

Race and Oral Histories In San Diego, UC San Diego

Interviewer: Cristabel Otero

Date: May 13th 2020

Location: Zoom - San Diego, California

Sub collection: Race and Oral History Course ETHN 120D, Spring 2020

Length of Interview: 00:43:19

CO = Cristabel Otero

GFR = Gloria Favela Rocha

CO: We are recording this interview for Profesora Yen Espiritu, her ethnic studies class 120D: Race and Oral history in San Diego. I Cristabel Otero am the interviewer and Gloria [Favela] Rocha is the interviewee. Today is May thirteenth twenty twenty approximately 10 AM and we are conducting this interview over Zoom in San Diego, California. And this interview will feature Gloria's family background, her work in the community, her journey as an artist and how COVID-19 has perhaps impacted her and her work as an artist. And I want to thank you again for being here and despite the circumstances like I had mentioned, we're still able to connect and I'm so grateful for that. And I'm grateful to be able to hear your story as well. So I will start the interview [laughter]. And I guess if you could please just tell me a little bit about yourself, how you identify, where you're from, and maybe how long have you lived in San Diego.

GFR: Okay hi I think I identify myself as Mexican American. First generation American both my parents were from Durango, Mexico and my father came here as a teenager. My mother came later with my two older brothers and I was born in Fallbrook so I was born in North County and I've lived in North County my whole life. So I now live in Valley Center. And so I've had, you know, like lived in farming communities my entire life. Yeah.

CO: Thank you. Can you please tell me a little bit about your background like where your family is from and what type of work they do.

GFR: Well, my, my parents came from Durango to Fallbrook. And my--the rest of us were born, so I have six brothers and I'm the middle child. I don't have any sisters and we grew up in the country. My father was a migrant worker and then worked as a--in the groves, the orchards, avocado orchards. And so we grew up on a farm our entire lives. We lived out in the country in a farm with a lot of animals, growing our own vegetables in the garden. Chickens, you name it. Chickens, turkeys, pigs, goats, everything you can imagine on a farm. And mostly rural. You know, like away, not a lot of neighbors. So it was--It's been a good, you know, kind of a different life from you know what, like a city life. And so I'm really attracted to the city just because it was not something that I experienced growing up. But I really think it really formed, who I was, my creative process because as much as I had a big family, I also spent a lot of time by myself out

in nature, chasing my brothers, but also creating by myself because I was the only girl. I didn't have any neighbors, any female neighbors to play with.

CO: Wow.

GFR: So I became a tomboy. As you can imagine, with all those boys around me, but it was, it was good. They're still around me, all of my siblings live nearby. Two of my brothers live in Fallbrook still, one lives in Temecula, one in Escondido and two of my brothers have passed away. So that's but we're all close, very, very close to each other. Yeah.

CO: Awesome. Thank you. So what is one of your first and favorite memories of when you first started painting, drawing, and really getting into art?

GFR: I think the first. I had always wanted to--I didn't take a lot of--I took a lot of college prep classes when I was going to high school, so there wasn't a lot of time to take like fun classes, but it was always on the back of my mind that I, there was something that I wanted to do. So when I got a little bit older, I experienced an art class, an oil painting class and my teacher she was a muralist and but one of the first memories I had of learning with her was seeing colors like the vibrancy of color come to life, like it's almost like my eyes were unveiled. And I could see like I really appreciated the depth of color like it almost like became three dimensional to me, the color itself and it changed the way that I saw the world around me. Just the different shades of color. It was a huge, huge awakening, for me, and I knew that I had--that it was going to change my life. That that moment changed my life. It changed the way It wasn't just paint on in a tube, It was actually a different way of viewing my surroundings and it's like landscapes, which is mostly, I mostly paint landscapes.

CO: Do you have any like specific experience that you want to highlight that kind of like--like related to art. I don't know if you have any like specific experience like that or anything in general [light laughter].

GFR: I think, you know, one of the things that come to mind is I painted a mural at Palomar hospital and it was it was, or it is called a historical mural and the reason it was the landscape, what the hospital site looked like a hundred years ago in Escondido. And so I did research kind of basing what the surroundings look like from that site in Escondido a hundred years ago. So I got to see kind of those old old buildings that somebody, you know, a lot of them don't even exist anymore. The old ranches that were out there. And I got to plug in pieces, even some of the nurses would come out and say that ranch that you're painting in that in that mura,l that ranch belonged to my family a hundred years ago. So really it was a huge honor for me to do that for the hospital. It took me two months of research to--together the drawings and the sketches and then took me ten months to paint the mural.

