

# UC Santa Cruz

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Crossing Borders, Crossing Worlds: An Oral History with UCSC Professor Olga Nájera-Ramírez

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*Crossing Borders, Crossing Worlds:*  
*An Oral History with UC Santa Cruz*  
*Professor Olga Nájera-Ramírez*

**Interviewed by Susy Zepeda**

**Edited by Irene Reti and Susy Zepeda**

Santa Cruz

University of California, Santa Cruz

University Library

2014

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## Interview History

Olga Nájera-Ramírez was born in 1955 and raised in the small town of Davenport, California. She is the fourth of six children. In the early 1950s, her parents came to the United States from the state of Durango, Mexico, part of a migration of Mexican-Americans to the North Coast of Santa Cruz County. Her father worked in the fields and at the Davenport Cement Plant. When Nájera-Ramírez was eight, her father died and her family labored in the fields along with finding other jobs to support themselves. Her mother worked in packing sheds and canneries in several places in Santa Cruz County. This oral history begins with Nájera-Ramírez's recollections of growing up in Davenport. Nájera-Ramírez's early labor as a farmworker and the importance she placed on creating familia within the community in Davenport grounds her later vision of facilitating access to the university system for people of diverse locations.

Even as a small child in Davenport, Najera-Ramírez was interested in becoming a teacher. Her high school counselor held what Nájera-Ramírez's termed "a paternalistic view of the minorities" and discouraged her from pursuing an advanced education in academia. But Nájera-Ramírez persevered, and despite a lack of mentors or even financial advising, became the first in her family to attend a four-year college, entering UC Santa Cruz as a student in Merrill College in 1973.

As a UCSC student, Najera-Ramírez danced with Los Mejicas which galvanized what would become a lifelong interest in conducting research on the dance and traditions of Mexico and Mexican folklore. She earned a dual degree in history and Latin American studies from UC Santa Cruz in 1977. Nájera-

Ramírez remembers the Chicano/Latino graduation feeling like a family party—this speaks simultaneously to the small numbers of Chicanas and Latinos graduating in 1977, as well as to importance of music, food, and cultura within a university setting to sustain people of color. Her recollections of Chicano/a Latino/a life at UCSC in the 1970s, as well as her faculty mentors and classes, are an invaluable contribution to a little-documented aspect of UCSC history.

Nájera-Ramírez's involvement with Los Mejicas during her undergraduate career in 1976 gave her the opportunity to meet Rafael Zamarripa, a well known folklorico maestro, in Colorado. As a result of this life-altering meeting, Nájera-Ramírez decided to attend University of Guadalajara and further study dance. After three years, she returned to the United States and attained her MA in Latin American Studies from the University of Texas in 1983. She also married her husband, Ronaldo Ramírez in that year. In 1987, Nájera-Ramírez earned her PhD in anthropology from the University of Texas, with a specialization in folklorico studies.

Nájera-Ramírez is perhaps unique among UCSC faculty in that she is a native of Santa Cruz County who attended UC Santa Cruz, and then returned to her alma mater for a lifelong career as a tenured professor. In 1989, Nájera-Ramírez was hired by UCSC's anthropology department, where she has now taught for twenty-five years. She is also a founder of UCSC's Latin American and Latino Studies department and has directed the Chicano/Latino Research Center (CLRC). Striking in Nájera-Ramírez's interview is her dedication to communities of color who are producing knowledge of "Greater Mexico" and beyond. This is

evident primarily through her mentorship of graduate students of color, active guidance of Los Mejicas, and participation in cross-border projects of the CLRC.

Along with being a published writer, Olga is a film producer who has created two major films, *La Charreada: Rodeo a la Mexicana* and *anza Folklórica Escénica: El Sello Artístico de Rafael Zamarripa* (Mexican Folkloric Dance: Rafael Zamarripa's Artistic Trademark). She describes the making of these two films in her oral history and demonstrates her dedication to visual arts and culture.

Nájera-Ramírez has also served as the faculty advisor for Grupo Folklórico Los Mejicas of UCSC since 1997, which has been dancing folklorico since 1972. Los Mejicas fosters a strong sense of community at UCSC, thereby helping with the retention of Chicano/a and Latino/a students. The group performs at public schools throughout California and in the process does outreach to potential UCSC students of all cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Olga Nájera-Ramírez was interviewed in three sessions by Susy Zepeda at her home in Santa Cruz County. The interviews took place on May 2, May 16, and May 30, 2013. Nájera-Ramírez's articulate reflections, warmth, and intellect facilitated powerful storytelling that offered a unique perspective from a lifelong connection with Santa Cruz County. The interviews were transcribed by Irene Reti and a transcript was returned both to Zepeda, who audited it for accuracy of transcription, and Nájera-Ramírez, who edited it for flow and accuracy. We chose not to italicize the Spanish in the transcript, a political decision that recognizes that italics can "other" Spanish words as "foreign," or non-normative. This is a style preferred by many Latino/a writers today.

Copies of this volume are on deposit in Special Collections and in the circulating stacks at the UCSC Library, as well as on the library's website. The Regional History Project is supported administratively by Elisabeth Remak- Honnef, Head of Special Collections and Archives, and Interim University Librarian, Elizabeth Cowell.

*—Irene Reti, Director, Regional History Project, University Library*

*—Susy Zepeda, Interviewer, Regional History Project*

*University of California, Santa Cruz, April 11, 2014*

**Zepeda:** So, welcome Olga.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Thank you.

**Zepeda:** We're here with Olga Nájera-Ramírez and it is May 2, 2013 and we're here in your casita here in Santa Cruz. So, thank you for being part of this oral history project.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Oh, my pleasure.

**Zepeda:** We're so honored to be able to do this work with you. And I'm Susy Zepeda with the Regional History Project. Let's begin with when and where were you born?

### **Family Background and Growing up in Davenport, California**

**Nájera-Ramírez:** I was born in December 1955. I was officially born in Santa Cruz at the Sisters Hospital, which was right across from where the Dream Inn is now. Now it's just a parking lot. I was raised in Davenport, California. But Davenport is such a small town, at the time that I was born it didn't have a hospital.

**Zepeda:** What was it like for you growing up in Davenport and who made up your family?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** I'm the fourth of six children. And my family, up until I was eight years old, consisted of my parents, my three brothers, and two sisters. But

my father died when I was eight years old, so that changed rapidly. But growing up in Davenport was a great experience because it was a small town, and it was made of immigrants from different parts of the world, particularly Greece, Italy, the Philippines—not so much Mexicans at the time that I was born—and Portuguese. So it was a very culturally mixed group of very recent arrivals.

My family landed in Davenport in the early fifties and that was the beginning of an influx of Mexicans along the coast. So there were already a couple of Mexican families living in the area at the time. It was typical to have your neighbors listen to a different type of music, to speak a different language, and to eat different food. We'd get together at church events—because we were Catholic. There were two churches, the Protestant church and the Catholic church. And a lot of people were Catholics and so my life revolved a lot around church activities, not so much because my parents were super religious, but mostly because my mom said it would be good for us to have a foundation in some religion and we could change if we wanted to later. So she instilled that.

And then also through school activities we got together for potlucks. At the end of the year the teachers held a luncheon at the elementary school. The luncheon was an opportunity for all the families to bring food, so it was a potluck. It was just amazing, the range of foods that you could eat. So that was a lot of fun. That's when you really could tell the different ethnic groups.

**Zepeda:** That's amazing.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah, so those are two of the things that I can tell you about.

**Zepeda:** And how would you describe your family's socioeconomic status, your class status?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** We were very working class. I didn't think we were—I mean, I knew we were poor, but there were moments when that poverty seemed more intense than others. So we definitely always thought the Italians and some of the other immigrants that had already been there for a while to be higher class. I knew I was working class.

**Zepeda:** And was that because of the work that your family did?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, yes. My mother was a stay-at-home mom, by my father's determination, and also [because] of the number of kids that she had. There were six kids, but we all were about a year or two apart. Within ten years, my mom had six kids. My father first worked in the fields and then he started working at the cement plant. That cement plant closed two or three years ago but for a long time that was a big industry for the locals and a lot of people worked there.<sup>1</sup>

**Zepeda:** And you also did some work in the fields.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, when my father died, since my mother was a stay-at-home mom and worked very hard at being a stay-at-home mom, she did everything for us, cooked and cleaned—we had to help but she did the bulk of

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<sup>1</sup> The Davenport Cement Plant was founded as the Santa Cruz Portland Cement Company just after the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake to supply cement for rebuilding the city of San Francisco. It changed ownership several times over the next century and operated until January 2010.

the labor—but when my father passed away then my mother had to transition into finding a job outside the home, trying to make an income. And one of the choices was to pick peas up the coast because the whole family could engage in that labor together, and some of the neighboring families did the same thing.

So we did that for about, I think three summers as a family, but as the members of my family got a little bit older, they would find a different form of employment. So, for example, my oldest brother was the first to stop working there, but then he was working at a gas station as an attendant, back in the days when they usually—

**Zepeda:** (laughs)

**Nájera-Ramírez:** (laughs) —filled your car with gas, cleaned your windshields, put your oil in, and all that. Anyway, the choice was either work in the fields or find another job. And we all tried to find another job.

During the year, one of the things my mother was doing was working at a packing shed in Davenport sorting sprouts. Later, it became the Odwalla Juice Company, but now it has been abandoned as well. But anyway, that's what she did and she also did babysitting to supplement her income. And eventually she started working in Santa Cruz at the canneries. I guess the last place she worked was at the cannery off of Seabright [Avenue]. Pacific Coast Producers—it used to be Stokley's at one point. But anyway, so that was her career.

She actually had a business education background and was an excellent typist. She knew how to do stenography and she'd worked for my grandfather in this

little town that they lived in. He was the presidente municipal several times and later he was a tax collector. So my mom was always his assistant until she got married. But she had formal training. The problem was she didn't speak English. And because she was a stay-at-home mom, she didn't take any lessons in school. But even before he died she was already taking these correspondence classes in English. She would type up her answers and mail those in, so it was this thing back and forth. So she understood English but she was always reluctant to speak it and would use the kids to go with her to translate at banks, at doctors. Whatever business she had, she'd always take one of us and we were able to translate. And to this day, even though she's perfectly capable of understanding everything and she can communicate, she still always wants one of us to go with her and still wants us to translate for her. So that became the thing that she did. When she was by herself, and she used to drive and everything, she could manage. But she just got used to having one of us be with her. It makes her feel more comfortable.

**Zepeda:** And could you just say where your parents are from.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Oh, my parents are from the state of Durango. My mother grew up in San Bernardo, Durango, a mining area near Parral, Chihuahua. It's in the upper part of the state that borders Chihuahua. So it's mountainous; it had a lot of mining, gold and silver mining. And it's not exactly clear where my father originated, because he was adopted. My mom remembers seeing him when he was in third grade, so somehow he made it to the town. San Bernardo is a remote, isolated little town. So he did have some growing up experience there.

But it's not clear if he was really from Guanacevi, which is another mining area, where he was originally from. But pretty much from the state of Durango.

And then my father ended up getting taken in—it wasn't a formal adoption—by a woman in the town that my mom grew up in. So they reconnected, and by this time my father had been coming over to the States to work as a *bracero*. At one point he was working at a mine in the area where my mom's family lived. And this American owner of the mines refused to pay the workers. They were kids—they were like eighteen or—they weren't really grown up. So they went to my grandfather, because he was like “the man” and they requested his assistance. My grandfather had this habit of bringing people to the house to eat. So he invited them to eat, and lo and behold my mother and he connected. (laughs) So that was how the romance began. Anyway, so my grandfather resolved the issue and forced the—I don't know how—but he had political connections, and he got the mine owner to pay them.

**Zepeda:** Wow, that's an amazing story.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, I think this something that really influenced this—my grandfather was not only *presidente municipal*, but at some point he also represented the county that he lived in at the state level. He held a post in Durango (the capital of the state of Durango)—which is when the family got their education. My mother got to go to business school because she was living in the city, as opposed to the little town that she grew up in. So that afforded them an opportunity to get different kinds of education.

But my grandfather was always into promoting social justice, from day one. He was very honest. Even when he was a tax collector, and he occupied that position several times over his life, but he told me that he returned some money, and it wasn't very much money, to somebody and they said, "Well, why don't you just keep it?" And he said, "Because it's not mine. It's yours. And that is my job." And like I said, people used to come solicit his assistance all the way until he was quite old. Like, when the governor was running for governor one time, and this was probably in the late 1990s, he still went to San Bernardo, where my grandfather was, to symbolically request his support. And, of course, my grandfather endorsed him. But he had that kind of a reputation.

**Zepeda:** Yes, a deep respect from people.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yes, a deep respect. He was very well respected. And like I said, his whole thing was about social justice. I think several of us in the family, one brother in particular, who became a lawyer, a public defender, and my family members that work in social work—that was like, *inculcado* (instilled in us). Right away it was something that we knew we were supposed to do, work for the public good.

**Zepeda:** So one of your brothers became a lawyer?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** One of my siblings, yeah, the brother that comes after me, who also went to UC Santa Cruz, Roberto.

**Zepeda:** So maybe we can speak about your education, starting with elementary school.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** In Davenport there was a small school that only had first through sixth grade, and these were multiple-grade classrooms. So two big classes—first, second, and third; fourth, fifth, sixth. That was it. We used to call them the lower grades and the upper grades. (laughs)

**Zepeda:** (laughs)

**Nájera-Ramírez:** And then at one point, the school got a little bit bigger, so we started dividing the classrooms into first, second; third, fourth; fifth, sixth. So we started using the auditorium, because it really was only two classrooms.

But anyway, it was interesting, because at the time, English was the required language and we didn't speak it. I think it's important that my mother recognized the necessity of having us be able to demonstrate our academic knowledge, that we were intelligent people. She taught us how to do our letters. She taught us how to do our numbers; she taught us simple math. So all of us who went, all of her kids who went to school, already came with some kind of preparation. And her idea was that just because we didn't speak English, she wasn't going to let that be a problem for us. It was very common that kids who came and didn't speak English were set back a grade or two, because by the time they caught up with the language fluency— So it was hardest on my older brother and sister, because they were the first out the door and into elementary school. My sister, my older sister, used to tell me how hard it was, the misunderstandings, and not being able to—I'm sorry (crying) she's the one that passed away.

