

Emma Pérez

Emma Pérez: Reflections on a Career in Chicana/o Studies

Chicana/o Studies Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Todd Holmes
in 2020

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Emma Pérez (Courtesy of Alma López)

Abstract

Emma Pérez is a research social scientist with the Southwest Center and professor of gender and women's studies at the University of Arizona. Born and raised in South Texas, Professor Pérez received her PhD in history from UCLA, and held faculty positions at the University of Texas, El Paso and the University of Colorado, Boulder before joining the University of Arizona's Southwest Center in 2017. She is widely regarded as a pioneer in Chicana Studies, whose scholarly work and novels have explored the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality. Her scholarly publications include: "Sexuality and Discourse: Notes From A Chicana Survivor" (1991); "Speaking From The Margin: An Uninvited Discourse on Sexuality and Power" (1993); *Chicana Critical Issues* (1993); *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas Into History* (1999); "Queering the Borderlands: The Challenges of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard" (2003); "Decolonial Border Queers: Lesbian, Gay Men, Transgender Folk in El Paso Juarez" (2012); and "Between Manifest Destiny and Women's Rights: Decolonizing Women's History" (2016). She works of fiction include: *Gulf Dreams* (1996), which is considered one of the first Chicana lesbian novels; *Forgetting the Alamo, Or Blood Memory* (2009); and *Electra's Complex* (2015). In this interview, Professor Pérez discusses: her family background and upbringing in South Texas; her educational journey from high school to attending UCLA; her graduate experience as a Chicana and getting established in the profession; her reflections on the state of Chicana/o Studies and how the field evolved over her career; the struggle to include gender and sexuality within the field; the aims and contributions of her scholarship and works of fiction; the reception of Chicana/o Studies at the universities she served; developing the comparative ethnic studies PhD program at the University of Colorado, Boulder; as well as her thoughts on important works, themes, and high points in the field's development over the last fifty years.

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Project History

By Todd Holmes
Berkeley, California

Over fifty years ago, UC Berkeley anthropologist Octavio Romano founded the publication, *El Grito: A Journal of Contemporary Mexican-American Thought*. In many respects, it was one of many actions of the time that sought to channel the educational aims of the Mexican American civil rights movement into the corridors of higher education. And in the years that followed, scholars on campuses throughout California and the West built upon those objectives, ultimately establishing the academic discipline that became known as Chicana/o studies.

The Chicana/o Studies Oral History Project was established in 2017 with the goal of commemorating fifty years of Chicana/o studies and documenting the formation of the field through in-depth interviews with the first generation of scholars who shaped it. As a research unit of The Bancroft Library, the Oral History Center has enjoyed rare access to the academy since its founding in 1953, compiling one of the richest collections on higher education and intellectual history in the country. Interviews with Nobel laureates and university presidents fill this collection, as do those with renowned poets and leading scientists. Thus, oral histories with the founding generation of scholars in the field of Chicana/o studies were a fitting addition. Moreover, documenting the formation of an academic field aimed at studying the Mexican American experience was a rare and special opportunity all its own.

The importance of the project was without question; the reality of executing a project of this size and complexity, however, ushered forth a host of logistical challenges. To that end, we at the Oral History Center forged partnerships with scholars and universities across the country, establishing what could be considered an unprecedented collaboration to document the history of Chicana/o studies and celebrate the scholars who played a vital role in its formation. I first created an advisory council composed of recognized junior faculty in the field. Establishing the council was important, as it not only brought a larger, community voice into decisions on the project's scope and direction, but also seasoned expertise to the nomination process for interviewees—a procedure that likely proved much lengthier and more complicated than anyone anticipated. Ultimately, the council helped develop a list of over twenty-five prominent and pioneering scholars to be interviewed for the project.

The second part of this collaboration developed with universities. The Oral History Center is an independent, soft-money research unit at UC Berkeley, which means the office receives very little direct support from the university. Endowments and fundraising underwrite the OHC's operations. For the Chicana/o Studies Oral History Project, a generous consortium of deans, provosts, chancellors, and presidents stepped forward to extend support. Stanford University sponsored the first two interviews, with the University of California Office of the President raising the bar by pledging to fund all UC-related interviews. The pledge not only sought to highlight the role of UC campuses in the field, but also served as a call to arms for other universities in the West to follow suit. Many university administrators answered that call. Deans at UT Austin, Arizona State, and the University of Arizona pledged support, as did administrators at Loyola Marymount, Gonzaga University, UT San Antonio, Brigham Young University, and the University of Houston, among others. Again, highlighting the leading role of

California in the field, the California State University system agreed to fund all CSU-related interviews for the project. The outpouring of support behind the Chicana/o Studies project stands as an inspiring collaboration within the academy.

The scholars included in this project represent some of the most influential writers, educators, and activists in the field of Chicana/o studies. To be sure, their contributions to the field are many, from teaching and scholarship to mentoring and administration, with each playing a unique and significant role in advancing the study of the Mexican American experience from a mere idea in the late 1960s to a mainstay on college campuses across the country five decades later. I'm indebted to each for their generosity and participation in this project. They not only opened up their homes and offices for the interviews, but shared their work and experiences with sincerity and candor. They also exhibited a noteworthy level of humility, as each would be among the first to call this project far from complete. Projects are often imperfect, and this oral history series is no different. Some of those we wished to include, such as Juan Gómez-Quiñones, passed away before they could be interviewed, just as funding complications have delayed the inclusion of others. Thus, as the first installment of this project goes to press, we remember those who passed before they could participate and look forward to the new additions to be made in the years to come.

This project significantly advances our understanding of the development and evolution of the field of Chicana/o studies. Yet the development of Chicana/o studies, as captured in these interviews, is more than just the story of a discipline. It is the story of a generation of scholars who broke through barriers to take their place in the nation's universities, and spent their careers documenting the history and experience of their community. It is the story of educational reform, where scholars of color demanded that America's curriculum equally include all its citizens. In many respects, it is also a story that highlights another side of the civil rights movement, one where actions in the classroom, rather than those in the streets, proved the long-lasting vector of social change. It is my hope that this project does justice to that legacy.

Advisory Council

Miroslava Chávez-García [University of California, Santa Barbara]

Raúl Coronado [University of California, Berkeley]

Maria Cotera [University of Texas, Austin]

Matthew Garcia [Dartmouth College]

Ignacio García [Brigham Young University]

Mireya Loza [Georgetown University]

Lydia Otero [University of Arizona, Emeritus]

Stephen Pitti [Yale University]

Raúl Ramos [University of Houston]

Oliver Rosales [Bakersfield College]

Mario Sifuentez [University of California, Merced]

Irene Vásquez [University of New Mexico]

Interview 1: September 21, 2020

01-00:00:00

Holmes:

All right. This is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is September 21, 2020. I have the pleasure of sitting down with Emma Pérez, for her oral history for the Chicana/o Studies Oral History Project. We are here at her beautiful home in the wonderful city of Tucson, Arizona. Emma, thank you so much for rescheduling, and with everything going on, taking the time to sit down with me.

01-00:00:30

Pérez:

Absolutely. I'm very happy to. Thank you, Todd.

01-00:00:33

Holmes:

Well, in our two sessions we're going to explore your career, your work and experience in the field, and also talk a lot about your life. So, I think a good place to start is maybe talking a little bit about your family and family background.

01-00:00:48

Pérez:

Yeah. Well, you know, I was born in a small town named El Campo, Texas in 1954, which I always think is an incredible pivotal moment, 1954, because that was the year that Brown v. [Board of] Education was passed to overturn Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896. This is the historian in me, right, immediately coming out. But I think that's so vital, because that small town in Texas was so incredibly segregated.

And it was—I grew up in a section of Texas that was really east, more East Texas, which meant we had a large African-American population, and we had a lot of Chicanos who'd been there, Chicanx, who'd been there for generations, right? So it was a different—it was very different from say, South Texas or even as far over as San Antonio, because we grew up with a different kind of segregation, I think, that South Texas didn't have. Because in South Texas, like Laredo or Brownsville, Mexicans were the majority. We were not the majority, so it changed the dynamic of how we were perceived.

And El Campo was—it had been a migrant camp since the 1890s, I believe, and that's how it got the name. So it was a small town, about 9,000 people, and there were pockets. You know, this was the white side of town, the Mexican side of town, and then over here the black side of town, which we were not very far from—maybe less than a mile, yeah. And it was interesting to grow up there, because the racism was so incredibly—whoo, [exhaling] horrific. [laughs] It was pretty bad. I mean there were still water fountains that separated black and white. And this is—I was already, you know, six/seven years old, and I would see those water fountains that separated colored from white. And being brown, it was always that in-between space, right? We were being treated as if we were not white—but then the census wanted us to be white.

01-00:03:07

I remember my father [José Camposano Pérez]—my father who passed away about twenty years ago—he was a brilliant man. Seventh-grade education. You'd never know it, because he was self-taught—a World War II veteran, World War II hero really, Purple Heart. And he became an upholsterer, self-made—tapicero—and that's when we were young. In El Campo he had his own shop that was in front of our house. But my father hated the fact that he would be called *white*. So on documents, he would always erase that, because the census only allowed that, right? You were either black or you were white—and sort of, that's happening again. After the Reagan years, actually, Hispanic got taken up, but he would always scratch it out and put *brown*.

So for him, brown was a category—which is kind of interesting, because this is what is happening a lot in academe, right? That brown becomes its own racial category. And it was very clear to him that as a brown person, he was being treated very differently. He wasn't white and he wasn't black. He knew that brown was its own—because he experienced the racism. We all did. We all did in that small town. Segregated pools. It was just a town of an incredible amount of segregation. Brown people were treated as if we were inferior, and then black people were spat upon. It was pretty bad. It was pretty bad. I didn't like it. I didn't like growing up there at all. I always thought I was—you know, I'd look up at the stars and think—get me out of here!

We moved to Houston when I was twelve. My siblings—two older sisters, an older brother, my mom and dad. We moved there because my dad wanted a better job. It wasn't going well with the upholstery shop. He worked really hard—and that was also because of racism, right? So we moved to Pasadena, Texas. And NASA opened in the 1960s, mid to late '60s, right, remember? It was right around that time, and that's when he began working for NASA. And he was the kind of guy that—because he had self-trained, he had a mind and a vision, and so the engineers would come to him and say, "How do you do this?" So a lot of the stuff he made went into space, right?

01-00:05:34

Holmes:

[softly] Wow.

01-00:05:35

Pérez:

So brilliant man. If he had—I mean engineers would go to *him*. He was very modest, my dad. He really was. The thing I need to say about my dad, too, is that this is why I got so interested in Mexican history—during the Mexican Revolution, because his family crossed the border during the revolution. Right around 1917 is when they came from México—from Northern México, and then they landed in the small towns of Texas. So of course, the Mexican Revolution became important for me to study.

And then my mother [Emma Zepeda Pérez], on my mother's side though, they had been in Texas for generations in all those little pueblitos around there is where they had lived. I have, I think, a document of my great-great

grandmother [Guadalupe Muniz Barrera], her marriage certificate that's from that area, from that region of South Texas. My mother, she's still around, eighty-nine, pretty vital, still goes to yoga, still goes dancing, has a boyfriend who's ten years younger than her. She's pretty amazing and gave us a really good life, you know? I think that it was just really hard to grow up in so much poverty and racism—not to mention the sexism/homophobia. That's something else altogether that we had to deal with. But very resourceful. They were all—they were both very resourceful.

But landing in Pasadena was a little better—but I don't know if you know anything about that part of Texas.

01-00:07:11

Holmes:

Go ahead. Yeah, well, I also wanted to discuss that.

01-00:07:12

Pérez:

Pasadena, Texas—*Urban Cowboy*. Have you ever seen the movie? That's Pasadena, Texas. Yeah. Gilley's [Club] was not far from my house. Interestingly enough, I had an uncle who was my mother's kind-of stepbrother, who used to play there. He was a Chicano who played electric guitar, country guitar, with this white guy, a country singer—right, it was pretty funny—but that's also what East Texas *was*. For Chicanos, polka was important, country music was important, speaking English with a very southern Texan accent—Chicanos who were, yeah, that's how my dad spoke English, with a very southern Texan accent. My cousins still do. Yeah, it's very interesting.

01-00:08:02

Holmes:

What were your parent's names?

01-00:08:03

Pérez:

Oh, my dad was José, José Camposano—Camposano was his mother's name—and then Pérez. My mother—Emma. I was named after my mother. Emma—Zepeda was her last name. She didn't have a middle name—and then Pérez, of course, from my dad. It's still Emma Pérez. So, I'm still Emma Pérez. My middle name is Marie. It was really María, but you know, the racism again. It's like—let's change the name, and it became Marie, which makes no sense. Yeah, those were their names. I have other siblings—Yolanda was the oldest, then Cristelia, which is not a very common name—José Roberto, my brother, then myself. Many years later, sixteen years later, my precious little sister was born, and her name is Sonja, yeah, and she lives in Houston. They all live in Houston now, except for one who lives in LA still.

But yeah, when we got to Pasadena, Texas, that's another kind of urban cowboy/very country western, incredibly racist—different kind of big-town racism, as opposed to small-town racism.

01-00:09:15

Holmes: Discuss that a little bit.

01-00:09:18

Pérez: Well, it was—[laughs] it was segregated again. Pasadena was very—redlining was very important there. So, there was like one street where Mexicans lived, right. And then there were no blacks allowed in Pasadena. Redlining had not allowed that. Yeah, the laws that passed did not permit particular kinds of people to live in this town, and Pasadena was definitely one of them.

I went to high school there, and I did not like it—again, because of the yeah, the way brown people were treated. There was one black guy in the whole high school, one black guy. Yeah, it was not easy for him. And of course everyone sort of idealized that. It's like—oh my God, see? We're not racist. There's a black guy here. [laughs] Of course we'll treat the brown people like shit, but it doesn't matter. They're just inferior anyway. So I ended up finishing my senior year in Cheyenne, Wyoming, of all places, because my sister—this is during the Vietnam War. My second sister, Cris, was married to a guy who was also from El Campo, and he was stationed there in the air force.

So a lot of the Chicano guys, you know they were—during that time period I remember this happening. A lot of the Chicano guys were being drafted into the Vietnam War. And to *not* be drafted, one of the tricks was to join in, and to join something like the air force. So then they would get some clerical job here, stateside, instead of having to go. But I also knew a lot of Chicano guys who would go, and they came back incredibly traumatized in the sixties and seventies. It was pretty rough.

But I ended up going to Cheyenne, Wyoming to finish my high school year there. And that was another interesting place, the West. The high school there was kind of cool. People were protesting the war, which was good, something you would never have seen in Pasadena, Texas. They were all incredibly patriotic, so you wouldn't see that. But in Cheyenne you did. There was more criticism of that, even though it still was the West, and small town. I got busted for drugs there, actually. [laughs] Still on my record, interestingly enough. Yeah, because at the time, ironically—and this was in Colorado. At the time marijuana could be as much as a felony. Yeah, yeah. So my lawyer had to bring it down to a misdemeanor. I think it's still—yeah, it's still on my record, because I tried to volunteer for my daughter's school, and I had to do a police report, and it was on there—which is ironic, because it was in Colorado. And the laws now are—you know, Colorado's one of the first states to pass that marijuana was legal. It was very funny that all of this would happen there. But yeah, that was high school.

I don't know if I talked enough about El Campo, but I do know that it was going there and being in the first grade, and being shocked with the racism

there and the racist teachers was pretty harsh. Even the fourth grade. I remember in the fourth grade a teacher asking me, on the day that we studied the Alamo, because you always have to study the Alamo in Texas, and it's always the patriotic men at the Alamo. And she actually asked me, as a fourth grader, what I thought, and if I was happy that the US had won the war. And my dad had taught me to be very proud. My mom and dad had taught me to be very proud to be a Mexican. And all I could—my fourth-grade little mind could come up with was that I didn't have all the answers, and I think that perplexed her. And I think at that moment, I probably decided I would become an historian.

01-00:13:31

But I also decided to become an historian when I was eight years old and John F. Kennedy was killed, because that's when I started documenting, in a tiny little white notebook, everything that happened every day. Because Mexicans were very, very big Kennedy fans, right? Because he was Catholic, because Jackie spoke Spanish. I mean so many things that were alluring about this couple, and the civil rights too. And Bobby Kennedy too, who was the attorney general and was very pro-civil rights. So, yeah, I started becoming an historian early on. That and the fiction too, always sort of seemed to mesh for me in those early years.

01-00:14:18

Holmes:

Well, you talked a little bit about the politics, right?

01-00:14:20

Pérez:

Yes.

01-00:14:22

Holmes:

And so, you talked a little bit about Vietnam. We talked a little about—particularly the racism that you had to confront there in Texas. How was this, both within your family and then even in the larger community—because during this time, particularly by the time you're in high school, so we have civil rights brewing.

01-00:14:41

Pérez:

Yes, yes.

01-00:14:41

Holmes:

And then taking off. We also have the Chicano movement starting by 1970.

01-00:14:45

Pérez:

Yes, yes.

01-00:14:45

Holmes:

Discuss how did that—not only how that impacted you, but how did that also impact your family?

01-00:14:53

Pérez:

I think that—let me back up, going back to El Campo when we were growing up there in that small town. Again, I was pretty young when a lot of that activity began. And Crystal City was not far away. But this is before social media, this is before Twitter, this is before people were really able to keep in touch with each other across the miles, right?

But what I do know, because I was—I might have been still in grade school. I had cousins who were in high school, middle school and high school, and they were already acknowledging or starting to protest as Mexicans. And I remember one of my cousins coming home and saying you know, we protested and we walked out. And that's when the blowouts were starting to happen, right? "And we walked out because they gave us tests that were different from what the white kids got," and that was usually something that people would complain about. It's like—wait a minute, are we getting tests that are harder than what the white kids are getting? Because the tests are always different. But of course there was so much more involved there. It's like readiness—who's middle class, who's white, who has the resources? Versus having Mexicans who were still being—

01-00:16:02

The schools were segregated too, by the way. There was a Mexican school. There were the white schools, and definitely the black schools in El Campo. And my dad, because they couldn't keep us out of the white schools, the brown people, he sent my brother and I to the white schools. And it was really—not fun. [laughs] Not fun at all. Yeah, the racism was pretty avid there, too. But I think he kind of felt like—you know, we'd get a better education, and he probably wasn't wrong. There were more resources there for us.