CO: That's amazing.

GR: So a year. It was like a year process.

CO: That's awesome. That's amazing. Thank you so much. How has your upbringing and life journey so far inspired your art. I know you kind of already mentioned it. But yeah, like how. I'll repeat it again. How has your upbringing and life journey so far inspired your art?

GFR: I think I think for me it's you know we paint what is what is familiar to to us, or I do I paint what is familiar to me. So having like a deep appreciation for nature and the not only just what you see but also sense and the air that you breathe like when you're out in the country. The simple life in open space. That's that holds a lot of inspiration for me. And it also has want to as a matter of fact, this year I was going to travel in Mexico and paint landscapes of Mexico. Just in all like all regions of Mexico. I've been invited to go to parts.

00:09:01 - 00:09:13 [Disruption in audio caused by internet connectivity issues]

GFR: Yeah, so I have, I have a, I have about two or three murals that are now have been postponed because of, you know, I can't travel into Mexico and I was in Michoacan in the Nahuatl coast, the Native American coast of Michoacan and I'll be painting in these micro resorts that are owned by Nahuatl women and I'll be painting murals to hopefully kind of enhance their signage from the freeway that there's these beautiful places right along the beach that people can can travel to and stay at so I'm super honored to be with these women. They are they, they're living on their ancestral land for, you know, for you know thousands of years and they run their little their businesses, they run their businesses and it's quite--it's probably the most beautiful beaches I've ever seen in my life. So, and they're wonderful people. So I would do anything for those women.

CO: Thank you. What have been some of the hardships you have faced as an artist and or community activist?

GFR: I don't know if there's been probably one of the things that was hardest for me was I live out in the Valley Center, and we've had wildfires here and in the, the very first wild big wildfire that we had out here, we lost our home and our, and I lost my business, my artwork everything and that was in oh-three and in the process of trying to like fight the insurance company I lost my ability to paint. I was blocked like a writer's block for three years. I couldn't pick up a paint, it would actually make me cry to pick up a paintbrush. And I, I ended up going to therapy because I couldn't understand why. And one of the things that I learned was because you have everybody has hardships in their lives. And I hadn't dealt with that pain in my life. And so that the losing our house was another loss.

CO: I'm so sorry

GFR: And I couldn't work [crying]. And It was how I as an adult, how I identified myself was as a painter. And I became really scared that I would no (?) [longer?] paint again. So, I ended up

going to therapy and she explained to me that I had to paint things that were troublesome to me, they were painful. And my whole life I had been painting things that were beautiful. And so I couldn't paint like darkness that was inside of me. So I started painting the darkness. It gave me back myself because it was what I was feeling, and the (?) [loss?] was not the darkness the darkness was losing my family members like half of my family has died. And I think that my painting has been a refuge from that like it takes me to a place that I don't have to think about the sorrow in my life because the painting brings me so much joy, but it also made me avoid the darkness and having to, having my therapist tell me, some of the most beautiful paintings in the world have to do with darkness. It's not about beauty in life. It's about the realities of life and how beautiful those paintings can be and so she kind of unlocked that inside of me and I didn't even realize that my children were like--they were suffering because they weren't seeing me paint. And they were worried too I was never going to be able to do that again. And so I realized that the painting, any kind of creative process that you have or a gift that you have, it is therapeutic. It is therapeutic and so and after the fire and recovering our home and fighting like I saw the ugliness and the greed in society, which I had never experienced before either like I thought, you know, if you, that people are mostly good and then they will honor contracts with you know, insurance companies. But that wasn't reality and I didn't want the work(?) that I didn't want to see the ugliness and the greed in the world. So that was something that I had to learn that there isn't always goodness and not even just in society, but also in ourselves. So it kind of made, like another awakening was seeing how people can be hurtful of others and that people always have good intentions. And so I had to regain my voice like I had to regain like my strength and realize that there's people who suffer much more than I have, and but that we are connected to each other with suffering.

CO: Thank you so much for sharing that. Thank you so much. I can't even begin to imagine what that must be like, but I'm so I'm glad that you overcame that and we're here now.