**Zepeda:** Mmm . . .

**Nájera-Ramírez:** But she did tell me that it was really hard—she said it was hard; she tried to explain to the teacher something and the teacher didn't believe her and would make judgment on her. The teacher just didn't understand what Elena was saying and she just assumed that my sister was the one who was in the wrong, and that wasn't the case. So that was hard—(crying)

**Zepeda:** We can pause this whenever. (recording paused)

**Nájera-Ramírez:** My mother's strategy, then, was to have the older siblings speak to us in English so they could be the people who could ease us into the language. So the pattern in our family was that all of our siblings, we always talked to each other in English and we always talked to my mother in Spanish, my mother and my father, as long as he was alive. So we had this bilingual thing going—out the door with the school, English; in the house, Spanish. But even in the house, we wouldn't talk to each other in Spanish, the siblings. It was just—that was just the way we were raised because we started practicing English at home.

Anyway, that was the way it was for a long time. And as we acquired the ability to speak English, my mother would lend us to her comadres, who were recently immigrants, who then had to go to the doctor, or to PG&E [Pacific Gas & Electric Company], or whatever business they had, and our job was to help them translate. We got very good at it. It was a little bit awkward sometimes because we didn't have the technical, medical terms, for example.

**Zepeda:** (laughs)

**Nájera-Ramírez:** And sometimes you were describing, you know, body parts that you didn't really want to say. But this happened to all of us and it was my mother's contribution to helping people. That's just the way the families survived. Nobody had social workers. We didn't have a lot of services. In that way, the community was pretty united and the Mexicanos in particular, when they came into town—because the families started to increase—and they would come and they would meet my mom or the Pérez family and they would network with us and they'd, you know, teach them the ropes and tell them about insurance and that kind of stuff. These are working people.

**Zepeda:** So you became a resource for your community.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah, but it was a resource that was reciprocated. It was also passed along. We received this from someone so we're going to do the same for somebody else. That was a very nice part of living in Davenport. So some of the family members that we grew up with, to us they're like siblings. We are very close. And so that was a beautiful part of it.

**Zepeda:** So after elementary—

**Nájera-Ramírez:** So after elementary school, then we had to take a bus. Back in the day, they used to actually have a school bus and it would come and pick up the kids in the morning and take them to Mission Hill Junior High or to Santa Cruz High. So they'd make the route, and then you'd have to wait after school; the bus would collect you and take you back into Davenport. And so we pretty much had to be there by 7:30 in the morning and then we got home around 4:00 in the afternoon.

**Zepeda:** How was that experience for you?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, the bad part of that experience was that we couldn't do any after school activities because we wouldn't have a ride home. It wasn't like today. There was no [Santa Cruz] Metro bus out there. It was just the [school] bus. So it was very hard to try to do after school activities—like I would sing in choir and on a rare occasion my mom would come and pick me up but it was really problematic. And the population in Davenport was so small that it wasn't like I could go with all my girlfriends. I basically grew up with one really close friend. But sometimes they'd have older siblings that worked and so we'd work out a system to try to do some after school activities. And then, as my older brother and sister would drive, they might help.

But it was limiting. I remember, as a little girl, feeling like we were stuck—we can't go to the skating rink, we can't go to the movies, we can't do all these things because we have no transportation and our parents were working. As we got older, our older siblings would also get together. The neighbors and the next neighbors and the whole family would go in the station wagon and go to the Skyview [Drive in], or go skating or something like that. In Mexican families and I guess in Filipino families, the older siblings really become like second parents. They all have that role. So if the parents were working, then they might substitute and do something like that. Which was fun, because can you imagine all these kids in the theater or at the Skyview Drive In? (laughs) It was fun.

**Zepeda:** (laughs)

**Nájera-Ramírez:** What's funny is that as we got older, we decided, wait a minute, we would work this. We would say, "Well, let's call ourselves the Davenport Youth Group and when we go skating we're going to ask for a discount for the Davenport Youth Group." So that's what we used to do. And it wasn't just our immediate family; it was the neighbors, because we had all had the same problem. We were short on money, no transportation—as we got older—like I was a babysitter in Davenport, so a lot of the mothers would trust me: "Well, if Olga is going, then you can go." They just wanted to make sure there was going to be some sort of a supervisory role. So that's how we worked the system to our advantage and to try meet our needs.

**Zepeda:** So when you did the skating and the movies, was that in Santa Cruz?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah, there was nothing to do in Davenport. We really didn't get to go to the beach very much because my mother was very gender-specific, so we couldn't really go across the highway to the beach. That wasn't allowed for the girls. But we would go to the creek and go fishing. If there were a lot of kids, we would play baseball, kick the can, whatever. We would use the school for big baseball games for the whole town, including some of the adults, which was fun.

My mom was good at sports—she'd sling a baseball over the fence. Now that I think about it, she really wasn't that old. I'm sure she was a lot younger than I am now. She was probably in her forties, early forties, which is not old. But to us, she was a mother. And you would see the power she had. So that was fun.

And even some family members here from Santa Cruz, that were early arrivals to Santa Cruz, they loved to go to Davenport. Because in their minds, there were all

these Mexicano teenage kids and they would come and spend a Sunday with us. So that could be a lot of fun, simple fun, but we figured out how to make the best of our situation.

So that was the Davenport entertainment, that and birthday parties. Like, we had this neighbor down the street. Every time it was an event, a holiday or a person's birthday, the family would invite all their friends, and that was everybody. (laughs) So we'd go to the celebrado's and have these wonderful big meals with lumpia and quien sabe que tantas cosas. I got used to eating rice all the time, white rice with my meals. And it was so much fun. They had older teenage daughters, so they were teaching us the cool dances and all that type of stuff. And among the Mexicanos up the coast there was a chain of families at different ranches that became compadres. So there were baptisms and everybody would go. It was, wow, we get to drink soft drinks and the comidas. And again, the teenage girls—and guys, but most of them were Mexicanas, the girls, they would teach us all the latest dances, the twist and this and that. So that was fun.

Those families eventually started moving away from the ranches up the coast and moved into Santa Cruz, a lot of them on the westside. And again, they're like family members because we grew up interacting with each other from the early years on. Some of these families are ten, twelve people.

**Zepeda:** You said there was this racial mix. How did that impact you?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, I think it had different kinds of impact. On the one hand, I think it's probably why I became an anthropologist, even though I didn't realize it, because I was so interested in the different languages and the customs and the

foods. So that was really intriguing to me. And my girlfriend that I grew up with, she's Filipino. We used to compare languages and foods and holidays: "How do you guys do it?" We would literally do this comparison thing and we would see parallels.

I did feel that as people of color, though that was not a term I used, that we were on lower socioeconomic rungs typically, although there were a lot of very working-class, white people. It always seemed to me that the Italians were a little bit more established, with some kind of business, like the local grocery store or things like that. I think the fun part was also hearing the linguistic differences. It was very intriguing. Like, I remember playing with my sister and the neighbor and we would pretend that we were speaking a different language, like trying to follow the accent even though we were just making up words. So that was kind of interesting.

**Zepeda:** A lot of learning around language. That's interesting. So how was your experience at Santa Cruz High?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, by the time I got to Santa Cruz High—it was interesting because there are these lineages of families and everybody knows—so again, this was in the late sixties, early seventies, I graduated in '73. So this was a time of growth. We started to experience growth in the Mexican community. But it was still pretty small. We knew all the families. And we would see each other at the weddings and baptisms. We didn't do quinceañeras back then, here [in the U.S]. So we had that sort of network going on. But I also tried to blend in and try to do

some activities at school. And again, the ride was a big issue. But by then my older sister could drive. So she would pick me up.

My mother still had this very conservative approach to raising the girls, in particular. I mean, she was more outdated than her counterpart sisters in Mexico. She wanted us to keep our dresses longer. We couldn't date. There were a lot of things we couldn't do even though my cousins over there (in Mexico) were allowed to do them. She say, "No, no. When we grew up—" I said, "Mom, you imagine yourself in your generation. Look at mi Tia Chagua. Her kids can do these things—" But she was like—her standard was from her experience rather than the standard of our cousins who lived in Mexico. But a lot of the Mexicana girls were all in the same boat, so we understood that.

So, for one thing, I was able to hang around with my siblings. If I was with my older sister, or even my brother, not that he really liked us to be, I could do things with their generation. So I felt like I was too mature for my counterparts. I really did think that the other ninth graders were kind of boring. I didn't even want to go to their parties. I was happy hanging out with the older crowd. Not that I was dating or anything, but it was just fun because we had food, we had fun, we danced and stuff like that. In Santa Cruz High the general trend was people get together, they drink, or they smoke pot. I didn't do that, especially the pot. And the guys were all hanging out here—it was just not my scene.

But I decided that I needed to have some official activity, so that I could get permission. Because if it was a school function, my mother would give me permission. I tried out for flag girl and I got to go with the marching band to

different events and activities and games. And then I thought, okay, well then I'll do cheerleader. Those are the things that I did as a way to give myself an opportunity to be more social. Because otherwise—because there was no dating. But it was fun going to the games. So, you know, that was my experience.

**Zepeda:** So, earlier on you mentioned that when you were in Davenport you could hear different forms of music, and you could hear the neighbors' music. So I'm wondering—because so much of your contribution in your work is around music and dance—what was your early relationship to music?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, I will say that we didn't always have a television, so the radio was a big thing. In the house, my mother constantly had the radio going on. I think that was her connection to an outside world because she did spend a lot of time indoors. So she always had a radio station on. We didn't always get Latino or Mexican music on the radio. So I remember she would say, "Oh, a la seis va a empezar el programa de I don't know what and then she'd flip on the radio and they'd play a polka or whatever. I still remember some of the music that opened the program. One started with the Marcha de Zacatecas. I don't know. I just remember all these different things.

But for my mother, the music world was really important. It was something that she really liked. And she liked the Mexican films. I remember that she used to have these old-fashioned family albums. You know, the ones with the black and then you put the little corners and you put the black and white photos in? It was all black paper. Well, in the family photos—we loved to see these, from her growing up, and the relatives. And in there she had paper-clipped newspaper

cuttings or from magazines, like Javier Solis or Pedro Infante, and I remember, really the first time I saw them going, “These are relatives?” (laughs) I could tell it was a different texture. My mother would always tell us about the *costumbres* (traditions). She would always tell us about the films. And she would tell us about the music. And she would listen to it.

So we grew up with that as a foundation. And being from the north—the Norteño music, the accordion was very popular. We had one set of very distant relatives, blood-wise, but they lived over the hill in Union City. And when we got together, the first thing that my mom would do was go to her Tia’s house and they’d turn on the record player and they would put on like, *Alegres De Teran*, and it was dance time. It was always fun. Dancing and singing and playing music was always important.

But outside the house, we did mainstream music. So I remember when the Beatles came out, the first time I saw them on the Ed Sullivan [Show]—I remember watching early versions, when we did get a TV, of American Bandstand. I remember listening to the English radio, because sometimes, like I said, there wasn’t anything in Spanish, or they were hard to get. So driving in the car with my father, he would go to the lumber mill and I wasn’t even in first grade, and I remember hearing Barbara Lewis, all these old—you know, Mary Wells—from that generation. Because that was the radio station. So we listened to KMBY and I would love those songs. When I was little, I’d get a little bench and stand on top of it by the radio and sing.

**Zepeda:** (laughs)

**Nájera-Ramírez:** I remember this. I always liked to sing. And I liked to dance. My mom says—it wasn't like I'd break out into dance, but when Mickey Mouse Clubhouse or whatever would come on, or American Bandstand, I would start dancing. To entertain ourselves growing up, my sister and I—we would have loved to have taken dance classes, and all the little girls that were a little bit more well-to-do, and not Mexicanas, would take tap and Hawaiian. Those were real popular. So we would watch the Ed Sullivan Show or Red Skeleton and we'd look at the routines and we'd imitate them as best as we could. And we'd do these productions for my mom. Who knew I was really going to get into dancing? (laughs)

**Zepeda:** (laughs)

**Nájera-Ramírez:** But that's what we did. We just loved it. We'd make up these routines when we were in elementary, junior high. You figure out how to make up things on your own.

**Zepeda:** That's really powerful. So where to go from here? I guess the next question here is around your pursuit of higher education.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** The idea of being an educator was something I'd figured out by first grade. One of the reasons I think had to do with the fact that my mother's family was growing and even though there were only two siblings after me, I started teaching my brother how to do simple letters and whatnot. For some reason, I just liked that. I don't remember if my mother told me to do it or if I just did it to be like the teacher in school, you know how you try to imitate them.

So back in the day, they used to have these mimeographed papers. It was before Xerox. So the teacher would run off worksheets. I would take them home and practice with my brother. He wasn't even in school yet. Mrs. Thompson knew how much I liked to do this stuff. At the end of the year she came and brought me a supply, leftover things that I could use for my practice school with my brother. And my girlfriend would play with her sister. They were our pupils; we were the teachers. I think a little part of it too was because—I told you that we had multiple grades—so as a third grader, for example, the teacher had to run three different groups. So she'd put some of the older kids to go work. I remember she'd say, "Okay, Olga, go read with the first graders." They would read and I would be like the teacher. She did that with all of us. I don't remember being particularly gifted. Not that the classes were that big. Or I would read to a group.

So between what I did mostly at home as play, and then what we did at school, I knew I loved it. So my desire to be a teacher was like from day one. I did know college was required. I have a friend who is maybe six years older than I am, again, one of the older sisters of the family. I used to hang out with her a little bit. She was very smart. She used to always get straight A's in high school. She wanted to pursue education as well. So I kind of thought—what is she doing? I'm going to do it. And I remember taking the college prep track, and all these things I just knew from what everybody else was doing. I was figuring things out. I knew I didn't want to do the secretarial route.

