it have—it wasn't simply because they were strip clubs, but there was a lot of interaction between the patrons and the performers. So I remember even passing by the stores, being amazed at these images of women. And then they had black bars—[*laughs*] black bars on their eyes, black bars against their chests, hiding the nipples. I could never understand that.

But anyhow, that's what it was. And that was Tijuana when I was growing up, until I was about twelve or thirteen years old. And a real difference between being a Mexican on one side and a Mexican American on the other side.

And there was a lot of resentment in Mexicans. They said, oh—I remember walking with my grandparents, between them. And I was about eight years old. And one of them yelled out to me, in Spanish, like, oh, "You think you're so much better than we are." It wasn't until that that it crystallized that there was a kind of—I don't even know what you call it. [*inaudible*] I don't know.

We used to laugh, when I was older, about how you could tell a woman from Tijuana and a woman from the US. And part of it is, the women from Tijuana didn't shave their legs. They had stockings, but they had these long hairs mashed up against the stockings. And so we knew that they were from Tijuana and not from [*inaudible*] or—and this was also something that, sooner or later, the border patrol figured out as well, because the border patrol became quite expert at—or tried to become expert at—how to tell who lived where.

And there's this wonderful essay I just read about—which I'd never thought about—where the border became the division between Mexicans on one side and Indigenous people on the other, which I thought was really a profound thought. Because rather than say I'm Mexican American, now I say I'm an Indigenous person on this continent, just like—but it was the border that really differentiated that. The Navajos don't like it, I don't think. But listen. Hey, I'm with you, brother. [*laughs*]

CG: And as these identities are—as you're saying—started changing, how did that inform you as a person? If you were, for example, to identify yourself after you graduated from high school, started going to university, how has that identity changed through time? And that's one important—

YL: Yeah, that's—

CG: —thing that you told me also over the phone, just the recognition of Chicana—

YL: Yeah.

CG: —being Chicanx or Chicano. What does that mean to you and also to your art and your work?

YL: When I was a teenager, if white people wanted to engage me because I looked like a nice little girl, [they said], "Are you Spanish?" Which was very common. All of us who grew up in Mexico, within my generation—that was the polite way of inquir[ing]—they knew who I was, for heaven's sake. And so I can't even remember [how] I responded—I think, the first time, I said, "No, I'm not Spa—" then I realized that they were being polite. They were being polite by not calling me Mexican. So they were being polite by calling me Spanish.

And it wasn't until I left home, graduated from high school in '61, and became part—well, shoot. I became part of SDS, believe it or not. It was only a tiny, small, little organization. But in community college, or junior coll[ege]—we called them junior college—we started out as the Young Democrats. Then we became the Mariner Discussion Committee. This is College of Marin. And then we became the—oh, the Mariner Dis—

But we invited Gus Hall from the Communist Party, the local—he was this gray little man in a suit. And I said, that's a communist? Because we had already gone through this fifties scare about communism. And it eventually, very quickly, became SDS, Students for Non—what is it? Students for a Democratic Society or something like that.

And we actually sent one—at least, well, I remember one because he was my good friend—to be part of the bus caravan for voting for Black people. And he came back what we call shell-shocked at the end. But it really is PTSD. And I haven't seen him in quite a few years. But even many years later, there are certain things he will not do, like sit with his back to the door or do other things. But it was such a traumatic exper[ience]—and it was the first time, I think, where the Civil Rights Movement actually became reified for us.

And I eventually moved to San Francisco and got a little, tiny room in an SRO—single rooms only—hotel run by a little Mexican family. And there were only about, I don't know, twenty rooms, or fifteen to twenty rooms. And that's how I enrolled myself, eventually, into state college, is one little room with a sink on the end in the corner.

And I became part of the San Francisco State strike in 1968. And that's where, really, my identity really became—I was not a Mexican who was ashamed I was where I was. We went home, ate beans, talked Spanish, and all that stuff. And then once I left the doorway, then I entered into another world. You, I think, as a child, accept that as, you enter one world, and you go into another world, rather than feeling deprived.

Although, I have to say, when I was in high school—because I ran with a bunch of what we call now nerds. And there were about six or maybe eight of us. But two of us were Black. Two of us were—well, one of us was white. And I can't remem[ber]—we had Japanese. We had a lot of Japanese in San Diego, at the time, after the internment camps.

But we used to meet after school in the Latin Club. We were called the Latin Club. But it was like Latin the language, which the Romans taught. So I have to explain that. People don't know—people do study Latin. It is a language. So we met after school.

And this one man—young man—his name was Conrad [*inaudible*]. And I mention Conrad a lot because—and he was a tall white guy I mean, really. And double thick—I mean, really, we were all, to a certain degree, I don't know. We were all characters. [*laughs*] And he had thick eyeglasses. And we all shared things once a week. And he brought Mozart. And that is the first time I ever heard Mozart. And it's like Little Richard all over again. It took my breath away. And I forever thank Conrad for introducing us—playing Mozart for us.

And one of the other women was interested in yoga. We're talking about 1960—1959, '60. And so she introduced us to yoga. And her sister, Barry [*inaudible*] I remember Barry because she was loud. And she was going to be a lawyer. Who did I know—who did we know who would even think about—she's Black. And who would think about being a lawyer? So it was a lot of small revelations within our small group. We also later went to go see Hitchcock's—with Anthony Perkins—[*laughs*]

CG: *Psycho*?

YL: Yeah, that's what it was. *Psycho*. Yeah.

CG: You're mentioning all of these cultural references from a lot of various cultural landmarks. When did you first encounter Mexican art or art that was Mexican or Chicano?

YL: None. Zero. None at all. I did not encounter Mexican art. Nothing. Zero. Various different kinds of Mexican culture, because there was also pochas. And I was not a pocha. But I certainly did wear a fishtail skirt. I didn't wear poufy hair. But there were different styles. And there were Chicanos there—or Latinos, or Mexican Americans—who shied away.

And even when I went to graduate, about, I guess, eleventh grade, and my friends—my nerdy friends—were talking about college, and I went and talked to the counselor. And I may as well have been talking about a foreign language, because she could not even—I can't say picture—but she could not even conceive of the idea of a Mexican American being in college. It's like talking about an alien or a frog or a dog going to college. It was just not within her realm of possibility at all.

And so I got nothing from her, because there were two tracks in Califor[nia]—which they finally got away [from]. One track was the college prep, and the other track was—I don't even know what they call[ed] it, but it was basically learning woodshop and economics—not economics, but cooking and things like that.

CG: How much did you learn of your own heritage compared to—

YL: Nothing.

CG: —the missions in San Francisco and the rest of California?

YL: Nothing. In San Diego, there is a mission, which we were told was a fort and overlooking the bay. And we went there, and there was a little church. And the tale goes that there was a little village and Ramona was there. Now, Ramona is a fictional character who was supposed to be—I guess she's Mexican or Indian. I guess she was actually, in truth, probably an Indian—a California Indian. And then she fell in love with this white guy, and they had a tragic romance. So that was part of—I can't—Old Town in San Diego.

And so there was nothing. It's hard to believe, but we did not exist. We did not exist. And Mexican art, to me, was the tourist arts. They were the paper flowers. They were the plaster pigs dipped in velvet. Or there were other critters that were made out of plaster and sold to tourists. I don't even know what they were, because we didn't buy them. But we knew that as the cars were leaving Tijuana, that there were all these men and women among the cars selling this.

That was Mexican art. That was Mexican art, to me. And I regret that I will not live long enough, because I have an idea of wanting to work with tourist arts because I believe that tourist arts are really the—I don't know how you'd say it. The easiest way, but not quite true, is the corruption of folk art. But there's a certain—

Even Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who did the velvet paintings—and when he did that, it cracked me up, because that was standard, as far as selling tourist objects that didn't exist before. That's what I'm saying, is that tourist arts did not exist before, at least on the border. There was a whole industry in the trains coming through Kansas to Los Angeles in the development of Navajo rugs and Navajo jewelry and all that stuff, which was based on Spanish gear for horses. But beautiful stuff. But silver hammers and—but that did not exist. The economic imperative is so strong.

And to me, what I saw on the border in San Diego and Tijuana was Mexican art. And it didn't appeal to me. It was like—I can't even explain what it was. I can't say if I didn't like it, but it was the other. Definitely the other. And I did not mistake it for fine Mexican art. Fine Mexican art was maybe the Helguera calendar arts with the pyramids and the Aztec princes and all that. Because a lot of Chicanos, in doing initial—

This is where the Mexicans laughed at us. In doing muralism, when Chicanos started doing murals, the images that we had that were the most repetitive and visually beautiful were the calendar arts. So we did a lot of pyramids, and we did a lot of glamoured-up—now we look at them, and they're dancers out in the streets, that sort of thing. But at the time, they were glamorous ladies and—[*laughs*] all very highly sexualized women.

And the Mexicans laughed at us, because I remember meeting this Mexican filmmaker—and this was several years later—laughing at us as, why did you do all these pyramids and these Aztec Indians? We had no other way—we had no other imagery. There was very little, as far as excavations go. But that was *National Geographic*. Who read *National Geographic*? And that was usually one or two little—and they were all written by white people doing their little thing and trying—

Anyhow, but it was totally foreign to us. No kind of imagery, as far as being a Mexican, or having any kind of history. That, I think, was the first thing that we realized in doing our artwork, was there was no historical precedent. And we had to learn it on the spot, or we made it up. Or we made it up. And I find no fault in that, because it helped us to survive.