But as far as what that meant for the family, it was not something that was bearing down on us, because every day was survival. Like every day was what kind of paycheck is my dad going to get? How are we going to eat? We'd go picking cotton too, in the summers, because that was a way we'd raise money for school supplies, right? My mother always knew the farmers that would give us work, so that we could do the cotton picking along with the migrants who would pass through town. It was more about day-to-day survival, till we moved to Pasadena. And then my dad working for NASA changed so much of that. But again, it was like living in this bubble where the—I think so many different things were happening in Houston, were happening in South Texas. And in these small towns, there was so much bearing down upon them, upon us, that that kind of activity was a lot harder to just seep in. You didn't feel it seeping in. It got squashed so quickly, you know.

01-00:17:48

I know it was pretty remarkable when we moved to Pasadena, and Houston being close by, because that's when I really felt the antiwar stuff going on, is in Houston. When I'd leave Pasadena, which is just a suburb—it's across the

street really. And I'd go into Houston and meet different friends, and I'd see the kind of antiwar movement that was going on—certainly all the drugs, alcohol. But the drugs that were—marijuana sort of freeing everyone's minds, and the sexual liberation—it was pretty freeing in many ways. In many ways it was, but then I'd go back to high school and then the oppression. You know, girls had to wear dresses. As a brown queer, it was pretty hard to wear a dress, and then I got feminized a lot, so that's its own kind of toxicity that would happen for me, especially as I got older and moved to LA and began identifying more as butch, or queer butch or lesbian, and all of those different categories. But yeah, dress codes were pretty horrific back then, too.

But yeah, I think that things also changed for me after high school, and moving to LA in 1973. My sister and I—I think I had completed a year in junior college, San Jacinto Junior College, down the street. Again, more of the racism, the sexism. I remember some of the male professors who—I was becoming a feminist, and some of the male professors were pretty upset about that and what that meant. And there was a lot of that kind of cis male, white, very racist superior sort of entitlement—and not just with the cis men, but the cis white women as well. But then the tradition—I mean it was coming from my own culture as well, right? The pressure to be a certain way. The pressure to have boyfriends. The pressure to get married and have kids.

01-00:19:58

Leaving when I was nineteen was pretty important. And landing in LA in 1974—yes, which was *freedom*, in *so* many ways! [laughs] Because this is pre-AIDS, right? This is when LGBT movement was in all the cities. It was the pockets—New York, Chicago, San Francisco, LA, all of these amazing cities is where you would go. I mean it really was that narrative. It really was the narrative of leaving the small town and going to the city that was the place where you could have that—meet all these queers and have freedom and fun. And that was LA. That was definitely LA.

It wasn't easy initially, because my sister and I took off with my nephew, and he was only four. And we landed in LA, didn't have jobs, didn't have money. And found jobs, and I think I worked my way—I had to get residency in California before I could go to school. I ended up doing that at Cal State LA. No, junior college, then a year at Cal State LA—I mean Cal State Northridge, rather, which was kind of a pocket of Chicano movement stuff. But I was over here doing communication studies. And I wasn't quite—I have to admit, I really was working on my feminism and working on what it meant to be Latina and Chicana at that time. That was '74-'75.

01-00:21:39

It wasn't till I landed at UCLA that it all began to make sense to me. And that was also because someone like Juan Gómez-Quíñones was there. That isn't that I took classes with him—I didn't have the courage to take classes with him yet. I was taking classes with Kitty Sklar, Temma Kaplan, all the

women's historians. And that's where I started to figure things out about class and race and gender and sexuality, which was vital. And the MEChA [Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán]—mechistas were very, very prominent at UCLA, and I respected a lot of them. And they tried not to be homophobic, but they couldn't help themselves. They just couldn't. And some of them were really nice guys too, and some of the women too. But I just never felt a part of it.

I was over with the women's center and had to deal with the white girls who were incredibly racist. So those of us who were the lesbians of color always felt like we were in-between, right? So we formed a group in LA called—no, there was already a group in LA called Lesbians of Color that we would hang out with. Mostly African-American women, a lot of Latinas, and then we formed another group called Latina Lesbians. At the time it was—you know, queers were lesbians. But UCLA for me was very important. But then finding my own community outside of that was pretty vital, because there were restrictions at UCLA, of course.

But it was exciting too. There was a lot going on. There was still protests, because it was the 1970s. We would march a lot. Affirmative action was being contested. This was the Bakke case. I don't know if you remember Bakke, who was one of the first—I forget the entire details of it, but he was a white cis man who sued UC Davis because he wanted to get into medical school, and he claimed reverse racism. And it became a big, big issue. So affirmative action here, in 1977, '78, I think right around there was when it was occurring. We would have a lot of marches. We'd usually do this with the law school there at UCLA. The Women's Resource Center was really vital too, in a lot of those marches. That became a lot of—Juan was there. Juan Gómez-Quíñones was there too, so the Chicano movement, it's like it was already immersed, because he had been so much a part of it in East LA.

01-00:24:07

And so, you know, when people talk about well, what are you doing for your community? And it's like okay, the community's right here, folks. It's like why do you keep separating it out? We're not separate from our realities here. We *are* our community, and this is something that I think—that we're still dealing with today, and I still get confronted about that.

01-00:24:37

Holmes:

I wanted to ask—so you moved to California.

01-00:24:41

Pérez:

Yes.

01-00:24:42

Holmes:

And you spent a year or so at Cal State Northridge?

01-00:24:45

Pérez:

Yeah.

01-00:24:47

Holmes: Which was actually one of the first Chicano—

01-00:24:49

Pérez: Yes. Chicano Studies, yeah.

01-00:24:51

Holmes: Yeah, with Rudy Acuña.

01-00:24:53

Pérez: I know.

01-00:24:55

Holmes: Did you have any involvement with that?

01-00:24:56

Pérez: No, I did not. I did not. I was over in—here's what was kind of difficult for me at the time, is that I was involved with someone who was taking classes there. And she was in the music department, quite brilliant young woman. And I was not able—because I didn't have residency. She asked me to take a class for her under her name because she didn't have time, and I was so eager to be back at school that I said, "Sure, I'll take your class!" And it was under her name. I was—and she was a white girl. I had her name, and I took the class and did really well. [laughs] Then I got residency, and I went back to the same department. And this was in rhetoric and communication, because I'd been a debater in high school, so all of this kind of came easy to me, extemporaneous speaking, poetry reading, all of that stuff. And so, I was having to be quiet about who I really was. And then once I became that, then they started discovering it, then I was already starting to leave and go to UCLA.

I didn't know of Rudy—I didn't learn about Rudy till I got to UCLA. And I had tremendous respect for him. *Occupied America: [A History of Chicanos]* became vital. I didn't meet Rudy till I was a grad student, and that was in an archive in Mexico City. And I saw him, because he's so—you know who Rudy is. I went up to him, and I just told him how much I respected him and his work. And ever since then, he's always been someone who's been pretty kind to me. I know that there has been severe sexism in the way he treated someone like Anna NietoGomez. There were certainly women who dealt with a lot of that, the machista stuff that was prevalent. And unfortunately, Rudy was part of it. But no, not then. Not till I got to UCLA, and my development as more of a radical person began happening there on that campus.

01-00:27:12

Holmes: What were your first impressions as you show up to UCLA? Now you're back in college.

01-00:27:15

Pérez: Yeah.

01-00:27:17

Holmes: And coming from Texas, with the racism that you've dealt with, and that you still even dealt with here and there in California, right?

01-00:27:24

Pérez: Yeah, absolutely.

01-00:27:24

Holmes: That you actually had a program like Chicano Studies—

01-00:27:29

Pérez: Chicano Studies. Yeah, yeah.

01-00:27:30

Holmes: Talk a little bit about your impressions of that—like 'Wow, we created, a discipline about our community.'

01-00:27:36

Pérez: Yes, it was freedom. There was a kind of freedom. And it wasn't just because it was about race, but it was also about class. And there was a way in which people were trying to deal with gender, but it wasn't quite there yet. And that's why I became a Chicana historian, because of the gender/sexuality element. But there was such freedom when I arrived at UCLA, and beginning to understand—oh my God! Not only is this pride in what my father and mother already taught me, but there are people walking around who are feeling this and living it. And it's also about class, and being *proud* of coming from a working-class background. That was such freedom for me.

And that was with some of the white women professors, too, who were Marxist feminists at the time. Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, was vital in my intellectual development as well. And that was also something that Juan Gómez-Quiñones understood very well himself, so I was very fortunate to have the mentors I had. Between Juan, Kitty Sklar, Temma Kaplan, I got a pretty good understanding. Oh, and what was it, Robert Brenner, who was like a really superb Marxist. He had issues—still has issues with gender, but still, he was pretty good about—I learned a *lot* about surplus value from him, which still is important to know. I teach my students, always, about surplus value.

It was just so refreshing—it opened up so much. And then the queerness too, that was everywhere. The Women's Resource Center. It separated out again, with the race versus the whiteness. I mean, we were still being attacked. If you were brown or black—what are you doing with those white women? It's—queerness, homosexuality is just bourgeois, right? That was being thrown around. Because the mechistas, of course, were more Marxist, so it was that old ideology, that old language. Which is probably why I started doing some of the work about Ricardo Flores Magón, the anarchist, which was also Temma Kaplan's work in Spain. Because the anarchists were basically contesting that in their own way. And Juan understood that too, because his

work was on the anarchists with the Partido Liberal Mexicano. And I was very fascinated with them, and the way they were dealing with gender and attempting to deal with gender and sexuality. But still a step—not quite far enough.

01-00:30:07

And so that had a lot to do with my intellectual development, just trying to make sense of who I was. Where I came from, as a working-class brown Chicana who didn't get to be butch—except once in the first grade when I got to wear my brother's blue jeans, which was the most remarkable, liberating day of my life. Because it snowed in El Campo, so they let me wear jeans, and I thought—this is *it!* Now I have—I don't know how many pairs of jeans, but it's all about jeans. [laughs] But it was incredibly liberating for me. And UCLA *did* open all of that up for me, in ways that just felt like I'd never felt before. And so I stayed. I felt lucky. I stayed there—I didn't know it was a hotbed for Chicano Studies. I didn't know it was a hotbed even for Women's Studies. I just landed in the right place, and there was no reason to leave.

I was going to go to law school, actually. And I did take the LSAT. Studied a lot, took the LSAT, and I got accepted into the one at—Hastings, in San Francisco, which I would have really loved because it was very progressive. But at the last minute, I realized how much I loved academe and history, the writing of history, and that it felt like a social commitment to become a historian. Because at that time I knew—I wasn't reading any tracts by Chicana historians. I was only reading the work that Juan had, and some of the other Chicano male historians had produced, and then the work that the white women were doing. And it's like—there was a big hole. And I didn't know what historiography was. I'd studied political science and Women's Studies, and became a historian because my favorite mentors, as an undergrad, were all historians.

01-00:32:06

And again, I think people were becoming historians because they understood precisely what Marx had been talking about, the importance of unleashing and unlocking the stories of the common folk. And the French—what is it, [Fernand] Braudel—I think they were also, the social historians understood this really well, too. It was more of a political kind of move, to become a Chicana historian. I knew there were probably only two or three in the universe at the time. And actually there were. There was Louise Año Nuevo de Kerr, who got her PhD at UCLA, and Shirlene Soto, who was a Latin Americanist—I think out of the University of New Mexico, which is kind of interesting that UCLA and UNM produced the first Chicana historians. And well, unfortunately, they both passed away. You probably know that. They were both wonderful. I loved them. Both of them.

So yeah, at the last minute, I was like—I really don't want to go to law school. Can I please get a second chance here? And one of my mentors in women's

history wrote a really incredible letter to get me into the history department. I felt very fortunate to get to stay. Yeah.

01-00:33:33

Holmes:

Before we move on, I want to get more of your thoughts, particularly from that vantage point in time, on the development of the field and then get into your graduate studies. But before we get there, could you talk a little bit about taking your first Mexican-American history class, your first Chicano/a history class? I mean—particularly growing up in Texas, hearing their version of the Alamo.

01-00:34:00

Pérez:

Yes, yes.

01-00:34:01

Holmes:

Which I think we'll get to tomorrow, because you kind of played with that—

01-00:34:05

Pérez:

Yeah, yeah, I wrote about it. Yeah. [laughter]

01-00:34:09

Holmes:

So, talk a little bit about your experience as a Chicana, sitting in your first class that's really, in a more objective way, going to be discussing your community's history.

01-00:34:18

Pérez:

I did not take a Chicano/Mexican-American history class until I was a grad student with Juan. Because again, I was too scared to take a class with him! He had a reputation—

01-00:34:30

Holmes:

What was the reputation?

01-00:34:31

Pérez:

The reputation is that he was incredibly brilliant, and he was astute, of course, politically astute. He'd been in the sixties himself. He was one of the foremost activists in the student movement there in LA, East LA. And I was scared to do it. I was scared to go into his classroom, so I was taking women's history classes over here. And then seeing the big hole there, and saying wait a minute—"Mexican Peon Women [in] Texas,"—that's the best article you've got for us, from the 1920s, by a woman named Ruth Allen—seriously? No, these women aren't just following men. That's not what my grandmother did and what my mother did. They kind of challenged the guys.

I was figuring that out, and not until I was a grad student did I finally take classes with Juan. And I fell in love with his pedagogical style, which is very laid back. He teaches in an interesting way, because he's so laid back and quiet, but it's nuanced. He's so nuanced, and I just so appreciate—because he's such a poet. He's a poet-philosopher. I still admire him so much. I admire his mind, his way of being in the world, because he doesn't live from his ego. It

took me a long time to figure out what that meant—it's always about what's out there and what the community needs. And you know, I mean when he was younger I know people had their issues with him and that he was a womanizer, or whatever. I don't know. I don't know. I mean—we all have our reputations, right? [laughs] But what I know is that it was liberating.

And *then*, because I was one of his grad students—there were a bunch of us who were admitted who were from Texas, and we all were studying with Juan—and very happy to do so. We'd go sit in his undergrad classes and learn about Chicano history there. Yeah—and just sit in the back mesmerized with his knowledge. And he never used notes. [laughs] He just wrote on the board and gave us timelines about labor history, and I just learned a lot. I learned a lot from him, yeah.

01-00:36:53

Holmes:

That's—yeah, as one who also was on the cusp of that transition, from we're writing on boards and lecturing to now we have multimedia presentations with smoke machines and lights.

01-00:37:06

Pérez:

Yes! Oh my God, yes! You know, I still use the board. I can't help it, because of the spontaneity. It's not pre-planned, and I want the spontaneity.

01-00:37:19

Holmes:

You were saying that you got into Chicana history later and into graduate school. From your vantage point of coming into UCLA as a graduate student, what works did you come across from the early pioneers that really impacted you?

01-00:37:38

Pérez:

Oh—María Cotera. María Cotera was so important, and I'm so lucky I've had a chance to meet her, and her daughter Martha [P. Cotera]. Wait is it—it's the opposite. I'm sorry. It's Martha Cotera and her daughter María. I'm sorry. Yeah, I love them both. But yeah—Martha Cotera's *The Chicana Feminist*, a little monograph that I came across, probably as an undergrad. I'm sure I was an undergrad. And it was probably in the library there—the Chicano Studies Library was just a little piece of heaven. And Richard Chabrán was the librarian. I loved Richard, because he was so forthcoming. And he would just—any students who would go in there, he'd say, "Okay, have you seen this? Have you seen that?" And he was very good with showing me a lot of the stuff that the women were publishing. So—Martha Cotera's *Chicana Feminist* was just—it outlined it all for me. It was so important for so many others too, because there was no one else who had done that for us. Yeah, no one else had done that for us.

01-00:38:54
Holmes: The field also was beginning to take shape particularly by the time you came to UCLA. There was actually journals in the field that young graduate students could publish in, right?

01-00:39:03
Pérez: Yeah.

01-00:39:04
Holmes: New research could be put out there. And here I'm thinking of, of course, *El Grito*: [*A Journal of Contemporary Mexican-American Thought*].

01-00:39:11
Pérez: Yes.

01-00:39:12
Holmes: Coming out of Berkeley. *Aztlán*: [*A Journal of Chicano Studies*].

01-00:39:15
Pérez: *Aztlán* was vital. *Aztlán* was vital. I learned so much because of the Chicano Studies Resource Center, and Juan was still the director at the time. And *Aztlán*—you know, I'd read all the early stuff. I probably have some of them, too—some of those early journals, yeah.

01-00:39:34
Holmes: So on one hand it's showing a young graduate student, particularly by 1980, a field that's maturing, let's say, and also bringing a lot of that new cutting-edge research. On the other hand, as a Chicana, did you look and say there were things that were missing?

01-00:39:52
Pérez: Oh God, yes! [laughter] I know exactly what you're saying.

01-00:39:54
Holmes: Discuss that a bit.

01-00:39:56
Pérez: Yeah, gender/sexuality—but just gender alone, right? And the way gender was being dealt with was kind of problematic, because it was always like the afterthought. And gender was only class based. It was always about—yeah, it was a very old school kind of Marxist take about class, and women on the backburner. And that we're all in this together, and class is primary—and the rest of it isn't. Culture isn't, gender isn't, sexuality—of course not. So that was always my battle in the program. Juan never fought me about it. He was like—he got it, in his own way, and he didn't contest that. It was more like the feeling of the way the field had already developed itself. And so trying to push against it was really hard. The historiography was already set.

And you know, the books being published by all of the men that Juan had trained were mostly labor history. And it was men's labor history, with women

being peripheral—with the exception of Vicki Ruiz, because she comes up and she did the UCAPAWA [United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America] study, which is really good. But that was later, that was later, of course. But the early works—I mean it was always labor history. That was primary. And what did that mean? Because of the working class, because of the Marxist perspective as well, which made a lot of sense. But then what did that mean for gender, where women as laborers—they were *not* just laborers. And I deal with that a lot in *Decolonial Imaginary: [Writing Chicanas into History]*, as I try to lay that out in the historiography in the way it's constructed. And how did that historiography make an impact on the studies themselves, and keep us within the box? Because I wanted to explode the box, which is probably why I never got hired by a history department again after *Decolonial Imaginary* was published. [laughs] I kind of set that up for myself, but that's okay.

