

Race & Oral History Project

Title: Ymoat Makitaoui Interview

Narrator: Ymoat Makitaoui

Interviewers: Andy Cho

Location: Zoom (San Diego, CA)

Date: May 15, 2022

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Andy Cho: Hi. So, I'm going to read you the oral history release form. "This interview was conducted in accordance with the goals and course description of a HIUS 120D: Race and Oral History in San Diego, under the direction of Professor Simeon Man. In consideration of the recording and preservation of this oral history by students of the University in California, you, Ymoat Makitaoui, the interviewee, and me, the interviewer, Andy Cho, hereby transfer to the university the rights to publish duplicate and otherwise use the recordings and transcribed interviews and any photographs and or videotape footage taken during the interview. This includes publication rights in print and electronic form such as on the Internet, the right to rebroadcast the interview or portions thereof, and permission to transfer the interview to the future media. The University of California, San Diego hereby agrees to preserve the products of this oral history interview according to acceptable professional standards and agree to provide the narrator and interviewer with access to the taped interviews." So, with that, do I have your consent to move forward with the interview?

Ymoat Makitaoui: Right, yes, you did

AC: Okay, perfect. Thank you so much. So, today is May 15, 2022, it is 2:20. I'm interviewing today, she is one of the founders at Detention Resistance organization, Centro Cultural de la Raza and other organizations. Thank you for joining me. So, my first question is where and when were you born? When did you come to the United States?

YM: Well, thank you for doing this interview and providing this my oral history of my perspective. I am grateful and just glad that this is happening so my full name, my original full name is [Spanish 2:15], the name that I use now is called Ymoat and that was something that I acquired the name through initiation into indigenous practices of things that I've done in the past. But I grew up, I was born in a small little town called [Spanish 2:33]. Which is the state of [Spanish 2:38] in the city of [Spanish 2:39] and that little town is you can actually find it on Google maps but it's so small there's probably only 5000 people that live there, it's very small. And I was born in the ranch or of the [Spanish 2:52]. And was brought to the U.S. at the age of five years old, so I came to the U.S. undocumented, and I used my sister's papers. So, I, my sister is one year younger than me and she was born in the U.S., so I was able to cross the border with my sister sanctification at the time, and I remember crossing the border when I was five years old, and then I stayed here in the U.S. until I was 14 years old, at the age of 14 is when I acquire my permanent resident, and I was able to go back to Mexico for the first time.

AC: Oh, wow. Who else was in your family?

YM: Yes, so I'm the oldest of seven, I'm the oldest of seven siblings. Yes, and I have two step siblings that I don't know where they are. But I'm the oldest of seven siblings and among the seven siblings, three of us were born in Mexico and four of them were born in the U.S. and my father, his name is [Spanish 4:14] and my mother, her name is [Spanish 4:18]. And, yes, I have been here since the age of 14, I went back to Mexico for the first time now that I know that I have papers. During my whole childhood, I didn't know that I didn't have papers. I think we were, I grew up in East County in Oklahoma City, that's where I grew up. I grew up in a community where were Arabic, Muslim. And so, I was very, I didn't grow up in the South Bay so, border patrol was not as presence and the East County, very occasionally the border patrol will be there, but not as frequently as it was in South Bay. And then, at the age of 14, I went back to Mexico and then I realized, why is it that we moved to Mexico which the U.S. and Mexico, we have so much land, animals, horses, cows. We have two or three houses, and I didn't understand why we left Mexico, but a lot of the politics force, a lot of people from my community to came to the U.S. There was a big crowd that lasted for more than, more than 14 years and that region and we depend on rainwater to be able to grow harvest corn and beans and other crops. So, a lot of people were forced to sell their lands very cheaply and other animals. And They will send their sons to the U.S. to be able to send money so that way they can keep their land, but only a few of them were able to maintain that and my father, he was sent here to the U.S. when he was 15 years old to work and send money to his father. So, this is, this is how we were able to maintain our land in Mexico, because of us, my parents, being able to work here and send money back to Mexico. So, when I learned that everything about this, I continued to support my community and my people. I bought more land, built a little house for myself, and I

hope that I can one day go back and live there, maybe five months of the year and the U.S. But it's something that want to continue to support the people in the community, I personally.