We still had a lot of Mexican culture, obviously, in the food and in the way that we dressed and the vaudeville shows that went through with Mexican humor—some of it quite vulgar, but [it] was funny. What can I say? But it was quite a lot of Mexicanos. There was Mexican. But there was no what I think anybody would call fine art at all. At all.

And there was no history. There was no history. It's as if you came to this country and was raised here, and if you're a Colombian or a Guatemalan, and all of a sudden, as an adult, you say, Hmm. What do I know about Guatemalan history? And you're not going to know. You're not going to know, because this culture that we live in now does not teach it. Or what we know about Colombian—right now, the history that exists for Guatemala is poverty, is the escaping of women with two-month-old babies walking—

CG: So you're fed these narratives. And this discourse exists with these narratives. And this is all until you discover otherwise or uncover these kinds of more interesting histories that are thousands of years old and all of these icons that, for example, I think, from what I can see in your work, you reclaim.

YL: Yeah. Well, reclaiming is an interesting word. And I don't use it, because I didn't know it in the first place. So I can't reclaim something I didn't previously own.

And in 1978—it was the year I graduated [with] my master's. And that was the year that the Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess, was found when they were in the Zócalo digging for a new

subway entrance. And all of a sudden, there's this image there. And not only that, but they found pyramids upon pyramids upon pyramids. So we can only guess how many hundreds or maybe thousands of years that—you just don't build a pyramid overnight—that it had existed.

And the Coyolxauhqui was one that I personally picked up quite a lot, because the Coyolxauhqui—the story goes, she was dismembered by her brother, Huitzilopochtli. It's a long—it's not a long story, but it is a story. And I had never encountered a female goddess. And the only other female goddess was the Guadalupe. And it wasn't until the Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess, was found that I realized who Guadalupe was. Guadalupe is Coatlicue, Coyolxauhqui's mother.

See, Coatlicue is the great goddess. She's the one that—she's horrific. It's like, her head is two snakes, head to head, like this. And her arms are like this. There were two snakes also emerging from the mouth of serpents. And she's also defined, in English, as the lady with the serpent skirt. And her feet are like these claws because she digs into the ground. The Earth is where she is stationed.

And when the Spaniards first saw the Coatlicue, they looked at it, and they said, "Oops!" And they reburied it. They didn't even bring it up. They just said, "Oh, I don't know what this is." But it's a powerful—if you ever go, you should go. I only saw it once, and that was—oh gosh. Oh God, maybe thirty years ago at the Museum of Anthropology. And I knew, as I approached it—because it's not very big. It's maybe five foot tall, maybe less—that I should kneel down, because I was in a presence—the presence of something cosmic.

See, this is where the Spanish—the Spanish came over from the Western European Christian tradition. And so their idea of Mary and Joseph and Jesus was too small. They only thought about human life and human things. But the Coatlicue is talking about the cosmos. To me, I feel like the Coatlicue knows about black holes.

And if I were to do a painting of her, not only would I show her and maybe—and I have one where I do remnants of the Guadalupe's cloak on her shoulder. But in the background, I would show—because they've discovered there's other Milky Ways, other total, total, total—because we are in the Milky Way, but we're in just a tiny, little dust speck. But they've now discovered—also because the land rover to Mars and all that confirmed it—that there are other Milky Ways. So who knows how infinite it is?

But to me, the Coatlicue is that larger idea of the cosmos. She's an idea. See, that's where, I think, the Indigenous people were—even, like, in North America—were much more conceptual in dealing not with just singular human bodies—they have those stories too—but that they overall see this as a conceptual—of ideas, that the creation and the creator is a larger image. And the Spaniards were so tiny in their thinking. But the Indigenous people know.

And so that's when I discovered that the Guadalupe—because she's so ubiquitous. Everybody loves the Guadalupe. And I've said this before, that the Guadalupe is really—has a thin veneer, a thin coating, of Christianity. But as soon as it dissolves or wears off or drops down, it's the

Coatlicue. It's the larger image. And I think that's why a lot of Mexicans just feel an attraction to it, because it is a larger concept. The Indigenous people are conceptual.

And so that's when I realized—when they found the moon goddess, the Coyolxauhqui, in the circular stone there in front of a pyramid where you would have to step on it to go up to the pyramid—that there was something else going on there. And it wasn't just—it wasn't a simple thing like we think of Christianity and the saints and all that other stuff.

But that's when I knew what it was. That's why, in part, that I could—I could play with it, see? Because once I realized that, then I realized that women, ordinary—well, I just knew that already, but it just firmed it up to me—that women need—what we need is not just somebody who looks like Superman with long hair. What we need is a total idea of what a woman can do and be, that it doesn't necessarily mean that kind of imagery.

That's why I chose my mother, who was a working woman, at an industrial sew[ing machine]—making her own cloak of stars. She's not waiting around. She's making her own cloak of stars, and with the sun still radiating from her back.

And my grandmother, who—I did that portrait of her when she was in her eighties. And I put a knife in her hand because I did not want to—in the US America, there is the idea of old people as—and especially old people—she's an Aztec Indian, for Chrissake. She belongs on the head of a nickel—that sort of emblematic, ancient US American soil that we robbed.

So that's why I put a knife in her hand, because I just did not want to have this—I don't even know how to describe—this impotent elderly lady. That's the only—and then in her other hand, she has a flayed—a skinned snake, because to me, the snake, Quetzalcoatl, represents many things [from a] philosophical point of view. And it means also life and its permutations—

That I wanted to present her, at her older age, as recognizing already that she had lived out our little time span that we have here on Earth, or wherever it is. I don't know if it's on Earth, because I know when I go, I'm just going to be dispersed. Who knows—you might be breathing in a molecule or something from me.

So I wanted her to be at peace, at total peace, not ashamed that she's old. And she's dressed in civilian clothing, how she usually dressed. And I put the little brooch that she always wore. It's the crescent moon. Yeah, a little black crescent moon on her chest. And just totally calm. That's all I wanted.

But she has a knife. And she's—the flayed snake. So there's a kind of—not only the power of her life having lived, but also the potential of—I know that my grandmother would defend me, life and limb. And I felt like, in doing that, with her holding the knife, that she would not hesitate to defend me, one way or another. I wanted her to have some sort of symbolic power in that way.

CG: And you, for example, are mentioning the conceptual nature of the Aztecs or the Mayas. And you yourself are using some of that conceptual nature in your own art, in your own activism, which, in my opinion, is interdependent. One would not exist without the other. The activism without the art, and the art without the activism.

YL: Absolutely. Absolutely.

CG: And you have mentioned a lot of influences that are not only about Mexican American art or Chicano art or culture; you've also got some influences from the moment you moved, for example, to San Francisco from San Diego.

YL: Yeah, but even before then.

CG: And even before as well.

YL: And that was in graduate school. And that was Allan Sekula, who was a photographer, who—

CG: Martha Rosler as well.

YL: And Martha Rosler, who—we became friends. It was my privilege.

CG: They were who to you? Who were they to you? I know that they were—

YL: Who were they to me, or—

CG: —your professors in UC San Diego, but—

YL: Yes. They—

CG: —who were they to you?

YL: They were not even professors. They wanted to become tenured, but I think there was a real kind of antagonism toward them becoming tenured. And I just, by chance, when I first joined the MFA program, took a class from Allan Sekula on lab—photo lab—how to develop your pictures and all that stuff, which—and film—which nobody knows anything about. But I know about how to do it.

And we were supposed to have a project. So that's when I was volunteering at Chicano Park with the high school girls that—I chose them because they were—the most interesting things, actually, right now—while I was in graduate school. And I did this as a project for Allan Sekula.

And he was almost a magical teacher. And I can't tell you how or why. But it was more like an attitude toward knowledge, an attitude toward dismissing any kind of authority. I can tell you—he was the funniest man. But in a shocking and dismissing any kind of school authority, corporate authority, even—everything. And it was done with such charm that what he—

And then I also took, from Allan, the next semester, the history of photography. And my life changed, totally. And he had just written—and it was published in art form—his discourse on [Alfred] Stieglitz and some of the work that he had done. So that was very—so he was not only a writer and really a fantastic speaker, but also—

With Martha, I had met Martha. And she was teaching a women in film class. I couldn't take the class, but I definitely would sit in on [it in] the back. I would [go] in the back and just sit in on her class. And what they both did was they gave me a language. They gave me a language about how to talk about art. And I use it now to this day. And it's all, I guess, standard discourse in analyzing imagery. And so I learned to talk about not only what's in the frame, but also how what's outside the frame influences what's in the frame.

And I found that I just loved teaching children and looking at their drawings about—I've had some wonderful experiences with children about—one that is quite vivid to me was, they did all underwater scenes. So it was talking about the horizon line. Where does the water end, and where does the sky begin? And talking about underwater scenes and how we have a symbolic language about that—just that straight horizon line.

And I played with them, like, saying, if you have one foot with a fin going out in one direction, but going off frame, that what do you know? You guess that there's probably another body there, another swimmer. But you don't know that. But part of that is what we learn and what we—

So it was just—they were fascinated in understanding how the images that they produced were so rich in potential storytelling, in potential—yeah, a potential narrative that they could not see, and that beyond that, how did we learn that there is probably more water beyond the frame? And where would it begin? Where is the sky? It was just wonderful.

And the other thing that I remember—this is part of my conceptual language in talking with children—was—because Nike had just come aboard in doing running shoes. And all the little kids were wearing Nike shoes. And I said, "Did you know that Nike was a goddess?" "No." "That she's female?" "No." "And that she sits on the hand of Athena?" "No." "And she carries a sword because she's Athena's right-hand lieutenant? Because when Athena says, go take care of this and all that, it was Nike that went out and took care of business." And again, they didn't know this.