01-00:42:02

But yeah, I think it was frustrating. It was frustrating. And then one of the most important books that was published at the time, too, was out of Chicano Studies Research Center, and it was—I think it was co-edited by Adelaida Del Castillo, who was a grad student in anthropology at the time. And she was married to Juan at the time too. And then Magdalena Mora, who was a really important Marxist, and unfortunately passed away a few years later because of brain cancer, a tumor in her brain. And she—everyone loved her. I barely met her once. But that was an incredibly important book. And I think it was—I forget the name—*Mexican Women in the [United States]: [Struggles Past and Present]*, something like that. And there were different articles.

And again, in that book, what bothered me is the manner in which women, once again, were only laborers. So what did that mean for gender and exploding that beyond the workspace? Because if you're only talking about the workspace, then you're not talking about the social relations that create the kind of inequity that's going to happen in the workspace. So, I think that became my project as a Chicana historian. That's why gender/sexuality became so important to me to discuss. Yeah.

01-00:43:26

Holmes:

Well, before we get to graduate school and that work, I also wanted to discuss, in a sense, Chicanas trying to carve out their own space.

01-00:43:38

Pérez:

Yes.

01-00:43:39

Holmes:

And so here I'm thinking of MALCS [Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social], which was founded in 1983.

01-00:43:41

Pérez:

Yes.

01-00:43:43

Holmes: An acronym that translates—women active in letters and social change, yet it was originally written in Spanish.

01-00:43:53

Pérez: Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social—sí. Yeah. And exactly what you said, women who are active in letters—meaning academe—and social change. Yeah.

01-00:44:01

Holmes: Discuss the founding of this and your involvement, because a lot of—it's funny, unless you've come across this organization, you may not know who was all involved at this time. And then when you look at who's involved, it's the who's who of Chicanas in academia.

01-00:44:20

Pérez: I know! It's so funny, isn't it, because we didn't think of ourselves as who's who. We're mostly grad students.

01-00:44:24

Holmes: At this time.

01-00:44:25

Pérez: Most of us were grad students. Yeah, because we were, again, the first generation. And that was—again, the vital people for me—Deena González and Antonia Castañeda. We became very close, the three of us, because we were all Chicana historians. Antonia at Stanford, Deena at Berkeley, me at UCLA.

And we met—let me back up a little to the first Chicana history conference that was held at UCLA in 1982. Again, Juan Gómez Quiñones and Adelaida Del Castillo were instrumental in getting anybody who was doing Chicana history. It was a pretty important moment, because I didn't know other women who were doing—other Chicanas or Chicanos who were doing women's history, Chicana history. And I was a master's student at the time, and that was when I met Antonia and that's when I met Deena. That's when I met Ramón Gutiérrez as well, who I think had already won the MacArthur [Fellowship]. And I met—yeah, people from all over. Shirlene Soto was there—all kinds of Chicano/Chicana historians were there. Louise Año Nuevo de Kerr was there as well. And so, it was kind of a moment when we met each other and were able to network, and out of that became the friendships that would carry us through. I mean without Deena and Antonia—we helped each other finish our PhDs. We really did. We really were that important to each other. [Important to add Vicki Ruiz, Al Camarillo, Emilio Zamora, and Doug Monroy, to name a few others. Cynthia Orozco was my fellow graduate student at UCLA and she also presented at the conference.]

But what we also knew—and this is when I was doing a year in Berkeley with Deena. She was there because she was getting her PhD, and I moved to live

with her. And I was doing—working at the Latin American Studies Center, I suppose is what it was called. And that's when I got to take a class with Leon Litwack—a brilliant man, generous, generous man. And that was when the Northern California Chicanas, who were either at Stanford, Berkeley, UC Davis, all of those schools, and then some of the other colleges too, like probably San José, Santa Clara—all the Chicanas who were around there decided there's a problem with NACS [National Association for Chicano Studies]. There's a problem with the Chicano Studies organization because it's so male-centered, and still so labor-centered—it's all just about this way of interpreting Chicano history and Chicano Studies. We need our own organization. We need our own group. But we don't want it to be an academic organization in the same way. We want it to be a space where we can come share papers and be more communal about it.

01-00:47:11

We would meet either at Davis, because Ada Sosa-Riddell—she was from that first generation with the guys—Ada Sosa-Riddell is a political scientist, and she was at Davis. It was her vision. She'd been wanting this for a long time. We would either meet at Berkeley or at Davis. I think Angie Chabram was there as well. Pat Zavella was at the meetings. Sylvia Lizárraga, who was at UC San Diego, Deena, myself, Beatriz Pesquera, sociology, Denise Segura, sociology, Inez Hernandez-Avila and—Elisa Facio, who was my colleague at CU Boulder, who passed away from cancer a few years ago, and she was very, very important. I wish she was still around—she went by Linda at the time, yeah. Yeah, we were mostly grad students, and we gathered and talked about what do we want? What's it going to be?

Antonia Castañeda was really instrumental in writing the statement. We all sort of contributed, but Antonia wanted to make sure that class was in there. Because the funny thing about our—the trio that we were: Antonia, Deena González, and myself—we were very close and worked together very closely. I mean a lot of my intellectual development was from them, and I admire them so much as historians. The funny thing is that for Antonia, who had been a migrant worker from Texas but ended up in the Yakima Valley—she was always about class and the importance of being working-class. And the importance of what that meant, to come from that kind of poverty, but still to have that pride of what it meant to be workers. But then Deena—for Deena it was always race, coming from New Mexico. For her it was always, no, we're not Hispanic. Yes, we're brown people. What does that mean? So race, for her, was—and also having a Navajo grandmother, so everything about being racialized in that space. And for me, it was more like—okay, but how are we going to talk about gender and sexuality? So the three of us made a good trio, because we always pushed each other. It's like—yeah, you're talking about *that*, but then what does *this* mean? And so, I learned a lot about how to always pay attention to *all* of these things.

I mean now, I know the Kimberlé [Williams] Crenshaw stuff is all about intersectionality, and I think that works. For Chicanas, it's other kinds of things. For us—I mean Gloria Anzaldúa gave us *nepantla*, that in-betweenness. We were always talking about—as Homi Bhabha taught me—the interstices. And that's why the decolonial imaginary, for me, it's about that middle space. What is it—how we are always crisscrossing. And that, for me, was really vital in my intellectual development as well. Did I answer your question?

01-00:50:32

Holmes: You did, beautifully! [laughter] I haven't had a chance to talk with Deena yet.

01-00:50:40

Pérez: Okay, you—

01-00:50:40

Holmes: But I did interview Antonia.

01-00:50:42

Pérez: Yeah, good.

01-00:50:44

Holmes: And then—Vicki Ruiz, I think, was also there.

01-00:50:46

Pérez: Yes, Vicki Ruiz was there!

01-00:50:48

Holmes: She was there at UC Davis already.

01-00:50:50

Pérez: Yes. Vicki was at UC Davis, and she was *so* important. And I love Vicki. And she was such an incredible force for all of us too, because she was one of the first to finish. I mean she just got her stuff *done*. It was pretty admirable. And so yeah, she was part of MALCS in the beginning. Yeah, there was a core group of us, but the organization blossomed. And there were different times when it would meet there in Davis or Berkeley, and I think then it started moving around to different places. Yeah, and it's still around, and it's the younger generation. I don't go that often. Antonia does. She's very committed to it. I go every now and then. I went two years ago when it was in El Paso. And usually I don't go, because it's right around my daughter's birthday, and I just don't want to take her to an academic conference in the summer for her birthday. [laughs] So I usually haven't gone. Plus, I have this thing about summers. I don't really like doing conferences in the summer. That's when I get to do most of my writing. Yeah, because—we give so much during the school year. Antonia retired a while back, so she has that extra time maybe. I don't know. But it's also about making a commitment, and I think I feel I make enough of a commitment to grad students during the school year.

But I think MALCS is very important, because it focused on grads and undergrads, and it still does. It still focuses on mentoring grad students and undergrad students, who can go there for their first time. I mean, National Association for Chicano Studies—it was *Chicano Studies*—was really important to me in 1982, because that was the first time I got to present as a grad student. And it was nerve-racking, because I met people. I went to panels—like with Rudy Acuña. I went to panels that Pat Zavella was having. I went to panels that Antonia Castañeda was in. And Deena González and the whole—Berkeley women had their own panel, which was like—okay, we're the Chicana feminists. And it was really, really vital that they did that, because that was going to be the beginning of MALCS, as well. I mean these women who were already uniform and doing this kind of gendered work. It was exciting to me. It was so exciting to me to see what Berkeley was doing, and they were just being so open about it. We didn't have quite that uniformity at UCLA yet, but Berkeley certainly had it.

01-00:53:26

And of course, it was the Bay Area—and Deena was the only queer in the group, and she would push that. And she and I ended up being the first out lesbians, and that was kind of important too. Because at the first Chicano NACS that I went to in 1982, with her, we danced as two women—and it was like the floor opened up, right? It was like the opening of the Red Sea, because people were like—oh my God, two women are dancing. And this was in 1982. It was pretty funny. But it was a queer moment. It was a lesbian queer moment when that first occurred. And then after that it took years later before we organized the Lesbian Caucus and the Joto Caucus, and then really made an imprint in NACS.

01-00:54:21

Holmes:

Let's talk a little bit about now starting graduate school at UCLA.

01-00:54:24

Pérez:

Okay.

01-00:54:26

Holmes:

Which you've already done such a great job of laying out, in the sense of why you stayed, right?

01-00:54:32

Pérez:

Yeah, yeah.

01-00:54:33

Holmes:

And which was interesting too, if you think of it, during that time, you have about maybe three or four main centers for Chicano Studies.

01-00:54:42

Pérez:

Exactly.

01-00:54:43

Holmes:

Right, and so UCLA, Stanford, UC Santa Barbara by that time.

01-00:54:47

Pérez: Yes. Exactly, Santa Barbara, yeah.

01-00:54:51

Holmes: And UT Austin.

01-00:54:52

Pérez: Yes, UT Austin too.

01-00:54:55

Holmes: And you look at these four, so you had choices. But I know you—I know you weren't exactly looking, *per se*, for that. So the decision not to go to law school, just to stay—that probably speaks to a lot of how comfortable you were at UCLA.

01-00:55:11

Pérez: I was very comfortable at UCLA, and I didn't know I had choices, quite frankly. No seriously. I came from a small town. I didn't know that people applied to lots of grad schools. I didn't know that I even had an option to do a PhD in grad school. I just assumed I would become a lawyer, because that's what I knew, that people became professional. And then it was also about my family too. It's like—well, when are you going to get a job? Of course, become a lawyer. Grad school? Really? What is that? No *m'hija*, that's too much money/too much time. Don't do that. [laughs]

01-00:55:48

Holmes: Were you the first in your family—

01-00:55:50

Pérez: To get a PhD, yes. But, my older sister, Yolanda, got a BA. My second sister, Cris, got her MA, and then I got my PhD. And then my little sister also got her PhD. But now, she's a Unity minister, so that's a whole other avenue that she's taken us into, which is pretty cool. She's become Reverend Dr. Sonja Pérez. I'm very proud of her, because she saw the fallacies of neoliberal education these days. It's so different—well, you know. You've seen the trajectory of what's happened with the university and college. But so yeah, I was the first to get a PhD. My brother was in high school, and that was it for him.

01-00:56:34

Holmes: So discuss that a little bit—so you're feeling at home at UCLA.

01-00:56:38

Pérez: Yes.

01-00:56:39

Holmes: And now you're going to start taking classes with Juan, and really studying Chicana history.

01-00:56:42

Pérez: Yes.

01-00:56:44

Holmes:

Discuss that process for you, that experience.

01-00:56:46

Pérez:

It was *exciting*. It was so exciting. It was just really thrilling for me. I don't know—I loved that he was a poet-philosopher. That he'd written a book of poetry too, because I'd written a lot of poetry too, which was really bad poetry. And I loved fiction. And I loved creative writing, but I put that aside. And I didn't want to go into an English lit [program]—because I was scared to go into English lit. And there was something about history that felt very liberating to me. So that's why I *stayed* in history. In that sense, even though people don't really consider me a historian as much anymore, in that sense, I still really push that with my students—that without the stories from the past, you're not going to make sense of today. Or even of our future, right? Seven generations into the future. Then what does it mean seven generations back, the way tribal groups have shown us? The indigenous have shown us, right?

So, interestingly enough though, I remember working with Juan, working on the Flores Magón brothers and what gender meant with that. And his being very open to it, and presenting my first paper at the first NACS I went to. And Al Camarillo—I remember he approached me and said, "Have you thought about going to Stanford?" And I was like—going to Stanford, what is that about? I had no clue that there was a distinction between a public institution and a private institution. And an Ivy League institution. I didn't know what *any* of that meant. And I thought about it a minute, and he said, "Why don't you—let's talk. You should consider coming up here." Which would have probably changed the trajectory of my career tremendously, because Stanford grads—Antonia being one of them. And he—to his credit—Al Camarillo trained so many Chicanas, so many Chicana historians. And Vicki Ruiz, of course—two of the primary ones that I know of. But a lot of the younger ones. I don't know what that would have meant for me.

01-00:58:53

I was just so in love with the kind of socialist/feminist/Marxist/gendered kind of stuff that I was getting from Juan and from Kitty and from Temma, who all ended up on my committee. And moving was not that easy. I don't know how I was going to go—I really had no sense. It had been so hard to move from Texas with no money—and to find a job, and get residency, and doing all of that to go to school. And I thought—I've got friends here. I'll just stay. I like the people here. People tell me Juan's a big deal. I think I'm good. Because I had no clue—again, I had no clue.

01-00:59:32

Holmes:

Well, you were among some of the first Chicana graduate students there at UCLA. In that program.

01-00:59:40

Pérez:

Yeah, I was. I know! I didn't know. I had no clue what any of it meant. I really didn't. I mean Cynthia Orozco became a close friend of mine, and she was also from Texas. Beto Calderón, who was at—I think he's in Denton. He was also in our cohort. I forget some of the others, but we were a little cohort together. Yeah, but I was definitely in that first group with Juan. Yeah, and we would have grad classes together. Yeah.

01-01:00:14

Holmes:

Did you have much experience with the Chicano Research Center?

01-01:00:20

Pérez:

I went there often. My experience was that I would go there and meet Juan for office hours, because that's where he was. He was the director. And then it was across the way from the library, from the Chicano Studies Library, which I loved, where I would hang out and write and read a lot. Because Richard had so many documents there—I think that's probably where I read *Regeneración*, which was the newspaper of the Partido Liberal Mexicano, which helped me make sense of my first article that I wrote and published as an MA student. So the Chicano Studies Research Center became the place—it definitely was a home for a lot of the Chicanos, where we'd hang out with each other.

01-01:01:12

Holmes:

Juan had developed, early on, a relationship with UT Austin. A lot of the graduate students who were Texans, came to UCLA or vice versa—

01-01:01:25

Pérez:

Yes.

01-01:01:25

Holmes:

They always talk about there was a relationship that developed early on that some of them began to call the UCLA-UT Austin axis.

01-01:01:36

Pérez:

Yes, it was.

01-01:01:38

Holmes:

Did you participate or have any experience with that?

01-01:01:42

Pérez:

I didn't until later, and I really never did. It was pretty male centered. It was pretty male centered. I mean all good guys, right? But they were doing—and they were that generation that Juan was training. And I think I've heard Emilio Zamora, a Chicano historian speak about this more than once, is that they all sat down with Juan—and they were all grad students. And Juan basically told them—this is what you're going to do, this is what you're going to do, this is what you're going to do. And he gave them their dissertation topics, because he knew the big gaps historiographically, and they dutifully did it. Because Juan had that kind of charisma and aura about him. You didn't say no to Juan if he said you're going to do this. Like "Okay! I'll do this then." But they were

all studies that had to be done. There was a big historiographic gap. But yeah, Emilio was definitely there. I guess José Limón was as well, but he was an anthropologist, more of an anthropologist. I don't know if he was in the group, but he definitely worked with Américo Paredes. And Nelson—Victor Nelson [Cisneros] was also part of the group. I forget who the others were.

But I didn't so much—for me, again, the Chicanas were in a different place. We were in a different place, and we were pushing against the gendered norms. And so that was why the Chicana history conference became so important, in 1982, and that was why MALCS became so important shortly after that. Yeah.

01-01:03:13

Holmes:

Well, let's talk a little bit about your early scholarship.

01-01:03:16

Pérez:

Okay.

01-01:03:18

Holmes:

I think—*Chicana Critical Issues*. Now, this is an edited volume published by Third Woman Press.

01-01:03:24

Pérez:

Yes.

01-01:03:26

Holmes:

Which Norma Alarcón was—

01-01:03:27

Pérez:

Alarcón, yeah, yeah.

01-01:03:28

Holmes:

Discuss the genesis of this edited volume. I know this comes out in 1993, so it's almost ten years after MALCS.

01-01:03:38

Pérez:

Yeah, you know—I don't remember it too well. [laughs] I really don't, because it was—there were so many editors involved, and I remember meeting with them once or twice in Berkeley, and discussing the different articles that would go in it. I know it was an important volume, but I don't remember too much about it, quite frankly. I'm not a really good editor. I'm so like into the work that I'm doing. [laughs] I'm very selfish that way. Because there's so much that needed to be done. I think if anything, I probably deferred to the other scholars who were working on that—certainly Norma, always deferring to Norma Alarcón, right?

01-01:04:23

Holmes:

Well, to me, in going through that volume, it was a good testament, actually, to why MALCS was formed.

01-01:04:31

Pérez: Yes.

01-01:04:31

Holmes: And finally making that kind of inroad, of pushing the discipline, as you were saying, pushing against that historiography.

01-01:04:39

Pérez: Exactly. And it was also because Third Woman Press was so pivotal. Third Woman Press—Norma Alarcón was very clear about why she wanted that press and what it meant for Chicanas/Latinas to publish. And not just Chicanas/Latinas—I mean it was Third Woman, so of course it was other women from other ethnic/racial groups who also published with Third Woman.