**Zepeda:** In high school you took the college prep route?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah, you have to take chemistry; you have to take algebra; you have to take [advanced] English. So I knew that. It was clearly defined.

Unfortunately, our counselor had a very paternalistic view of the minorities. I think in his heart he thought he was being kind by telling us, “You guys should follow a vocational tech program, go to Cabrillo [College]. That’s good enough for you. That’s a good thing.” So he played the same thing with me. And I’m like, “No, I don’t want to be a secretary. It’s a great profession for some people. I want to be a teacher.” And he really didn’t help me. I wasn’t getting bad grades or anything.

I wanted to go away to—at the time a lot was happening at UCLA and Berkeley and I thought, “Ooh, that would be cool.” I didn’t really know what it entailed. It just looked interesting. That was college, for me. This was when all the riots were happening. So my mom is like, “No way. You’re not going anywhere.” I didn’t have any money and my mother thought I was too young. I was seventeen. She said, “Cabrillo and UCSC—take a pick and go with it.” And that was basically it. So I thought, well, I’m not going to Cabrillo because that’s what my counselor is telling me to do. And I know enough to know that I’m going to need a B.A.

### **Becoming a Student at UC Santa Cruz**

There was no real outreach that I recall. I remember after my counselor told me to go to Cabrillo I was so upset. I could really feel this was discrimination. So I somehow got it together to go to UCSC and go get the application and figure it out. To me, the hardest part of that process was learning how to do the financial aid. Because I had no idea how this worked. My mom paid everything straight

up. You owe PG&E—you just pay it. She didn't have a checkbook; she didn't have credit cards. And so it was a pretty intense process, me trying to translate to my mother— By this time I'm older, I'm in high school, but I didn't know how to do all those financial aid forms. Luckily, I got a few scholarships and I also had benefits from my dad. I had Social Security benefits.

So between that little bit of scholarship and the Social Security, I was able to finance my way through education. And working. I worked all the time. All the summer I worked. By this time I was doing recreation programs and I worked in a kindergarten. I can't remember what else I did—I babysat all the time. I remember cleaning this lady's house, a librarian, actually. Her kids work up at UCSC. I babysat them for a whole summer, at least.

Anyway, so between that, that's how I managed to finance my education. And I had no idea, no idea that there were outreach counselors who were bilingual, who would go talk to your parents. I found this out because I met all the students that came in from the [San Joaquin] Valley, the Fresno area, and from LA. And they would say, "Oh, yeah. The counselor came and talked to my mom." I'd say, "Really! They do that? Where were they when I needed them? I had no idea." I think they just didn't think of Santa Cruz as a place that maybe had enough Chicano/Latinos, or maybe they did it very superficially.

Anyway, I know that in their communities the outreach counselors were really good about actually making connections with the parents. I thought, oh, that would have been wonderful!

**Zepeda:** Exactly. To have that translation happen for you.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yes, to have somebody encourage and explain to my mother why this was good. I mean, she never stood in the way. She always thought we should do education. She just didn't know how.

**Zepeda:** So were you the first to go to—

**Nájera-Ramírez:** The first to go to a four-year university. My oldest brother, he went into the navy. So I don't think he went to Cabrillo until after. My second brother went to Cabrillo part time. But my sister, my oldest sister, she went to Cabrillo and she did want to be a secretary. That was her forte. She did the training at Cabrillo College and over the course of her life she managed to get her B.A., which was a big deal because she moved up. She became a legal secretary and was getting paid a hell of lot more than I was as a professor in her lifetime. (laughs) So maybe I should have done that.

No. But anyway, I was the first one to go to a four-year university. After I went, my brother went. You know, it's like you open the doors to somebody and they figure it out. So my brother went to UCSC and then my sister went to Stanford. And then my brother ended up going to Harvard Law School. I remember when he applied. He said, "Olga, I'm applying to all these schools, Stanford and—" He, at the time, had a girlfriend and I said, "Just throw your name in all of them. What the heck." He got into every law school except one of them, where his application was late. And he finished. So it definitely was worth it. He's a very smart guy, but very down to earth and very community-oriented. So when he started working as a public defender, I remember my older brother going, "Work

for a corporation, pay your debts, and then go back to do this stuff—“ But he had a different plan.

**Zepeda:** Exactly. So I wanted to ask you a little bit about what it was like to enter UCSC, coming from Davenport.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, it was really interesting because Davenport was a practice fieldwork site for a lot of the kids [at UCSC]. If you were in the education program, you actually had to do field study, which I did. Some kids chose Davenport, like, oh, this is our local little town— And I think there were some issues that I could feel. I felt like some of them were very condescending, overromanticizing poverty and ethnicity—you know, these are kids from Marin County, from very rich families. I remember two people working in the recreation program and they—you know, they had good intentions. They had this summer program and I didn't get to be in it because I was babysitting. But we did a trip to their houses—these two people from Marin County, they were actually dating at the time; they grew up with each other. And they both had swimming pools. It's like, wow, swimming pools, really? So I remember doing that.

I had this sort of weird relationship [with them]. On the one hand, I thought, well, their hearts are in the right place. On the other hand, they are a little bit too patronizing for me. I don't know, I felt like I was judged a little. I remember one of the women taking me to campus and introducing me to some people. But I just didn't click with them. I just felt like, oh, these UCSC students. I thought of a lot of them as these fake hippies. That's really what I thought. And they were

forever demonstrating and campaigning at Safeway and all this type of stuff. I felt disconnected. I really didn't want to go to Santa Cruz. Honestly, I didn't. The image I had of them was just not where I fit. I had no idea that there were that many Chicanos.

For me, when I went to UCSC—I went because, like I said, it was the only game in town, and that was going to get me the basic B.A. that I needed. When I went to an orientation—EOP [Educational Opportunity Program] invited me to an orientation—I didn't even know what EOP was. But I thought, I'll go. And I remember going into the Classroom Unit, the smaller one, I think the capacity was about 200 people. I went into this room full of color and I thought, oh, my God. I had never seen so many black and brown faces in my life. I thought, hey! This is promising. (laughs)

**Zepeda:** (laughs)

**Nájera-Ramírez:** That was really a welcome thing. Because I told you, my high school was—you know, I knew all the families and there weren't that many of us. So it was a really empowering moment for me to see a different side of UCSC that was not that obvious to the community. I made really good friends. I didn't live on campus. I didn't want to live on campus. And I couldn't really afford it, so they let me get away with that. I had to get permission.

So I lived at home not realizing what a problem that was going to be. Because my mother thought, you know, you leave in the morning and be back by 5:00. "Why do you have a class on Monday night?" "Mom, I don't know. That's just the way the schedule is." "Why do you have to study at school?" You know. So it

was a whole different routine. It was very hard to adjust from the high school schedule and expectations, to what you want to experience as a young adult. So anyway, I think I moved out in my second year.

Being in school, I felt very unprepared. Because I really didn't have a clear idea, academically, of what to expect. I had no real, clear guidelines. So it was all a very tough learning curve for me. I felt very insecure. I felt very intimidated. I thought everybody else was way smarter than me. So it was really hard. It was really hard. I remember taking calculus because I was very good at math. Well, I did not realize that you were supposed to have trigonometry before you take calculus. So, here we were doing calculus problems that relied on some trig and I had no idea what that was. So I felt like a failure. I really did. And I was very, very inward about—I thought I was going to flunk out. I was like, oh, my God.

Then I talked to my counselor, who I was very shy to be around. He was a white man. It was John Isbister, as a matter of fact. He was nice but I just felt terrified to talk to him. The one faculty that I remember thinking, I would like him to be my advisor, was David Sweet. David Sweet at the time, I think had just finished his PhD. He lived on campus in the dorms as a preceptor, so he knew a lot of the kids, and he spoke Spanish. His wife was Mexicana. And he had kids. So I just thought he was the happiest man. I thought, I'd love to have somebody like that.

Eventually he did become my advisor because I ended up switching to Latin American studies and I did start doing the education track. So what's interesting is that when I was browsing, my counselor told me, "You know, you can change your major. You don't have to stick with math. I suggest that you try some

introductory classes." I was so scared of wasting time. I really was. But he said, no, no.

So my second quarter I took *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* with none other than Shelly Errington and another faculty member. They were team-teaching it. I think Shelly had just gotten hired. It was an interesting class but I thought, no, this is isn't for me. Why would anybody want to do anthropology? It wasn't what I wanted.

I think the best thing that they did in that one class was have us read this article by Horace Miner. I don't know if you've ever read this article, "Body Rituals Among the Nacirama." Well, Nacirema is American turned backwards. And what they were showing in this article that was published in the late fifties, was demonstrating that the way that anthropologists write about a community is very detached. So if we were to write about American culture in those same terms, things would seem very exotic. I remember them saying, "They have this medicine ritual and they brush their teeth with hog hair". It sounded very exotic and then I thought, oh, my God, they're just brushing their teeth. They showed us the way that we represent others— And I thought, yes! That was the best thing I learned in that class. It gave me hope that here was some kind of an anthropology, or some kind of a discipline that actually could see what they were doing in terms of the way that they represent minorities. So that was very hopeful.

But I moved on and did other things and decided on pursuing the education route, which you had to do to get your credential, or your preliminary credential,

and did Latin American studies. So I thought, oh, I get to do literature. I get to do language. I get to do history. I get to do music. It was real broad. So it was nice. I liked that major.

But I ended up with so many history credits that my senior year, literally the winter of my senior year, the department called me and they said, "Olga, graduation is around the corner and we noticed that you haven't even declared the major." I said, "Well, I'm not a history major. I'm in Latin American studies." And they go, "Well, that's funny. You've satisfied all the requirements. The only thing you have to do is decide whether you're going to do a history oral exam or whether you're going to write the thesis." And I thought, oh, I'm already up to here with Latin American studies. They require both. You had to do a thesis and a comprehensive exam. So I thought, well, fine, if I've done this much, I may as well do the final step. It has to be orals because I don't have time to write another thesis. So that's how I ended up with a double major, by fluke. It wasn't all planned.

**Zepeda:** That's the way it works sometimes.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** I took every single class that David Sweet offered and he did Mexico, Cuba, Brazil. So I took all of that. Then I took American history with

John Dizikes.<sup>2</sup> He was fabulous. I still tell him how much I enjoyed his class and he goes, “Oh, tell me again.” (laughs)

**Zepeda:** (laughs)

**Nájera-Ramírez:** He was great. And then Gary Gossen was an anthropologist. I took his senior seminar with him on the Maya to satisfy my Latin American studies major. He was the first one to really encourage me to pursue anthropology. He said, “You know, Olga, if you’re interested in dance (and you’re interested in the different things I was interested in), there’s a whole discipline.” And he even suggested that, “The University of Texas would be great because of your interest in Latin America.” So that planted the seed.

**Zepeda:** Wow, for your next step.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** For my next step. My intended next step was to work to finish the credential because you get a preliminary one at the end of completion of the program. So I thought, well, okay, my next step is going to be to do that.

**Zepeda:** So I wanted to go back a little bit, because you said that in the anthropology class when you read that article it really resonated with you. So, it seems like you already entered UCSC with a critical awareness around—

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<sup>2</sup> See Cameron Vanderscoff, Interviewer and Editor, *John Dizikes: Reflections on a Life of Learning and Teaching at UC Santa Cruz, 1965-2000* (Regional History Project, UCSC Library, 2012) <http://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/dizikes>

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, I think I did and it was really experiential, the critical awareness. Comparing myself to the other students at UCSC, the mainstream students, I could see there was a social, economic big difference: you know, they have privilege and I don't. I could see that while they might romanticize us in certain ways, they also were very patronizing. So I came in with that knowledge, that experience, the double consciousness always looking at me. (laughs) I think that made me a little bit critical. And that probably gave me power. Because had it not been for that I might have just succumbed to let them absorb me and make me feel like trash, even though that might not have been their intended—you know, I don't know how active they were in trying to make it happen but that was how I felt. So that was helpful.

And being able to step outside and be with family members and people. Like I've told you about that woman who was a Mexicana and she was in the community studies major and she was working for her credential. So, if I didn't have a community like that to fall back and reflect and talk, it might have been different. But that really helped, being able to talk to someone who was doing wonderful things.

Because the woman, Maria Pérez, when she was in community studies, she took that program very seriously and they do a lot of community work. She participated in the Community Action Board and she was responsible for starting a Headstart Program in Davenport. She was doing a lot of really interesting and important work and I thought, yeah, I could do that. She was working for the community. It resonated with the kind of thing I wanted to do. I

didn't do exactly what she did. But she was a role model to show me that it was possible, even if I wasn't a super straight A student like she was. She was very giving.

I worked with her as an assistant when they started a kindergarten. I went and worked with her, and with Headstart I worked with her as the junior assistant. Some of it I did for free just because I wanted to do it. She was also involved in the church. And we all sang in the choir and we had to clean the church and all these things. So we had a social relationship, even though she was six years older than me and she was friends with my sister. It was more like almost another older sister in a way. But those were important connections for me.

By the end of my sophomore year, my sister was going through a divorce. She had gotten married right out of high school, pretty much, or maybe her first year out of high school. And within three years her marriage was over. She knew it was a mistake and she wanted out. So she got a divorce. She was already working for some lawyers and stuff like that. Her social world was married couples. She felt like she was really old. She was what, twenty-two or twenty-three? But you know, back in the day, women married earlier and to be divorced was like, really? How did that happen? She didn't have any kids. So when she split up with her husband, she first moved back home, which is where my mother wanted her. And then she decided that she was going to get an apartment, so I moved with her. So we lived together.

**Zepeda:** That's nice.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah, so that was a little bit more tolerable for my mother. And it was good for us, so that's how I ended up moving out. And then after that, I moved in with other friends. We eventually moved back together a couple of times. So that was my way, my passage. So I never lived on campus. I don't know what that experience was like.