GR: Thank you, thank you im grateful too.

CO: The next questions that I'm going to ask, will be about community. So when learning about the story of Anastasio Hernandez Rojas, what most impacted you about what you learned of what happened to Anastasio and what his family lived through for 10 years. And please let me know if you at any time need to pause or take a break, because I totally like understand that.

GR: I think about what happened to Anastasio. It was heart wrenching to watch the video of him being murdered. As a matter of fact, I had been sent the video like well over a year ago and I started watching it and I kept stopping it. And I couldn't get through it, it was, it was painful to watch somebody being killed. And so I kept pausing it , pausing it trying to go back to and watch, and I was finally able to get through it and that's when I was invited by Victor Ochoa to to one of his classes, an airbrushing class. And I hadn't been to college you know in almost thirty years but [pause] in that class we started, there was an image that came up that he wanted us to airbrush and it was a picture of Maria which is his widow and his children. And it started this painting this big panel and talking about images, a group we wanted to put in this in this panel

and there was like, you know, maybe three or four of us that really became interested in the story of Anastasio and it was a, the timing of it, like the children that are in the encampments, you know, the issue of immigration, people being you know, just so uncompassionate like (?) [unclear] that was part of that story and at time, Victor asked us if we wanted to meet his family and we met, we met her down in Chicano Park and there was this very deep connection that I felt with her. And one of the, one of the reasons that I had a deep connection was because I didn't know but my youngest brother, Ricky. He had been working on the case to present to the government of what had, how Anastasio had been killed. He was one of the first persons to stand beside Maria and her family. And she found out the Gloria Favela Rocha, she asked me if I was if Ricky was my brother, and she instantly we instantly had this very, very strong bond and trust. And so there was a not only was there that connection but I connected to her as a mother and the the journey of her suffering her family suffering was super, super strong. So for, for me meeting her the mural was no longer important to me. I mean, the, the, the most important thing for me in the story of Anastasio to show like how much pain as human beings we can cause to another person and also her children like what how this affected the lives of our children. So one of her kids who's about the age of my son. He hasn't been able to leave his house in 10 years and the only time he leaves is with his mother, he's afraid.

00:20:11 - 00:20:17 [Disruption in audio caused by internet connectivity issues]

CO: Okay. Let's see. I don't know if you wanted to continue that point.

GFR: For me, the--being in support of Maria. And (?) [unclear] special the--the journey of their healing, which really has they haven't really healed at all because the people that killed her Anastasio and the father of her children, they still walk around free and nothing was ever done. And so naturally the--her kids are angry and they're fearful for even for their own lives, they're fearful for the lives of their mother because she's now become a target. He's been warned like you cannot go near the border. Everybody knows who you are there and it's been ten years and I think that it's been, there's been no justice and no punishment, these people, these men that killed her husband. And so I think pain. You know, I think coming together with these other artists that feel inspired by her story to tell her story and to create some imagery that will prefer [unclear] you know maybe fifty or a hundred years or beyond and I don't know will serve as a reminder that we have, that we need to stand instead of tearing people down and it's our actions don't, they're not isolated something that's been going on you know for a hundred years and it continues. I mean, it's Anastasio was not the last person that was murdered so for me it's, it's this journey of healing that hopefully that's that's what will begin for them that I can, we can as a small group that I can humbly help Maria and her--and her kids in this process a little bit

CO: Were there any personal aspects of Anastasio's story that you found related to your own personal history or events in your life?

00:22:58 - 00:23:09 [Disruption in audio caused by internet connectivity issues]

GFR: Fingers crossed. Yeah, I said that I think that I related to Anastasio as like seeing my own father in him and you know, my father coming from Mexico as well and you know, there was times that he had to outrun the Border Patrol. As a young man, and how fortunat-- how unfortunate it was, you know for Anastasio, the outcome of his life. But how close I was, you know, from that being my own family's reality, it could happen to anybody that crosses the border and those extreme things like none of us are that come from another country are safe from that. So I really, I could relate to that, like, you know, as that and things really have not changed that much. You know, they really haven't so I think that's how I related to him.

CO: What is it about Chicano Park that makes it an appropriate place for Anastasio's mural to live?