01-01:05:11

Holmes: Well, let's talk about your dissertation and first book.

01-01:05:12

Pérez: Okay.

01-01:05:13

Holmes: So, the dissertation was titled, "Through Her Love and Sweetness: Women, Revolution, and Reform in Yucatán, 1910 to 1918." And this became the genesis, a base for *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*.

01-01:05:27

Pérez: Yes.

01-01:05:29

Holmes: So you've mentioned this a little bit before, of what you were aiming to do in this project. Discuss the genesis of how you came around to this dissertation. Let's start with the dissertation—

01-01:05:38

Pérez: The topic?

01-01:05:39

Holmes: Yeah, the topic.

01-01:05:40

Pérez: Oh God—it was a political strategy, again. What I didn't talk about before, in my graduate career, is that, when I did my master's, Partido Liberal Mexicano was one of the master's papers, and it was heavily theoretical, heavily, heavily theoretical. And so, the committee—when I handed in the papers—because I think we were supposed to hand in about two or three different papers, they said they wanted to give me a definitive MA and say no, you can't go on for your PhD, because you really don't know what it is like to do archival research—which kind of made me mad. And Deena González and I were partners at the time. It made her very mad, and she was at Berkeley, so she had access to a whole other world, right?

But when I went to Juan about it—this is why I'm so devoted to him—he was incensed with it. And he wrote a single spaced long three- or six-page letter to the committee, to the department, saying why they were wrong. And he understood what I had been doing in that article, because I was studying the Partido Liberal Mexicano, which he had published about. And he understood that I was looking carefully at the archive, at *Regeneración*, at those newspapers, and coming up with the ideology of the group. But that's not something that history was interested in unless I was becoming an intellectual historian. And that was not the parameter of what was the understanding of that history department for me. It's definitely in Chicano history. And again, it's the categorizations, right—the boxes, that became *Decolonial Imaginary*, that became the critique that I did.

So they pushed me back. They said I couldn't—Juan contested it, I contested it. They said okay, then prove to us that you can do archival research. And I was like—I will *prove* to you that I can do archival research. Not only can I do it, but I'm going to do archival research in Mexico. And you're going to see how many boxes I can go through, and how many archival works in Mexico City, in Yucatán, at the Bancroft, at the Nettie Lee Benson [Latin American Collection]—*all* of these places, so that I can write something that you will know I know how to go through the archive. So that's why it became Yucatán—the Yucatán feminists. I came across the first papers about the Yucatecan feminists in the Bancroft, which is one of my favorite places. I love the Bancroft, which I think you know pretty well. [laughs]

01-01:08:16

Holmes:

It's where my office is. Yeah, it's—

01-01:08:19

Pérez:

It's where your office is.

But I mean the Bancroft was such an exciting place to do research. It was my favorite, favorite archive. I loved getting there early in the morning and just writing on the little cards with the number of all of the documents you wanted to look at. And that's when I came across papers on Yucatán and the feminist congresses. And I was like—oh my God! There's a feminist congress in Yucatán in 1916, with all these Mexican women? At the turn of the Progressive Era in the United States? This is fascinating to me. So in a way, it wasn't so far-fetched.

And then I decided—well, then I'll go to Yucatán! And there are also papers in Mexico City. I'll go to the Hemeroteca [Nacional de México] in Mexico City. That's where I met Rudy Acuña, doing research, just out of the blue one summer. And I was of course trying to prove that—I had to write a paper to the master's committee, to show them that—yes, I was worthy of going on to my PhD. So I did. I revised it. I wrote a paper on the Yucatecan feminists, and they were like oh, okay. We'll let you go on.

So then it became the topic. But I was confronted about that by certain Chicano male historians. And the thing they would say to me is, "Yucatán has nothing to do with Chicana feminists or Chicana history, you know." And I'm like, "Really? For me it does." And see, Juan understood that, given that he crossed borders. But a lot of the Chicano historians who'd been trained in *US* history, did not believe in crossing borders. And I just defied it anyway, because I thought ideas cross borders with people. [laughs] And I thought, why don't we look. I mean no, I cannot prove that some of these Yucatecan feminists ended up in Texas or in California. But I do know that those pamphlets were still important, and I want to look at this, and so I did. And that's how I ended up doing more research also about different groups in Yucatán as well. I went to Mérida and did work there in the archive. Yeah, yeah, it was fun.

01-01:10:49

Holmes:

Discuss the decolonial imaginary—which is a term that's been used many times, right? *After* your book.

01-01:10:56

Pérez:

After, yeah, I know, I know. And people kind of forget to cite that, but what are you going to do? [laughter]

01-01:11:03

Holmes:

In your words, describe to us what that is.

01-01:11:07

Pérez:

Thank you for that question, because I think about it a lot these days. And I've been wanting to write about it once again with some close friends of mine who do work on the decolonial, like Macarena Gómez-Barris, who does work on the decolonial too, and is working on decolonial queer/*cuir*. And we've been trying to make some sense of how/what that means in the manner in which the imaginary takes us somewhere else.

Because I came to the decolonial imaginary really when I was already a professor at UTEP [University of Texas at El Paso]. I went to the School of Criticism and Theory. It's called the theory boot camp, and I was fortunate enough to have studied with Homi Bhabha, who I respect tremendously. And he was a postcolonial theorist, as you well know. And he is—I forget where he is now. Last I heard, he was at Harvard. He came out of Oxford, I think. And the seminar with him was just so enlightening, because I learned a *lot* about postcoloniality and the fact that Chicanos were not postcolonial—historically. Even for Homi, the way he taught—Homi Bhabha—the way he talked about the postcolonial, for me, made so much sense. Because for him it was like—always about postcolonial hope. It's the future. It's not what we're living. It's certainly a *way* in which we can describe socioeconomic relations. But it is not what is—if we think of the postcolonial as the moment after all of these horrific colonial relations, then we're not there yet.

And that made sense for me, for the decolonial. Because if you're looking at the Chicano/Chicanx population, and Latinx population *in* the United States, in the confines of this space—and certainly, you can talk about it for the Global South too—then the coloniality takes a different turn, right? Historically, certainly if you think about Arizona, New Mexico as colonized spaces till the twentieth century—that people forget—then you're going to talk about social relations in a different way. But what does it mean when coloniality is still hovering? It's still hovering in different ways. Not just socioeconomically, but ideologically it's still hovering. The way in which people relate to each other, it's still hovering.

01-01:13:29

So that, for me, always coming back to what the imaginary—the imaginary for me was about discussing what is it that happens when it's not tangible? I mean yes, we talk about class. That's tangible. We can take numbers and say yes, women, brown women make this much less than white women or than white men. And so it's easy with the labor, with the economic market. But what happens when we're getting into the psyche? What happens when we're talking about people's relationships to each other, that have much more to do than the economy, than class, or even gender norms. But it is part of gender norms too. It's about the way in which we construct. And the way I try to explain it to some of my students too—because we're in a moment once again where people are saying oh, the decolonial is not a metaphor; the way people used to say the borderlands is not a metaphor, it's a geographic space. Well, of course, I'm not going to contest that. But then what happens, for me, with the decolonial—yes, I respect indigeneity and land. And the vitality—the incredible importance of discussing that, because the entire US continent and the Global South are all indigenous, and we don't talk about that enough.

But what does it mean when we talk about those groups of people, whether it's indigenous, whether it's Chicano/Chicana, Latino/Latina, white, whatever, and when we begin to talk about their relationships with hope, with love, with all of the things that construct us in ways that we can't touch—and yet we can. So affect theory becomes kind of important here too. But for me, the imaginary too, is like how are we going to imagine or create something different, a different kind of future? Even a different kind of *present*? That it doesn't just rest on the fact that yes, we've made this table. We've constructed this table or we've planted these seeds. I mean how did this come to *be*? How is it that we have this kind of psychic relationship with each other, right? I mean for me, imaginary is all about possibilities. What are the possibilities? What's the future? Even the present—what are the possibilities?

01-01:15:55

And so imaginary becomes that sort of amorphous thing. But then it really isn't amorphous, because we're still living it and *feeling* it every day. I mean it's about what we choose to feel a certain way, right? Are we depressed today? Are we going to feel joy? And what are the circumstances around us,

given COVID, given the apocalypse that's around us right now? Because it's pretty severe globally and going to get worse, I think, before it gets better. So then, where do we choose to put our energy? Are we going to put it with the glass half full or the glass half empty? I just error on the side of hope. What does hope mean? How do we hope? That for me is all *inside* of the imaginary.

I think that when people say to me, well, your work is unrealistic and romantic—and I have gotten that critique about decolonial imaginary, because they say I'm just operating at a whole sort of romanticized space. And I'm like, Well, I guess I am. I guess I do believe. I guess I am an old school kind of romantic. But even in that, I want to think about different kinds of futures and different kinds of relationships with each other that are not just based upon what we see, but how do we feel, and why do we feel what we feel, I guess, is what still works for me. And I was trying to get at that when I was an undergrad. I was trying to get at that when I was a grad student and trying to make sense of how we talk about gender and sexuality, not just within the realm of class. Or even how we talk about race, not just within the realm of class. Because race is not just—it's all about the imaginary and the imagination, and what we decide we're going to assign to it. How do we assign these meanings? So for me, it's all about how we come to be what we've come to be, and then how do we explode out of that if we need to explode out of that. And I think we do. [laughs]

01-01:18:06
Holmes:

That's very well put. I wanted to ask—so we see how this is coming together with the dissertation. How did you change that around for the larger book? How did you have to expand the project or narrow it or—

01-01:18:22
Pérez:

That's a very good question, because only one chapter from the dissertation ends up in *Decolonial Imaginary*. And I usually tell people—please don't read the dissertation, because it's just an exercise. I mean that's what dissertations are, right? You know that. It's an exercise and usually not our best work.

But I was pretty fortunate in landing in a place like UTEP, where I had very, very supportive colleagues. I was the only Chicana in the department. And it was Vicki Ruiz's job. She left, and then they needed to fill it, and I ended up getting the job. So, I was very fortunate there. And I was able to have a few years of postdoc, I think, and they were usually pretty understanding about when I'd have to go away. And in fact, Colorado was one of the postdocs. I went and did the Rockefeller, and I—buried in the back of my mind, having had classes with Juan and having understood Chicano historiography, or historiography the way I did, I began to *love* historiography, because historiography is about where it all happens. Where people begin conceptualizing and interpreting, right? And trying to do their revisionism, and that's where you get the epistemes and the categories, and that's what I thought was so fascinating to me. And I was already starting to read Foucault,

so of course it was all making sense to me in a different way. Theory always—philosophy/theory I've always loved so much.

I began to do the critique, and that first chapter in *Decolonial Imaginary*, really is a critique of Chicano/Chicana historiography, right? And the master narrative, and what does that mean exactly. It took about a year to write that chapter, but it was in my head and I knew exactly what I wanted to do with it. And that's when I develop all those other categories about what, you know, where we have been placed and how we become so much a part of what is delineated for us as Chicano historians. How do we push against that? Because then we become the very thing that we are contesting, which is so Foucauldian, right? Of course. So that became that chapter.

01-01:20:46

And then the other chapters were research that I had been doing. The Yucatán feminists were important, and that was in the diss. And I only included the feminists because that was the stuff that had always led me to Yucatán anyway. And then I had been doing some research in Houston on social/cultural clubs, for the turn of the century. And I learned a lot about Texas history that moment, the Mexican Revolution once again, the time period that my dad's family is from. That became a chapter—not my favorite chapter, not the best well written, but it was part of it too. And then the Partido Liberal Mexicano—I updated that to talk more from a Foucauldian perspective too. Archaeology—how things said come into being. And that chapter was *definitely* the anarchists, and how they discuss gender and women as still peripheral, but still part of the anarchist movement.

And then I had another chapter to write. And I thought God, it would be fun to talk about Selena. Selena had just been murdered. And being from Texas, having family in Corpus Christi, having family in all of that region. My mother, having herself been to weddings or quinceañeras where Selena performed when young, and they sang, and so it was like a family member having died, even though, of course, I never knew her. But I loved her, and I cried and cried. My mother and I would talk on the phone and cry about Selena having been murdered. And so that chapter then became partly about her as a desiring/desired object/subject. And then I did some other—I think I did some critique of some film too. And I was trying to get to what I would do for the future work. That was that last chapter. Of course, I've yet to do it—the intellectual work I'm trying to deal with now might—I might start getting at some of that again.

But that's how it came to be, and I really was trying to do—I took Foucault, both Foucault and Marx quite seriously. Marx I took very seriously as a grad student, and then once I became a professor and I was able to read more theory, then Foucault became really vital for me. Because then I was trying to make sense of the distinctions between archaeology and genealogy. And that's

what I kind of do in the book, is I track archaeology and then move to genealogy at the very end. Yeah.

01-01:23:29

Holmes:

Discuss a little bit about your intended aims. When we put a work together, we have our argument, and this is the narrative or the story that we want to tell. What were some of the high aims that you had for this work going into it?

01-01:23:48

Pérez:

For *Decolonial Imaginary*?

01-01:23:48

Holmes:

Yeah.

01-01:23:49

Pérez:

Well, first of all, I didn't know it would be—people weren't writing the decolonial yet. It's become a big school. I mean Walter Mignolo—all the guys who tend to erase a lot of the women. And I like their work. I respect Mignolo, definitely. But it's interesting to me that—they say they respect Gloria Anzaldúa, but really never do the work that much, other than cite her. But yeah, I didn't know at the time that it was going to become such a vital school.

It just made sense to me, as I was writing. And when I was—let's see, I published the book in '99, when I was initially writing that stuff in '96, '94, and I took the class with Homi Bhabha in '95, I think. And that's when it started making sense to me. Because it wasn't postcolonial, and I'd keep arguing with people like—no, it's not postcolonial. Do *not* call it postcolonial if it's here in the Southwest. It makes no sense. It's *decolonial*. And I kept having those arguments. And then I just thought it was pretty important to make sure that we understood it was decolonial. It's that time lag, right, that I learned from Homi Bhabha, too. It's between the colonial and the postcolonial. We're *still* in that time lag of trying to deconstruct, because I always thought of decolonial as a deconstructive tool—not a thing, not a thing itself, but rather a tool that we *use*. And so, I guess I was pretty impassioned about it at the time.

But I also wanted people to—if they were going to think of it as a deconstructive tool, then what did that mean for them within the level of the imaginary? How were they going to do that? What were they going to tap into? So I guess I was thinking of it as sort of overarching tool that people could access. And I didn't know that it would get picked up so much. I was pretty much in shock, because I still get—I still get checks from Indiana University Press. [laughs] I mean—they're small checks, but they're still checks. And so when I see it cited a lot, I'm like—wow, I never thought that people would really get it. It took a while. I mean when I initially did it, they were like—what are you doing? What *is* this? Why are you calling it that? It should really be called *Writing Chicanas into History*, and *then Decolonial*

Imaginary. And I argued with the editors and I said absolutely not. Decolonial imaginary has to come first, because it is about that theory and method, and how other people from other disciplines will be able to use that theory and method.

That was what was most primary for me, having been so influenced by philosophy and theorists. I took political theory a lot as an undergrad. Yeah, as an undergrad when I was at UCLA, and I learned so much about theorists, and that was always one of my first loves. Theory and fiction, which I never think are so different. Poetry—philosophy, poetry—hmm, about the same thing. Yeah. [laughs]

01-01:26:51

Holmes:

Well, talk a little bit about the reception of the book when it came out. Because what's interesting is when you look at a book, there's various lifespans that a work may have.

01-01:27:04

Pérez:

Yeah—yes.

01-01:27:06

Holmes:

And then there's books that have various lifespans that are all connected. If their lifespan is long, it's in phases—and we see this a number of times]with great books, where barely anybody noticed it for the first two years.

01-01:27:24

Pérez:

Yeah, yeah.

01-01:27:24

Holmes:

And then all of a sudden—explosion, right?

01-01:27:27

Pérez:

Yes.

01-01:27:27

Holmes:

Discuss your experience as the author of *The Decolonial Imaginary*.

01-01:27:32

Pérez:

Of *Decolonial Imaginary*? I'm not sure that people noticed it much initially. I don't remember. I remember that I was at the Berks—Berkshire history conference [Berkshire Conference of Women Historians] with Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Antonia Castañeda. And I'd never been to the Berks before. I had always heard my mentor, Kitty Sklar, talk about the Berks and the importance of it. I think Vicki was there too, Vicki Ruiz was there. But I was in a panel and suddenly—you know, and I was talking about the book and how it was going to come out pretty soon. And then someone came in the room—it might have even been Vicki, and said, "Oh, you know, it's already there. Indiana has it." And I said, "You're kidding!" It was the moment when I thought wow, here I am at a conference and the book is finally out. It was pretty exciting.

But I think that after that, it just felt like—[makes a little so-what sound]. The book was just out. I remember going to some other conferences, and it wasn't really acknowledged much at all, like at the American Studies Conference or at any of the others. It's not as if it made any kind of impact. I think it took at least five years before people started paying attention, and it was from different disciplines. It wasn't from history. It was from different disciplines of people approaching me, either from English—you know, literary critics—definitely college of ed., a lot of college of ed. folks, which always perplexed me, but they seemed to really catch on to it. Anthropology as well, sociology, some historians later. It's been more current that I've had more history grad students or even professors who acknowledge it and think of it as something that has opened up some borders or boundaries. Yeah. But it still perplexes me. I mean I thought I was just doing something that I felt impassioned about—and that always *bugged* me about history. It's like seriously, folks? We're going to do it this way? What about if we explode those boundaries? Because there really are no boundaries, right? Lucky, I guess. [laughs]

01-01:29:48

Holmes: Well, it's usually actually the sign of a great work if it's able to get outside the disciplinary silos that we are placed in in the academy.

01-01:29:57

Pérez: Well, thank you.

01-01:30:00

Holmes: Well, actually—you know, this is a good place to stop for now.

01-01:30:04

Pérez: Okay!

01-01:30:04

Holmes: And then we can pick this back up tomorrow morning with our second session.

01-01:30:08

Pérez: That would be great.

01-01:30:08

Holmes: All right. Thank you, Emma.