### **Merrill College**

**Zepeda:** Okay. So you were affiliated, though, with Merrill College. So how was that? Do you remember the environment?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, I remember it was very lively. I remember there was a lot of Chicanos. That was one of the places. Merrill was definitely a place that had a lot of Mexicanos, from my perspective. Crown not so much; Stevenson some. But Merrill was like a real place—that's where Mejicas started. They started there. And there were a lot of people in the third-floor dorms. I think they might have had bilingual dorms? Anyway, a lot of my girlfriends lived there and I used to hang out with them. We used to have dances. I remember—somebody was telling me about the Crown-Merrill Rec Room. But we had the Rec Room and we used to use that for rehearsals for Mejicas at one point. I remember also going to parties and dances in there. That was the first time I heard Little Jo.

What was cool, to me the parties were awesome, the Chicano parties, because people had *costumbres* like mine. They didn't just show up in flip flops, jeans, and a T-shirt to a dance. Oh, no. We pressed our clothes. The guys cleaned up. And they were dressier. I was telling my girlfriend in high school, she was still in high school, I said, "Oh, Velina, you should see the way—they're like us. They

dress up.” In our generation if you went to a wedding you looked dressed up. A como pudieras, but you did. And it wasn’t like all casual. The non-Mexicano parties, the mainstream parties, I never went to. But they were—you know, people would just hang out the way they still do, and they were very casual. But the Chicano parties—they dressed up and they had funk music, they had Tower of Power. They had Mexican music, getting into Tejano music. So they did the gamut. And I thought, that’s where I—I found my world. I really did. I thought, okay. This is the Chicano person. So that was my identity. I thought, this is exactly me. It blends all my parts. It’s not like: Mexicano at home, mainstream at school. This blended everything. So it was a real nice find. (laughs)

**Zepeda:** So were you already identifying with Chicanos and Chicanas?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** I was identifying as Mexicana. I always called myself Mexicana. The only problem was that my relatives would sometimes poke fun at us and call us gringos, gabachos, or pochos— That just really— I felt very insulted. I could see that I was not a Mexican national, because I was born and raised here. I could see that there was an American part of me. But I didn’t know how to blend it. “Chicano” was the perfect word for me. That was the time of the whole Chicano movement. So it was fitting. Like I said, I found a sense that connected the different elements of my identity that resonated with a bunch of other people. We all connected. So it was really awesome.

I remember coming home with some of the girlfriends that I had, taking them to my mom’s house. And they were like, “Yes, homemade flour tortilla, chorizo con huevos, chile, frijoles.” They were dying for this food because they had to wait

until a three-day weekend or something to go back to Madera, or whatever place they came from. So at my mom's house they were like, "Yeah!" So my mom got connected to my girlfriends, especially the girlfriends. And then some of the people would actually go to the church in Davenport. I remember the Santanas coming to church. That was where they liked to go.

**Zepeda:** Wow, to find the connection.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah, the connection.

**Zepeda:** So, let's see. I wanted to get the year you first arrived at UC Santa Cruz.

### **Chicano/Latino Graduation in 1977**

**Nájera-Ramírez:** I entered in fall of 1973. And then I graduated in fall of 1977. I officially graduated and walked in the spring of 1977, because I had finished the history major and got through the program. So we did the Chicano graduation. I have pictures, but there were probably like thirty of us, *cuando mucho*. We were at Stevenson. And we did it like a *boda*. We had the ceremony. At a certain point in the ceremony—it was a very short ceremony—I remember that we went and gave flowers to our parents. And then there was a *comida*. They butchered a cow or something. This was Laura, the mariachi woman. Now it's Laura Sobrino, but at the time it was Laura Garcia. I remember her uncle butchered, prepared the *barbacoa*. (laughs) And I remember inviting my family, the *comadres*. I mean, we had this big on party. After the *cena*—and everybody ate a full plate at least-- then we had entertainment. So we had some people sing. We had local mariachi playing and then Mejicas did a performance. And then we moved to the band.

And we had a band and we danced. It was fabulous! I don't think they do this anymore because the crowd is too big and there's no place to accommodate everyone. But it was like, we're going to a wedding. And I celebrated fully.  
(laughs)

**Zepeda:** That's amazing.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** It was really fun. It was really fun.

### **Mentors at UCSC**

**Zepeda:** So I wanted to get more of a sense of your mentors, who guided you. You mentioned David Sweet.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Oh, well David Sweet, yes. He was doing the Latin American history and social history, "the people's history," he used to call it. That was what resonated with me. I thought, yeah. You can learn all about the institutions. You can learn all about the politics. But how do you know what the experience was like to live in a particular era? And that was his approach. He called it people's history and I loved that. I took everything he could teach me. So David Sweet was an important mentor.

Gini Matute-Bianchi was—I don't know what her status was at the time—I don't think she was a full [professor]—maybe she was a lecturer. But she was the one who mentored me through the education program. So I took classes with her. She was very young and very lively. I could really relate. I mean, how many Chicanos do you get? I don't remember what her official status was but she

eventually was hired full time as a regular faculty. So I'm not sure if she was finishing, but anyway. So she was real important.

And then David Kilpatrick, who was a music teacher, he was hired as an assistant professor and was teaching a Music of Mexico class. And I'm like, oh, my God! I didn't even know about it. The other Mejica members told me, "Oh, yeah, we're taking this class. It's really cool and we get to learn about—" I said, "I'm there." So I started going, just auditing the class because I loved it. And then I thought, well, I better go back and take it from the beginning, because I only did half of it. So I officially enrolled the second year and took the whole course again. It was fabulous.

At the time in ethnomusicology, especially the people out of UCLA had a performance practice. So you could not just learn the music of a given culture, you had to really practice it. He told us there had to be a practice dimension to our learning. So he created different ensembles. There was a Norteño ensemble; there was a jarocho ensemble; there was a huasteco, and mariachi. So there were four ensembles that they created.

And what was really cool was that we were actually able to connect those ensembles to Mejicas and we performed together sometimes. These were all student ensembles, and they included white people, as well as students of color, and some community members, and some of the maestros that he would hire. Like, for example, say there were experienced mariachi musicians—he would say, "Well, we need to bring you in." So they would also play. So it was kind of an interesting group.

My first year when I audited, I'd just dance. Because that counted. I thought, well, I'm already dancing and I'm not officially in the class. But the second year I thought, no, I need to go back and challenge myself. And the only instrument they would teach us was the accordion. So I took accordion lessons with Laura, and David. That's how I passed that class. So David was real important and served on my committees.

And by my third year, maybe, was when Pedro Castillo came. First Chicano professor in history.<sup>3</sup> I have to take my Chicano history class. So he became another important mentor. So those four were the key ones: Gini, David Sweet, David Kilpatrick, and Pedro. They were on my committees; they went to my weddings—the whole nine yards. It was cool.

And they supported me. I took three years when I graduated, and went to Mexico. I would stay in touch with them. So when I was ready to go to grad school they knew what I was up to and could write me letters and wrote me good letters so I could get into school.

### Los Mejicas

**Zepeda:** It seems like Los Mejicas was really central to your experience.

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<sup>3</sup> See Irene Reti, Interviewer and Editor, *Professor Pedro Castillo: Historian, Chicano Leader, Mentor* (Regional History Project, UCSC Library, 2013). See <http://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/castillo>

**Nájera-Ramírez:** It was. And what happened was I knew that there were Mejicas, but I really didn't know what it was. I had a very good friend who was in, I think it was Latin American studies, but he was a Merrill student, Anglo, and he invited me to go see him dance in Mejicas. I remember that I had gone to work out with my sister and took a shower and I said, well, I think I'm going to go because Dennis is real nice and he wants me to go see him perform. This was before I took the Music of Mexico class—so I assumed it would be not even all Mexicanos. And I thought, well, but it will be nice.

So I went to go see. It was a Merrill College Night. It was in the spring. I remember the group coming out and I thought oh, my God, they're all Mexicanos, practically. Dennis was there with his little blond hair tied in a ponytail and there might have been a couple of other white people. But it was predominantly Chicanos. And they came out and were so excited to be there. They were so full of energy. It was contagious. I'm like, oh, my God, you know? And at the end of the show they said that it was open, that you didn't have to have any experience to join, and please come back in the fall. And I did. I thought, I'm there.

So my second year I started working with Los Mejicas. It made a big impact. One of the things was first finding this community that was able to connect to—like, we never had any dance classes so, hey, I was learning how to dance and I was learning how to do Mexican dance. So that was cool. And a lot of people who were in the group were in the education path. Some of them were teaching elementary [school], or doing their training in service, doing field study in

Watsonville or wherever. And part of what they would do was teach dance. That was just exactly the kind of stuff that I was into, so that helped. I started doing outreach.

And then we performed. We would go back to people's home communities, like Visalia, and wherever the kids went to school. They'd go to their former high school and we'd do a noontime assembly. Then we would use that opportunity to encourage kids to go to school. So we were doing outreach—tell them, yeah, you should think about going to college. We would do a lot of recruitment. And then internally it was a retention thing because we were bonding with each other and surviving through our different majors. And then we were doing a lot of making our own costumes, figuring it out. There were no patterns. We would just practice and with whatever skills people had we would just pull it together and do the best we could.

So it was a real uniting experience. It was working collectively, with meager resources, but a lot of enthusiasm, a lot of passion. And we were able to be very politically active. We would go to all of the rallies, the farmworker rallies. Of course, you have to have your dance group and mariachi—whatever you could culturally to represent. So we were there. We were in a lot of those kinds of activities. And it was a boom in that age because there was mural painting and stuff like that. There was a lot of collaboration with other artists. It was fun. It was a lot of fun.

And then, I had to go one step further and want to know why—why do we dance like this? Where do we get these traditions? And so it became the topic of

my Latin American studies thesis. But the reason it became the thesis was a) because I wanted to do it and find out more and b) we were already doing in-service workshops with local bilingual teachers. And they wanted us to give them guidance. I thought, I barely know anything. How am I going to teach them? But I still knew one thing more than they did.

So we learned a lot from each other but we also attended dance conferences at the regional level, at the state level, national level. And that was the way we acquired more information from maestros who were more experienced dancers. Sometimes the maestros at national conferences were brought from Mexico. So that started a whole network of folkloristas who were also trying to give support to the local schools. So I thought, well, I'll do a lesson plan that teachers can have so that if the kids dance in an after school activity, they can hook it up to history lessons, geography lessons, cultural lessons, and this and that.

**Zepeda:** That's genius!

**Nájera-Ramírez:** So that was the incentive. There used to be this place at Merrill College—well, it was in the Communications [Building] first and then it ended up at Merrill—there was this unit called the Third World Teaching Resource Center. What people were encouraged to do was to use their projects for classes—or their research, I guess, at the professor level—and make these lesson units available to whoever wanted to check it out. It was a library. So that was my senior thesis. So I did this bilingual slideshow that you sync. Because this was before we had the modern technology (laughs). It would go beep and it was

time to go to the next narrative. So I had a narrative, and explained, and showed costumes, and things like that. So that was what I did.

What's sad is that someone took it and never returned it. When I came back to Santa Cruz, I asked about it because the Third World Teaching Resource Center was still there when I returned as faculty. And they said, "You know what? Somebody checked it out and they never returned it." I'm like, "Oh, my God." And I was too poor to have made a good copy for myself. So I had pieces of it but not the full unit. So that was the end of that. I thought, I wonder who has it?

**Zepeda:** Someone out there.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** So time goes by, time goes by, time goes by. Fast forward to Lionel's [Cantú] memorial service.<sup>4</sup> I had the bright idea, and it was a good idea—we were going to do a misa service here—and I said, "We need to have mariachi because he loved that music." I thought, it can't just be Holy Cross because they would sing in this soprano voice that nobody can keep up with and it's very old-style church music. So I decided that I was going to call all of the faculty and ask them to contribute twenty-five dollars, so I could pay for mariachi because if I was going to get a good mariachi, and it would cost like \$900, you know. So everybody took this pledge. I collected all this money,

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<sup>4</sup> Lionel Cantú was a professor of sociology at UCSC whose research and teaching focused on queer theory, queer issues, and Latin American immigration. Dr. Cantú died on May 26, 2002 at the age of 36. Olga Nájera-Ramírez was one of his close colleagues at UCSC. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lionel\\_Cantú](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lionel_Cantú) —Editor.

contacted this mariachi that I know in San Jose. And we were negotiating the price and they asked me my name. I said my name. They said, "You mean Olga Nájera-Ramírez?" "You mean Olga Nájera? Did you go to UCSC?" I go, yeah. She said, "This is so weird." I didn't know the woman that I was talking to. She said, "My friend went to UCSC and she checked out your unit, the Third World Teaching Resource Center lesson thing that you did." And I said, "Really? What ever happened to it?" She said, "It's in my trunk. Because I live in San Jose, she gave it to me and said, 'When you have a chance take it up. But I never get up there.' I don't know how long she's had it. I think it might still be there, Olga." I said, "Really?" And she did have it, and lo and behold she returned it to me. (laughs)

**Zepeda:** (laughs) That's amazing.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Can you imagine? It's bizarre. But I got it back. Unfortunately, the Third World Teaching Resource Center closed and disbanded and all that. But I still have my unit. Isn't that amazing? After all those years that transpired. It had been twenty-five years.

**Zepeda:** That is so magical.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** It really was. And under the circumstances, you know—

**Zepeda:** What a gift.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yes, I think Lionel was working it. It was really awesome.

**Zepeda:** That story just really got to me. (teary) Wow. It's powerful. And how beautiful that it came back to you.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah, it sounds like something you would make up, but it's really true. It was really magical. And the mariachi really did come, and they did play, and they were good. It was awesome. We had a little technical dispute with the priest at Holy Cross because he did not want the mariachi to play, He said, "Olga, you're stressing me out,"—he didn't know me—"You're stressing me out." I said, "Look, we need to make it culturally relevant." He said, "Well, they can't just come up and play entertainment music." I said, "No, there's a misa. They know how to do a misa. They know the liturgy or whatever, they know where they come in." He wasn't familiar with this.

So we had to compromise. His woman was going to do some of the responses and then the mariachi could do some of them. So they alternated. And as a gesture of, I guess, support and respect, the mariachi stayed and played for the reception a little bit. I hadn't paid them enough for all that but they went ahead and stayed because they said, "Well, we only played half the game? Right?" So it was very sweet.