There was also a lot of other things, like Hercules. There was something—I can't remember. It was a cartoon. And they didn't know any of this richness that they could work with, that they could work with, in their storytelling about their shoes, for heaven's sake.

Anyhow, so there was a lot of language that—and I also saw John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*, who was also wonderful. And what was the name? I can't even remember anymore. All these old guys who wrote—one guy—and I can't remember his name—wrote about body language. It was just one little book about body language, but I learned a lot from that. And I still use the ideas about that in how to depict not only how I use it, but how advertis[ing] uses it.

And this is where, I think, Allan and Martha opened my eyes to the commercial aspects of conceptual art. Advertisers use conceptual art. They assume not only what's in the frame, but also what's outside the frame. And that's how they sell. Even now, on the Internet, I think it's quite prevalent.

But yes, I am a conceptual artist. And I enjoy it immensely. And I still do it. And it's used in my whole analysis of advertisements, especially about how Mexicans are portrayed in the media. Since I have to divest myself of a lot of stuff that I have, one of the things that I did start was this collection of Mexican cookbooks. And they're all Mexican cookbooks done by non-Mexicans.

And what was interesting to—and I'm trying to—if I can't find anybody who might be interested in this little collection, find somebody who might be interested in just having it in their home and having other people look through it, is—because most of the books, like *Sunset* magazine. There's some old magazines that are done.

And even [Williams] Sonoma, that wonderful store—oh God. I love that store—did a book on—and I have it—on Mexican food, which was pretty good, actually. But the guy fell in love with Mexican cuisine. And there's a lot of that going on. Rick Bayless—and it's all done by whites. But it's all an interpretation. It's all a [*inaudible*] they're presenting a representation of who we are. Let me put it that way.

CG: One question there. Your art decided—or you decided, with your art—to merge not only the activism and this conceptual nature of a lot of symbolism that has a lot of levels, you also decided to depict very specific subject matter in a way that hadn't been represented before, especially women in very common situations, everyday situations. And this depiction, this frame—what you put in, but also what was out—really reflects on what you're saying. All of these levels.

YL: Yeah.

CG: My question for you is, in your mural—

YL: We're talking about working-class women.

CG: *Exacto*.

YL: Old, middle-aged, fat, skinny, young.

CG: And also yourself, your mom, and your grandma in the Guadalupe triptych, also when you were doing other art, like *Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?* You're using all of these things that are subverting expectations.

YL: Oh, you understand it. Oh, you understand it.

CG: You're subverting expectations.

YL: Yes.

CG: And Yolanda, that's very important because that's also the influence that you've had on others—

YL: Yeah.

CG: —that came after you and with you. So my question is, your muralism work in San Diego, which was not as much as the rest of the other conceptual work—you ended up here in San Francisco, where there's this huge Mission District mural scene that you became a part of. You framed it. You grabbed your camera. You documented it.

YL: Some of it, yes.

CG: Which, it's some of it, but it's most of what is also there.

YL: Because the women were totally ignored. Mujeres Muralistas, I think, started in '71, '72. And there were, like, originally three women. And eventually, others work with them. But Patricia Rodriguez was the one that I—and also Graciela Carrillo, who I actually adored. Beautiful woman, very talented, very different than Patricia.

Patricia was from Texas. And there's a certain element of traditionalism that exists, even in her work, that I don't know if she's here, she'll understand it. But Graciela was, I think, from Los Angeles. So there's a different kind of tenor to them.

But anyhow, and they were taunted when they built the scaffolding to do the first—or, one of the first images they did was on this laundromat between 25th and 26th Streets. It was a huge wall. And it was the first time, as I understand it, that they worked together. And they didn't know how to meld the design that they had or the style—Consuelo Méndez was the one from Colombia? Venezuela. OK. Yeah, that's right. OK. So she's still there. [*laughs*]

So they wanted to work together like the men did together. But the men worked singularly. So there was always one jefe and helpers. So there was no kind of trying to—no sense of a cooperative mission there. So I think the mural is gone now. But the thing is, if you look at it, you can see almost three panels or maybe four panels of imagery.

And one of the things that the Mujeres Muralistas did, which was totally contrary to what was going on at the time, and especially what had just come from the men—were a lot of male heroes. So there was no Zapata. There was no Aztec warrior whose name I forgot. And there was none of the staunch male imagery that I think we've all become used to.

What they did is, actually, they introduced women—images of women—in a mural. And some of them are very pretty. They were, as I recall, in traditional dress and all that, in part because there was no other kind of alterna[tive]—they're not going to show somebody getting on the

bus, on the Muni, going to work. So they haven't quite—they realized that they needed to reinvent the imagery of women.

Their masterpiece is *[Para] el mercado*—I can't remember. It was for Paco's Tacos because they were afraid that this little taco company would go out of business because the McDonald's was going to be built on the corner. So they hoped, by doing a mural in their parking lot, that Paco would be able to survive and [customers would] be attracted to come. And they were paid $400 for it—everything—materials and—among the women. So—

JAVIER BRIONES: I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the—you mentioned that when they were putting up the scaffolding, they were mocked. And I'm wondering [*inaudible*]—

YL: When they were what?

JB: When they were putting up the scaffolding—

YL: Oh, yeah. Oh, excuse me.

JB: —they were mocked. I wonder if you could—

YL: They were—oh God. They were mocked. But it's very interesting because they were mocked in a very traditional Mexican way. And that was, if you fall down from there, and you hurt yourself, you'll never have children. That was the big scare, that if you trip and fall, whether you're walking along who knows what, doing hopscotch or anyth[ing]—it doesn't matter. Any kind of physical work that—I remember hearing that myself. And they were told that. Their lunches were stolen. They were catcalled all the way.

This is where Patricia would be able to give you more detail on it, because she's the one that told me about this. And the big threat—and I remember the big threat was, you will never have children if you fall down from the scaffolding, whether it's two feet or it's twenty feet. It wasn't that high. But there was a kind of leveling of fear into the endeavor. And I would talk to Patricia, because it could be anything from dealing with chemicals and—they really struggled, but they did it.

And then with Paco's Tacos [*Para*] *el mercado*—did I say that correctly? [*laughs*] Was their masterpiece, because what it is—because one of the things that we did learn from Indigenous—and I think it's throughout at least the Americas—of the idea of paradox, the idea of yin and yang, the idea of the whole being part of the opposite.

And so they had a morning scene—early in the morning—where there were, presumably, the women picking the crops, whatever they're going to sell, and then walking with their basket on their head toward the marketplace. And then the central image was this marketplace. And they're all sitting down. And there's one woman with her hand out, sort of saying, I've got good stuff here. And where they were selling their who knows what—camotes, whatever the—chiles. Who knows whatever it was? Tortillas.

And then there was them wrapping things up and getting ready. And then the last image is the backs of two women walking away, about three-quarters of the way up into the actual space, into a night sky, and walking away. The day has ended. They've done this work.

But what they did was not only active women, but they showed women as part of the economic and financial well-being of the village, of the community, because there was no other imagery of women being part of contributing to the community.

I did a residency at the Arizona State University. And they came out of it. His name is—anyhow. Aldama. I forget his last name. Arturo Aldama, who was editor of the Latin American encyclopedia. And part of the entry was the Mujeres Muralistas. And he had submitted it to several scholars in our department. Ethnic—it was Chicano Studies. And I was the last one [*laughs*] because he said he was not satisfied, somehow, with what they were submitting.

And it wasn't until I submitted that what they—the revolution of what they did was that it actually included women as part of the community, not only as part of the community, but as contributors to its survival, because that did not exist at all. That did not exist at all. So to me, that's their greatest contribution.

And plus, it was beautiful work. If you've ever seen it, it's just absolutely stunning. And it was coherent, as far as—they melded the style, and where they have the distance of the fields where they're gathering their goods, and then at the end, the distance of them leaving the center space, the communal space of the marketplace, and where they are totally participants as equals within the marketplace.

And I am convinced it is their masterpiece. If you ever get a good image of it, I would strongly recommend it. Strongly, strongly, strongly. I know that there was a mural—a group in New York. But I think they were Asians.

JB: One of the curious things, for me, is for you seeing these women putting up the scaffolding and painting, and these women then being—the actual images of the women being painted. What was that like for you to witness that at that time?

YL: Well, I was already—I was ecstatic. What can I say? And especially not only that they were doing all this physical stuff, but that they had buckets of paint, and they were—they had a transistor radio, so they had music on all the time. And it's right there, almost at the center of 24th and Mission—that little parking lot behind them.

And so it was a joyous space. And I wasn't the only one. Many, many people—as far as I know, they didn't get the catcalling and the disrespect that they got from the one on the laundromat. But the work itself is quite superior. And I was going to say something else, and I can't remember what now.

JB: Just like, how did it feel for you, at that time, to see these women?

YL: Oh, because I knew them personally. And I know that there were other young artists, like, Ester Hernández, who was quite young, Irene Pérez, who came and worked with them, who were, I think, also quite goggle-eyed at being—I think Ester painted a chicken or something. I can't remember. But there was a kind of—just putting a brush to where the master also works. It will live with them forever. Forever. I didn't paint. And those were images that—I must have photographed them. I can't even remember anymore.

But I showed them to the high school women in San Diego Chicano Park, and their eyes just about fell out of their head. Just beautiful. On slides, I'll tell you, that kind of concentrated color and imagery—and they understood it. That's the thing—they understood it. There was nothing foreign about it. There was nothing that had to be explained. They understood exactly.

And to them, it was, I think, too natural. It wasn't that they had to justif[y]—I didn't have to justify what I just said to you guys, because they didn't know the history of it. But to them, it was like, "We're ready to go!" [*laughs*] They were ready to go.