01-01:30:08

Pérez: Sounds perfect.

Interview 2: September 22, 2020

02-00:00:00

Holmes:

All right. This is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is September 22, 2020, and I have the pleasure of sitting down for our second session with Emma Pérez, for the Chicana/o Studies Oral History Project. We are here in her beautiful home in Tucson, Arizona. Emma, thank you for again sitting down with me today.

02-00:00:25

Pérez:

Thank you, Todd.

02-00:00:27

Holmes:

In the last session, we covered your early life and up through graduate school. So in this second session, I wanted to talk about after graduate school and maybe start with some of the academic appointments you had early on. This sometimes provides a great vantage point of how Chicano Studies is operating in various academic environments.

In 1985, you had a visiting lectureship at the University of Minnesota, and that was in Chicana and Chicano Studies and history. How did that opportunity arise?

02-00:01:01

Pérez:

Well, you know, I was dissertating. I'd already finished—I was ABD, and I hadn't had an opportunity to TA or teach at UCLA, so I felt like I needed to get some teaching under my belt. And so Guillermo Rojas, who was a really wonderful guy—he was also from Texas, Victoria, Texas. And he was the chair, or director, of Chicano Studies there, and he needed someone to fill in for a Chicano historian named [Dionisio] "Dennis" Valdés. And so, for two—I think it was for the two quarters—he needed someone to teach the Chicano history class, and I think Latin American history class. And it was all new preparation for me, because I'd only been really dissertating, doing odd jobs so that I could continue having the job I had—or continue being a grad student. So I was pretty grateful to him.

So moving there, in the dead of winter in January of 1985, was quite a challenge. I remember landing there and thinking oh my God, this is—this is cold. [laughs] This is cold. But I was fortunate. There were good people. Guillermo was very good to me. It was a small department, small program, and the students were good. I might have had one or two people of color—two women of color in my classes of say thirty/forty, and mostly a lot of the students were from Minnesota. I learned a lot about Minnesota, that's for sure. And you know, lots of really good, cool people. They had some good activities. I met some wonderful artists too. They brought in someone who was a playwright at the time, a Chicano playwright. But you know, I was very grateful to Guillermo, and I taught Chicano history, Latin American history. I think I also taught a Chicana history class. I forget what else I might have

taught, but it was a lot of class prep for me, because I'd never taught any of that stuff before. It was good, because it prepared me for my job, once I got to UTEP. Those were classes that I just—I was always preparing lectures—always. That's all I did. [laughs]

02-00:03:21

Holmes:

That's usually the run of the mill, right, when we start teaching—day and night?

02-00:03:23

Pérez:

Yes, always preparing lectures. Yes.

02-00:03:26

Holmes:

How was the reception? I mean we're thinking of Minnesota, so we're out of the West, in many respects.

02-00:03:31

Pérez:

Yes, yes.

02-00:03:33

Holmes:

What was the reception of Chicana and Chicano Studies in Minnesota?

02-00:03:36

Pérez:

It was interesting. It was a small department, very small. I forget who else was in it. Maybe it was just me and Guillermo, and a lecturer who was also a TA. And I think that there was definitely a willingness on the part of the student population. I mean otherwise, why would so many of those students who were non-Chicano/non-Latino have taken those classes? I mean they were full—these were full classes, so I was pretty surprised, to be honest. And they were very willing to learn. There's something about that in the Midwest that I've learned about, is that—at that time certainly, and this was 1985, so things were a little bit different. I think that I had such convictions about I had learned in history. The kind of thing like—I remember how much I would stress the deportation trials of the 1920s and '30s, and the anti-immigration that was just rising up again at that time period, in the mid '80s, and discuss all of that with them and thinking well, this could never happen this way again. This is why we need to discuss this and be so aware of it. And here we are again with that, with that scapegoating. Yeah, so I think it was a good, it was a good gig for me. I enjoyed it, yeah. I didn't enjoy the minus 70° wind chill—at all. Can I turn up the air?

02-00:05:08

Holmes:

Yeah!

02-00:05:08

Pérez:

Sorry. I forgot to do that earlier. [interruption in recording]

02-00:05:14

Holmes:

Okay, we're back. So then—so you survived the Minnesota winters.

02-00:05:21

Pérez: I did. Minus 70° wind chill factor one day, I remember.

02-00:05:22

Holmes: Ohhh.

02-00:05:23

Pérez: [laughs] I was going to go outside, because I thought—oh, it's so beautiful out there. And my housemate, my roommate at the time said no. And she was a Chicana from El Paso, but her boyfriend was this really cool guy from Minnesota, and he's the one who pretty much kept us abreast of what we should and shouldn't do in that weather. Yeah, yeah.

02-00:05:45

Holmes: Well, the following year you come back to California.

02-00:05:47

Pérez: Yes, came back.

02-00:05:48

Holmes: For a lectureship at Cal Poly-Pomona. And this was in Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies.

02-00:05:54

Pérez: Yes, it was combined, yeah.

02-00:05:55

Holmes: Discuss that experience, because that's switching it up a bit—and in some respects maybe going back to more of an area of study that you had focused on.

02-00:06:05

Pérez: Yeah, exactly. I had—Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies. You know, that was a brief class called Race and Gender, I think. I was living in Claremont, I was able to take the freeway up to Cal Poly Pomona. I don't remember it that well. It was a small class, and because Cal Poly Pomona is the institution that it is, which is highly engineering, science, then Ethnic Studies, Gender, and Women's Studies was, of course, condensed into one. And there weren't that many people who were in it, so of course they brought in someone like myself, who was ABD, to teach a class for them.

So many of these lectureships, like at Cal Poly Pomona, UC Davis—even Pomona College, they were all while I was dissertating. So much of it just feels like—okay, what exactly was I doing? Because I was dissertating. You know how that is—that takes the priority, and especially when I was at both Davis and Pomona College, because while I was at UC Davis—thank God for Vicki. That's how that came up, because Vicki Ruiz—it was her position. She was on sabbatical, and this is how she's always helped me. I mean she basically said, "Hey, do you want to do this while I'm away?" And I'm like—thank you! Because I need something while I'm dissertating. I went, and

Antonia Castañeda was living in Sacramento, so I was able to live with her. And she was administrating at the time. She wasn't even able to dissertate. She'd come home and write—that's when computers were like these massive kinds of things. I think she had an IBM, and I would look at it and think wow, what is that thing? I don't think I had a computer yet. That didn't come till later.

02-00:07:59

But that's when I was teaching probably Chicana/Chicano history at UC Davis and—twice a week probably, and the other two or three days of the week I would get up super early and take the bus from Sacramento to Berkeley—from Davis to Berkeley, because you know there's a track, because so many people do that back and forth. I would get up really early and take the bus, and go straight to the Bancroft, which was heaven, and I would do my research two to three times a week. And there was so much there that was useful for me, especially on Mexico/Latin America/Yucatán/the Southwest—I mean there was always so much to do at the Bancroft, so that was kind of heaven. I focused so much on that.

My classes were good at UC Davis. There were a few students who I think I still know now. But I enjoyed living in Sacramento, and then, of course, taught at Davis. And I liked the community. I did. There was something really refreshing about Sacramento—you know, it's a cool little town, right? At that time—it was '85-'86—I just liked the people that I met. I really enjoyed that.

Then I moved back to Southern California where I'd been living, and that's when I taught at Pomona College in their history department. That was Deena González's job—see, this is how the Chicanas always watch out for each other. There were so few of us, too, so we kind of were like, "Okay, we'll tap into this person, because we know they're working on their PhD. Let's help them out." She'd already finished her PhD, and she was on sabbatical. She went up to the Bay Area, and we kind of traded places. And then I did her history gig for a year, which helped me a lot as well, and I taught her Latin American history class, her Chicana/Chicano history. I forget what else I might have taught, but it was the more—you know, the traditional history classes. Small, very small, because it's Pomona College. It's an elite. They call themselves the Harvard of the West, as you well know, which is kind of interesting. Good students. Very, very, good students. I enjoyed the students also who would come over from the other colleges, because you know it's a consortium. From Pitzer College—it was really usually more Chicanos and Chicanas. Scripps, of course there were more women, young women, who'd come over from there. It was a good experience. Again, I didn't feel as if I gave them my all, because I was really on a deadline to finish at that point. That was '87-'88, and I filed in '88, yeah. And the department was incredibly understanding about that, as well. Yeah, I was fortunate.

02-00:11:00

Holmes:

Well, then you do finish. And you go out into the job market, and you were hired at the University of Texas, El Paso, in the Department of History.

02-00:11:09

Pérez:

Yes.

02-00:11:08

Holmes:

Discuss that experience of coming back to Texas after spending so many years in California.

02-00:11:16

Pérez:

Oh yeah—it was somewhat surreal to go back to Texas, because when I left I never thought I'd return. Kind of a love-hate relationship. I mean, there is so much I love about Texas, and other things that I just would rather forget. Probably why I named the fiction *Forgetting the Alamo*, [*Or, Blood Memory*] right? We're in the process of always forgetting while we're remembering. But you know, prior to that I had gotten a postdoc at the University of Houston, and I was able to do research for one of the chapters of *Decolonial Imaginary*, on the Houston women, the social/cultural organizations, so I was already there for that year and I was applying to jobs. I didn't think I'd end up staying in Texas, but the UTEP job came up, and that had been Óscar Martínez's job as well as Vicki Ruiz's job. I think she had filled in for him, and then I filled in for—again, Vicki. Vicki has just been so helpful.

The West is very different. West Texas is not East Texas, where I grew up. And it was always funny, because people would ask me, "Oh, well what part of South Texas are you from?" And I'm like, "No, I'm from East Texas, where we talk with a Texan accent and eat jalapeños with our fried chicken." It's very different—and corn bread, lots of corn bread. So, I had to learn a lot about the desert, about El Paso/Juárez, and I welcomed it really.

I loved the population of students. The president at that time—you've probably heard of Diana Natalicio. She worked her way up from being an assistant professor in Spanish language and lit, and then became the president of the university. She had a vision for UTEP, and I always appreciated the fact that when she became president, the student population changed. Students would tell me this who had parents or relatives who had gone to UTEP or knew the university—that it had been probably 10-20 percent of Mexicans or Chicanos/Chicanx in the university. And at the height of her career it changed. And when I arrived, it was like 70 percent, so it was reflecting the population of the region—many, many Méxicanos from Juárez, and of course the Chicanos, and tribal groups over from Isleta, indigenous groups as well. It was an interesting classroom—I learned a lot from the classroom. Oh, and we'd get New Mexicans as well! So people look at it as this homogeneous population, but it really isn't. When you're sitting in a classroom of, say, 50 to 120 students, the majority will be Chicanx from that region, a lot of Méxicanos/Méxicanas from Juárez, and a percentage of the tribal groups from

Isleta and up the road. I learned so much from just being in that kind of mix with students.

02-00:14:33

And I learned about El Paso history, Juárez history, looking at the Mexican Revolution in a very different way, because the *frontera*, the border, is just an exciting kind of space. Of course, Gloria Anzaldúa had already written about it, so living there—beyond the metaphors—living in the borderlands and precisely knowing what is happening and how you're being treated, and how the Border Patrol polices. I appreciated that job a lot, and I had wonderful colleagues. I was the only Chicana initially—

02-00:15:12

Holmes:

Discuss that experience, as the lone Chicana in the department.

02-00:15:18

Pérez:

Yeah, the lone Chicana in the department—it felt lonely. But then it didn't, because they were like one of the most welcoming departments I'd ever been in—still, still. Well, the research center here [at the University of Arizona] is very welcoming, I have to say. I mean I love the guys and the few women—mostly older, and we can talk about that later—but I really do love the Southwest Center a lot. And [the Department of] Gender [and] Women's Studies has a lot of good colleagues, but I'm not really in that—it's like 25 percent.

But that history department—you know, I was pretty surprised at how welcoming they were. And there were a lot of Latin Americanists in the department, as there should have been. Some of my best friends, still, like one of the guys who got hired later—he came out of Yale, American Studies, Michael Topp. Michael and I became very close, and we still keep up a little bit. And he was a historian, and of course, and I just really enjoyed hanging out with him and talking a lot about history. Chuck Ambler too, who has just retired. He also came out of Yale—oh my God! The Yalies were watching out for each other, clearly. [laughs] And he was also someone who watched out for me a lot. He became a bit of a mentor, even though we're probably the same age. But Chuck, I think, worked with Natalicio's office as an associate—dean of grad. studies, and he did other kinds of things like that. He chaired the department too, when I was there as an assistant, and made sure I was taken care of as an assistant professor.

02-00:17:12

Holmes:

Well, and you're then promoted. There at UTEP you received tenure as an associate [professor].

02-00:17:17

Pérez:

Yeah, I did get tenure. I did get tenure, and that was based on *Decolonial Imaginary*. I don't think other departments would have given me tenure with that book. I really think that they would have questioned the validity of my

theoretical grounding, in the same way the PhD program in history had done. But this department, they were, you know, despite the fact that many were very traditional historians, they were open to that. And I really appreciated that. It was a small department, really, initially. I chaired at one point when it was growing a little bit more. And while I was there, and when I chaired, we did hire—I think it's before I left. See, I got a job at UC Santa Barbara while I was still at UTEP, because I'd been applying to different jobs, and because I wanted to get back to California. You know, we get the bug, right, and we think, 'Oh no, I've got to go back to California.' And at the last minute I rescinded that, and I ended up staying at UTEP because I realized I was where I wanted to be.

02-00:18:27

And by then we'd already hired Ernesto Chávez—I don't know if you know Ernie—still a very good friend of mine and he still teaches there. And so, Ernie had my job! [laughs] One of the things I thought—you know, we're creating borderlands history here, a PhD in borderlands history—so I called Natalicio and I said, "Could I have my job back?" [laughs] And she said—"Sure! We're going in that direction anyway." There was this kind of ruffling of feathers at the university, because people thought that we had planned that all along, that we'd been strategically doing this in the history department. I remember Chuck saying, "If we'd only been that smart!" No, we really weren't. Then I had a colleague, I had Ernie to hang out with, another Chicano historian. When I became chair, we hired Yolanda Leyva as well, as the oral historian. And then we had three. Then we hired someone else who had been a TA for me from the Houston area—John [D.] Márquez, who was in Afro-Am as well as in our department. And John left to go to Northwestern, and he's still at Northwestern. He's a brilliant, brilliant guy—you know, from the hood. I love John's work, too. There was a minute when there were quite a few of us—as Chicanos/Chicanas, yeah.

02-00:19:51

Holmes: Which is interesting, if we think about it. On one hand it makes sense, at UTEP, right?

02-00:19:56

Pérez: Yeah, it does.

02-00:19:57

Holmes: On the other hand, we look at it as in history—like in just the previous decade, how hard it was to have the university give a job line to Chicana and Chicano history.

02-00:20:08

Pérez: Yes, absolutely. It was very hard, and there was some battling that had to be done about it. Yeah, absolutely, because even when we had the PhD in borderlands history, we—the department—would have to discuss, "Okay, who's the next person that's going to be hired?" And in my mind, if we're

going to have a PhD in borderlands history, we're going to have PhD students coming here to study this border, and to study the border in the northern continent, right? And so, those became debates—yeah, definitely became debates about who should and shouldn't be hired. We survived it. [laughs]

02-00:20:52

Holmes:

Well, you also start at UTEP, really at a time where we see the field of Chicana/Chicano Studies starting to mature.

02-00:20:59

Pérez:

Yes, it was.

02-00:21:02

Holmes:

If we look back at the work of the earlier generation, we see this beginning to change. We're expanding into the Midwest, but more importantly, woman and gender, the rise in Chicana history really began.

02-00:21:16

Pérez:

Yes, yeah, yeah.

02-00:21:18

Holmes:

And you were very much a part of this, right?

02-00:21:22

Pérez:

Yes, I was. [laughter] I always forget. Yeah, we're the elders now—Deena, Antonia, Vicki, me—yeah, we're the elders. It's very funny.

02-00:21:33

Holmes:

What was your view of this maturation process? Was it something that you felt like—in comparison to graduate school, where you really had to fight to be heard? You know, or thinking of the first Chicana history conference in 1982 to where we're looking ten years later, or so. Did you feel that Chicana history had really begun to make its place?

02-00:22:11

Pérez:

Yeah, absolutely I think it was starting to. I felt that it was starting to, because—I just believed in the importance of numbers. There were so few of us. I remember Deena, Antonia, and I—Vicki as well—getting together and thinking when are we going to have more PhDs? There are so few of us who have PhDs in history as Chicanas, and the field is so wide open. Even now, I still feel we need pre-twentieth century scholars. I myself am not a pre—I mean late nineteenth/early twentieth. I don't do well beyond 1920, actually, to be honest. All of that is like current events for me. That's the kind of—and I love the nineteenth century, but most of my research really was late nineteenth/early twentieth. The Progressive Era, as it was called in the US.

But as I look—and even as I teach now, and when I teach Intro to Chicana/Latina Studies and I teach my students things about the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries, they get very excited. And I try to tell them, "Look, we don't have enough historians *doing* this. We need more!" There is someone

here in this department, in history, at the University of Arizona, named Erika Pérez—no relation—just published a book on the eighteenth century, and it's California. So again, there's a glut—you probably know this as a Californian, there's a glut of—which isn't really a glut. Let me take that back. We have *more* studies on California—for good reason, right? Because you've got the UCs, you've got Berkeley, UCLA, Davis, Stanford, which are all training people—UC San Diego too. They're all training people. And Texas has definitely contributed to training people, with UT Austin as well as UTSA, and then the border and Trinity [University] too, the private college there.

But, what happens to places like New Mexico and Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Nevada—all of these other spaces? I mean here in Arizona, how many studies on Arizona history? It just doesn't make the map. I mean a close friend of mine named Lydia Otero, who's also a Chicana historian, who actually lives one street over—we knew each other in the late seventies/early eighties in LA. We were in the Latina Lesbian group together, and later in life she became a historian. She's from here, and she's written a book on Tucson, *La Calle: Spatial Conflicts and Urban Renewal in a Southwest City*. And when people think about Tucson history, they go straight to her book or to Thomas Sheridan, who's also at the Southwest Center, because he wrote *Los Tucsonenses: [The Mexican Community in Tucson, 1854–1941]*—he's an anthropologist, it's from an anthropological perspective. Both important books.