**Zepeda:** That's nice.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah. So it turned out real nice. So anyway, back to Mejicas. So I was very curious and that became a lesson.

### Studying with Maestro Zamarippa in Guadalajara

But in the process of going to these conferences I started to familiarize myself with some of the maestros and actually make personal connections. And in one of the conferences in Colorado, there were four of us who went and I took a workshop with el Maestro Zamarippa. Everybody loved him. He was on stage doing a presentation on the charros. I thought, yes, you can really do this as a social history. This man knows his stuff. And then he told us, “And by the way, I have a dance school in Guadalajara and I have a dance company. You guys are all welcome to come.” I told my mom, “I’m going. I’m going to go visit.” She said, “No, no, no. ¿Como vas ir? No tenemos familia. Mejor ve a Durango—even Mexico City you have your tio.” I said, “No, Mom. I don’t want to dance with Amalia. I don’t like her style of dancing. I’d seen her show already.” I said, “No, I want to dance like Zamarippa and I want to work with him because I want to learn how to do this stuff.”

So it took a lot of arm-twisting and like I said, I just told my mother, “I’m going to go.” So I begged her one Christmas to go with me to meet the maestro in Guadalajara. We had never been.

**Zepeda:** Wow. And how old are you at this time?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** By this time I’d graduated from UCSC. So I’m twenty-two or something.

**Zepeda:** Still very young.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** So I told my mom, “Please come with me.” So we took a bus from Durango into Guadalajara and we explored the whole town by foot. I didn’t realize how huge Guadalajara was! Oh, my God. We were so sore. I was not a big-city woman. But we did manage to go see the group perform and we did manage to go the school and talk to the maestro. And I told him, “I want to do this.” He said he would support me. He was the director. It turned out that it was a school that is for local citizens. And I wasn’t a local. It really wasn’t designed for foreign students.

But como quiera they worked it out. I started going to school there. I said, “Even if I go there for a year, Mom, even if I go for a year, I’ll learn more and I’ll speak better.” Because I wanted to be a bilingual schoolteacher. That was still my idea. I was still going to be a bilingual schoolteacher.

I loved it and I stayed for three years. But I got disappointed with the carrera because I was learning how to dance and learning how to teach dance. I was not learning how to do research. And that’s what ultimately led me to abandon the program and pursue my master’s at the University of Texas.

### **Graduate School at the University of Texas**

**Zepeda:** I see. So did you apply while you were in Mexico?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, by my second year I could see, I’m having a great time, but this is not really going to help me have better credentials at Santa Cruz or California to teach. Because I was already teaching dance, so I thought this isn’t really going to help me.

So the second year that I contemplated graduate school, I missed the GRE [Graduate Record Exam] that they offered in Guadalajara. I didn't realize that you could also just try just showing up and paying registration. So the third year I thought, okay, I'm doing this. I went, and I remember my roommate, she was from Texas, and she also wanted to do the GRE's. So we applied, went, and took the GRE in Mexico.

And then I applied to graduate school and I only could think of two schools. I could think of UCLA, because I wanted to go to California, and I knew that they had something to do with culture because my maestro, David Kilpatrick, had been there. And then the University of Texas, because my other professor had told me that was a great place in Latin American studies.

I got accepted to both. But UT offered me a full ride for the first year and UCLA gave me partial support. Well, I had zero money because I was living off of what I earned in Guadalajara. So that made me choose Texas. And it was a hard experience because I had been away from my family for three years even though I'd come back and see them. It just felt like I needed to be back here. I had no idea what Texas was like. I'd only been to El Paso. I had no idea what the university was like, didn't understand the climate.

Then when I got there I couldn't take the climate. It was like a 100-plus degrees. And I thought, oh, my God. And then my ex-roommate—she was a little strange and she had a big rivalry going on with me so she didn't want me to take the Texas school because that was her school. She wanted me to go to California. So

when I chose Texas there was a lot of competition between us, and that was very difficult.

But anyway, I went to Texas and really before the end of September I was ready to turn back and see if L.A. would still take me. I just didn't like it. And I met this woman, who is still a professor, her name is Teresa Meléndez. She was at UTEP (UT El Paso) at the time, but later she went to Michigan State in Lansing. That's where she's at now. Anyway, she was a post doc at UT at the time that I was there. And Chicana. She said, "Olga, your desire is to go back to California [but] it's better that you stay here." She coached me and made me realize that I just should bite the bullet and finish my master's.

So I did and by the time I finished my master's, Ronaldo [Ramírez] had already proposed to me. We decided we were getting married after we both finished our master's.

**Zepeda:** So you met there?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** We met there. My very first fall. And I told him. I said, "I intend to go back to California. I know you're born and bred in Texas and your family has lived here for many generations. But I'm going back. So if you want a serious relationship you'd better consider that I'm going back, so if you want to live with me that's where we're going to live." (laughs) By this time he had visited California and he liked it. He goes, "Okay." I thought, yeah, right. It's not going to happen. I didn't think it would happen. Because you know, guys, partners, will tell you anything to sway you. So I thought, yeah, right.

So anyway, I did that. By then, I knew that even though I wanted to come back to California I needed to consider what my plan was. I thought maybe I should do something besides just go straight into teaching. And I considered the idea of doing research—I had met Américo Paredes and started working with him, the very first semester.

**Zepeda:** On your master's.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** On my master's. He was my mentor for the project that I did on Los Tastoanes, which became the topic of my dissertation and ultimately became my first book. So he encouraged me to take it on. I was real shy in class but I went during office hours and I told him, "You were talking about the Santiago and the Moros and Cristianos, and I did a study in Guadalajara with my cohort. It was really rough; it was really very basic, because we had no orientation and then no one collected it and I was really disappointed. But I still have all of my notes." He said, "Why don't you do an independent study and write up a paper and use the library to get research on the Moros y Cristianos." So I did.

And then he said, "You know, Olga, what you need to do with this is do an ethnographic component. You should go back to the community and really study it." So I started going back and forth and started collecting information. And when I finished my master's, I thought, this is just the tip of the iceberg. So long story short, it became the topic of my dissertation. But before I chose the dissertation topic, I contemplated where I would go, and I thought since I want to come home, I'm going to try to go to Berkeley. And the problem with Berkeley

is that they didn't have the kind of folklore I wanted to do. At Berkeley, Alan Dundes was the big leader and he had psychoanalytic approaches, which didn't do what I wanted to do. So I thought, no.

So I ended up staying and doing my PhD at UT. And so I thought, oh, this is the first nail in my coffin because I'm already not going back to Santa Cruz. I'm going to end up living here forever. That's what I thought. And then when we bought a house, I thought, there's the second nail. (laughs) Now we have a house. I'd only lived in one house, you know. I didn't know that you sell houses and buy new ones. So that wasn't part of my experience. I thought, oh, crap. Now we're getting serious. And so (sighs) it was scary.

But we worked with this really interesting guy. Preparing for marriage in the Catholic Church, you have to go to these pre-cana meetings. They basically give you guidance on what to expect in marriage. And some of them are like, yeah, you have to get along with your in-laws, of course. Basic things. But we had one guy who did the financial and legal aspects of marriage. I thought, okay, I know nothing about this. And he's the one who gave us the beginning image of what it meant to own a house and how do you finance things. And it was eye-opening to me because I just always paid cash. I said, "But we have nothing, nothing in our accounts!" And he goes, "Yes. But you also don't have debt. Olga, do you realize that?" I said, "Really? That's a good thing?" And he goes, "Yeah! Students have loans. You don't have any." And I'm like, wow, okay.

So knowing that I had zero was an advantage was really good and I did have good spending practices. I was very frugal with my money because I never had

enough. So I had all these practices. And he goes, “No, these are going to be good for you.” Actually Ronaldo did too, you know. He had a little account. Anyway, that’s a different story. But that’s how I ended up in Texas.

Ronaldo made good on his word. He was working as the grad recruiter for the LBJ School of Public Policy in Texas and met Sylvia Hurtado, who was the grad recruiter for the program here at UCSC. And when she was going to go to quit to go back to college, she wanted to pursue her PhD. She told Ronaldo, “You know what? You said your wife is from Santa Cruz. I’m leaving my job. You should apply.” This is an open search. So Ronaldo goes, “What the hell? I’ll apply.” He applied and he got it. It was a big pool of three hundred people. But he was experienced and did a good job on his interview. So I’m in Mexico doing fieldwork and he’s over here. (laughs) He moved to California without me at first. And then I caught up with him.

**Zepeda:** So then just to rewind a little bit.

Nájera-Ramírez: I’m sorry.

**Zepeda:** That’s okay. It’s a fascinating story. So how long was the master’s time?

Nájera-Ramírez: Two years.

**Zepeda:** Two years. And then during that time you applied for the PhD.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Right. So I only applied to UT in the end. I was considering Berkeley but then in the end I thought, no. And José Limón was more actively involved in my career then because he was back—he’d been gone or something,

doing, I guess, postdocs. I had worked mostly with Paredes. But Paredes was sick and getting sicker. And so José was the one who really talked me into staying at UT. It made sense because by this time I knew all the people in the folklore program and the anthro people and it was the kind of work I wanted to do.

So intellectually, it was a wonderful match. And I'm glad I did it because it's not there anymore. It was there for a certain time and then the folklore program fragmented and faculty started going different places, including José, who ended up coming to Santa Cruz. He was in American studies for a while. So anyway, things really changed. Paredes retired and there was a lot of commotion in the department. I, by this time had physically left the program because I was working on my dissertation here, living with Ronaldo.

**Zepeda:** I see.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** It was again, a magical moment of the right kinds of forces—good practice in folkloristics and good practice in Chicano/Latino history and studies. The two met and it was powerful for me.

**Zepeda:** (exhales) Wow. I feel that's a good place to pause. Don't you?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah, it probably is.

**Zepeda:** So we're here back with Olga Najera-Ramirez and it's May 16, 2013. Hi, Olga.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Hi, Susy. It's fun to be here with you again.

**Zepeda:** And I'm Susy Zepeda with the Regional History Project. So we'll start with a little bit of [wrap up] from interview number one.

### **Mother's Occupations**

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yes, I was describing one of my mother's first jobs after my father passed. One of them, of course, was babysitting because that's what became obvious to her. But she also started working at a packing shed—not a canning industry—there in Davenport, where she packed Brussels sprouts. And she did that for a year or two and then the packing shed was closed, and so she moved into Santa Cruz off of, I believe, Fair Street. It was a packing industry called Moceos and they did Brussels sprouts.

After that, then she started getting into the canning at Pacific Coast Producers, which used to be Stokely's, I believe, at one point. The company changed names several times. There she did mostly pears and string beans. So that was her work history. And she did all that until—I can't remember—she retired shortly before Elisa was born, so roughly about the time I got married. So that would have been the 1970s, early seventies, she retired, and thankfully, was available to help me with Elisa. It was a joy for her to have one kid to deal with, as opposed to the six of us.

### **Graduate School and Marriage**

**Zepeda:** Yes. So actually, that's where we left off last time, speaking about your graduate work at UT Austin and then transitioning.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Right. So I finished my master's at UT in 1983. That was the year—at the end of my master's, Ronaldo and I got married in June. So it will be thirty years this June, believe it or not.

Zepeda: Wow.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** We did it the old-fashioned way, which is to say, I had to tell Ronaldo, "It's not just up to me to accept, even though I accept, but according to Mexican tradition, which my mother believes in, it's important for you to formally request my hand in marriage." He didn't know how to do that. So I said, "Well, you could call her. You could go visit her, or you could write her a letter." So we opted for the letter writing. I told Ronaldo, "Tell me what you want to say." He said, "I want to marry your daughter." I said, "No, no, no, you don't start that way." (laughs) So I guided him. I said, "First you say, 'Señora, como esta?' A greeting. So then he's giving me the sentiment and I'm telling him, "Okay, this is the way it has to be phrased."

And so, anyway, we did this letter, sent it to my mom. And she said that when she received the letter she said, "Oh, how nice. Ronaldo is writing to me." Back then, people still wrote more than they do now. She said, "He was saying all these nice things." And all of a sudden she gets to the second or third paragraph where he gets to the point about marriage, and she started crying.

My family really liked Ronaldo, all of them. And when we called, I think it was over Thanksgiving—I was here and they were all there—and they were all hooting and hollering and like, yay! They were very excited about the wedding. I thought that was a good sign. I thought, if some man can get all six of my

siblings and my mother to consider him a worthy candidate, that must be a good sign. Because we're all so different, in certain ways.

So we had the wedding. And then while I was terminating my master's, I was already thinking ahead, "Where am I going to go get my PhD?" I decided that we would stay in Austin. I had always told Ronaldo that I wanted to move back to California. So he knew a woman who was leaving as grad director at UCSC. And he was doing grad work for UT as the grad director for the LBJ School. So she told him there's a vacancy. He applied and fortunately he got the job. I was in the field doing my dissertation work in Mexico and he packed up and moved to California.

So I thought okay, he was honest about understanding that I really wanted to come back home. So as soon as I finished a few things—I had already done all my coursework—I wrapped up and came with him. I joined him a month or two later and started working on my dissertation at home. And fortunately, by this time, José Limón, who was one of my advisors, had a job at Santa Cruz. He was in American studies. He suggested I apply for the Chicana dissertation fellowship at Santa Barbara.

So I won and I moved down to Santa Barbara. So now I'm commuting to see Ronaldo, because he's here in Santa Cruz. And then finished my dissertation, and José, by this time was doing a postdoc at Stanford. So I'd fly home to see José, at least once a month and then stayed the weekend with Ronaldo. And when I didn't come, Ronaldo would go. So that was a very nice thing because we had been married at least three or four years. So it was nice.

And then the Chicano students invited me to participate in their Chicano Grad[uation] at UC Santa Barbara, which was perfect because there was no way I was going to fly all the way to Texas in the heat and expect my whole family to go all the way to Texas to see me get my PhD. So I had a PhD ceremony with the Chicano students at Santa Barbara, and José, who was at Stanford, came down and actually hooded me. So it was wonderful. I couldn't have asked for a better deal. So that was very special. We had a really good time for the weekend. The Chicano students had a banquet, mariachis, a dance. So kind of like a wedding, kind of like my B.A. It was the same kind of thing and it was wonderful. We had a really, really good time. So that was great.