AC: Wow, that's amazing. When did you first hear about that, that your parents were working in the U.S. to kind of transfer all the money?

YM: Yeah, I guess, so, there's an incident that happened when I was 14 years old. I was doing laundry with my mother I accompanied, I heard to the laundry, and it was a big launderette and there were probably 50 people doing laundry at the same time, and I think I was the only teenagers at that time at the launderette. And there was a border, there was an ICE rate to happen that day and that ICE rate probably took maybe 70% of the people that were at the launderette. And when the border patrol agent came to me and asked me, we have papers and I said no, I don't have paper. I was just very honest that we didn't have papers but I didn't know at that time my mom never told me, hey you're already are a resident, you're good, but I didn't know that, but my mom didn't have papers yet, so my mom was very scared, so the launderette owner knew of my mom and this is how we did laundry for so many years, he took us to the back and hit us so we were behind the launderette and we went to Big Lots. And we entered through Big Lots and we were waiting there probably three hours until the ICE rate finish and they took so many people at the launderette. And then from that incident or that situation, I asked questions and I asked my mom like so what's happening like this, you could have been separated, they could have taken my mother. They could have taken me, and that the situation was winning mark in my life in many ways, and I asked questions, who else in my family is undocumented and I

realized that all my family from mother's side they are all undocumented and they live in their, her family space in Denver. They live in Colorado and did a lot of construction and built houses. And from mother side of family came to San Diego to [Spanish 9:01] and they went to [Spanish 9:02]. And half of them didn't have papers and some of them did so from that from that situation, I asked questions, who else in my family in the U.S. is living undocumented. So, I realized that many of them were living undocumented and they've been struggling and how it was difficult for them to just to live here without having any support and then I understood quite a bunch of people were like that. After I got my residency, we didn't go to the dentist or the doctor because we couldn't afford, or we didn't have insurance here. And I related why many people were always also endorsed, then we then we only went to church, the house and work, we didn't have we didn't socialize with the community here because people were afraid of being picked up by ICE.

AC: I can't imagine how difficult it would have been as living with your families and going through all those situations. So, could you tell me about your first job?

YM: So, I went to school here in high school and I think my first job was at a nonprofit. And then I started working in a [Spanish 10:30], so in a big nonprofit, in a [Spanish 10:36] community. And I was only, I think I was only 16 or 17 when I started working there, I was turning 17. And I would take the trolley, it took me two hours, just to be able to take the bus, take the trolley from Oklahoma City all the way to [Spanish 10:51], but it was a direct like, there was a direct line orange to the blue line I mean to the orange line and,

I think that was my first job and I was running the, we call it the secret cafe, but it was a computer room, so there was an after-school program. So, kids after school that will come to this computer room, and I would assist them with homework, homework, to use the computer. And then I became also very involved with San Ysidro, but you might ask why I'm traveling so far for this job. Well, part of it is that I have my aunt and family was also living in San Ysidro, so church or main church or family church were in San Ysidro. And that church was called [Spanish 11:37], so we will go every Sunday to San Ysidro, so for us it didn't seem far away because we were accustomed to going there every weekend. So going, working as Casa Familiar, it was really welcoming and very Community based. There was also a lot of game, activity, a lot of youth were engaged and wanting to be involved with games, so I was tied to create different programming, I had a liberty to create some program to be able to just support and, support many of the youth that were there were coming to San Ysidro. That was my first job, that nonprofit, and I was actually got paid to do that. And just really fell in love with the San Ysidro community also being so close to the border, I was also very engaged with the politics of being there and by the border and knowing the situation that was happening.

AC: Thank you for sharing your story. So, my next question is how have history events affected you.

YM: Can you repeat the question sorry.

AC: So, how have history events affected you.