GFR: When I walked through Chicano Park it's almost like I'm walking through a book, the pages of a book and the stories that it tells in and it also makes me feel like it's almost like a church to me like a very, very deep spiritual place. So there's that like connection to me of like the the storytelling, but also the spiritual aspect of it all the stories of people's connection to one another connection to spirit, [unclear audio] life experience, yeah.

CO: How will the mural contribute to the overall narrative about the history of Chicano Park, and how does it complement other murals?

GFR: I think there's there's in a way. There is the--the there's that common thread of...

00:25:43 - 00:25:49 [Disruption in audio caused by internet connectivity issues]

CO: How will the mural contribute to the overall narrative about the history of Chicano Park, and how does it complement other murals?

GFR: I think it's--it's like a recorded history of struggle and of hope and I think the Anastasio mural definitely has those components of what is the what is the struggle of our people and what is the struggle of immigrants, all immigrants to this country, and what is the whole like what is how can we--how can we support the ones that come after us as well. So that's it's another page in the story of Chicano Park. Yeah.

CO: What do you feel is your relationship to the Latinx community and maybe specifically to the undocumented community?

GFR: I think the--the let me see let me check my notes here is that [pause] I think, for me it's like the living in living in the farming community of San Diego. It's there's an awareness for me that and one you know, like, very close reminder for me of the roots of my roots of my family's roots and how because it's present here you can see it, it's visible, it's not it's part of its part of the landscape it's part of it's part of our everyday life. So that's how that's how I relate to it and

how--how important, for it is for me and for my family that we always have that in our mind this, you know, this is very close to my to our hearts and how we need, we need to be a voice for people that can't speak for themselves. We need to be a support for when they can't they don't have resources that we have resources to that we--we become, in a way, like a bridge, you know, to kind of help if there's in any way that we can in those small in a small way or in a large way to be the to be the voice of people that really are not heard that live in the shadows. So that's what, that's how I see my role not only from my family, my brothers are very much in that belief as well and so they inspire me to continue to do whatever it is that I can. Yeah.

CO: How and in what ways do you give back to your community. How has giving back to the community shaped your values?

GFR: I think I think in this, having this support system, which is my brothers. I'm very, very close to them and they have a very deep seated love for their community and for undocumented workers and so they do they do fundraising and do drives and you know as recent as like I think they've done a drive, my youngest brother did a drive last Sunday and the Sunday before and so they keep they keep it they keep it real for me, you know, they go out into the they go out into into the migrant camps asking, you know, for what in a very protective way so that there are those families aren't, we're not exposing them or they're not exposing them to more harm. But also making a list of things that they that they might need, medical supplies, blankets, food. And so when my brother [came] from those camps he put out some, you know, asked our family and also on social media if people can donate. There's going to be a site where they're collecting those things. So I think that, you know, having a family that's very inspired to help that definitely it makes me proud of my family, but it also inspires me as well to to give and to feel, you know, honored into being a place that I can, I can give as much as I can but it's. So that's wonderful having a family that's that lives in--lives and breathes and that's their purpose in life.

CO: So in contributing to the Anastasio Hernandez Rojas mural, what do you hope for would be the end result? What would you hope people would take away from this mural?

GFR: I'm hoping that that we're gonna be able to reopen like in--and revive the case of Anastasio so that it can, they can continue the family can continue strives for justice for their for Anastasio and it's going to take a big effort because it's a big you know no one's ever been punished for what's been done to the immigrants, the murders and so it's, it's not a small undertaking cycle that it will bring awareness to people that didn't, didn't even know that this was happening and It will also give them courage to maybe see things a little bit different and see their own journey, their own family's journey as as immigrants, because most you know most everybody I know they're they're immigrants to this country as well. So the only ones that aren't are the, you know, my neighbors, which are the Native Americans that live around me. But everybody else's they've--they've had they've had a journey as well. So I hope that they can relate to Anastasio through the story. I hope it gives people courage to go to Chicano Park and not only see the Anastasio mural but also see the other murals that are there as well.

CO: Thank you. How does this mural contribute to collective community healing. Is this a form of public justice, why or why not?