Then I moved back. I got a postdoc at Berkeley. So now I negotiated to live in Santa Cruz. I was auditing a grad course on folk religion with my mentor, Stanley Brandes. So that was nice because I just lived here. But this is when I decided, "This would be a perfect time to have a baby." I instantly got pregnant, as soon as I decided that's what I wanted to do. I was intending to keep the postdoc for the second year, with a possible renewal in the third year.

### **Getting Hired at UCSC in Anthropology**

But at this time I was sort of fishing lightly, checking out some job prospects, including one at UCSC, I have to say. But I had to finish my dissertation first. When I tried for the Santa Cruz one, I hadn't finished my dissertation. When I finished my dissertation, I didn't even think of Santa Cruz. I think I applied to Mills College, and I didn't get it but I got an interview. And then I applied to UC San Diego and they hired me in communications. They offered me the job. I was

content because I thought, well, at least I don't have to go to Texas. I didn't want to go anywhere east. I was fine just on the coast. I didn't even want to go to Arizona. I thought, this is where I want to be. I thought, at least I'll be close to my family. And they [UC San Diego] were looking for a job for Ronaldo. They were going to try to accommodate him. Thank god he wasn't a professor, so it was easier for the deans to try to work that out.

And while this negotiation and discussion—and I'm not fighting, I'm happy—I get an opportunity from the Department of Anthropology [at UCSC]. They say, "We have a Target of Opportunity [position] and everybody gets to nominate their person, so we want to know if you would be interested in an interview?" I'm like, "Yes!" By this time I'm already showing. I'm about four months along, or five, because it was in April. They quickly decided they did want me. I had not signed the paperwork at UC San Diego, so I was able to accept the Santa Cruz offer, which was my ideal job. This is where I wanted to be, from the get-go. Ronaldo was already working here, we had a little condo, and now I was going to have a baby. My mother was free to help me with the baby.

So everything just worked out perfectly. This was 1989. Elisa was born in August and I started my job in September. My mom would come every single day in the morning, around 9 o'clock, and then I would just make it a habit of going straight to work. I'd come back, sometimes around 2:00 or 3:00, sometimes a little bit later. I tried not to make it too long. And then my mother would leave here around three or four o'clock.

At that point, my mother was driving still. So I had wonderful childcare. Except that her parents were alive and every spring she would go spend two, three—one time as long as four months, taking care of them. She would hang out at their house and help them cook and clean and then her sisters would go visit her. That was when I realized what other parents had to go through with their childcare. People had to come in and babysit and by the time Elisa was three, we put her, during those months, in day care. She didn't speak any English at this point because she had spoken only Spanish and slowly had to learn to speak English. Now she speaks more English than Spanish.

But anyway, so that was the story. And then by the time Elisa was in third grade or second grade, my brother moved back home with his two girls and had custody of the children. And so, she turned her attention to take care of them. But by this time Elisa was bigger, so we could drive her to Westlake [School], go to work, and one of us would come back, and we'd put her in after school care and then we'd pick her up. So by this time we weren't so childcare dependent on my mother, but, of course, we missed her because she had been such a great childcare provider. And she always had time, or made time, to try to do something else. She would always cook. She would say, "Well, I have time. While the baby's asleep I'll do your laundry." "Mom, you don't have to do that. As long as you take care of the baby." But she did and it was really nice. My house was like Grand Central Station, because since my mother was here she still attracted all my siblings. So they'd rotate in and out. It was fine. It was great. So that's how that worked out.

**Zepeda:** That sounds like an amazing story, how it all came together.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, it is amazing that it happened, because from my mother's perspective, I had the credentials. "Why couldn't I just get a job at Santa Cruz?" I said, "Well, it doesn't quite work that way. There's a recruitment process and you don't automatically get hired."

So that was really nice. It was wonderful to be back in my home area and to be able to get my job, and to negotiate family, and all the demands of my job. And, of course, the marriage. But I had a lot of support. So it was very convenient.

**Zepeda:** How amazing, also, that this is the area where you are from.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah. And I knew that I liked Santa Cruz. I liked the educational experience I had at UCSC. And I always thought, this is where I want to go. Back when José and I were talking—I used to go talk to José Limón a lot during his office hours and we were thinking about possible places—he thought Santa Cruz would be a good place. And I said, "Well, that's my number one choice, José. I've always wanted to go back. I like where I come from."

And this was before we knew they were going to have a grad program. So the fact that they had a grad program made the jobs more available. A whole bunch of us came in at that time: Susan Harding, Anna Tsing, Judith Habicth-Mauche, Allison Galloway, Lisa Rofel, Dan Linger—there was a period of three or four years where a bunch of us came in because of the grad program. So that worked out just perfectly. I mean, it couldn't have timed it myself. (laughs)

**Zepeda:** So you were part of establishing the grad program, then, developing in anthropology?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yes. Which I believe we launched—I can't even remember the first generation—but if I was hired in 1989, the grad program probably started in 1992, something like that. I'd have to verify the date. So we continued to grow a little bit. We had Nancy Chen and Ann Kingsolver and a couple of other hires during that period.

**Zepeda:** And what was it like for you coming in, in terms of finding community? You already knew some of the people.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, I knew the Santa Cruz residents but I didn't know the UCSC community. There were professors who had been my professors, who were still there. David Sweet, Pedro Castillo, Gini Matute-Bianchi—they were still there. So that was one set of communities. And I also got invited immediately—but I didn't do it the first year—to join the LALS [Latin American and Latino Studies] steering committee, because it used to be a program. And as a product of that program, I was happy to go back, but not the first year. I was like, let me get my feet wet and figure out how to handle the job with a daughter and everything.

So I started doing that. There I felt a connection because I had already worked with several of the faculty there, David and Pedro, for example. I didn't know Pat [Zavella] very well. I knew of Pat and I knew her work. I remember asking José, "José, aren't there any Chicana anthropologists?" And he told me, he said, "Well, there are. Not as many as we'd like." And he said, "One professor

whose work I really think is worthy, is good, is Pat Zavella. And she happens to be at Santa Cruz.”

So I would have my annual meeting with Pat, really as a mentor. I would seek her out as a higher, more advanced scholar than myself. I would say, “Pat, I have to do this. I want your advice.” So we’d formally go to a luncheon. We weren’t friends. We were just colleagues. We did this once or twice a year. We’d meet on campus at Whole Earth [Restaurant]—remember the Whole Earth? Or downtown at a restaurant. And it was like that.

And then, I knew Aida [Hurtado] mostly because Ronaldo knew Aida. Well, he knew all the tejanos, well, he knew everybody, but he especially knew all the tejanos. So he knew Aida. And then I met Norma Klahn through LALS. And I had gone to school with Guillermo [Delgado-P]. Guillermo was a product of UT and we were in the same department of anthropology. I just wasn’t close friends with him. But we knew each other and we were cordial. So we got to be friends here. So slowly we started gelling with the community, with the Chicanos.

### **Chicano/Latino Research Center**

And at that time, Norma and Pedro had the brilliant idea of establishing the Chicano/Latino Research Center. And so, I was on board. That’s how I got to get even closer with all of those Chicano professors. That was an amazing program. I just think it was best thing that ever came along for me. Intellectually, it was a very strong community. Because of the cross-border, Latin American connection, it spoke to my work. Even though I’m trained as an anthropologist, my original degree was in history and education. So I was able to do all the kinds of things

that I did, with people that were experts in their various disciplines. So it was wonderful.

I remember all my work on charros came through that cycle. And when I was doing my work on the charro as a symbol, I remember I had people like Julianne Burton—people who did film, people who did melodrama, people who did history, people who did masculinity. I mean, I just had all this resource of people to read my drafts. I felt very productive and I felt like my work was respected, and taken seriously, and supported.

That was a really dynamic moment for me in my career, in terms of the work that I was trying to produce. It was a great thing. And, of course, *Chicana Feminisms*<sup>5</sup> came out of that period. So we had these wonderful research clusters. We had a melodrama cluster. We had a Chicana feminisms cluster. We had a borders cluster. Then we ended up doing the pop culture cluster. So all the clusters that I participated in were very productive for me, and made wonderful ties. I was able to integrate my students into them and that helped strengthen them. It was just a wonderful thing. I think probably the best thing that happened to me, intellectually, was the center. Because we did all kinds of projects and we were always crossing into Mexico to attend a conference, or we had them come up to do a conference. It was a really good networking space.

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<sup>5</sup> Gabriela F. Arredondo, Aida Hurtado, Norma Klahn, Olga Najera-Ramirez, Patricia Zavella, eds. *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader* (Duke University Press, 2003).

**Zepeda:** So one of the things that you described was people giving you—it sounds like people were giving you feedback on your work. So was that one of the main functions?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, because we belonged in research clusters. So in the research clusters we'd come together and read a set of materials if we wanted to. But you could define the cluster and do whatever you wanted to. In some spaces, what we did was trade papers. And in the pop culture, as you might remember, we would be sharing some readings, but then we'd say, "Does anybody have a paper? We're getting reading for the AAA [American Anthropological Association] or LASA [Latin American Studies Association]," or whatever. Then we would bring drafts of the paper. And sometimes we'd work with subsets of the group. I remember working with Elisa Huerta and Russell Rodriguez [grad students in anthropology] on one of my pieces, and having a separate meeting from the bigger meeting. But it was that sharing of spaces, trading ideas, sometimes debating in a healthy and productive way, rather than a hostile way. It was so wonderful. It was a really good space.

**Zepeda:** So how is it that space—because it's an actual location—

**Nájera-Ramírez:** It's an actual location. So I was part of the steering committee. We had regular meetings and discussed funds, when there was such a thing as UCOP [UC Office of the President] funds, and then funds from the dean, and things like that. So Norma and Pedro started out. Then Pat was the next director. And then when Pat was the next director, they wanted me to be the director after her. I said, "Well, I will do it but I want a co-directorship." And the reason that

we were dwindling down to one was because we didn't have enough money for the support. So they agreed they would put me on with Pat so we could overlap and I could learn. And then Pat cycled off and I stayed on as director. And then after I stepped down as director, Aida took over. So we kept it like that. But all the time, I was either a member of the steering committee, or a member of the advisory committee. You know, there was always something—even when I was no longer director, I was still very involved.

### **Undergraduate Research Apprenticeship Program**

And that's where we developed the URAP Program [Undergraduate Research Apprenticeship Program], which is another feature that I'm very excited about, because we were able to develop a mentoring program that I felt spoke to the needs of the faculty, that could be productive for the students. Because some of the other mentorship programs were—my job was to work with a student but staff figured out who needed to be with me. What do they know about the kind of work that we do and the kind of work that the student does, and what is appropriate for each discipline? So they were trying to do, in my mind, a cookie-cutter approach to mentoring, where the staff made all the decisions. And I thought, that's not the way I want to participate, even though I did participate, and I tried to make corrective measures, and had frank discussions. I remember

having a long discussion with Rosie [Cabrera] at a larger meeting.<sup>6</sup> She heard my ideas but she had her ideas of how she wanted to do it. And eventually we thought, well, why am I arguing? Let her do her program. And the other ones that existed—there was the SOAR program and other ones—and we'll just develop our own.

So the faculty were very excited—I remember Pedro, and Norma, and Pat, and Aida—and who else was there? But we decided, we're going to do a URAP Program. So we thought, what do we want? Gabriela Arredondo was there. So we said, faculty should get to pick. Do we want the best students, or what kind of students do we want to work with? Well, we don't really have to worry about the best students because they're already making it. We wanted to go to the B-plus students, the B students, who, with a little push and a little guidance, could really excel. That was our target population. We thought, well, we'll work with juniors or seniors, and our goal will be to polish the gem. They will work, not on their projects; they'll work on our projects. We'll integrate them, so they can see how a faculty does research, and they will be our research assistants. They will be paid. It won't be credit; they will get paid as research assistants. And that was wonderful.

**Zepeda:** That is wonderful.

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<sup>6</sup> See the forthcoming oral history with Rosie Cabrera from the Regional History Project—Editor.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** And we said, and we'll give them a small stipend for travel, so that if the faculty thinks it's appropriate for them to join them in the field or to go to a conference, they will go under the tutelage, supervision, mentorship of a faculty. Because it used to be that a whole bunch of students would go to NAACS [the conference for the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies], and it was party time at Chicago, or wherever. They might attend a session or two, but really, that was not the agenda. I thought, that's embarrassing and that's a waste of time. I would rather take my students and have them meet the faculty at other universities where they might potentially apply.

So our model was a very healthy model. We said, "And there should be a little stipend for the faculty." We got like five hundred dollars. Which isn't a lot, but hey, it paid the plane ticket, you know? It was a really good model. Our students [gained an] understanding of what it felt like to do research or be a professor. And it might not be everyone's choice, but now they know that.

At the end of the year, they did their presentations. They were always really emotional because the students were so grateful for the help; we were so grateful for their help. It was a kumbaya moment. We were so happy. (laughs) So it was a really successful program. Unfortunately, the financial crisis really made it to where last year there was no more URAP program. So everything has slowed down.

**Zepeda:** But it existed, then, from the early nineties—

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah, it didn't start the first year. It started a couple of years after we founded the CLRC. We decided the focus was going to be faculty and

graduate students, really bringing together a community of scholars who are interested in doing research on this vast space of the Americas. So that was nice because we got to meet people from other departments, where [before] we never saw them. We actually had a physical location on campus where we could come together. And we would, as I said, do these conferences with scholars from Mexico, which was great because it really expanded my connections.

Everybody had different kinds of connections, so we started sharing. It was wonderful. We did some field trips together. One time, I think we went to Mexico City and there must have been at least twelve of us. (laughs) We were like little kids on a field trip. It was fun. And then we actually did serious papers and socialized a little bit and we'd come back in three days or whatever. Very, very good times.