YM: I guess depending on which historic events. But I guess, some events that mark me, there was, I will share two of them. So, I will show you from either, but there was a run called the Peace & Dignity run. So, in 2008, this is a continental run, you're actually running physically. And it's a continental run connecting [not transcribable 13:32] indigenous communities from North America, starting from Alaska, all the way to [Spanish 13:38], to Argentina [Spanish 13:39]. So, there's like runners that organize, every four years and they run through these two continents, and they run through indigenous communities. So, when I came across a friend and staffs that run with sacred staffs representing different communities and different messages from those communities. And when I came on, in touch with, I went to an event in San Diego, I think here at the Central and they were hosting these ceremonial steps and they were sharing about what piece of indignity. And I, I was very connected with the, with the message with the prophecy, of the eagle [not transcribable 14:16] indigenous communities. So, I dropped everything, I dropped out of school, I left my work, and I went to run for nine months. So, I think my parents were so disappointed and my last paycheck, I just bought a one-way ticket to Alaska. And that was all I did with the last paycheck I got, and I told my coworkers at Casa Familiar I'm leaving for this run, they all did a nice to get together for me and gave me some things for support. But I was very, I was very, I'm not sure if I was rebellious, but I just really was so called to do this, I can't explain it. So, I went to Alaska, and I didn't know what I was getting myself into, I think at that time I was, I was a student at San Diego State University, I was taking Chicano studies and I was learning more about my identity and my role in place in this world and identifying myself. But I also identified like, I'm also indigenous, like my people have been colonized, just because I'm no longer in touch with those roots and the language, there's still

people there. And then I need to find them, I need to be able to connect and because there's more than 60 indigenous communities, I speak [not transcribable 15:38] alone, so I wanted to, for me, this run is like connecting me to my people, that was my understanding. So, I went to this run, and this run really opened up my eyes and to realize that so many indigenous communities have been resisting they've been resistant to maintain their territory, to maintain their water, to maintain their resources, the system against the government. So, it's so many stories that I've learned that really connected all these communities, so it's very moved by giving me this consciousness of indigenous resistance, indigenous cosmologies. But they also brought me this realization that a lot of people are migrating up north, they're also coming from indigenous community, you know. And I have worked and seen people and that detention [not transcribable 16:31] that speak, don't speak Spanish, but speak their native tongues. And they are all, many of them are just migrants and they are indigenous communities, indigenous communities that have been displaced because the government has taken their territories. They've been exploited and they have nowhere to go, so many of the, many of the of the migrants are coming to the U.S., they're from indigenous communities that have been displayed in [Spanish 16:59]. So, this run mark was one historic event that marked my life in 2008, and I've been organizing and supporting that run and then the other thing that marked my life, just very quickly is, the Zapatista movement. So, in 1994, there's a big uprising that happens in Chiapas with this Zapatistas. And this upgrade of arms, because there were some arms, and they took over the city [Spanish 17:29] in Chiapas, and they basically [not transcribable 17:38], in 1994, the President of Mexico sign a free trade agreement with the U.S. and Canada and the free trade agreement was called NAFTA. And they were all celebrating, all the people, the government, they thought that this will bring so much more richness and provide a modernization to Mexico, that is, that