And I'll tell you a sad story, though, because they also named themselves Mujeres Muralistas de San Diego. So that's the ones—the high school girls that painted in Chicano Park. And I was in graduate school, so I couldn't be with them all the time. But I was what I call a technical advisor. I taught them how to do a scale drawing.

So I said, You learn how to do a scale drawing, you can copy anything. You know what a scale drawing is? I said, You can copy anything. And this was something my uncle had taught me, how to trace—how to do Sunday morning cartoons—that I learned how to do a scale drawing. And I could do whatever it was—Donald Duck or Brenda Starr or whatever. I could do it.

The young women—and they did have scaffolding. And there were men—young men—around. And they also got taunted and teased, mostly by men who—neighborhood guys who did not paint, but they hung out in an old couch near where they were painting. So they had no function other than to be the Greek chorus, as it were.

And they finished their painting. And then I got a phone call saying that somebody had gone by with a brush and—with an old brush with paint on it—and just went over their faces, because they did little self-portraits of themselves. And I said, We'll get our gear up, we'll go down there, and we will repair it right now. And—which we did, which they did, and I'm there—if I had a shotgun, believe me, I'd have it.

And then a few days later, they did it again, but worse. It was heartbreaking. That's all I can tell you. I think they even went back and did it again where it was not repairable anymore. That's the point. And they [re]did it the second time. But the third time, it was just not repairable anymore. And—

JB: Why did they do it?

YL: Why did they do it? We're still working on it. And when I say we're still working on it, we're working on male culture. We're working on Mexican male culture. We're working on Mexican traditional male culture. The answer is there somewhere.

CG: Because—

JB: Do you think they were afraid of women having this power, or they were angry at women having that power?

YL: Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey. Speak to me, Latino guy from Guatemala. Speak to me, guy from Colombia, because there's not that much difference, guys. And it's deep. It's deep. So you tell me. You tell me.

And this is where I had—I had this conversation with this man for several years about feminism and all that. He says, "Well, I guess you women will just have to teach us." And it took a while. And it suddenly dawned on me, I don't have to teach you a goddamn thing. I don't have to teach you anything. And talk about a fallback excuse. It was clever. It was clever because then it puts it on me to reform *más o menos* them. So—

JB: [*inaudible*] it puts the labor and the work back on you versus men doing the work themselves to figure out what the problems are with misogyny and the—

YL: You tell me.

JB: —culture. Yeah.

YL: It was the easy little shuffle off to Buffalo sort of little thing offstage, but leaving whatever responsibility they had behind.

CG: Speaking of that, Yolanda, one thing that you told me over the phone, that it's related to just the questions that Javier and I have been asking you—is that you said that the stories that have been told about the Mission District are generally favorable, especially about men, but they haven't been fair about—

YL: They haven't what—?

CG: They haven't been fair, they haven't been just, about the women artists like, as you're saying, your friends Patricia, Graciela, Juana—

YL: Juana Alicia.

CG: Juana Alicia Araiza. So—

YL: Who is one of my heroes, by the way.

CG: —what are some of those stories like the one that you just told us, even about—in San Diego—but from the Mission District that—

YL: I'm sure it's been repeated up and down California that we don't know about. See, that's the thing, is we don't hear about these stories. So when people look at the photography I did in—which I submitted to Allan Sekula, because I don't think I even mentioned the fact that the thing was destroyed. So there's this kind of untold story. That's so cliché. But there's not only an untold story, but there's—

We have not come to reckon with our culture. We have not come to reckon with our male culture. We have left them alone. And I think, with the Me Too generation, Black Lives Matter—time's up, guys. Time is up. And it may take a while. But I think, especially with the Me Too generation, where women are begin[ning]—"Oh, you were fondled, and he did that to you? Oh, I didn't—but this other guy did the same thing to me."

And what that does is it creates a community, because it's not just me alone that had that happen, that it all of a sudden—there's another friend or a pal. And she talks to somebody else, and all of a sudden, there's three or four or twenty of us having very similar—and we begin to see patterns, that sort of thing.

But I think the Me Too movement has to be kept up among us women because it's too vital. And it's unspoken abuse, unspoken strategies that men have used on us that, a lot of times, men don't use. It seems as natural as apple pie. And I forgot. You asked me a question. [*laughs*]

CG: What are some of those stories? Because you were saying they have been untold.

YL: Oh, oh, in the Mission. I can't think of any immediately, because I think this is something that happened to women individually. And oftentimes, it's not direct. I know that when I came up to San Francisco in 1978, '79, that the man I was with, René—there was a group of women in the Galería who—they didn't say it, but it's a very common parlance of, you stole him away. And I'm sure you all heard it in your family. She stole her husband or her boyfriend or whatever away from—men are not stolen away. They're just not held culpable.

And so I was, I think, accused of stealing René away from his current girlfriend at the time—or previous girlfriend at the time. And it created a real kind of undercurrent of hostility toward me. So there's a lot of ways that even that little ripple became—like, one of the women was quite prominent. And so she never said anything bad about me, at least that I heard. But whenever people came to want recommendations about, here's this list of artists, or can you give me a list of artists that I should invite to this show, I was not on it.

And I think that's a ripple effect of traditional male culture and how we, as women, need to [*grunts*] wake up. [*laughs*] And I think we are. I think we are. And I think that we have to call them on it. See, this is what I mean about when you talk about what happened to the women. I think a lot of it is individual.

And so this is where the Me Too generation really is helpful. And we have to engage men—not necessarily accuse them, but they don't know what they're doing. I think a lot of men do not understand how—in fact, I know that men do not understand the impact of what they say about women.

I'm going to give you a set of cards that I called pocket posters, which speaks directly to we, as women—and actually anybody—but we, as women, not to be victims and to talk to men as equals. And it's very—I had a Black woman tell me after a talk, it's very hard to talk to a man as an equal.

And in the cards, I even mention one of them, because when a woman talks to a man as an equal, he thinks you're being condescending to him. And even though you have no idea of feeling superior—but they do not—and that was one of the problems I had with Chicano Park, to tell you the truth, was, since I had no romance about the men working and painting. And I talked to them as equals, pretty much, because that's the way I'd been trained. The *consentida* (spoiled) part—this is where it happens. They considered me disrespectful.

And I don't know what to tell you. I have to show you the cards. But the cards are very much concerned about women talking to men as equals, but also warning men that when a woman talks to you as an equal, they will sometimes laugh at us or think we're naive. They think we're either naive or stupid.

And women will often say, "Oh, [*laughs*] OK." But women understand. And that's the part that men have to learn, that even though we laugh and act as if we didn't quite understand that they thought we were stupid or naive, or especially naive—then they're paying us a compliment—that we know. We know that they are belittling us in their brain. But we don't say that to men. So it's a warning. In one of the cards, I talk about that men have to be aware that women are aware and that we're trying to—

Anyhow, but one of the last cards that I mention is that men, to be liberated from patriarchy—this is the idea, because men don't think that they have to be liberated from patriarchy. So I'm putting this wording in, that if men want to be liberated from patriarchy and they're looking for the road to liberation, then they have to be careful about every recommendation they make, every conversation they have. And I forget what else. But it's that whatever they say has, built within it already, the potential for being liberated.

See, men don't think of themselves as being liberated from patriarchy. Women think about them being liberated from patriarchy, but men don't see it. But that's why I put that language in there, to insert it, to talk to men and say, would you like to be liberated from patriarchy? Then—and you want your liberation from patriarchy—then you have to be careful about what you say and the decisions you make, because women know.

JB: Yeah. And I don't want to speak for Camilo, but I think we are both in agreement that patriarchy is bad for all humans.

YL: Pardon?

JB: Patriarchy is bad for all humans, not just—it's especially worse for women and nonbinary people. But it is bad for men. It is bad for women. It is bad for people that—

YL: But unfortunately, men—

JB: Benefit from it.

YL: Yeah, no.

JB: But it's—

YL: They benefit from it, but they don't know—

JB: Yeah.

YL: It's like white people don't understand the benefits from it.

JB: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

YL: It's—like I also talk about, these are all things I talk in several—we were given an IQ test—it was called the Iowa IQ test—in eleventh grade, which was standard. They've quit it now. But it was, you have a table. You have a small plate on one side, and you have a cup on the other. What's your next action? The next action is, you take the cup, and you put it on the plate. Who in any Mexican household puts their cup on an empty plate?

And so it defines not only a culture, but it—it defines culture, but it defines class. And it defines what's proper. So a lot of us were sub[jected] to all these tests, and the scores were given to us. And when a counselor comes to talk about college training, she looks at you—and it's a cascade. You did not do well on that test because you did not put the cup on the plate.

And so it becomes cascading. In other words, if you're not going to do well on this, I'm not even going to bother giving you this other test, because you're not going to make it. Or something else happens. And this is how people from other cultures get trapped in this white patriarchy.

But white patriarchy doesn't recognize it. They see it as a middle-class standard of treating two different objects on a table, because they don't see it, because that's the way it's done. And so I talk a lot about this with my students. Well, I don't teach anymore. Too bad. [*laughs*] But—so we become aware.

CG: Basically, the questions that I have left are about you, your family, your legacy, per se, and also remembering René and what you want to say about your relationship. You've said very powerful things about men. And the important thing that I think I'm taking away from this is just, even if you love someone, they still can work on it. If you love a country, it still

needs to work for you and with you. So how do you think of the legacy of someone like René Yañez?

YL: We went to the same high school together in San Diego, and we both graduated in 1961. But we didn't know each other in high school. And he lived, for the most part, in Tijuana. And I lived in Southeast San Diego, where Lincoln High School was.