**Zepeda:** So what inspired that vision of Las Americas?

### **Cross-Border Perspectives at the Chicano/Latino Research Center**

**Nájera-Ramírez:** I don't know really where each person was coming from. For me, it was natural because I had been trying to do work on Chicanos. Part of my work was on Chicanos for education and looking at folklorico here—the only place I could do that was in Latin American studies. So that was one component. But then I went to Texas and the whole work of Paredes is crossing borders. That was his whole vision. So, to me, it finally gave me a space to be in. So I used to call it Greater Mexico, as he did. I remember going to the LALS meetings and always talking about Greater Mexico. And I remember David Sweet was, "That's a really interesting term, Olga, that you use." And I said, "Well, I didn't coin it.

It's Paredes's term." But he understood it spoke to the kind of work I wanted to do. So, I certainly wouldn't take credit as it being my vision. It just matched my vision.

But somehow, in other areas the idea of borders was finally coming into its own. It was a wonderful approach. It just made sense, if you look at the people that we study. If you want to study Mexicanos, you have to look at both sides. Because the population of Mexicanos in the U.S. was growing and there were all kinds of issues with immigration, and all of that stuff was very political. There was a lot of anti-immigrant sentiment. So it clicked. Everybody was behind this, and everybody was maybe coming from slightly different positions, but it worked really well.

### **The Emergence of the Latin American and Latino Studies Department**

And since, so many of us by this time were also on the "steering committee" of LAS, we changed the vision so that it would be Latin American and Latino Studies. Then the Latin American and Latino Studies Program—we developed it into a department. So it was this whole trajectory. It was a rich moment. Like I said, we were very generative. (laughs) We were doing all kinds of stuff. And the thing was, that somehow these ideas were gelling. Everybody was on the same page. There wasn't a lot of discussion—maybe a little discussion of why does it have to be called Chicano/Latino. If it's just Chicano, why do you have the Latino? But anyway, there were a few debates like that. But nothing in terms of the vision. Like I said, it was just one of those moments where things were very

fruitful and we were really pushing ahead and, I think, forging something very original.

**Zepeda:** Exactly. I remember coming here and learning about the Chicano/Latino Research Center and also about the Latin American and Latino Studies Program and being so blown away, so impressed by what was happening. It felt like a magnet—like, this is where I want to be!

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Exactly. It just brought people together in a very productive space. I remember participating in three research clusters. I mean, god, there's not even one now. Well, there is one. There's the Bodies, Borders, and Violence [cluster]. But still, overall, it was just so active. I don't even know how I did it because that was all on top of teaching and doing the grad work and whatnot. I was very involved with the CLRC and LALS at the time, very involved.

I remember when LALS became a department, one of the things that the social science dean wanted me to do was to decide, well, do you want to stay in anthropology in your own home discipline, or do you want to move over to help create the department with your FTE? And I was troubled because I thought, well, I like anthropology and I feel like anthropology needs a Chicana to represent the courses. Why do I have to make a choice? Before I wasn't getting anything and now they want me in both. And I didn't want to do a fifty-fifty. I always heard that was not a good idea, for promotions and stuff.

So we designed a structure, where there were going to be the full faculty that were the FTE's, and then there were going to be the affiliate faculty, which they always have, what they call the "below the line" appointments. And we created a

middle category called “participating faculty.” These were faculty who wanted to be a little more hands-on than just affiliates, but didn’t have to be at every single meeting. So we designed this middle category of people who were more inclined to participate, but not as fully as an FTE, like we didn’t get voting rights. But we would be at the meetings and things like that.

So that category was designed and we’re still using it, not as forcefully as we used to be, because I feel a little less involved in LALS as a faculty member than before. I don’t know what’s turned the tide. I don’t think there’s any hostile feelings. It’s just sort of not been emphasized as much. So anyway, that’s how that works.

### **CLRC Events, Conferences, and Projects**

**Zepeda:** So I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the CLRC, if there were any conferences or events that really stand out for you?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Oh, gosh. We had so many activities. I mean, it’s amazing. One of the first activities we had—we had a conference here and we brought in scholars, like Carlos Monsivais and Jose Manuel Valenzuela. And I remember, well, there were so many different conferences. I was in a Melodrama [cluster] group with Julianne Burton. We had a series of film people, a melodrama conference that was a one-day thing.

Then we had a larger CLRC one. There's this book called *Las Nuevas Fronteras del Siglo XXI*<sup>7</sup> and we did a whole conference here in Santa Cruz. Then we went and did the second component in Mexico City. And the results of those conferences, the papers that were given were put together as a book. And that was one of the first publications through the CLRC. I believe the articles—some are in English and some are in Spanish. I presented my work on a panel in Mexico City, and I remember Guillermo being on it. And I presented it in Spanish, which was a little bit scary, because my academic Spanish isn't as refined as I'd like it to be. But anyway, I delivered and kept the paper in Spanish. And then, I think we had a subsequent conference over here with that same group of people.

In between, there were other kinds of smaller conferences. I remember there was one on Chicana feminisms that I think Aida [Hurtado] linked to one of her classes. And then we had some—I think we did this twice at least—so there was some really exciting stuff happening there. I remember some of it being like a sit-down seminar and you had papers to read.

Then I remember Pat and Denise [Segura] did a conference on mujeres—I don't remember what else. But it was in Ajijic, which is near Guadalajara. So a bunch

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<sup>7</sup> *Las Nuevas fronteras del siglo XXI = New frontiers of the 21st. century Mexico: La Jornada Ediciones*, 2000. Edited by: Norma Klahn, Guillermo Delgado, Olga Nájera-Ramírez, Wilson Carter, Susanne Jonas, Patricia Zavella, John Borrego, Jonathan Fox, Paul Lubeck, Manuel Pastor, Pedro Castillo.

of us go down there. And that was really nice. It wasn't just UCSC faculty. I remember Denise Segura and Beatriz Pesqueira and then other scholars from Guadalajara. So we all met there. Rosa-Linda [Fregoso]—I remember her being there—she wasn't at UCSC yet. So some amazing—I remember when Lourdes Portillo did her film *Senorita Extraviada*, she came and did a big premiere here at Classroom Unit II. It was filled to capacity. I mean, we just had so much going on. The programming was—for the amount of money, and I don't remember how much money we had, it wasn't that much to begin with—but man, did we put it to good use.

Oh, and we funded graduate students. We did a graduate research assistantship, for starters, that was the assistant to the directors. And then we had a person who led the URAP program, and we made it one-fourth paid for their services and one-fourth to dedicate to their dissertation. And then, when Lionel [Cantú] passed—he was part of the group too—but when he passed, then we instituted an endowment for Lionel Cantú that we shared with sociology, LALS, and the center. Anyway, like I said, we were just so productive. It was amazing! It was really amazing.

**Zepeda:** And then the mini-grants, also, right?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Oh, yes. We did the summer mini-grants for graduate students, that's right. We would pick three students. Again, it was not a huge amount of money. It was like five hundred dollars. And the students would come back and they presented their work. It was very sophisticated and there was a big gathering, usually at the Oakes provost's house, as I recall. The faculty

mentors would come and the affiliated faculty would come and there was a reception. It was just one of those feel-good moments because you see these students advancing. I remember Sarita [Gaytan] was one of them. Marcos [Lopez] from sociology. Anyway, Felicity [Amaya Schaeffer], I think, gave a paper because she was here as a postdoc with Rosa-Linda. I remember her presenting work. Anyway, man, there was no limit to what we could do at the time. Just the energy and the productivity.

### **Diversity Work**

**Zepeda:** We've been speaking about LALS and also the CLRC—those are projects that invited another kind of energy on campus. Things were gelling. I wanted to ask you about other kinds of “diversity work” that you've done on campus or have been asked to do.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** We used to do these Chicana/Latina/Indigenous—once Reyna [Ramirez] came aboard—gatherings. And they were sometimes breakfast; sometimes they were going out to dinner, and sometimes they were potlucks at a house. The idea was to gather women together and make them feel like they are part of a community, people who were at different stages of their careers and were getting some outlandish feedback from their department, or their letter writers [for tenure and advancement review], or whatever. There were all kinds of weird things going on. So our job was to check in with each other, provide support and give advice and all of that. And by this time I'm more middle of the range. So everybody would teach someone one step below them, plus share ideas

and stuff. That was very empowering. We haven't done that in a long time. But we had several of those gatherings.

I always got invited to do things with EOP. And other offices would always ask me to come and give talks to visiting students, which I've done. Some of the student groups, like mariachi groups or folklorico groups will come and they'll know about me through the folklorico, or the maestro will know me through that. So I've spoken that way at a lot of different activities on campus, a commencement speaker, or what have you. That support in the different capacity as MC for Chicano/Latino graduation. I was a keynote speaker for Merrill College graduation.

Of course, Mejicas is a big deal. I started mentoring Mejicas, or more actively became their advisor, I guess is the best word, in 1997, when I received tenure, which was my promise to them. I used to work with them very unofficially and I told them, "When I get tenure, I will then be able to work with you more explicitly and make it part of my group. But right now I'm being pulled in too many directions, trying to finish my book and trying to finish a video and trying to get tenure." So in 1997, I became their advisor.

And we had such a great relationship that the Filipino students, the PCC, the Philipino Cultural Celebration group, which is comprised of four elements—there's the choir; there's the acting or theater; there's the folkdance; and a hip-hop dance. They call them aspects. They were really close friends with one of the members of our group. I think she was the former director. And so, she would always talk to them and they'd say, "Well, Olga did that and Olga did this." So

they said, "We want a mentor." So they came to see me and I said, "Yes, you guys should get a mentor. You need to find somebody who knows Filipino culture well and can give you group advice, but also content advice." And they requested several different people. I gave them names. And basically, nobody took up the lead.

So I felt so bad for them that I agreed to mentor them. So I'm taking them on as my group. I did it for two or three years. They're really awesome. I mean, really they're awesome. So I worked with the equivalent of CORE, like Mejicas has their steering committee. And we had some really nice times. But I told them, "This is just temporary while you guys find the right person."

I also gave them credit for their participation and activity in the group. So at one point the dean of social sciences, I think it was Marty Chemers at the time, was reviewing my stuff. And he says, "You know, Olga. Why are you doing this," (and I was not getting compensated for any of it) "Why are you doing this?" And I said, "Well, I'm loyal to Mejicas because that's what helped give me my foundation. And I feel that the Filipino students need—I'm happy to mentor them." He goes, "You're doing way too much."

Anyway, with the support of Manuel Pastor, we started creating the class as an official class, which would then count. It took me a while for it to count as a class. The two-unit class that I offered every quarter would be the equivalent of one class. So that finally got worked out but it took a while. And then the dean said, "You really should not be doing as much as you're doing." So I dismissed myself from the PCC, but agreed to sponsor them. They were doing one activity where

they would get—they're very organized—and they had some seminar, so I agreed to sponsor them just as a seminar. And they did projects and stuff. So I remember going to talk to them on a couple of occasions. But I was really just a faculty sponsor for a quarter's worth of independent study. So then I sort of bowed out. But I still, when I can, try to make their events.

So that was another big thing. At one point, this is not so long ago—well, one of the things that they did is they appointed me on the search committee for the chancellor's search. (sighs) They told me it was going to be a couple of months. It ended up—we started in April and we didn't finish until September. It was an enormous amount of work. It was an eye-opening experience. Some things were exactly as I thought they would be but it confirmed—(laughs) so it was a useful experience.

But it was just a ton of work. We would get binders like this that we had to sift through. And these are—they're not even applications. They're actually vitaes. They had a man who was a head hunter. And he'd collect all this information. It's a very delicate situation because I found out that you can't ask these people who are in positions of power, like chancellors or vice chancellors, to apply for a job. Because they can't publicly appear to be leaving their home institution. So there's sort of this weird process whereby they collect vitaes. We screen through the vitaes. So it's not an application. It's just the vitaes. And then we have these meetings and we weed out, basically we'd weed out—because there are tons and tons of these things—and this man that was organizing the committee and was getting the vitaes, he kind of had some back stories to tell us about them. One

hopes he was doing his homework, but— We really put a lot of trust in him, because he'd say, "Well, no, you don't really want to go with that person because of this." Anyway, we weeded them out. It was a very big job. But like I said, it was very interesting.

Anyway, that was a big undertaking. The sad story about diversity was that they kept saying, "We want diversity. We want diversity." And I finally just said, "Well, look, we need to create a pipeline because we're never going to find vice chancellors that are of color if the pipeline isn't built. We can say, 'we want, we want,' but anybody who is of color is not that high ranking because there's an imbalance. If we really wanted to do this, we need to construct some kind of a system where we're pushing people into the pipeline so that we groom them and get them into these slots. Not me, but I'm just saying others." (laughs) Anyway, obviously it was not going to be a chancellor of color, in my opinion.

But anyway, be that as it may. After that, there was a series of diversity initiatives on campus and there were different kinds of committees that seemed to be growing forever. At one point the chancellor approached me about spearheading a diversity—campaign, I suppose. I said, "Well, I really don't know. I'm very busy. But I will give it some thought. Can I have a month to give this some serious thought?" He said, "Okay."

So in that month I did some background [research]. I interviewed people like Pedro [Castillo], who was provost, and Eric Porter, who was the chair of American studies. I talked to as many people as I possibly could, got ideas and

everything. And then I went back and had a meeting with Ashish [Sahni] and the chancellor.

And basically I said, "I'm not going to be able to do this but here are some ideas that I gathered while I was doing this. First of all, how many diversity efforts are there going on? I've heard about a whole bunch and there are other committees that are coexisting. So it seems like we need to figure out what's going on, on the ground. We ought to figure out how many diversity groups are there and who are the people who are doing diversity kinds of work? And who claims to be doing diversity work? And then are we assessing this? So we need an inventory. We need an evaluation. There are a lot of groups who may claim to be doing diversity work and they're not. We should get rid of them. There are people who are not claiming to be doing diversity but, in fact, are. And we should be supporting them. Let's not reinvent the wheel. Let's assess what we have, and then support the good ones and eliminate the ones that aren't doing a good job before we build anything new. It's a slap in the face when all these people have been working in the trenches and we act like, 'Okay, now we're going to do diversity.'" I said, "I'll give you two examples." I remember Mejicas (I can't remember what my second example was. It might have been PCC.) But I said, "Let me give you a concrete example." (Oh, no. It might have been CLRC.)