they don't have, and they were trying to really that this free trade agreement will bring so much modernization to Mexico. But they never realized, but this free trade agreement really was a slap to the face to all indigenous people, because they basically didn't recognize indigenous rights, it didn't recognize that indigenous people are still in assistance and they're still surviving, they're still living there, they are not just placing [not transcribable 18:19]. So, the rise of the Zapatistas movement was like, it rose up on January 1st after the free trade agreement was signed, the day before. And they basically said no, we don't support this agreement. And I think [not transcribable 18:36] were shocked, because they never realized that so many indigenous people were organized and they organize a huge march, they call it the march of [Spanish 18:46] to Mexico City. And the government was able to see, it's not just the indigenous people, all people were against this free trade because what this really did was that, after the [not transcribable] history, after the Mexican revolution and everything was won, the indigenous communities were somewhat protected with what land community, land for us, called 'Hitos'. So, people wouldn't, couldn't sell their piece of land because it was community based. But what the NAFTA did was, specifically to take people, well you know, now you have the title of a piece of land of this, this huge, massive land, so it gave people titles of the pieces of land, and now individuals, not community, now individuals were able to sell their piece of land to companies, to corporations, to people outside. So, these lands were taken advantage, and also people that came in wanting to do corporations, mining, or take resources, they took advantage of the ignorance of many of the people that were given a title for first time of their piece of land. And there was selling their piece of land very, very cheaply. And so, they displaced them and many of the people that sold their land they ended up working for the people that bought them and their companies, you know, so they, the Zapatistas and the indigenous communities really created this consciousness.

And really brought inspiration worldwide, this lot of people who followed Zapatistas movement, so I'm not saying I'm a Zapatista, but I aspire, and I respect the movement, there really marked another way of doing things. And I think that work really inspired me to really create other forms of organizing here in the U.S., and I don't want to copy what Zapatistas have created, the guys had the way they have created a sovereign territory within the Mexican state and [not transcribable 20:47] so they govern themselves, and they acquire and a lot of land in Zappas, where they produce their own schools, their own medicine, their own clinics, and they have their own form of governance outside the Mexican state, and that's a huge inspiration to many people worldwide. So, I, those two things really mark my work and life or understanding the indigenous resistance, a piece of indignity connecting with all these indigenous communities, and then the movement of what it means to organize with this a political framework of [Spanish 21:28]. I don't know the answers, I'm not here to create a utopia, but I'm going to be doing things as we go, I'm going to ask questions, so collectively we create and what we decided through these collective agreements, then we see what's going to be unfolding, but I don't know what the end result looks like, you know, and it's not for me to determine that. But let's collectively build something different, something better, and let's just take one step at a time, one collective agreement at a time, that's the phrase that we learn, that we use in the organization today.

AC: Thank you, so.

YM: I think that was a lot.

AC: No, not at all, so did the two events make you gain interests in nonprofit organizations? Or were there like other events or things that made you interested in?

YM: Yeah so, the Detention Resistance is not a nonprofit. So, Centro is a nonprofit and I'm here, it's been, Centro in San Diego, it really signifies a space of, it was a takeover from different artists that were also conscious and then wanting to be able to connect to their identity as Chicano or indigenous whatever that may be. And they claim a space, well now a park, which is prime real estate for many people, to be able to demand a space to, for them to express their culture and their identity into practice or culture and identity. So, I was very captivated and being in the space, I've been in this space organizing for the last seven years, but now I'm a board member, so I have a say in a lot of things that happen in this space. But before that space, I was just using this space to provide an exhibit every year. So, every year on January, I would organize exhibit or series of events. And I was just a regular volunteer but now I'm a board member and I'm very engaged with the programming in the space. And currently, right now, we're really trying to make, what is the vision of the Centro, and I think about artists, guests, and [Spanish 23:44] who is still alive with us today, but he was the one of the original founders and was a collective as well, of artists. [Spanish 23:51] but he had created some designs and he imagined the Centro being like six stories high, and then I tell him, well, as long as I'm here we'll make at least one or two stories happen, but we'll see how that happens. But he really created these drawings, this futuristic, abstract, drawings of what the Centro will look like and what should look like because it can be a space for people to make art, but also to preserve and keep own history or own oral histories in our archives. To make this space to be a space where artists can also learn about themselves and their cultures and identities, but also they can also keep their information and