02-00:25:04

We have New Mexico studies because of Ramón Gutiérrez and Deena González, and a few others who have come up as well, but still not enough. How are we going to get more students interested if these departments aren't hiring more Chicanos and Chicanas to train them? Because in some of these spaces there's still the argument about the legitimacy of what Chicano history really is. There are some spaces that—and I think unfortunately, CU Boulder was one of those places that still believed, "Well, there's really no such thing as *that*. It's really just Latin American Studies or Mexican Studies." And they still don't have a Chicano/Chicana historian. I was in Ethnic Studies. I think they had a moment when they had one, and then she left. There have been different moments, but then they leave—and this is typical of CU Boulder though. Scholars of color leave—we can talk about that later.

But I think that the field still needs so much in different regions. I mean California still needs pre-nineteenth century studies. I think all of it, all of these regions. And then the Midwest—we can't forget Kansas and how many people migrated in the 1920s, and other areas of the Midwest. When I did my oral histories in Houston with a lot of the *Méxicanas* who had crossed over, whose families had crossed over during the Mexican Revolution or prior, they had started having family members going to Minneapolis, going to St. Paul, opening their own restaurants there. I thought that was so interesting, because then you'd see the direct line from Houston to St. Paul. And Chicago—I mean

we can't forget Chicago. There are so many studies that still need to be done. For me, I think—yes, let's open it up. Now we have thirty-plus Chicana historians, which I think is wonderful. And when people ask me, "Well, why do we really need more Chicana historians? Don't we just need historians"—I'm like, *seriously*? I mean there's something to be said for the field, and yes there is a field. And yes, we have been developing this field certainly—since the 1950s, right? I mean George I. Sánchez—he's so pivotal. His work is so pivotal. And I think that Carey McWilliams—I mean I never met him, but he made such inroads, Carey McWilliams. I mean so many—who is the other one, the labor historian?

02-00:27:47

Holmes:

Galarza, Ernesto Galarza?

02-00:27:47

Pérez:

There's Galarza as well—that's the one Antonia *really* was influenced by, Ernesto Galarza. Manuel Gamio, who was an anthropologist, right—Paul Taylor. Paul S. Taylor. His works always were so useful to me. I think that the 1950s, the early sixties, gave us a really good foundation. We move into sixties and seventies with people like Juan Gómez Quiñones, who's training all of these people who become so important in training more students. You know that legacy as well. But there's still so much that has to be done. Yeah. [laughs]

02-00:28:31

Holmes:

Well, I wanted to talk more here about some of your scholarship.

02-00:28:36

Pérez:

Okay.

02-00:28:37

Holmes:

Especially once you're at UTEP, because I think it's also a great example of what we were just talking about, of how this field was maturing. New types of methodology; new discourses were happening.

02-00:28:49

Pérez:

Yes, yes.

02-00:28:51

Holmes:

I wanted to talk about a piece you wrote; a chapter in the anthology—*Chicana Lesbians: [The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About]*, "Sexuality and Discourse: Notes from a Chicana Survivor."

02-00:29:03

Pérez:

[laughs] Yeah.

02-00:29:04

Holmes:

Discuss the genesis of that chapter.

02-00:29:07

Pérez:

Yeah, the genesis of that chapter. Remember I talked about how I had to prove myself as an historian? Right. So the archive, the archive, the archive—in Mexico and the Southwest. Which, you know, I did dutifully and I still enjoy archival work. But it's been a while since I've done it, because of becoming more of a fiction writer. And theory, too, is just—it just really grabs me. But I think the genesis of that is precisely because I felt like I had been doing the tradition of history, and so I needed to explode the boxes one more time, I needed to delve into more agency and creativity. And so, I think once I finished the diss., and I had a postdoc at University of Houston, I thought—oh my God! I can read some theory again. I'm so happy! So of course, what did I read? I mean there were the queer theorists who were writing at the time. People who I admire tremendously, like Judith Butler. But Foucault, Michel Foucault had published *History of Sexuality*, and I was like in heaven, reading that and reading other theoreticians. I discovered [Jacques] Lacan at the time. I'd read Freud and Marx, since I was in high school really. Because I'd skip classes—I was so bored, and I'd go to the library. And I didn't get good grades because of it, because I would go to the library and read Freud and Marx, yeah.

I think that was the genesis of "Sitio y Lengua," ["Irigaray's Female Symbolic in the Making of Chicana Lesbian: Sitios y Lenguas (Sites and Discourses)"]. You asked me about what was it like to go back to Texas? That's precisely why I wrote "Sitio y Lengua," Site and Discourse—highly influenced by Foucault, and Anzaldúa. It's like what does that mean, to be in a space that has been home, but isn't home? How do we recreate different notions of home? Because you know Aztlán too—Aztlán travels. Aztlán is not a space, geographic space. This is, again, why I get back to imaginary when people want us to think that 'it's just the *land*.' Well, even the land has different ways in which we perceive it. Our imaginary—our imagination is perceiving this land in different ways. So for me, the genesis of "Sitio y Lengua." was that—it was that theoretical concept, how do we make our own spaces with our own discourse, and honor each other while we're doing that? And honor each other's differences? Because we were, in that moment, right—the affirmative-action moment. We were in that moment when people were trying to make sense of multiculturalism, which is so problematic, right?

For me it was more like, how are we going to build discourses across differences? And how do we also honor ourselves when we need to be in a space with just people who have certain kinds of commonalities for particular moments? And I came to that too because I'd been—and I always say that I've been sober for about thirty-five years now. And at the time I'd probably only been sober five or six—no, three or four years, maybe. I learned a lot about what it meant to be in rooms with people who had these kinds of commonalities across differences. Because I was in rooms with old white men—and ordinarily as a Chicana, Chicana queer lesbian, I would have not done so. But hearing stories, and that kind of intimacy and honesty taught me

so much. And I thought, 'Why can't we do that in the academy? What is wrong with us that we're *so* in our heads all the time?' But I think "Sitio y Lengua," for me, was about that. Site and discourse. What does that mean, to develop our own languages within our own spaces? And I guess it got taken up a little bit. I mean—I'm a little embarrassed by the article because I'd just become an assistant prof, and I was still grappling with so much.

02-00:33:23

Holmes:

Well, you follow that up with, "Speaking from the Margin: Uninvited Discourse on Sexuality and Power."

02-00:33:29

Pérez:

Yes, I did. And it's almost the same article. I think I just revised it a little bit, so it wasn't that much different. I might have included some stuff—I was reading the French feminists—of course, again, the theoreticians. And people always accuse me of like, "Oh, you and the dead white men, and you and those white French feminists." I'm like—you know what? We all take stuff that works and we leave the rest, right? I mean I don't—I'm not an essentialist that way. I still read—I've been reading Spinoza lately, because there are things about Spinoza that resonate for me. I heard Foucault was reading Spinoza on his deathbed, when I was in Germany a few years ago, which is kind of interesting, because I'd already started reading it. It's about *God*. You know, how do we interpret God, and what does that mean in our lives, right? I guess he was thinking about that on his deathbed. Interesting, yeah. But what better time, to think about God. [laughs]

I think that for me, "Speaking from the Margin," was, once again, trying to revise that and assert it once again. What does that mean, to speak from the margins as a queer of color, a butch Chicanx of color, from a place like Texas? Who grew up when—despite the fact that *Brown v. Board of Education* had been passed—desegregation wasn't enforced, by any means. Not till much later. For me, it was also about what that meant in practical, methodological ways in my own life, and what does that mean for other people who have similar kinds of experiences? So that's how that came about, and using some of the stuff from the French feminists too, which now I wouldn't do so much anymore. The older I get, the more I become Foucauldian, and I still borrow from the concept surplus value that Marx had to offer us. I still become more and more of that, yeah.

02-00:35:36

Holmes:

Well, yesterday we talked a bit about, your book, *The Decolonial Imaginary*, which comes out around this time. So here I wanted to talk about you also diving into fiction right around this time as well.

02-00:35:51

Pérez:

Yes, yeah.

02-00:35:53

Holmes:

So in 1996 you publish the book, *Gulf Dreams*.

02-00:35:55

Pérez:

Yes.

02-00:35:56

Holmes:

Which is widely considered, I think, the first Chicana lesbian novel.

02-00:36:01

Pérez:

Yeah, one of the first. There are some people who will say that there's another one by a Chicana, mixed-race Chicana who was in Florida. The protagonist isn't necessarily Chicana. I think people contest that, which is fine. I mean mine was in Texas, and it's all about how are we dealing with these kinds of issues that we know about in the Southwest—homophobia and racism, and sexism, and machista, kind of nationalist culture. I sort of try to take a stab at all of it at the same time, from a kind of inner voice of the protagonist. A friend of mine was telling me last night—because I'm a Scorpio, and she's dating someone right now who's a Scorpio—and she was saying, "He's just so dark." And I'm like—"Really? You think Scorpios are dark?" She said, "*Gulf Dreams*." And I said, "Yeah, but that was thirty years ago! Am I still that dark?" [laughs] She said, "Yeah, kind of—you are." So I think there's that sinking into the depths that Gloria Anzaldúa calls the Coatlicue state, and what we discover from those depths.

Gulf Dreams seems like a memoir, but it's not. Gloria Anzaldúa gave it a blurb, and she called it creative nonfiction, which is interesting, because then people—when they get to the end they're think, "Really, did this happen?" Because there's a murder. "Did you really murder someone?" And I say, "Uh, it's *fiction*." It's still fiction. No, I never would do such a thing. But yeah, I think the reason I wrote *Gulf Dreams*—for two reasons. I started my dissertation one day, and there was a part of me that felt oh my God, how am I going to express that creative part of me that can't be in the dissertation? And I've always loved fiction. As I've said, I didn't have the courage to go into an English lit. program. But I always read lots of fiction, wrote lousy poetry as a kid. So I started *Gulf Dreams* at the same time I started the dissertation. I had to write portions, put it aside, finish the diss., get a job, publish articles, go to conferences—and I was still always thinking about when I could finish that draft.

02-00:38:25

And it wasn't until I got to UTEP, and I think I was on leave for a semester or something, and I was able to get more of it done. Yeah, and finally publish it in '96—it got published when I was doing a gig up in Santa Cruz. And Santa Cruz was really instrumental too. That was while I was at UTEP, and I had a year off to go teach for them for two quarters. Teresa de Lauretis, who was the series editor for Indiana University Press—she's the one who had helped get me that gig there for the two quarters. She published *Decolonial Imaginary*,

and we discussed a lot about both the fiction and then the text as well. But I learned a lot while I was at History of Consciousness too, because it really gave me more of a foundation for what I was doing in *Decolonial Imaginary*. I was able to expand parameters with those grad students who were actually really brilliant and have published a lot of their own stuff. [Students included Maylei Blackwell, Keta Miranda, Luz Calvo, Catriona Rueda Esquibel, and Charla Ogaz.]

02-00:39:37

Holmes:

Well, in 2003, you head to the University of Colorado at Boulder.

02-00:39:40

Pérez:

Yes.

02-00:39:42

Holmes:

You join the Ethnic Studies Department. Discuss how this opportunity arose, and what inspired you to leave Texas for Colorado.

02-00:39:51

Pérez:

Yeah, that's a good question, because I loved my students at UTEP. Oh my God, I had so much fun with them, because I could teach a class of fifty—majority Chicanos/Chicanas and Juarenses, right? And a few white students who spoke with an El Paso Chicano accent, because they're from there. It was always so cool to meet the white kids who were from there, because they just get it, right? I knew I was going to miss them. But it was an issue of resources in an R1, and it was an issue of going to an interdisciplinary program. I was becoming more of a scholar that was still grounded in history—like one of my favorite historians, Hayden White, who's also a theoretician, who taught at HisCon [History of Consciousness] and was actually one of the founders of it. He just passed away a few years ago—he was also a friend of Juan Gómez-Quiñones's. *Content of the Form: [Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation]* was one of his books that was really brilliant and very helpful to me as I was writing *Decolonial Imaginary*.

He was so instrumental in my work. He would always say things like, "Well, history is a good jumping-off point." It's the good foundation—and I still believe that. And I still teach that to my students. You need that grounding, and that grounding then will help you make sense of, *give* you the context for the present, the present world and the future. But I think that I needed interdisciplinarity more, and after having published *Decolonial Imaginary*, I realized how much I really enjoyed cultural studies. I enjoyed theory, of course, and then fiction. I wanted to write more fiction.

02-00:41:58

And Elisa Facio, my colleague, who was also one of the originators of MALCS that we discussed yesterday, she was there at the time. And she and I were close. We'd known each other since the Berkeley days. She was a sociologist, and she made it happen. I'd already been there for a Rockefeller

years before, and I had met a lot of the department, so I was a known entity to them. Ward Churchill—who you've probably heard of—he was the chair at the time, and so he also trusted my work. And so, it just felt like a good opportunity. I remember when I went for the job interview, and we went out to eat at a Vietnamese restaurant, and there was a big table of all of the ethnic scholars there. And they were just so much fun! I just enjoyed them so much, and I thought—yeah, it's time for a change. It really feels like it's time for a change. I'm going to miss the Southwest. I *know* I'm going to miss the Southwest. I'm not much for snow or the cold, but this just feels right at this moment. I wasn't sure how long I'd stay, but I ended up staying fourteen years. I mean it's interesting—I was in California fourteen years, UTEP fourteen years, and then Colorado fourteen years. I didn't plan it.

But the program was good. It was good, and we developed the PhD in comparative Ethnic Studies there, yeah. And I had already come from UTEP, where we'd worked on the PhD in borderlands history, so I had a little bit of experience in doing that.

02-00:43:44

Holmes:

Well, I was going to ask if you could discuss that a little bit more. The PhD program—Stanford also has the Comparative Race and Ethnicity Program. Did that program serve as a model or help shape your ideas?

02-00:43:54

Pérez:

Yeah, how long had they had that?

02-00:43:57

Holmes:

I want to say, Al Camarillo and others put that together in the early 1990s.

02-00:44:05

Pérez:

Okay, so much earlier, yeah. That makes sense. I do remember we did our research. And the research was—okay, which programs have something that's a PhD in Ethnic Studies as well as the other area studies? What do we want to borrow from? What do we think is useful? How will we get this passed, because—another PhD, right? And how can we train students so that they will want to come here? And I think that people decided—well, this is still the West that isn't Stanford or California, but it's closer to areas in the Midwest, and so we can make an argument for comparative Ethnic Studies. And also, there were scholars in the department. They already had an undergraduate program stressing comparative Ethnic Studies. I know when I was hired I was asked the question, "Well, how would you make this comparative?" And I said, "Well, my work really is already Chicanas and Mexicanas. When you cross the border, you're already doing some comparative stuff, right?" So, I think that was the agreement. It was a strategic reason for doing that. How can we get this passed so that it's a contribution.

02-00:45:22

Holmes:

What was the reception at the university of the new program?

02-00:45:25

Pérez:

It took a long time to get it. I was hired in 2003, and the dean promised that we would get one soon, because I was leaving a program that already had graduate students. I mean we'd *fought* for that. We'd had a master's program in in history, but it's different to have master's students from PhD students, as you well know. And so, we had fought to get that at UTEP, and made the arguments for that and why we needed them. And I think you could very easily look at the map and see where the PhD programs are concentrated. And they're in *inner* Texas. The borderlands, the border areas, did not have PhD programs. So, that was one of our arguments, and that's how we were able to get ours passed after a lot of revisions and work.

Whereas at CU Boulder, the dean and admin had been promising Ethnic Studies a PhD for quite some time. I landed there in 2003. When did it finally get approved? We started working on it—we were working on it really diligently in 2009 still, and still many, many years later. So the admin—you know, I think any scholars of color that you speak to, who have been through CU Boulder, will tell you that initially they seem supportive, and then they're really not. It's like Ethnic Studies is the space they keep so that they don't get critiqued that they're not having Ethnic Studies. And that is sad, for the students who are there. So, it took a while. The admin—they're like okay, we'll give you this many TAs. It always felt as if they were doing us a favor, like their commitment really wasn't there. It was more like—okay, what are you doing for us? What kind of grants are you raising? The kinds of questions they wouldn't ask other departments like political science or anthropology. You know, they consistently would say to us—you're just not bringing in enough grant money. And we're like okay, have you looked at other Ethnic Studies programs? And why don't you ask some of these other departments the same kinds of things? We're not sciences, we're not engineering—so that was pretty frustrating.

It was pretty frustrating. It doesn't really gel for them what Ethnic Studies is or what the area studies are. Even though Colorado—I mean so much indigenous history, right? There should be such a big program on Indigenous Studies there—if anywhere. And it was a struggle. We had just a few Native scholars in the department. I don't even know if there were any in the history department. Yeah.

02-00:48:14

Holmes:

You had spent time in a history department there at UTEP, fourteen years?

02-00:48:18

Pérez:

Yes, yeah.

02-00:48:20

Holmes:

I know you were discussing the colleagues, and that it was time for a change toward an interdisciplinary environment. What was your experience of being from a history department versus now in Ethnic Studies at CU Boulder?

02-00:48:36

Pérez:

I think—yeah, so many things are different about it. First of all, because history is a tradition and a discipline that keeps you disciplined. And then, Ethnic Studies opens you up to interdisciplinarity—you *hope* it does. But then once you get there you realize—oh my God, everybody's just still doing their own discipline, and we keep hiring people based on whose discipline is going to be the agenda for the moment. There's that battle still, in Ethnic Studies. And yet, everyone still wanting to be interdisciplinary. It's an ongoing conflict. Whereas in history, you already have legitimacy—you know that. I mean we do—and I think I was very adamant about that when I came out of my PhD program, that I really wanted to work first in a history department. And it wasn't so much because I wanted the legitimacy, it was that I still felt such passion about what history meant.

And then after, you know, fourteen years, and also spending time in other places where I was getting to do different things, because I was at History of Consciousness. I also got to teach at UCSB in their Chicano Studies program. I was already getting that interdisciplinary feel, and what that meant for my own work and how I wanted to expand it. Because even the last chapter of *Decolonial Imaginary* was not traditional history, by any means. It's cultural studies, it's delving into film, it's delving into psychoanalysis, it's delving into different kinds of things that I really enjoyed. It was just different; it's different. I still have tremendous respect for history and historians.