GFR: I think I think it. I think it really does -- It is a form of Community healing because i've even in the short time that we were working on it a lot of people came forward and were sharing their stories of, you know, when they were deported as young children, even though they were born here, but their parents were did were undocumented. They were deported to Mexico and they had never even lived in Mexico before and so I hear these stories, it's not--it's something that is not new. This has this has been going on to where they round up people and you know, basically dispose of them when they're not needed anymore or they feel like they're not needed anymore so I think it is it is when we can share our stories it does heal that does heal us and the I don't know hopefully this will bring it'll bring some justice and I mean that's the goal but I really see myself in the in the role of more of like a spiritual connection to the mural and a spiritual connection to Maria and to her family and I think that there's there's so many wonderful people like Pedro Rios that they they have the knowledge and the background and the courage to to fight the fight and I'm not really a fighter by nature, i'm--so i'm very thankful for those people that are around him in his organization that that have the insight and the and the courage and the heart to to find justice for Maria's family and for Anastasio.

CO: Thank you. How--so the next questions are just going to be a little bit about COVID- 19 and how that has impacted you perhaps. How have you worked through the sudden changes and uncertainty caused by the pandemic?

GFR: [Thinking] I think one of the--it's, it's like a double edged sword like it's given me a beautiful time for me to paint things that I wanted to paint for myself--so there's there's these, you know, these images that I want to for my--to keep for myself, instead of going out and you know painting what people are asking me to paint. So that's been a gift. The other part is the uncertainty of the economy because I don't have the jobs that were lined up for me to do they were postponed because I can't go out onto the site that therefore, I don't have that income coming in. So i've been i've been searching for other avenues like that so that I can continue working so it's been that uncertain time of like you know, day to day having to like we all have, you know, keeping a roof over our heads, you know, keeping food on the table, keeping the electricity on and so there's been a little bit and I run my own business and I have for many, many years and so all kind of falls on my shoulders. And so that's been a little bit that's been a little bit of a challenge because I don't have control over it and that's kind of difficult for me not to be in control my feeling that uncertainty, kind of shaky shakiness of it. But I know--I know that we'll be fine out of this and I keep you know my saving grace has always been my painting so anytime that I've faced a difficulty I can't wait for that time of the day that I set aside to paint like that I to get into that that zone again whereas I feel free. I feel free. Yeah.

CO: Thank you. What, if anything, has the pandemic revealed about society and economy in the United States?



GFR: I think, I think probably the the most interesting thing for me is as human beings we think we're so invulnera-- that we're like these that we feel protected like somehow we're in control and really, we're not. And we're all the same like it doesn't matter-- you know we can all we're all vulnerable to disease and to sickness and and how much in reality, how much we need each other and how easy it is to disregard people that we think, as you know, we want them to be in our society, but don't have a voice, don't ask for anything, and now these are the people that we need the most to continue having food on our table and so I--i'm thankful that that is what has risen from this and I hope that there's a new appreciation, a new appreciation for those for the people that really you know, have the toughest jobs of all and it gets they're so unappreciated

CO: What is something that makes you happy, and keeps you going during these uncertain times?

GFR: It's been--it's been a great time for me to reconnect with my, my children are now adults, young adults so it's given me that gift of not having to be out working every single day. I work a lot so it's given me an appreciation of being around them, not just as raising them as being children but now, like being around them as adults. I was a little nervous at first, because you know we all kind of have our own lives and we you know we do our own thing. And so coming together as adults, it was--it's been great to see their like their interaction. My daughter's working from home and seeing the work that she does like I'm really proud of what she does. And so I get to see and hear what she's doing. And so that's been a that's been very gratifying to me to see that and also my son I think he's been working here at the house. He actually works. He actually works with me. So he's been out of work, too, but so he's been he's been painting out in the garage and has his own projects going and he gets he gets really excited about the paintings that he's doing the work that he's doing and so I get to I get to witness that as well and if I hadn't had this opportunity of the virus, I would-I wouldn't have seen any of that I wouldn't be witness to that. So that's the gift for me is I get to see how they how they're forming their own adulthood, their own forming their own lives so that makes me happy. It makes me happy to be part of that.

CO: Thank you so much that was actually the last question [lightly laughs]. That yeah, thank you so much again for answering all of my questions and being so open for this interview, I definitely appreciate it and I'm glad that like we have this opportunity to talk and we'll have this opportunity to for other people, you know, to access this interview as well in the future, so thank you so much for that.

GFR: You're welcome. Thank you. Thank you.