The very interesting thing that I'm beginning to realize now is that my uncle came and said, "I would help you get to college"—since I had expressed wanting to go to college. And I wanted to go to Chouinard, which was an art school in Los Angeles, which actually trained and fed into the industry. So I could see myself as a set designer or even a costume designer or makeup artist. All of that just really—but the school was closed in 1961, the year I graduated. So it just really totally knocked me off-kilter, as far as going to school.

And my uncle wanted to go to San Francisco because of the gay scene. And he was a gay man, obviously. And so he and his friend, who had this huge, baby-blue Cadillac convertible with the roof down—and the back seat, where I sat, was bigger than the bedroom my sister and I slept in.

And René joined the military. He joined the army and was sent to, I think, North Carolina—one of the Carolinas, North or South Carolina—where there was a big recruiting training ground. And what I learned from René, when we became friends several years later, was that the sight of blood made him ill. It was just beyond his—even though he—there's a lot of contradictions [in] René that I can speak about better than mine. [*laughs*]

But his father beat him almost every night as a teenager coming home from work. And his mother, in Tijuana, wanted to join the country club. And so there was a lot of pressure. And there were two brothers, and he was the second youngest. And the older brother was favored. And so Ren'és way out was joining the military. So he joined the army. And he joined the special forces, the Green Berets. And he had told me that.

And my son, in dispersing his items, found the Green Beret. And so when Río told people that—I don't know who he told. He didn't tell everybody, but he told some that his father was a Green Beret—a lot of them just totally, like, "What?" [*laughs*] Because at the time, it was seen as pro-war, and really anti-Vietnam War.

Eventually what happened was that I think René, in being on the East Coast and encountering so much racism among the general population, as well as the military, and anti-Vietnam War sentiment—that it totally changed the way he saw the world. And he was also dyslexic. Unfortunately, I am too. And my son inherited a lot of our "other ways of learning" sort of ways.

And so René ended up doing his time in the military by teaching art or going to—in the hospitals, he would go to each bed and either draw for them or have them make things. So that's how he spent his military time.

And so when I met him, we were in San Diego at one point, and we went out to the suburbs. And he was a very good shot. So he was quite good at pistols. One of his friends, I think, had a pistol. And he was quite—just an unexpected talent or whatever that he did that. But he never talked about it. So I'm telling tales out of school sort of thing, because a lot of people did not know that about him.

And it was also discovered, in looking—because when I first came to live with René, to be with him, his taxes had already been garnished several—I think at least twice. And so he didn't pay taxes. So there was a lot of things that he, for whatever reason, could not or would not do. It's probably a combination.

And when I met him to be with him, ATMs were just coming out. So he just saw this little machine that spit out twenty-dollar bills. But he didn't quite understand how it worked. And he was working at the Galería at the time as well. So there were a lot of things, especially with the Green Berets, that people do not know about him.

He also—his green card was found, because he was born in Tijuana, in Baja. And because in the military, I think you could, at that time, become—submitted some papers—you could become a citizen. And he did not. But I think that's part of this pattern of not really doing a lot of the paperwork.

He did not even show up in the high school album. [*laughs*] I think there's a blank space, because he just, for whatever reason—because I know he used to go to work. He told me that after classes in high school, he would go off and work at, I think, Kress, which was a little five-and-dime store in San Diego.

And so they found his green card, and it was expired about eight years. So if the police or anybody had become aware—there was so much anti-immigrant spaces in between the time that he moved to San Francisco to the time that he actually died, that any of those times, he probably—who knows what would have happened to him? Because he was not a citizen and because his green card was expired. But he never got caught.

It's just amazing. René has a kind of—I don't even know what to explain it as. But there are some people who just walk through disasters and are never touched [*laughs*] by it. And I think René probably was one of those things that—that things would fall apart or whatever with another person that did not affect him at all. But he was enjoyable to be around. I have to admit that. Obviously, with all the big hubbub and whatnot with him, he was very creative. I don't know what to say about René.

CG: No, that's OK. No, you don't have to get into anything—

YL: Yeah, because I don't have a romantic—

CG: I don't need you to—we don't need anything.

YL: Yeah, I just—

CG: I mean, it's what you just told us—

YL: I think, even with this being said, that maybe—because there are a lot of surprising things that could be done and said about him. But he was creative. There is no doubt about it. René had a definite influence on Chicano art, because when I met him as an adult, I was in San Diego. And he was at the Galería. And he would come down because his parents were still in Tijuana. But along the way, he would stop at Fresno and Brocha del Valle, and other little Chicano alternative spaces where he introduced—

He was the one that introduced Xerox machines as an art tool and developed, at the Galería, a little shop where artists could make postcards and sell them out of the Galería in ways of trying to make a living, in one way, because all artists—we all live piecemeal, one way or another.

So he was quite creative and [it was] quite exciting [to] see what else he came up with. And I learned a lot from him as far as technique, but also, along with Allan and Martha, learning no fear. No fear, as an artist. No fear. And even—what happens as an artist also happens with you as a person. So there was no fear. And it didn't require courage. It just required an ambition to try everything. That's what I think happened, is just try everything.

I have to say, though, when I went back in '79, there was no—no, I take it back. When I went to San Francisco in '61—it was later than that, maybe '65—somebody asked me, well, what kind of art community was there? There was no art community. The museums and the galleries—they wouldn't even—we were totally invisible to them. Totally blind. And I think we, as Chicanos, learned very, very quickly that we were not part of the game.

And I've talked [about] this several times, and I'm going to tell you again why it had an impact on me, was that Asco—when they signed LACMA, the LA County Museum of Art, on the outside of the building, in ways, it was like a signature on an artist's work, but also a *placa* (a plaque), where they were also sort of giving the finger to the institution and saying, "Our fathers, our mothers, through taxes or through hard labor, built this building." And just to remind you that we also have a stake in it.

When I saw that, it really had a profound influence on me. It whittled down the concept of an institution, especially a public institution. And that was very, very important. So I think all of us, as Mexican Americans in California, learned that the museums were not interested in our art, although we were out there making it and having fun. That's why the alternative galleries opened up, and institutions. And we could make them whatever way we wanted.

And the Galería probably was one of the most creative. They did one on a man who had photographed all the marihuaneros (potheads) who had fields in Mexico growing stuff. And on horseback, walking—but it had never been—just out in front. This was fairly early in the game, so it was exciting. And so the Galería, I think, with René as the artistic director, took on a lot of subject matter that would not have been done—but no women's art.

So the Galería was established, I think, in ’69 or ’70. And Graciela Carrillo—we have to give her this credit. She and Patricia established the first all-women’s art show in the Mission, and I think just about anywhere in California, but in the Mission, for sure. And they found me. I was working as a volunteer for Los Siete, which was one of the first—what I call now—police brutality cases, because it wasn’t called that then. I’m calling it now to recognize what it was at that point—police brutality and them running around—the police just doing whatever they wanted.

I worked with the newspaper that we created, the *Basta ya!* And believe it or not, that little FedEx roll is a couple of the newspapers as well as a poster that I created for—the newspaper was also—the editor was Donna James Amador. So she was the brains, essentially. And I was the one that did the masthead and the tableau thing, the imaging.

CG: Which, again, explains or at least speaks to the intersections of all of these things, right? It’s the Third World protests, right? That’s one—Los Siete. All of these things were not only your activism; they were entrenched with your art. And also with you being a woman and also all of these things were part of what you were.

YL: Yeah. But that’s one of the things that also spoiled me, to a certain degree, because in 1965, a lot of this money toward—the war-on-poverty money came into the communities. But they did not think about hiring artists as part of their regular staff.

But this is where the Galería—or, not the Galería, but there were certain artists, and René being one of them, who pushed for murals, were pushed with engaging artists within that. And it was a real push. It wasn’t a natural fit for these nonprofit providers who came—when the monies came down, all of a sudden, they were there, sort of thing. It’s too dangerous for me to talk about, but you know what I mean.

So in San Diego, when I was working at the Chicano Federation about that time, we used to call them poverty pimps. I’m not saying that the ones in San Francisco were that. But definitely, that’s what they were called. We all recognized who they were, because there were also Black artists who also, in San Diego, came out of the woodwork. And we didn’t know where [they came from] or who they were, and all of a sudden were there for the community and waiting for this money to come down, raining down on the war on poverty.

And the person who gave me that collective work was a Black man himself. So he had already had experience. He was an older gentleman, so he had already had experience. But anyhow, there was not the immediate wanting to engage artists as part of their regular staff. But the artists pushed for it.

So this is where a lot of the murals actually began. But they were functional. They had to be some sort of signage or some sort of thing. But they also were mostly imagery of men as well. And some famous artists came out of that, especially Robert Crumb. And Spain Rodriguez was around. I don’t know if he was actually part of that group, but he was—Spain was part of that group. And René was chums and one of the organizers, to some degree, with that. So—about cartooning. We’re talking about cartooning. We’re talking about comics.

CG: Spain is a very good cartoonist.

YL: Yeah, so that even the idea of comics as being part of community art, community murals, was—all this was new ideas. All this was new ideas. And so René had a definite—a serious contribution. Everybody loved him and still loves him quite a lot. And I'll just let it go at that.

CG: We can leave it there.

YL: Yeah.

CG: I think, to me, the most important question that I have, other than if Javier has another one—is, while I did ask you about René, the most important thing that I want to ask you is, you are a very, very modest person, too, from all of our interactions. But you are very significant in many different ways that I hope you have understood—the ways that Javier and I know you've been significant. What is your legacy?

YL: What is my legacy? [*laughs*] That's really interesting. It's such an artificial question.