they can have access to that information and they can also be owners of these archives. It's not, stuck in an institution, where they barely can travel to those institutions but it's something that's close to community. So that was someone that had a vision of [Spanish 24:48] and something that I aspire to be here at the Centro and working in this nonprofit. I'm not a paid employee, who knows in the future, but I'm very proud, I'm doing all the footwork to make sure that we do hire paid staff here and there will be able to make the space more accessible for community, so community can create different projects. We have meetings once a month, we call it community proposal meetings, so people who have a proposal will come do it, [not transcribable 25:35], through their labor to make that happen. So, this is one of the nonprofits that I'm very engaged currently and then with Detention Resistance, which is now religious collective, we intentionally do not want to have it a nonprofit, but we are planning, we have a special sponsor, but we are, we are planning to create kind of like a sister organization that can focus and the humanitarian aid and post release support. So, especially this last year we've been getting a lot of, we've been struggling to place their friend compass, and to housing. So, sometimes they need a place to stay for two or three nights but because we call with many of the people, we used to have around 20 houses, 20 to 30 houses, community members opening their houses, where we compensate to stay one night or up to three nights, but because of COVID, all those houses are now gone, maybe two are still open. And now we require donations to be able to provide hotel rooms, to have folks stay and stay there, still safe for them to be, you know. So that's, I guess that's something that we're discussing currently in Detention Resistance, how do we create someone like a branch, that is a nonprofit, that can be the fiscal sponsor of this collective but without compromising the integrity, ambition of what abolition [not transcribable 26:49]. Because, you know, because part of me politically doesn't think revolutions, or it shouldn't be the nonprofit

because it's a movement, you know, it's something that is something that we do, with some movement it's not something that I don't do this to get paid for it, it's something that we want to change systemic structures that have been racism and that have been really destroyed millions of lives, so we want to be able to really change those root of structures of colonialism that are still in place today.

AC: So, you are doing a lot of work, so what motivates you to keep serving for the community and the movements?

YM: So, what motivates me?

AC: Yes.

YM: I think, it's funny because my partner or a husband, I don't know why he's still with me. Because there's no, there's no day of rest. But he's also similar like me we're always moving he's a professor, he's also an activist and he's also part of the Centro. So, we're both very engaged in the work that we do, but I guess what motivates me, even today, right now, hopefully, one day, you can see it Andy, but we've been organizing for three years this community market, the De la Raza. And it's not just a market for [not transcribable 28:46], but it is the community or the people that come every single month and to be able to share their skills, to be able to create other forms of sustainability, whether that be learning how to compose, whether that be being in

community and sharing their [not transcribable 29:05] crafts. But what motivates me so much is being able to see the same community come over and over again, and then offering, not being asked to, but offering their knowledge and skills to the rest of the community. And I asked myself how did that happen, and that happened by providing space for people to organize, having, creating, providing a space for people to think and create other projects and all these ideas and making people believe and think that hey you can literally create anything, you know, let's make better way that is humane, let's make another world that is just. So, that's the beauty of it, by the way, also the fire in me, it's also the, it's to continue and justice, I can't just walk away from the organizing because there's so much, I know that I know people and to have built relationships with people that are in detention centers or prisons that I guess it's just I can connect, I can't just walk away. You know, and as long as there's people, as long as there are still prisons and detention centers, I just, the work will never end, and there has to be another way of being able to, another way of providing justice that doesn't require holding people in indefinitely. And, in a square box, you know, like as, and this really is a global issue and I think there's, I'm not going to see a lot of changes in my life, but I know that the work that I'm doing, I hope that it marks something for the next three generations or more, you know, but I'm aware that I'm not going to be able to see a lot of changes in my life, but I want to be able to do as much as I can, as long as I'm still breathing.

AC: So were there any difficulties that you faced so far?

YM: What, organizing?

AC: Difficulties.

YM: Yeah difficulties, but what organizing or what specifically?

AC: All the, during the movements that you have participated so far.