I get frustrated with historians who say the documents speak for themselves. And there are still those who say that, as you well know. And I'm like—*wow*. Interpretation, revisionism—*wow*. [laughs] That's all I can say to that. So that's when I feel like—I guess I don't belong here anymore, because these documents have not been speaking for themselves. I mean when Justin H. Smith wrote, in the mid-nineteenth century that Mexico was at fault for the U.S./Mexico War, and he won a Pulitzer Prize. And it takes what, a hundred years later for people to say maybe that wasn't true? Maybe the documents weren't speaking for themselves. Maybe there was a little bit of prejudice and bias in the way historians formulate at the time. Which again, for me, it's so Foucauldian. What is that episteme? What is that genealogy? How are we imprinting the documents with this particular historical moment?

02-00:51:28

Holmes:

What was the reception of Ethnic Studies and Chicana/Chicano Studies at CU Boulder? I mean particularly leaving a program such as at UTEP, where it's highly respected. You were probably amassing, or at least have enough people within that field in the history department alone, versus what many history departments perhaps combined in some parts of the nation even had?

02-00:51:54

Pérez:

Yeah, yeah.

02-00:51:53

Holmes:

So at CU Boulder—how was Chicana and Chicano Studies viewed? What was the reception?

02-00:52:04

Pérez:

There's not much—I mean again, the history department, for one, doesn't have many—maybe they'll have one. They don't give them tenure. Same thing in the English department. My nephew teaches there, and he did get tenure. But he's the only one, and they keep trying to hire another one or two—and they still don't keep them, for whatever reason. And my friend Elisa Facio was in Sociology, and she came over to Ethnic Studies precisely because there wasn't enough support. There's a kind of elitism that still dismisses the importance of whatever Chicano Studies is, and treating it like it's the inferior stepchild. And that was frustrating. That was always incredibly frustrating. I never got that feeling at UTEP, and part of that was because I was in a department that understood that and understood the importance—even if there were some battles with some of the older guys who wanted more military history. Because Fort Bliss was there, and that was like, 'Hmmm, okay, if it's military history how can we do that creatively or differently?' And then Natalicio understood what that meant too. It felt very different to go to a place like CU Boulder, and never quite feeling legitimated.

A few things happened at CU Boulder. One of them was—you probably heard about the Ward Churchill, when he became this national figure because of his essay on 9/11. And then there was the case against him to fire him, despite the fact that he was a tenured professor. He stepped down as chair, and he asked me to step up, which meant an incredible amount of pressure from admin, from the community, nationally as well. I'd get phone calls all the time from all kinds of places, and I stopped answering my phone in the department. We got death threats as well. Basically, it was a patriotic moment, and so there were all these people writing in saying that we didn't know what we were doing and we didn't deserve our PhDs. And that Ward Churchill—they should also hang him. It was pretty disgusting, horrible stuff.

And the admin—they were after him too. They were pretending to support us, but they were really after him. They really wanted to get rid of him because he's a controversial figure. He's very controversial, and he doesn't care that he's controversial. And he wanted to get rid of the Columbus [Day] parade in Colorado. He wanted to rename streets that were named after the generals and colonels who'd massacred indigenous populations. So he wasn't very popular. And now, the Columbus Day parade is gone, right? But that was something that Ward had—along with the cohort of indigenous, different native folks began there in Colorado. That was a difficult moment, and I never really felt like the admin had our back. It was more—sure, we'll do this as far as what we need to do legally, but really, you know, how are we going to keep Ward? And they read all of his reams and reams of work, and came up with two footnotes that were problematic. And based on that scholarship, they were

able to fire him. Which—you know, footnotes are up for grabs, right? That's where the debate happens. I think there were some good things that happened in Colorado. I will say that. But I certainly never felt as if I had the kind of respect or legitimacy. I basically felt like—hmmm, what am I really doing here? Because after a while, it just feels like a struggle every day, every day. And the thing that makes it worth it is the students.

02-00:56:12

When I got the job here [University of Arizona], I contacted the associate dean [at CU], and she was really angry with me, because I didn't go through the right channels. At that time, there were only two Chicanas in all of the university—every department in CU Boulder. *All* of them—two Chicanas. I was in Ethnic Studies. There was another one in Communication, which is another college. And that didn't gel for them, despite the fact that Colorado itself has such a large Latinx population. It didn't matter, because for them—again, Boulder's over here. It's the elite space. The Mexicans and the Latinx can go to CU Denver, which is over there. And you always felt kind of that struggle with the manner in which the admin reinforced that. I was in shock when she treated me that way, and so I thought—why stay? I thought I could have gotten a counteroffer to stay. And I thought—nope, I'm out of here.

And being here [at University of Arizona] is just so incredibly refreshing, for so many reasons! I mean I entered a program, the Southwest Center, where all the older white guys, my esteemed colleagues, speak Spanish, and they understand the importance of where they are, of the land that they're on, what this means *geographically*. And that you would *never* find at a place like CU Boulder. They didn't even understand they were on Indigenous land, much less that there were Latinx folks, you know, as an incoming population.

I don't think that I'm saying anything that other scholars of color haven't said, who've left and gone to places like UCLA and gotten chaired positions in their areas of expertise. It's a tough place. It really is a tough place for scholars of color. They leave or they die, unfortunately. There were two wonderful—one of my friends who was in the English department, who unfortunately did pass away. Ward left. There were two brilliant creative writers. An Indigenous writer—Linda Hogan, who was in the English department, she left because she was not treated well. Lorna Dee Cervantes, who in my mind is one of the most premier poets that we have—and I'm not putting Chicana or woman in front of that. I think she's just a brilliant poet, and she was in the English department. And I always say yeah, if she had been a cis white man, they would have treated her like the genius that she is. But you know, it didn't matter how much she published, how much she did. And she was a controversial figure too, because Lorna doesn't follow rules. And so, she just left and went back to California. She's from San José, so she's still publishing now—and publishing beautiful stuff, yeah.

02-00:59:20

But yeah, people leave, and then they wonder. But then the admin treats scholars of color as replaceable because more will come through. But as far as retention, no, it doesn't happen. It's sad, because the students are so good. I had wonderful Ethnic Studies students. The white students too, who were Ethnic Studies majors, whether they were from Colorado or from the Midwest, they were really incredible and politicized in ways that were just so refreshing too. And we began to have Dreamers, Mexican—Mexicans whose parents had brought them and were undocumented, so then that was an issue too. But just so progressive in their politics and wanting to do some social change, yeah. They're still there. Really good students, yeah.

02-01:00:15

Holmes: I wanted to move on to discussing part two of your scholarship.

02-01:00:20

Pérez: Okay.

02-01:00:21

Holmes: At CU Boulder, there was an article published in *Aztlán*, "So Far from God, so Close to the United States: [A Call for Action by US Authorities]".

02-01:00:32

Pérez: Yeah.

02-01:00:33

Holmes: And this is really taking a big step of talking about women in the borderlands. But also, a woman's experience *with* immigration, which—particularly if we look at it during this time, we had the immigration debates in the 1990s. Now even in the 2000s. And so here, you're really taking that position of not just looking at immigration or that experience in the borderlands generally, but also putting a woman's perspective on this. Discuss that piece a little bit.

02-01:01:05

Pérez: You know, that piece came around because of the emergence of the Juárez murders. We were all becoming acutely aware of the Juárez murders in '92-'93—no, I think '93, '94, '95, right—'96, '97. They were trickling in. They were trickling in. When did I publish that article? I don't remember anymore.

02-01:01:33

Holmes: 2003.

02-01:01:34

Pérez: 2003—yeah. I had done a stint in New York City, I remember, in New Jersey and lived in New York in 2000, 1999-2000. And by then, the murders were already quite on our minds. And I went back to UTEP, and we started an international kind of liaison with Juárez because of the murders. And people weren't paying attention to them locally. Every now and then you'd get some national news about it, when there were enough happening. We began to realize—oh my God, there's some severe stuff going on here. And I think that

that article was about addressing what did that mean, that these murders were occurring, and the US and Mexico government officials were not really paying that much attention? Who was benefiting from that, right?

These questions were starting to get asked, and then the liaison that we had was pretty vital. I met some important people in Juárez who were part of the only women's center that was there. We made some really interesting alliances too. I remember there was a union guy who also joined, who was very committed to what this meant, a Chicano. I think we even had somebody from the FBI join our group. It was an interesting group, which really teaches you a lot about different political moments when you make specific political alliances against something that you know is so incredibly wrong and inhumane.

And the murders still continue, as you well know. It was just sort of a drop in the bucket, like trying to get people to start to pay attention to what's happening here on the US-Mexico border. Many people thought it was because of the maquilas, which began in the '90s, and the fact that you have so many multinational corporations coming in to the border. And then so many women coming from the rural areas into a place like Juárez to work. And so, then they're a group of women who are incredibly vulnerable. And I don't know if you've ever seen the film—*Señorita Extraviada* by Lourdes Portillo, because that basically lays out that early part of the murders in Juárez and the politics behind it, and who is being protected and who isn't protected, and the vulnerability of those women. And that it serves a particular purpose. I think it's international. I think it's what we see in the White House right now, with number forty-five and [Jeffrey] Epstein, and who gets protected. And the Hollywood crowd too. And I think a lot of that was happening as well. I mean who were the international powerful people coming—mostly cis men, and that they had access to brown young women, and the women's lives were not important, right? But it continues globally. I mean that's one hotspot. This is happening globally, as we well know.

02-01:05:00

Holmes:

That same year, you also published a piece, "Queering the Borderlands: The Challenges of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard," and this was published in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*. This is a subject that you kind of revisit your early research, really grappling with how do we put women—but also gay and lesbian men and women—into the history?

02-01:05:28

Pérez:

Yes, into the history again, you know, which is why in *Decolonial Imaginary*, one of the things I wanted people to pay attention to is the silences that speak—the erasure. So where do we go? It's the archaeology that Foucault also talks about. How far do we dig? Why are we leaving, in these linear ways, who do we leave out? Because we're telling the great stories—and who are the great stories about, right? But then, what about the people who just

consistently get erased? And for me—yeah, the LGBT stuff, I mean it's about how do we do this? How do we find the voices? How do we pay attention? How do we listen?

I think you're probably familiar with Saidiya Hartman's new book *Wayward Lives*, [*Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*]. And I really commend her as—is she trained as an historian? No, she's a literary critic who goes to the archive, and one of the things she's doing is what I've always thought was so vital and what so many people have always wanted to do, but she had the courage to go ahead and do it. I turn to fiction instead, but she mixes the genres, and says okay, they could have said this, they might have said that, but these are the people we see. And I think this is true for LGBTQ—for brown/black people on the margins and how we try to make sense of what their lives might mean, right?

I was just throwing that out there and saying how do we pay attention? For example, if we're looking at all of these women who were widows, what does that mean? Are they really widows? Who are they living with? I mean this is what the census says, but are you looking any deeper to find other kinds of clues or other kinds of hints of something else happening in these arrangements? So how do we queer the documents, right? I mean the documents can be queered so easily, I think. We look for differences instead of falling into what we think we already know. And of course, we're going to do that. We can't help it. [laughs] It's what we *do*.

02-01:07:36

Holmes:

Well, what's interesting on that is in 2012, you publish a piece, "Decolonial Border Queers: Case Studies of Chicana/o Lesbians, Gay Men, and Transgender Folks in El Paso/Juárez" It's almost as if here a decade has happened, and we're standing back—how much progress have we made? How much room do we still have to go? [laughter]

02-01:07:59

Pérez:

I know. Something I'd always wanted to do when I was in El Paso/Juárez is oral interviews with the queer community there. I never got around to it, but a close friend of mine who is a queer Chicano from California—from LA area, and now he's back in San Diego. He was in Vermont for a long time—Greg Ramos. He did those interviews himself, and so then they all went into the Oral History Institute [at UTEP]. I was able to get the transcripts, and that's where my work comes out of. Because he did these beautiful—and he's in theater, so he did the oral interviews as a performer, as someone who wanted to tap into these lives and do his own performances. But they're beautifully done. They're very well done, and you do get a window into what it was like for different kinds of queers living both in Juárez/El Paso, leaving, coming back, what it meant for families, what it meant for them. And some of the trans folks too, the transgender women—those documents as well, yeah.

02-01:09:16

Holmes: On that same note, in 2016 you publish a piece, "Between Manifest Destiny and Women's Rights: Decolonizing Chicana History."

02-01:09:25

Pérez: [laughs] Yeah.

02-01:09:26

Holmes: So it's—thirty years later, we can almost say.

02-01:09:31

Pérez: I know, same stuff. I get bored. [laughs] I get so bored, that's why I go to fiction. It's like—really, again? Again? But it's also revisionism, it's also a way of perceiving these things in different ways given the new populations. It's also new students. It's also impressing upon them—look, this is what's new, but this isn't what's new, so how do we deal with this?

Because there's still some things that are new. I mean LGBT rights have really expanded, right? And then on the other hand, they haven't. I mean we can get married now. That's not always a plus, I don't think. [laughs] But it is for a lot of people. I definitely commend them for it, but I think for me too, it's about being persistent and consistent, right. Being persistent with students and showing them—look, where do we come from? Let's not forget. I don't want to forget where I came from. And there are many people who struggled a lot for us to get where we are. I do not forget that. And I used to say this to my UTEP students: "I'm standing here in front of you as a Chicana—Chicanx historian, precisely because of the people who came before me and who made it possible for me to stand here. And so, I don't forget the generations who have fought for us to be in these institutions. I don't want to take it for granted. And I don't want *you* to take for granted that you get a space here, because people fought to open up these doors for us."

And so what are we going to do with that while we're here? How do we continue to keep the doors open? Or do we want to become gatekeepers? Because I think there's a lot of that that happens too, as you well know, especially because now we're in such a neoliberal moment and the universities have become more business spaces and neoliberal. Yeah.

02-01:11:31

Holmes: Well, speaking of fiction, I would like to turn to some of your fiction work that was being written simultaneously during this. Of course, as we spoke about yesterday, *Forgetting the Alamo, Or, Blood Memory*.

02-01:11:44

Pérez: *Or, Blood Memory*, yes.

02-01:11:46

Holmes: This is a work of historical fiction.

02-01:11:46

Pérez:

Yes.

02-01:11:47

Holmes:

Discuss the genesis of this book for us.

02-01:11:50

Pérez:

Oh God—that's such a good question. Thank you. I love to talk about the genesis of that. It's because I couldn't find love letters in the archive between women—really, it's that simple—and I got so frustrated. But it was also about wanting to find, in the archive, the kinds of stories that are there. But again, how do we express it in ways that the imaginary can validate—you know, our present-day lives. Because I think fiction still does that, right? I mean fiction—it isn't just fiction. It's taken from *something*. The imaginary is constructed by so much of what it inherits, and then what it's trying to interpret for the moment.

And I think for me that novel was—it went through many different drafts. A third-person draft, and before then, epistolary—I think it began as epistolary precisely because I wanted letters between the common folk, not the elite. You can go to California and find the Californios elite writing to each other. That didn't interest me. I mean I think it's great that it's there, but it's a different kind of thing if you're going to the common folk who were living on the farms, the ranches, who were being affected in different ways. And then I wanted to tell the story of my family, because I think there are generations who'd been there in Texas, so I wanted to tell the story of the parts that I already knew and the stories that I'd heard from my tías, from my abuela, from my abuelo, you know, different stories that I knew were true for that terrain, for that geography, right?

So, *Forgetting the Alamo*—again, why the title? Well, if you grow up in Texas, in *that* part of Texas, it's always about the Alamo. Remember the Alamo, which is the cry at San Jacinto by [General Samuel] Houston's army—that's how they led the troops against the Mexicans and [General Antonio López de] Santa Anna, and that's how they captured him. Like, "Remember the Alamo and the way our heroes were massacred." Which really, were they heroes? I mean we know enough that they weren't, but that myth continues to be renewed and revised when you go to the Alamo—that these men were heroes, when in fact we knew they were thieves, they were rapists. They were all the things that [President Donald] Trump says about Mexicans, right, that's who these guys were. Drunks, drunkards—so they become the heroes.

I wanted to challenge that, but not focus on them. It wasn't about *them* at all. It was about okay, what are the stories we haven't heard? We haven't heard about the common folk and the way they were being affected by the U.S/Mexico War. But before the war. This is before the war and how the terrain is changing, how Texas is changing, because Texas becomes a republic, 1836. It's right before that moment that the novel occurs, and the

influx of people coming from the South—and it's usually the South, Tennessee, Alabama maybe some from Virginia—and how is that changing the population. I wanted to write that in ways that I couldn't for nineteenth-century documents. And believe me, I'd gone through the Bancroft, the Benson, other libraries too, and I did find stuff that was useful though.

02-01:15:31

I remember reading Mary Austin Holley's work on Texas, and that was very useful to the way that I wrote the novel, because I was able to get a grasp of the land, the peach-and-cane land as they called it. And all of those little things that I had to study so much of—like what kinds of trees would you have during this specific time period? You've got to go to the documents and read this stuff, and Mary Austin Holley's was good. There was another book by a guy named Smithwick [Noah Smithwick] also on Texas—nineteenth century, early nineteenth century—for what the terrain would look like. And then New Orleans also figures prominently, but that's a whole other culture, because that's where you get the French, the elite, a different way of dressing versus the frontier in Texas.

It was exciting to do! It was just fun. I had so much fun doing that. What I've discovered at this moment in my life is that I usually write fiction with a piece—like I wrote *Gulf Dreams* at the same time I was writing the "Sexuality and Discourse," so they mesh with each other. And then, *Decolonial Imaginary* and *Forgetting the Alamo* mesh with each other too, because I was trying to work something out about coloniality and decoloniality. And so of course I'm in that moment of colonization in—with the coming of the U.S./Mexico War in *Forgetting the Alamo*. And of course, *Or, Blood Memory*, is a kind of honoring of one of my favorite writers, and my favorite novels called *Blood Meridian* [*Or, the Evening Redness in the West*] by Cormac McCarthy. I was influenced by McCarthy, who was highly influenced by [William] Faulkner, by the way, and Faulkner is also one of my favorites.