CG: Isn't it?

YL: Oh, it's absolutely, and perhaps, for a living person, unanswerable. The fact that my life, which was, about a year and a half ago, just—who knew how long it would go into the horizon? Is now going, yoink! [*laughs*] Like this. I have found that people are, all of a sudden, very interested in me and my work. And I scratch my head. And I say, is it because I'm going to die soon, or is it because—

Somebody told me, very nicely, that the audience is catching up with my work. That's what I was told, because even the Los Siete stuff—people are beginning to see it as the community coming together to support our youth. And they got off free, by the way. They got off from—and we worked with the Panthers. That was the other thing, I think, that's so beautiful about Black Lives Matters, because there's a lot of parallel there. And in fact, a lot of our goals, as Los Siete, were the Ten-Point Program for the Panthers. And so there's a lot of connection there.

And the fact that LACMA, LA County Museum, wants to collect [*laughs*] the [*inaudible*] and the Los Siete posters is—right now, I feel like there's a real change. It's slowly grinding. And the part that's overtly visible and significant is the Smithsonian book on—what is it? *¡Printing the Revolution!* or something like that—

That all of a sudden, such a prestigious institution is paying attention to do this very thick picture book—I assume it's a picture book. I saw it just briefly, so I don't know what's in it. But—on us, as Mexican Americans, as Chicanos. As Chicanos, actually, not Mexican Americans. As Chicanos, because it really does focus on the movement, the Chicano civil rights movement.

So that's really, really, really important, that I think it's going to be [*inaudible*] so that the museums, right now, have been scrambling since the pandemic, almost within two months of it—are like, "What are we going to do? How long is this going to last? We can't let people in. There goes our income—twenty dollars a head coming in, [*vocalizes*], stop. We have to lay off staff."

How is that going to affect our programming? And what kind of programming? Because it's all changing. It's all changing. We can't do our little nicey-nicey thing on Martin Luther King or Cesar Chavez as being part of our race component in our do-gooderism.

And what about all those young people doing conceptual—or, doing performance [and] God knows what? They're creating a new way of dancing. They're creating new ways of music. And they're painting in the streets. There's boarded-up businesses on the streets. And yet, there's artists painting; they're creating new work.

Is anybody going out there and photographing it? Because we're going to have to deal with it sooner or later. A lot of museums did not do that. But once they heard the Smithsonian [was] going out—and even in DC—beginning to photograph the plywood murals, they said, "Hmm. Maybe we should."

And the other thing that's important in what the museum dilemma—what the museums are facing is that the mayor of DC declared that it was OK to write "Black Lives Matter" in the street with letters that were two lanes high—and called it an installation. She did not call it graffiti. She did not call it anything else. But she gave it an art word. And that made the hugest difference, because all of a sudden, in yellow letters, all neatly done—it was seen as art.

And I think that's something else that has changed about looking at public art—that it's just not graffiti. The writers in Oakland and all of those storefront—they're not wri[ters]. They're writers, but they're artists. They're not graffiti artists, but they're artists doing it. And a lot of them, it's the first time they've done anything like that. A lot of them have practiced already. They have icons and whatnot.

And if the museums have not photographed that or documented, they're going to have to make things up real quick in doing this history, because I think, initially, a lot of the museums thought that they could ignore it, that it either would go away or it would not impact them. But it will, and it has.

Even, I think, within SFMOMA, they're doing this big mural—I haven't seen it—doing murals in the entranceway. And I said, Oh, that's interesting. And they're young people. Even though the museum promotes them as having reputations, I don't know anybody who knows them. But it's all right. So it's a changing game. So the education department isn't just going to do family—every Saturday, family there with kids, do little things on picnic tables and do whatever it is they did. No more of that tame stuff anymore.

And the museums don't know what they're going to do. They really don't. I think that's one of the problems that they have, especially with the Diego Rivera show and these—I'm guessing. I'm guessing, but I think they suddenly discovered that nobody was interested in Diego Rivera, because as I said, the population of the Mission and population of San Francisco—the Latino population—is no longer Mexican. It's Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Chilean, Honduran, whatever. But it's no longer predominantly Me[xican]—there are some Mexicans there. But they're an older generation, and they're usually middle class or aspirational middle class who own the little stores. And even the little stores are—they remind me of the tourist shops in Tijuana along the avenue there. Pretty stuff, interesting stuff. I like going in them. But we're not talking exploratory folk culture. A lot of it is mass produced. So there's a quite different way of how the little stores operate, because they operate really for the tourists that now come into the Mission. And so I'm going to get in trouble for that. [*laughs*]

But the whole idea—so now, who knows? The modeling may be something like what the Chicano alternative—like the Centro in San Diego, which is, right now, beginning to restructure itself. Chicano Park—part of it is becoming a museum in there and regarding the history of Chicano Park. Who knew? Who cared? And even within the Chicano Park film where Laura Pérez said, "Oh, it took us a year and a half to get one simple trash can!"

And so San Diego was so racist. I don't know if that will change real quick. But there is a different kind of modeling about how the arts are functional. And I think even the Smithsonian, in mailing out the book, is changing as well, and even putting its blessing on Black Lives Matter in these big yellow letters with the mayor. I'm sure the mayor had good support on that—doing that. And the police didn't touch it, I'll tell you. The police did not touch it.

So there's a change. And I think a lot of Chicano alternative spaces will have not necessarily total models, but certain aspects about how it operates in a community setting, and not only a community setting, but also in a racial and political setting. So it's—

JB: I have a question about that. So one of the things that I'm curious about is, going back to your legacy, do you feel like the work that you did and the work that other women did around you in the Mission—how do you think that has translated to the artworks that we're seeing now? How do you think that has influenced the younger generation of artists now?

YL: I don't know. I get the impression that it has, but I don't know. That's why I was excited when you were talking about the illegal alien. You didn't finish out what I would have said, and I'll tell you what I would have said—because the Guadalupe and the illegal alien were done at the same time, that same summer of '78.

And part of what I did with—there are so many ramifications with the Guadalupe. There's a lot of things. But one of the things that I liked about doing the Guadalupe was that there was an expression, that each of those women has their own personalities. And the girl running—the woman running—is enjoying herself. How many images do we have, even now, of women who are heroes or whatever having fun—or not even necessarily having—but enjoying themselves?

And my gift—and this is a gift—for the illegal alien—it's a gift to men because we have done the Aztec warrior up to here. And so rather than put a spear in his hand or whatever it is, I put crumpled-up immigration papers, because that's policy. We don't have our Aztec warriors dealing with policy. And that's what I think that our men need to do in painting about our heroes. They are men. Our Aztec men, golly gee, deal with policy and have brains. That's the thing, is, we're not just spear carriers, but we have brains.

And so the accusatory finger toward them is actually aimed at white people, right? And I had a friend who just recently said, "Well, what was the immigration policy?" I said, "Well, it was Jimmy Carter at the time." Yeah, but was it—I said, "Look at the title. Look at *pilgrim*." I had to direct her to look at [the word] pilgrim because it's about colonialism.

So when we talk about—I'm sorry, getting emotional. So when we talk about immigration policy, let's go right back to where it began. And that is with the pilgrims. We're talking about Thanksgiving, folks, and renewing and rethinking that whole thing so that here is a man—and he's not a perfectly handsome guy. He's not a movie-star-looking guy.

I've had several young men—three, at least—say, "You did a picture of me, even with the little crooked teeth and all that." But they see themselves within that image of—who's angry, who's righteously so. Angry but not about to shoot you with a gun, but angry because he knows what's going on with that immigration paper policy thing.

So that's my gift to men—[that] is to say, portray yourselves as heroes, yes. But portray yourself as heroes as a thinking, intellectual, conceptual, thinking person who has some analytical and strategic skills. That's what I want to see in the imagery of men. And so far, I haven't seen it.

In Chicano Park, there is—at least the beginning. I assume it's probably still there. There is a pantheon of about maybe six men—Chavez, Moctezuma, Zapata, Hidalgo, whatever his name is—all along, and they're all talk about [*inaudible*]. All totally deadpan expressionless. Deadpan. Deadpan. I don't care what anybody says. That doesn't mean intelligence to me. That doesn't mean action that I need.

So that's my gift to the illegal alien, to men. And I think they recognize it, because it's more—in fact, the people who have been the most enthusiastic about the illegal alien have been men, young men. And for whatever reason, they see themselves in that, with eyes that are alert, with eyes that are focused.

And I did not submit it for my orals for my MFA, because I knew I would not pass. They would just [*clicks*]. We don't understand this. Sorry. So I did not even submit—done at the same time. I'm seriously saying same time as the Guadalupes. The Guadalupes, they had trouble with also. But it was not as fearful to them as the Guadalupe was, because it's like a foreign—most of my professors on my committee were Jewish. And even at that time, there was a kind—and they were New York Jews.

And the thing is, they were quite proud of the fact that they didn't know anything about Christianity. They were not going to placate or—I don't even know how to say it. No, I don't know anything about Christianity. It's up to you. That's your business. So when the Guadalupe—I had to explain, this is the Virgin Mary rendered from a Mexican cultural experience. And when I say the Virgin of Guadalupe, she's Mary. She's the Virgin Mary, who is the mother of Christ—Jesus Christ. I had to go down the little lineage so that they would understand it.