YM: Yeah, I think there's a lot of challenges, I wouldn't say difficulties because everything is challenging. But I think it's just having people, having more people engage with organizing, engage with different types of movement work, whether that be affordable housing, whether that be education, I think we need to have more people, be more active and be able to change different things that are in that right, and within our system. So, I'm very engaged with abolition work, within the detention center and we really want to just to focus on this specific detention center because we wanted to give everything that we have ourselves and being able to provide that space, to listen to the hotlines every single day but it's really hard because we don't have those resources, we depend on donations. But at the same time for me, it's not about the money but being able to accompany somebody who, through the heart, [not transcribable 32:48] living right now. And so, I think it's always hard to be able to be present all the time, but all we can do, and I think is accompanying that people through difficult situations and letting them know that they're not alone and providing the emotional and mental support that's always needed, and you know we all, we all need that support. But there's some people that they don't have anybody in San Diego, don't have anybody in the U.S. to communicate with. So, at the same time we become kind of like a life line of emotional support because people become very desperate and,

within that being retain and there's a lot of mental illness that surges. And it's something that they acquire from being there for so long, you know. So that's always very difficult to hear, the cries of just inside, and not knowing what's going to happen and wanting to get out, not knowing how or when. So, it's always very difficult to respond to all those questions, I'm trying to find a way you know, I'm here, I'm here to listen in whatever way I can and you are another one, you can call me, call us back anytime, any day, there's somebody who's going to be on the phone line listening to you, you know, the team does all week as much as we can do right now.

AC: Thank you, and that was all of my questions, and is there anything else that you would like to share?

YM: Yeah, just, Detention Resistance has been active, I think, since 2018. So, it rails five years in the fall. And it started in 2018 fall, and it's pretty phenomenal that we've been able to sustain this organization completely volunteer run. And just activists wanting to continue to accompany called the detention center. So, it's just, there's still a solid group of the people that were there initially, and people take a break and they come back. But I want to be able to also allow the people that are there, within the collective is because they're all wanting to be able to create something different, and we're literally taking the time to discuss politically how do we articulate ourselves how do we what is this politics organizing and what this evolution really need in our conference here in San Diego and the border region, and how does it look like, you know, so we're against detention centers, prisons, we are also against the state, or we against the borders and the other thing being here at this perspective of living in the borderlands provides there's so

much insight and so much work to be done and just really grateful for all those members that are still with us and those that have helped support and maintaining Detention Resistance and we hope to be here as long as the detention centers are still there, we will still be here, so thank you for your time too Andy.

AC: Thank you, so just one last question, so has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your organizations in any way?

YM: Yes, well, I guess, for Detention Resistance, we started a visitation program, so we used to go probably twice a month and visit folks and I'm not sure if you saw the news, but I think two days ago they announced that they're going to allow visitations. But I spent three years without visitations. So, I'm really excited to bring that program back to live again, because it makes a big difference when you can see, somebody sitting across the table and be able to at least touch their hands, see their facial expressions, their tone of voice and their smile and it's a huge difference, when you're able to visit somebody, a stranger in person. And they no longer become strangers, and they tell you their entire lives, so I'm really excited now that visitations are backed. By that really changed a lot, because now we are dependent on the hotline, so we were spending so much more money, I mean maintaining the phone line, just to have people call us all the time. And there has been many hunger strikes, there are many incidents where they were sometimes our phone line will be saturated by so many calls. So that we're happy that we were able to have the hotline during that time, but now we're even more happy that we can visit people physically in person. So that changed COVID and within Detention Resistance. For Centro, it changed in

other ways, where it really gave us the time because the space is always available for community organizations to rent. So, we were able to create an indoor gift shop like [Spanish 38:26]. So, it's like a collective [Spanish 38:28] that we have, we also built a [Spanish 38:31], we've been working on the garden area. So, we were, we also painted some fruit crease within Central, so COVID gave us the time to really give some love to the space and do some repairs and be able to bring more life to the space. But now that COVID has opened, has diminished in some extent because we still are living in COVID, but now, people are wanting to have events so it's completely busy so now Centro is filled with events every weekend. So, it definitely this, we definitely took advantage in whatever way that we could take of COVID, but we definitely lost many loved ones, and you always want to be able to remember all those people that we lost and that they're still with us, you know, and their spirits are still with us and we do this work for them as well. So just being able to still organize this with manners.

AC: Thank you sharing all of your stories, it was great to hear.