If I was to talk about my favorite writers, the big three—although now the big four, because I would add Toni Morrison to that now that she's passed. But even before, she was a brilliant writer who has always influenced me. But definitely Faulkner, [Gabriel] García Márquez—who was also influenced by Faulkner, by the way—and then Virginia Woolf, because you know, it's Virginia Woolf. I've got to throw that in. I mean—she was a brilliant, brilliant writer. I learn a lot from her—*Mrs. Dalloway* is so beautifully written. It's seamless. If you want to read seamless, read *Mrs. Dalloway*. No wonder Michael Cunningham wrote *The Hours*, you know? Have you ever read *The Hours*? It's beautiful, beautiful. The movie's okay, but the novel is beautifully done. But it's *Mrs. Dalloway*, and the seamlessness between the transitions. It's the hardest thing in fiction is transitions. Well, it's hard in academic work! Then how do you do it in fiction and not lose your audience and still get your scenes to move? I learned from that. I learned a lot about characters and

Southern greed, Southern racism, certainly the way Faulkner writes those characters.

02-01:18:47

Cormac McCarthy was from Tennessee, you know, and he ends up in Texas. He lived in El Paso for a while. I used to try to stalk him. I would drive by his house, never see him. I'd go to the restaurant where I knew he'd hang out—never see him. One day I bumped into him at—what were those video stores—Blockbuster. He was standing right behind me. And I was like oh my God, it's Cormac McCarthy! [laughs] And I didn't know what to say. I was like—and he's so shy. He's painfully shy. So, yeah, *Blood Meridien*, and then also the trilogy, *The Border Trilogy* I think is beautifully written. Those really influenced me too. And reading Toni Morrison, too, influenced the way that I wrote *Forgetting the Alamo*.

I had a lot of fun writing that, but it went into so many different revisions. I took some writing workshops—one at Columbia and then one at Iowa in the summer, and those helped a lot. And then there was another brilliant editor who works out of the Bay Area, and he gave us a workshop in Denver, and I learned a lot from him too, yeah. So it's a different way of thinking and processing. So how do I do it at the same time? Often, I can't. It's like trading brains, right?

Like right now I'm working on a speculative novel. It used to be called, *I, Ben Espinosa*. And then I realized, from sharing it with friends, that it's really about a sex/gender shifter. The new title is *Chronicle of a Shifter*. And it's sort of coupled with some articles I've already published—one in *Aztlán*, and then one in an anthology that's coming out of Germany for a gig that I did. And it's called "The Will to Feel," and I'm trying to get at affect theory, but then also what does this mean when we think about affect and how we make sense of love and desire and all of these things that we put aside in academe? That we don't want to talk about in academe, and yet we're always talking about? And affect theories put it out front and center for us once again. There's a way in which that one and the novel come together. I haven't figured it out yet. I haven't figured it out, but I will—hopefully, hopefully.

02-01:21:22

Holmes:

Well, I also wanted to talk about in 2015, *Electra's Complex*.

02-01:21:27

Pérez:

Oh yeah, that was fun.

02-01:21:30

Holmes:

So this is a murder mystery on a university campus.

02-01:21:32

Pérez:

Yes, yeah. I kind of like to play with genre, not because I'm such a great writer, but because it's a new challenge each time, and it just helps me grow in different ways or it just keeps me interested. But mystery—I am not a mystery

writer. I so respect people who are mystery writers. My friend Alicia Gaspar de Alba—she wrote a really good one called *Desert Blood* which is about the Juárez murders. And also, I don't know if you know the Henry Rios mystery novels by Michael Nava. And Michael Nava, as a Chicano/Chicanx from California, went to Stanford, got his law degree there, and was a lawyer and wrote mysteries while he was doing that—while he was a lawyer. And he was one of the first Chicanos to give us a protagonist who's Chicano and gay, and dealing with so many issues. I mean—I don't know if you've ever had a chance to read any of his work, but he's just such a good writer and such a generous human being. I love Michael. I had read all of those. I studied them. I'd read some others—Lucha Corpi, who's a Mexicana/Chicana has published some mysteries too.

But I decided to do the mystery because I wanted to have fun with mocking and poking fun at the university at this moment in my life, because I was in CU Boulder. I was on sabbatical for a semester. I'd had this manuscript on my back burner for a while, and it was called *The Shameless Sisters*, because it was going to be something else, right? And then I thought I'm going to drop that and the protagonist will be a university professor. I'd lived in New York—why not have a Chicana in the middle of New York and talk about how much she misses the Southwest, or they miss the Southwest? Because it's kind of gender queer protagonist, and with a best friend who's a trans buddy. It was just fun to do! I mean—it didn't take a lot. It did and it didn't. It's not my best writing. I think *Forgetting the Alamo* is my best writing, because I was so careful with that. But this one was more just fun to write. There's sex probably on most of the pages, and that was supposed to happen as well. It was more for the queer community who was like—you know, we need more sexy novels. And it was like—sure! Why not? I'll do it. I often talk about how I think that *Electra's Complex* is the protagonist from *Gulf Dreams* who's so dark, and everything is just depressing and dark. And then, she leaves home and grows up, and is now a university professor—and everything's about fun and pleasure and getting into trouble. And, you know, life. [laughs] Life goes on, yeah. I often think of *Electra's Complex* that way.

Some people have asked if I'm going to do a sequel. I haven't really thought of that. I might write a sequel, I think I've already started one to *Forgetting the Alamo*, because once I landed in this terrain, in this desert, the voices came back to me. And it's as if that protagonist Micaela [Campos] wants to come back and talk about the 1870s and the emergence of lynching against the brown body. And we know reconstruction is when, after slavery, right, post-slavery is when we began to have even more lynchings against blacks, and also in the Southwest it's happening to Mexicans, Chinese, Indigenous, different groups of people. Yeah. Once I finish the speculative one, I may get back to that, yeah.

02-01:25:44

Holmes:

Well, that's exciting.

02-01:25:46

Pérez: Yeah.

02-01:25:48

Holmes: Well, on that note, let's talk about returning to the Southwest. You came here [to] the University of Arizona in 2017?

02-01:25:55

Pérez: Yes, yes.

02-01:25:57

Holmes: And this is a joint appointment as a researcher with the Southwest Center, and a professor with the Department of Women's and Gender Studies. How did this opportunity arise, and what attracted you? I mean well, I think you kind of answered what attracted you to leave CU Boulder.

02-01:26:10

Pérez: Yeah, yeah—Colorado. But why Arizona?

02-01:26:13

Holmes: Yes.

02-01:26:15

Pérez: You know, my sister had already been here. My sister and brother-in-law had been here to work on their PhDs. And I was familiar with Tucson, too, actually from my friend Lydia Otero, who lives up the road, became an historian and taught Mexican American Studies but is now retired. I knew people here. People in Gender and Women's Studies were former students of mine, actually, and were working here. And I had other friends too—so there just seemed to be a lot of Chicax/Latinx, queers, and a different kind of community here. And I think that the opportunity came up—really, I was a spousal hire for someone, and that didn't quite work out, which—you know, it's neither here nor there.

But I was open to coming here precisely because I missed the Southwest so much, and I missed being close to the border. I mean it wasn't El Paso/Juárez in the same way, but you still feel it. And you feel it in the classroom, because the students come from pueblitos across the way, and they can talk about their families from across the border. And I missed all of that. I missed the terrain. I mean—this desert is so stunning. The saguaros—I just feel the ancestors out there when I go jogging every morning.

And yeah, I guess I felt very lucky. I felt especially lucky that the Southwest Center was open to having me, because it's got some stellar scholars there. Thomas Sheridan, David Yetman who's won I don't know how many Emmys for his PBS show that is shown internationally. He's such a generous guy. There are others in the department—Jeffrey Banister, who's the director, and a geographer who studies the politics of water in Mexico and is also editor of the *Journal of the Southwest* here at the Center. Gary Nabhan studies

agrobiodiversity in the desert region and has published 26 books. There's Robin Reineke. She was instrumental in founding the Colibrí [Center for Human Rights], if I'm saying that correctly? It's a nonprofit that's been around for a little while, and they've been documenting the bodies of the disappeared, of the people who are coming across and dying in the desert, and they find the remains. And so, she does incredible work, and now she's in the program, too. Jennifer Jenkins has expertise in literature and brought a digital archive of 450 films on Native Americans to the Center. Maribel Alvarez, currently an Associate Dean, is a Latinx anthropologist. It's a research center, so we have teaching appointments with another program, and mine happens to be with Gender and Women's Studies, which makes total sense, right. I'm 25 percent with them, and 75 percent with the Southwest Center, yeah. I feel very fortunate to be here, yeah.

02-01:29:09

Holmes:

Well, they're lucky to have you.

02-01:29:10

Pérez:

Well, thank you. I feel lucky to be here.

02-01:29:13

Holmes:

Well, we're coming to the end, and I wanted to get some of your reflections here on the evolution and the growth of Chicana and Chicano Studies. We can see that the field has matured and grown dramatically since your early days at UCLA.

02-01:29:30

Pérez:

Absolutely, because there were only—what, two Chicanas with PhDs in the universe, and then Antonia, Deena, and Vicki and I—and a few others, we just multiplied. Yeah. [laughs]

02-01:29:43

Holmes:

Well, in your view, what have been some of the really major developments in the field that you've seen?

02-01:29:50

Pérez:

I think that the field is moving—I mean certainly there have been more gender studies. There have been more studies that put gender into focus. It's not just about labor studies, which I still think is prominent and very important, but it isn't just labor history. There have been more social histories. I mean Al's [Albert Camarillo] work was social history, of course. And then he trained students. He trained so many students that way. I think that there isn't as much fear of being interdisciplinary. There are more people grappling with the cultural studies that can make interventions. It's still a tradition, but I think that we still need so much and so many more, right? I mean I still argue that. We still need so many more pre-twentieth century, pre-nineteenth century studies, more geographic spaces that have not been studied as much. And, you know, how do we look at these spaces like Sonora, Arizona, without the

border, how do we think without these borders that are constructed in the nineteenth century?

I think we absolutely need more on Indigeneity, and Indigenous populations—there's such a conflictual thing that is going on there, right. I mean I try to deal with it a little bit in my novel, because—we forget that about these spaces. It's not just brown and white, but what does brown mean? And it's not just black and white—what does that mean? Why do we keep forgetting Indigeneity and the way different tribal groups have been here forever and the way they've become part of these different populations? I mean—many Chicanos consider themselves indigenous, but what does that mean? And why do some want to call themselves white or "the other white?" What the heck is that about? I still press brown—I still press brown, and how brown is its own category. And we're back at the Hispanic, the way we inherited it in 1980. That's its own battle. Again, what does that mean for tribal, Indigenous groups? We need so much more research about that, and the conflicts with the way in which Chicano history has developed itself. Is it always paying attention to that or does it not?

02-01:32:23

Holmes:

There's also thinking of the role of activism in the field of Chicana/o Studies. How important it was in that development, how the field really grew out of that.

02-01:32:35

Pérez:

Yes.

02-01:32:36

Holmes:

What are your observations today of how activism has continued to play a role in the field—or does it?

02-01:32:41

Pérez:

I think if you're in Chicano Studies that's already its own activism. That doesn't mean to say there aren't people who drink the Kool-Aid, right, and become part of the system and decide it's so important to legitimate this. And on the one hand it is, so it's always that struggle. How do we legitimate it so that people are still getting jobs and training more people so that we continue to do the research that needs to get published? That is *also* important for social change. There are so many ways of doing social change, right?

I think that for me, it's still in the classroom. And the students *bring* it to the classroom. They bring the activism to the classroom. When I think of the students I inherit here in Arizona, they're so fierce and they're from the border area, and they're very aware of what's happening because it's the border. And they're very aware of the policing by the Border Patrol. And they're right at the front lines of the protests. They always are, and they teach me so much. I think the activism is always there. How do we respond to the students, right, as people in our position? Because we become those in privileged positions.

How can I support these students who still need a lot of support to move on in their lives? I mean, given the little that we can do is in these spaces, but there are still things we can do.

I think—for me, it's not a division. It's always a mix. It troubles me when people say, "Oh, what are you doing for the community?" It's like—my community is in my classroom. *I'm* my community. Why do you want to separate that out, and why do you think we're separate—because then it borders on being so anti-intellectual. And anti-intellectualism is in the White House right now, and that's where it takes us. And if we're not willing to grapple with reading and being critical thinkers, then we've got a problem, because we need to be critical thinkers. And I teach my students the importance of bring critical thinkers, too. To ask, how are you going to make sense of the world as a social activist, Chicana social activist? Yeah.

02-01:35:07

Holmes:

In looking at how the field has established its place in the academy—the number of panels at national conferences representing Chicana and Chicano Studies, to NACCS having its own conference. MALCS as well, right?

02-01:35:27

Pérez:

Yes, MALCS as well.

02-01:35:29

Holmes:

And then we see Chicana and Chicano scholars being elected to the heads of these organizations, and even becoming university presidents—thinking of Ricardo Romo at UT San Antonio, as well as others. So on one hand we can see that perhaps Chicano Studies really has established its place within the academy. And yet, on the other hand, as you were just discussing, we could look at your experience at CU Boulder and think—

02-01:36:00

Pérez:

Not so much.

02-01:36:01

Holmes:

Yeah. What are your thoughts and observations on that, and how do you see us moving forward in the future—and of not forgetting?

02-01:36:09

Pérez:

Of not forgetting, exactly. How do we not forget? I think that again, it becomes an issue of numbers and representation, and having the commitments from people who are allies, who are in positions of power. I think that the struggle continues. I mean Antonia always says that too—so does Deena, who is now a provost. And it's amazing—I mean I think it's wonderful that she is. How many Chicana provosts do we have? We don't—and she was persistent. And I'm so proud of her and grateful to her for her persistence.

I think that we need people in all kinds of spaces and positions, and we need allies to continue this and to understand that—especially at this moment, when

detention centers are filled with brown bodies; black as well. Certainly, people from different populations. But we know the majority are probably brown bodies, and we know that there are brown babies and we know that there are brown children. So what does that mean, and how can we not forget that? Because if that's happening now, and people are choosing to forget that, then we're in trouble. I think we *are* in trouble, because there's something about brown that still gets diffused, because the East Coast is so black/white—which is fine. I mean I think that it is and it isn't, because there's more on the East Coast than black/white, and so much of black/white reality comes from the legacy of the Civil War of course.

And I'm one of the first to say absolutely—we'd better—this is also a Black Lives Matter moment. And we'd better, all of us, get behind that. Because these are burning houses, so what do we do when the house is burning? We pay attention. We don't say—oh, all houses matter, you know, when there's a burning house over here. And I think that the brown houses are also burning. But again, it's the silence, it becomes like—okay, the brothers in San Antonio, Joaquín and Julián Castro. Why wasn't Julián more prominent at the debates? Why is it that the brown body still gets kicked aside? And now Biden is struggling and he's attempting to get the Latino vote, they say. I don't know, I mean it's probably going to happen anyway because of so many Latinos being anti-Trump, and they should. Although unfortunately, there are too many Latino "Trumpers."

02-01:38:45

So brown becomes such an afterthought, right? Why do we continue to be an afterthought? Is it because we're so close by? Is it because the border is here and people think—pfff—the same way they used to think in the 1920s. Oh, these people are not—who was it that said it, some of the senators too, in the 1920s, when eugenicists became so prominent. There was even a Berkeley professor who said, "Oh, this isn't a problem. We can always send them back so easily. It's not like Italians or Chinese. We can't deport them as easily, but we can always get rid of the Mexicans," and it continues to happen. Here we are—let's build a wall. The wall, yeah.

I think that there's still so much to do. There's always so much to do—which is a good thing, right? There's still so much to do. I still believe in hope, erring on the side of hope. I believe in the young generation. I watch them. I really think they can teach us so much, because they come with freshness and eagerness and new ideas. And I just want them to know their history.

02-01:39:55

Holmes:

That's very well put. [Pérez laughs] We stand on the shoulders of others as you were discussing earlier. Are there scholars in the field who have passed that you would like to recognize?

02-01:40:08

Pérez:

I think the Chicana historians like Louise Año Nuevo de Kerr, Shirlene Soto, whom I mentioned yesterday. I've also got friends—Gloria Anzaldúa passed in 2004. And she was still much too young. And I learned a lot—still continue to learn a lot from Gloria Anzaldúa. And a close friend of mine, a black trans man, Vincent Woodward, who was at CU Boulder, and he died of AIDS. And it was really hard to watch that because he was an incredible writer, poet. He left too soon. And you know, I also—I mean on the shoulders of—beside people who were also beside us. I don't know, so many people have left already, and it's upsetting. Then we have COVID right now, and we're losing people the way we lost people in the eighties. So, certainly—I mean there are some people who are alive, who I would not be sitting here without. I always talk about Juan Gómez Quiñones, Antonia, Deena, Vicki Ruiz—some of the usual suspects. But yes, that first group of the Chicano/Latino men—and some of the women too, who get erased, like Jovita González, who was very important. Again—Martha Cotera, who's still around, and I think we *all* owe so much to her too, as a Chicana feminist.

So, I think it's just like a sea—seven generations back, right? Our ancestors too, standing here, because of our ancestors and what we have to honor. Yeah.

02-01:42:05

Holmes:

Well, Emma—any final thoughts before we wrap up?

02-01:42:08

Pérez:

I'm just really grateful to you, and that you're doing this project, because thirty-five/forty years ago, when I was starting my research and becoming a Chicana historian, it just seemed like there was no end or there was never going to be some dent. But this, gathering these oral histories of the Chicanas and Chicanos who have been working at this and training and discussing and writing and—I think to grapple with that and to document it for us is just so vital. Because then we can look back and say—oh wow! Okay, there is a legacy here that's continuing. We haven't stopped. There seem to be gaps, but that's okay. We haven't stopped. It's going to continue. I'm really grateful to you, Todd. Thank you so much.

02-01:43:00

Holmes:

Well, thank you for your time, and all your work over these years.

02-01:43:02

Pérez:

Absolutely. Thank you.

02-01:43:03

Holmes:

All right. Take care.

[End of Interview]