And I was very lucky because I knew, about three or four days, that my committee was not going to understand what I did with the Guadalupes. So I went to my committee head, and I told her what I saw as a dilemma. And she said, "Well, find somebody, but they have to be tenured." So I went to the directory of tenured faculty at UCSD and just found one. Jeez, and I forgot her name. God. [*laughs*]

And I called her up. She worked out of the medical school. So her business was chemistry and medical—the influence of pesticides. She had already done her dissertation on the effects of pesticides on people working in the fields. This was 1978. And I told her very—we had, like, a ten-minute conversation, if even that. I said, I need somebody tenured to be part of my orals who can explain what I'm doing with the Guadalupes, because my committee is not going to understand it at all. And sure enough, they didn't. I floundered about trying to explain it.

She came in late. [*laughs*] She came in—I was so ecstatic that she came at all. And she came in late, took over the meeting, and talked about the work. And whether they understood or—I think they did underst[and]—they're not stupid. They understood it to some degree or another. And my head of my committee also made sure that nobody left the room unless they signed it that I had passed. So Lisa, I can't remember her first name. But I'm going to dedicate the exhibit that I have in San Diego to her.

JB: It's wild to think that you needed to have an expert to explain your artwork at the time in which it was made, because I think one of the things that's really been enlightening to me in this process is understanding the way that Chicanos and Latinos and Latinas and Chicanas had to make a [*inaudible*] for themselves, because the museums, the institutions, didn't see that. As you said, you were invisible, they didn't pay attention—

YL: Not interested in a discussion.

JB: And it's such a heartbreaking story to hear—that you needed to have an expert explain your work to a mostly—a committee that didn't really understand it. And I—

YL: I don't blame them, and I—

JB: Right.

YL: —understand the oppression of Jews and not wanting to have anything to do at all with Christianity. There's no argument there. But it wasn't favorable to me at all, especially in an institution of learning.

JB: I think, going back to the legacy question that we were talking about, it really does—you having those artworks and showing them and exhibiting them in the seventies, in many ways, probably opened eyes and opened doors for people that came after you, creating these images. I think one of the—

YL: Oh, that's interesting.

JB: —statements that you made that just has really stuck with me—and I guess I was wondering—and this would be my last question because I know it's getting late, and we're getting tired.

But this idea that you're painting an image of a woman enjoying herself, having fun, something that you didn't see at the time—definitely, you didn't see Latina and Chicana women enjoying themselves. It was always, like, the mother or the sacrifice or the worker. And just a woman in freedom enjoying herself, and the idea of how radical that was at the time and the fact that it continues to be a radical notion, is awful and also amazing that you painted that and you had the vision to see that and to paint that.

And I just—I guess I want to say that if you—I know that it's an absurd question to ask about legacy, right? But I do think that there is a lot of power in your own knowledge about the fact that you painted something that you had never seen before. It's like, you created these images that you had never seen before. And I think that there's a real power in that.

YL: Yeah. I wasn't always—I was aware of it, but not necessarily in an articulate way. I just—because I had just learned to run, and it was such freeing in my body that that was—I had another fellow student photograph me.

And I also, with her hair—I talk about her hair. This is one of the critiques I have with the images of women as heroes, as superheroes—that they always have this billowing hair, like a crown—and I just put out what my hair actually looked like so that there's a kind of realism, because what I was aware of was, I wanted—no need to glamorize ordinary women. I really wanted women to say, "Oh." And I did with—"My grandma looks like that!" or "My mother also works at a sewing machine."

There was a group of organizers in Texas who wanted to put my mother on their flag as part of their union logo or something. And I thought, God. But that's it. And so she's big, and she's peeking out this way. So she's not there smiling or anything behind her industrial sewing machine. I wanted something real. I wanted something that wasn't apart from the people who were—I knew who my audience was.

That's the other thing, is I knew who my audience was. And so I didn't have to glam it up at all. And so in that, I could trust my judgment. I didn't second-guess my judgment at all

regarding that. I was old. I was, like, thirty-six, thirty-seven years old. I wasn't, like, even twenty-six or seventeen going into graduate school. I knew I already had a body of experience—life experience. And I knew I just wanted real wo[men]—

Because that's really what the work is about. One of the main things is an homage to working-class women, because nobody does that for us. Nobody does it for my mother. She was an obese woman who then sit all day. Part of the reason she died—because she had brown lung from breathing in the lint of selvages of the cloth that she worked on. Nobody knows that. But the women know that. The women who do that know that. And then when they go to the doctor, they're suddenly told all those years of inhaling lint has damaged their lungs.

And my grandmother, I think, was, in many ways, a slave. She never had any friends. She didn't know how to drive. She had to depend on my uncles to take her. She ran the garden. She swept the house. She was the last person at night to turn on the heater and the first person in the morning to turn off the heater. And I know, when I say that, there's somebody out there—my grandmother does the same thing, even now.

And that's what I want, because us, as ordinary women that—we don't have to doll ourselves up in any way, that we are really wonderful. We have a fantastic heritage, which we're just learning about. To me, it's like, we are probably one of the most talented and skilled and creative groups, or whatever, of people. And we've created so much that I think it's going to take a few years for us to really recognize what happened in the span of maybe thirty years. And at the same time, not only creating fantastic works, but also trying to create—

I know like Los Siete we learned a lot from the Panthers. We had a breakfast program. We also had several—we opened a restaurant, which was insane, next to what used to be the Levi Strauss [building] in the Mission now, because we thought the women, during lunchtime, would come and have a nice, wonderful, warm Latino lunch of some sort or other.

But they didn't come in, because what happened—[*laughs*] all our movement friends came in with their fatigue jackets and their combat boots and their berets, all looking—they just needed a big—[*laughs*] a gun belt and who knows what? Scared the women away, which is—who would have thunk it?

So we ended up closing it very fast because we were not getting the population that we wanted. But we thought about it—creating a nice, inexpensive, warm lunch. And all of this—that they just had to go across the street through this little, tiny alleyway where Levi Strauss [was]. And they were all workers at sewing machines. I don't know how many hundreds of women there were.

And so there was a lot of creativity that happened there, as well as the newspaper. The newspaper was cut and paste. And we were criticized for that. But at that time, when Donna—Donna James Amador—was putting together the newspaper, there were at least twenty-one newspapers up and down California, most of them at junior colleges, state

colleges, even UC colleges, all popped from *mechas*, publishing their own stories, but also through teletype whatever—

Bringing in stories from Cuba, bringing in stories from Africa, bringing in stories from China—that Donna, in her wisdom, saw that they might—so they were all that cut and paste. We never would have seen that, believe me, if we had not published what was going on in Cuba, what was going on in Africa. So—my nose is dripping. [*laughs*] Sorry.

JB: That's OK. Do you want a Kleenex?

YL: Yeah, would you, please? [*cross talk*]

JB: —over there by that lamp.

CG: I see them.

JB: Yeah. Yeah, thank you for sharing this with us. I think there is—

YL: *Gracias*.

JB: —a real power in—one of the things that I think I've always felt, at least in my own film work—and I see it in your work, and I see it in many other people's work—is that there's a real power in seeing ourselves and seeing people that are not glorified, that are not—it's like—

YL: Mediated through white eyes. Yeah.

JB: Or it's like—I think I heard something from a creator recently that was like, why do we always have to be the best version of ourselves? Why can't we just be ourselves? Isn't that just enough?

And it's like, because there's been so many forces consistently telling us that we don't have history, that we don't exist, that we're not good enough, that we're invisible, and literally making us invisible, there's such a radical act in creating something that—as you said, you knew who your audience was, and you knew that people were going to see it, and they were going to understand it.

YL: Yeah, I knew it.

JB: You didn't have to explain it to them.

YL: I absolutely knew it.

CG: And that's also, if you think of it, what question that we have asked you today, even about legacy, it's absurd because we don't think about legacy, because legacy is something that is nonexistent for people like us. And if anything, it's not necessarily about legacy, but about recognizing what is. And the recognition of what is, you gave us ourselves.

YL: Oh, yeah. Well, I guess that's a thank you. [*laughs*]

JB: One of the things that I think Camilo and I talked about—we had this conversation with Juana Alicia. And—

YL: And I adore Juana. Juana and I just [*clicks*].

JB: Yeah, she's great. And I can't remember exactly what she said, but she talked about how, basically, in seeing herself painted and seeing women painted, she started to realize this history and this identity and this creativity and everything that you've just mentioned that she didn't even really see before. It's like, that identity became synthesized in posters and murals. And I think that that is such an important thing that we maybe can take for granted now because it's everywhere. But at that time that you were making it, there were no models for that, right?

YL: No.

JB: You had to build it because there was nothing to look at.

YL: Look at the nanny piece that I did. The nanny has—in the center, it's a uniform—gray and then a white collar. It's what people wear in either private homes or hotels. And it's in the center. And it's got two white louver[ed doors], like somebody would have in a nice middle-class home to hide their washing machines. But on one side, there's an advertisement from *National Geographic*. It's called *When You Think of Mexico*. And it shows a flower vendor.

And I didn't even think about it. It wasn't until I showed it at UC San Francisco that they talked about the Indigenous woman. I just saw it as a Mexican woman. But it is. It's an Indigenous—because we're all becoming aware now of Indigenous people. So it was an Indigenous woman in her apron—just a regular, ordinary, what your mom would wear at home. And she's got a bowl full of flowers that she's offering to the woman standing in front of her.

And the woman in front of her is white. And she must be standing on a little box or something, because she's quite elevated. But she's wearing a peasant white blouse—scoop neck and little [*inaudible*] and rickrack and a—I can't remember. But it's what we would call a Mexican costume. It's a replication of what we would think a Mexican would wear. And she's a white woman. And she's got hoop earrings. This is the usual—but the woman who is the vendor doesn't have that costume. And she's got work clothes on. And it's called *When You Think of Mexico, Fly Southwestern Airlines*. That's what it was.

And on the other side of the nanny, an image from *Vogue* magazine. It's also black and white, and ten years later. So one was '61, so maybe it's twenty. And the other one was '91—thirty years later. And so it's basically the same idea. There's a very tall white woman having a slice of *sandía* like this. And she's got hoop earrings on. She's got, I think, a blouse with one shoulder down. And she's got a full skirt and a very much Mexicanized peasant cowlick. Not

as poorly made as the first one, but this one is much more—because it is *Vogue*, and they are trying to sell clothes.

But the person standing next to her comes up to her about—she's maybe five foot tall—an adult, but five foot tall. And she's wearing a sweater. And she has, on her head, a little flat basket with slices of watermelon in the basket. So obviously, she's a vendor. And she's just bought this slice of watermelon. But also, the sweater—it is so worn that there is a hole. You have to look, but there's a hole in the sweater. And the edge is slightly—not greatly—raggedy, but you could tell that it's a sweater that's been worn many, many, many times.

And it has a title like *Wool Feels Great* or something like that. But it's the same image of the appropriation of what somebody might think is a Mexican costume, a touristy costume, and that the second woman is Indig[enous]—they're both Indigenous-looking women—that the Indigenous women are offering, in humble—

The one that had the *sandía* on her head is just standing there. And you can't even really see her face, because the shadow—it's a black-and-white image, as I recall. So you don't have any expression on her face. But you do see her clothes, which relate to the uniform I have in the center—the nanny—which is—now we're talking about essential workers. [*laughs*] Ai-yai-yai.

JB: But I think the importance of—you were painting people that don't see themselves, that don't see themselves represented. And I wonder if you could just speak a little bit about the importance of that for you.

YL: It's very easy to do—number one, because I just look around. If I need something, I have an idea. And a lot of—what was the question?

JB: It was more like a statement about—I guess my question was, what do you think is the importance of people seeing themselves in your work?

YL: Well, I obviously think it's greatly important. And this is my way of having them invest in an image, invest in a public image that has been published thousands if not millions of times that represents them. That's what I want—is that they don't see that as a faraway image, but they see that as themselves.

And when I had that show, I yelled out at the audience. I said, "What about you women of noncolor?" I said, "Don't you identify also with the white woman there? Doesn't that make you embarrassed? Doesn't that make you angry to be associated with a colonizer?" And then I was told that the meeting was over. [*laughs*]

But that's the idea, that I want even white women who I see as allies—definitely as allies—they also are invested. They want to be seen as the colonizers? Because I can bet you a nickel, and many nickels, that either one of those two images was not done by a woman. But I want women to identify with the images that I put out, where there is no separation, whether they feel like, gee, that woman is beautiful, or that woman is really—she needs a new set of clothes or a pair of shoes. I want women to identify with the images.

There is no doubt in my head—that's why I don't tinker with them to make them look better. I do not do that at all. My mother [*inaudible*] being obese, my grandmother being really, really old, and myself as unabashedly having a nice time doing something—and with her skirt. I remember I'd get calls all the time about, about that skirt rising up so high. They said, "Is that meant to be provocative?" I've seen more women in bikinis and thongs and, God help us, the Emmys with less clothes than that.

And I said, "Yes, it's meant to be provocative." And that is, in part, because the Virgin of Guadalupe is never shown with legs. You don't have a sense of what her body is inside. And she's so overdressed that when I talk about it, I say, "Can you imagine this woman walking? Just walking?" And they can't, because there's all this yardage at the bottom of her feet. And I call her now a woman in bondage.

Plus, I also talk about what she's standing on. She's standing on the crescent moon. She's not standing on the back of this little angel. People sometimes do that. Mm-mm-mm. Look again. But also, I said, "What is he doing? What's this little angel doing?" He's got wings on, so we can assume that he's an angel. He's got one hand on her dress, the other hand grabbing her cloak. And I look at his face. I said, "We call him—"

Oftentimes, I hear Chicanos talking about the baby or talking about—well, not the cherub so much, but talking about the baby at the bottom, which—and I said, well, what is this portrait of? It's a middle-aged man with a receding hairline. And he looks really Spanish. To me, he looks really Spanish. But nonetheless, he is a middle-aged man with a receding hairline.

And so they say, "Are you stepping on him when she's running?" I said, "No, he just wouldn't let go." He's got his hand on her cloak. He's got her hand on her dress. And he doesn't know what's going on. And so she has no—and I say she because it's an it. It has no—the image has no way of doing any harm to this person, but the person just is in the way. That's the only way I describe it. He's in the way.

And I don't get any arguments out of that, to tell you the truth, because many of us who know Guadalupe have not looked at it, period. We assume that we see a little baby there. We assume that we see this very pretty image. But it's—

I had a wonderful story. I was teaching at UC Santa Cruz, and I was talking about the Guadalupe. And I said—there was one of the writers who was talking about the image that I said—they described the Guadalupe as an image of a young girl—Mediterranean girl, Jewish. They expressed—the writer said she looked very typically like a Jewish Mediterranean girl—something like that.

And then in this dark room, she's Jewish? [*laughs*] So much for catechism. She's Jewish? I have no idea what—and somebody obviously going, [*groans*]. But to me, it's probably the most enjoyable response I got talking about the Guadalupe. She's Jewish? [*laughs*] And I didn't even say, "Well, you should talk to her, talk to her son as well."

For me, when I heard that, I knew I was doing the right thing. I knew I was doing the right thing. All I did was I just talked about—I said, "Before I show you my images, let's look and see what we've got here." So I would start out with, "What's that?" Somebody said, "They look like daggers." I said, "Well, it's really the sun. She's standing in front of the sun, so the sun is radiating behind her. Not attached to her, but behind her. And it's the sun radiating from her in that way."

And I said, "What is this?" "Stars." But I had to tell them that this is the heavenly cosmic universe with the stars in the sky at night, this beautiful cloak that she had on with the gold trim. It's the heavenly cosmos, because that's what Coatlicue is.

And I said, "And what is this?" "Horns," they said. "It looks like cow horns." And I said, "It's really a crescent moon." I said, "It's horns." I said, "It probably was originally silver, a silver kind of coating put on it—gilding." And I said, "Silver has a tendency to tarnish, and it turns black. So I think that's probably what it was. It was probably silver at one point. So it's turned black, but it is the moon. And that's what she's standing on."

And then I talk about the little [*putti*]. That's what it's called in Italian, is a little [*putti*]. And singular, it's called a [*putto*]. But I try not to use that, because it's too distracting. It's too distracting for my students to hear [*putto*]. So I say, it's a little [*putti*], as they say in Italian, because I want them to know that there's not only a Mexican description, but there is an international art description for who and what she is, because she comes out of—I said the Renaissance, but somebody told me it's too early for the Renaissance. But I still hold my guns on that, that it does.

It's a little bit early for the Renaissance, because in the Renaissance—and I don't know if my students know, but I tell them—I said, "In the Renaissance, it's a whole different way of thinking, where all of a sudden, we, as human beings, became part of the measurement of the cosmos, of the Earth. And we became the model for which everything else was measured." Because I don't think they know that. And anyhow, so there's something else that's been on my mind.

JB: Sure.

YL: And this comes out with the pandemic, not only with the museums, but also with the ethnic studies programs that Donna James fought for, what Los Siete really—the grouping came out of the ethnic studies strike, which I was a part of—because now I think it's been about four generations, something like that.

And I talked to this—well, not young, but he's young enough. I told him—because he's also—I know several people who are heads of ethnic studies departments, Chicanos. Who knew, right? [*laughs*] But they are—and I tell them—poor things, when I can corner them—I said, no more mediocre research essays. Give me stuff that really matters. Don't give me the tried and true or what you think I might want to know. I want risky stuff coming out of ethnic studies. No more mediocre stuff.

And I'm adamant about no more medi[ocre]—I tell you, personally, I won't tolerate it. I will not tolerate it. I fought for those programs. I don't want any medi[ocre]—you've got two years before your tenure? Wind up, live out your tenure for two years. But when you leave behind, bring in some young people. Bring in somebody who you have to take a risk on, as far as scholarship or intellectual, conceptual—whatever they're thinking.

Bring them in before you leave. Leave a trail behind. Take a risk. But no more mediocre stuff that's predictable. No more. I personally will not tolerate it. And I'm not the only one. And I'm not the only one. We fought so hard for it, and I'm not going to let it die on the vine. I refuse to let it die on the vine. Good stuff.

JB: I couldn't agree more with that. [*laughs*] I could not agree more with that.

CG: Yolanda's face and some of her artistic and activist legacy is depicted in four large towers at 16th and Folsom in San Francisco as part of a mural that was led by Jessica Sabogal and created with the help of Bianca Rivera, Paola de la Calle, Shanna Strauss, Malaya Tuyay, and Elizabeth Blancas.

After the oral-history recording was over, Yolanda gave Javier and me a double set of an artistic and civic effort she has called pocket posters, one for ourselves and one for our partners. These pocket posters are a few small, card-sized renditions of her work, including 1979 photographs she took of *Las santas locas*, a small rendition of *Your Vote Has Power*, her Guadalupe triptych, and a small version of *Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?* Which are all now part of my office's wall.

In July 2021, Yolanda received a $50,000 fellowship from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Ford Foundation as part of their new Latinx artist fellowship. And in an interview with Mission Local, she said that she's planning on using the money to organize her life's work into an archive, which can serve as a tool for educating the public.

A reminder on each one of her pocket posters, which were mentioned earlier, is to seize the time, taking the time to remind us to do so, to vote, to respect ourselves, among others. Yolanda López has seized it, and we are the better for it.

This oral history of Yolanda López 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

JB: 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.