But anyway, I said, "Let me start with Mejicas. This is what they've been doing. Since day one they were very interested in retention, in creating community on campus that was friendly to people who were interested in learning about Mexican traditions, regardless of their background. So they started with

retention. Then they started doing recruitment. Then they started promoting Mexican culture. They've done so many things. They go to the public schools, many of the schools that they attended, and recruit students in to the university and say, 'This is a place. We will help you build community. We are here to support you.' And we diversified the programming on campus because they're performing all year round and then they do the two-hour show in the end of the year. There's so much work that they're doing and they have not even been recognized. We're fighting to try to get our stage, access to the stage. It's ridiculous."

Anyway, I gave them an earful of things to consider but said, "I will not take this job on because I think"—frankly, I just thought it just wasn't being done right. But I thought, I don't need any more battles to handle and by this time I was on senate committees like the Committee on Planning and Budget, that I needed to pay attention to. Those are heavy-duty meetings. You meet once a week for four hours. And you have a whole bunch of policies and issues to discuss and figure out and respond to. We were under, I think, Susan Gillman. She was great. She was a very organized and serious woman. It was a difficult experience. At first, it was intimidating. Because again, you get this homework of a binder and you're like, "Oh, my God. By next Thursday and I'm trying to teach?" It's crazy. But it was good.

And so, one of the things that I've learned in my life, the hard way, is that you have to say no sometimes. So, I just felt like, I'm going to have a headache with this diversity stuff. I feel like there's a lot of organization that needs to take place.

And I don't think the structure is going to let me do what I need to do. So I don't want to do it because it's not going to work. I finally learned, the hard way. But other times I would agree and—

**Zepeda:** You had that example of Las Mejicas and also the CLRC, and then also you helped establish LALS—

Nájera-Ramírez: Right.

**Zepeda:** So all this other work shows that you've been doing this diversity work.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah, I've been engaged in a lot of work that way anyway. And like I said, it's never been really talked about as diversity, but for Latin American studies of course it is, because the majority of the students are working-class Latino/Chicano students, Indigenous students. I would say those are the majors. And we service the university and provide a lot of courses. So I think there's been a lot of work that's in the spirit of diversity, in the spirit of Hispanic-serving institutions and it's not really overtly recognized or rewarded.

**Zepeda:** Definitely. So I wanted to ask you a little bit about anthropology and maintaining diversity within that space.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, that's an interesting conversation. During the time that I've been there, we—in terms of diverse faculty—we hired Nancy Chen, and we hired Jackie Brown, who was a black woman. And I remember for the Jackie Brown position that I recommended that we invite Pat Zavella to be on the committee. I don't think I was on the committee. I don't know why I recommended her. Good move. (laughs) I remember that one of the senior

faculty was a little bit resentful that we had brought an outside person. I said, “Well, she’s an anthropologist and it’s on race—I can’t remember what the categories were but one of the research areas was race. And I thought, we need somebody in there who does race work. So anyway, she participated in the search. She didn’t have a vote but she participated in the search. And that’s how we got Jackie Brown.

And let’s see—that’s as diverse as it got. And all of a sudden we started hiring—not that I don’t like them—but a lot of white people, and men. So that’s interesting, just in terms of the ratios and what’s going on. I guess Mayanthi Fernando, and I don’t know what her background is, isn’t a white person.

One of the things that I found disturbing was that when searches came around—I mean, everybody is very nice to me. They’ve always been nice to me. I’ve never felt overtly shunned or anything like that. But whenever we did a hiring, and we’ve done many hires in my time, I felt that some people’s worst sides came out. And when it was issues dealing with difference, particularly ethnic and color differences, and maybe class, but mostly ethnic and race, the comments that some of the faculty would make—I could just see a double standard, I mean, I really could. And the comments that people were entitled to say I thought in other places would be totally inappropriate—it was disturbing.

I remember somebody that was a candidate and his work is very well respected. But one of the comments was, “Well, he wears his ethnicity on his sleeve.” And I said, “Well, you really can’t hide your brown skin. (laughs) You really can’t hide whatever your features are.” It’s like—it was just so inappropriate. “And then

you want them not to talk about race? That's wearing it on his sleeve? We are, after all, anthropologists understanding issues of power and inequality." That is our—we had as our slogan, or our theme—culture and power, I think it was. I said, "You don't want us to talk about these issues? I mean, that's the whole point." I thought, god, if anthropology can't get it right, what are we going to think about math, where they are not as conscious of these kinds of themes in their work? I thought, my goodness. Anyway, it was very startling to see that line of thinking. It's disturbing to see the unfairness and the politics around hiring, sometimes not even active in individuals, but the way it plays out it's scary. You see a lot of that. So that has been disappointing. And it's in hires, I think, where all the nasty things can come out. I remember having to go have a drink after this. (laughter) I'm serious, after some of the meetings I was just appalled.

But I think in recent years the anthropology department, as a collective, has become less divisive. It's not politically charged, where you feel like you have to take sides, where at one point it was. I still wouldn't say that there is no discrimination. Again, I don't think it's overt. Maybe it's unintentional. You get socialized to think a certain way and you see that in people and it's hard to break through some of that. But you just see some unfair—"Like, are you realizing how you're talking? Are you realizing how you're making me feel? Are you even aware that this is such privileged way to speak? If there were numbers of me you might not be able to get away with saying this." And so, sometimes you have to retreat into silence because it's too much to take on. You're just not going to. You figure, well, what's at stake? Well, some things are really important and some

things are less important. Sometimes you have to—you know, basically you have to pick your battles. What can I fight and what is not worth getting crazy about?

**Zepeda:** Yes, that makes so much sense to me.

Nájera-Ramírez: Yeah.

**Zepeda:** And how about the diversity amongst the students, the graduate students?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, there I think that it's been a little bit better. I was grad director for almost four years. And during that time I could see my own effort in trying to increase the diversity. I think we've been pretty successful. One of the things that's hardest is that—well, if you look at graduate students as a category, it's very likely that the students of color are not going to perform so well on the GRE's. In our department, GREs are required, but it is up to us to figure out how much weight we want to give GREs. So being on the committee is an opportunity to remind people: well, even working-class students who have attended average schools or substandard schools are not going to do so well as the privileged white middle-class students. So we can't take those things so seriously. Let's look at—maybe GPA is better. But were they working full time? There are all kinds of things to look at.

I feel like we've done a decent job, not a great job but a decent job. There are students from different ethnic backgrounds and language abilities. What the politics are internally in how well they get along—I do know that students of color tend to align with each other. I know that there are still some feelings that

maybe the faculty don't understand how they're making the students feel discriminated against and it's a very difficult space for students to confront. I think very few times have they fully confronted. Maybe they try to sidestep, or come and get counseling, get advice—like how do I handle this situation? This is how I feel. That can be scary, but—

As a department, we do not admit graduate students by faculty preference. In some universities, in order to get into a program, one of the faculty will get to pick a student and they get to pick their student. Well, we don't do it that way. We pick a collective group of four or five students and then we assign them a mentor. If we can find a mentor that matches, and a faculty member who is willing to work with that student, that's great, but the students always have the flexibility of switching. And so that's a way that if we made a match and it wasn't that great, personality-wise or research-wise, they can make that change.

But in my case, that was one of the historic things. When I first came on board, I was given the Chicano/Latino or of-color students. Some of these were students that had been matched to other people and were difficult. So that was a chore. This is not really my area or this student is—we're not really on the same page, different kinds of reasons. But anyway, somehow we would manage.

Through the CLRC we were able to give our students a lot of support. I know that when we went to conferences, other students who were not UCSC students or were not affiliated with the CLRC would say, they talked to [our students] and said, "You guys always—your faculty are organizing panels and if they don't organize the panels with you, they're there supporting you." We were

really there making ourselves visible and cheering them on and everything. I think that was really powerful. I'm proud that we could do that. We have a good track record with our graduate students.

**Zepeda:** I think that's the amazing part of hearing your story, too. I'm remembering all the pieces of the first time that we met and you shared your own biography with me. And then, to hear how it all happened for you. It's so powerful. And then, to hear you also say, "This is how I feel about my writing." I'm thinking also about the folks who will hear this. How powerful of a story, to know that you keep going despite all of those things that can get in the way—

Nájera-Ramírez: Oh, yeah.

**Zepeda:** —or that can take us off course.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, there are a lot of pitfalls. There are a lot of obstacles. There are some things that are institutionally unfair and we're not going to reverse them. I think that's the hardest thing for me to see. I tell my students, "You can't take all of these things personally. Because there're battles that you don't know about. There's politica; there's movidas. And it's going to affect you whether you deserve it or not, and whether you even know about it. So, when you don't get selected, you don't know what the conversation was like. You don't know what people brought out to make something happen or not happen. And when other people get in, you don't know what palancas they had, how they got in. And when you look at it, it's going to seem very unfair. And I've seen it. So, you just have to toughen up because some things we're not going to change, at least overnight. But you have to not let it demoralize you to the point

that you think you're not a worthy scholar. You are a worthy scholar. But these things are real and they will be things that you have to confront. So you need to build alliances; you need to keep trying. And don't let it get you down, because it can happen but it's just that there is still a lot of stuff.

**Zepeda:** In the institution.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** There is. It's scary.

**Zepeda:** It is. Well, thank you, Olga.

### More on CLRC

**Zepeda:** So, welcome back, Olga, for our third interview. Today is May 30, 2013 and we're at Olga's house in Santa Cruz. I'm Susy Zepeda with the Regional History Project. I wanted to start today to see if we could rewind a little bit from our conversation last time about the Chicano/Latino Research Center, and if I could ask you a little bit more about the *Chicana Feminisms* book project, because that seemed very important.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Okay. Yes.

**Zepeda:** So if you could speak about how that project came about, the inspiration for it—

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Okay, well, to the best of my recollection, the book project emerged in the hands, basically, of Aida Hurtado, in psychology, then. I'm not sure if she was singlehandedly the only person, but I remember that it was attached to a series that she had, a lecture series on Chicana feminisms. So that's

what I remember. And then, there was a Chicana feminisms cluster that I didn't belong to at first. And if I recall, I think it was people like Keta Miranda and Pat Zavella and Aida [Hurtado]—I don't remember who all the other women were. But the lecture series proved to be very provocative. It stimulated a lot of energy. I'm not sure if the *Chicana Feminisms* coincided with the cluster or if it came after the fact. But basically, it wasn't in my hands. It was in their hands, and Aida being the principal person.

So then they developed the cluster and I guess at some point I got involved in the cluster. I wasn't even part of the group. But I remember that they invited me, "they" being Pat and Aida, to contribute a chapter, and Norma Klahn also.

So, I looked through my material and thought, what do I have that's even relevant? And I had two. I had one on escaramuzas, the women who mount in the charreada, and I had this paper that I had been writing in pieces, in fact it started to come together when I was in the melodrama group. I remember thinking that one way to conceive of the ranchera was as a melodramatic form. But I had pieces of it and I had shoved it one of my files. I told them about the project and they said, "Well, we kind of like the idea of the ranchera." I said, okay. So I took it out of the cabinet and started working it up.

And then, I guess at the same time they had invited me to be part of the editors. There were four original editors—Pat Zavella, Aida Hurtado, Norma Klahn, and myself. We used to call ourselves the M&M's, which was a name that we borrowed from another cluster that I was in with this woman, I can't remember her name right now, but she was a visiting professor entertaining the idea of

becoming the provost. So somehow she ended up in the cluster and she even came up with the name Las Meras Machas. So then, we borrowed the name and the four of us, not the cluster, but the four of us, would get together on Friday mornings and have breakfast. And meet and kind of collaborate about the book but really, it was more of a—like a socializing, professional—we'd talk about everything from home to career. Somehow, along the way, Gabi [Gabriela Arredondo] came along and we decided to invite her to be the fifth editor.

And when we started getting serious about the book, we did a Call for Papers and we decided that it would have a respondent that was not a Chicana, for each paper, so we could have a dialogue. Because we thought that was part of our process and we wanted to exemplify it in the book. So that's how we went about doing it.

I remember that we spent a lot of time creating the introduction. I think Aida had a draft and then there were other drafts. And then we sat there and we did a lot of talking, a lot of meeting, and really worked up the introduction. I don't know how long it took us.

But it was a wonderful event because—I don't know if you saw my Facebook picture that I put the other day—at the end of the process, when it was published, we did a book launch on campus. And we invited most of the women who had written, not all the respondents (I mean, we invited them but they couldn't come) but the original authors were there. And it was quite a number of us, I can't remember how many, like fifteen, maybe more.

It was a really good unifying project and we realized that there were lots of different ways that people learn about feminism, and that's why it has the "S" in it. I had not personally really been involved in reading the scholarship on feminism, but I had my opinions and I had lived experience. We thought, there are different ways, different avenues through which people become feminists, and their perspectives, and our book should reflect the various types. And what we liked about the group—there were different generations—and we were from different regions. Even though we were all Chicanas in some form or fashion, we also had very different family lives and growing up experiences. The book was going to reflect that process, that variation. I think in that way it's been very successful. I was very happy with it. It took us a long time, as all edited projects do.

**Zepeda:** Right. So was it in the collaborations and in the Friday meetings that you learned all these pieces about each other?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, we had known each other for a while but I think it provoked reflection on how we got to be where we are, and what it is that we know about our process and each other in terms of our attachments to feminist projects, and also about Chicanidad. That was the other thing. Because all of us were on this side of the border, even though some people were born there and had different kinds of relationships—like my family—born here but always connected to Mexico through family and then friends. So it was a variety of responses.

**Zepeda:** Thank you for sharing about that. I also wanted to ask about the paper series.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Oh, okay. We decided that there would be a working paper series. The basic source for the working papers were presentations that we had through the Chicano/Latino Research Center. So sometimes the presentations were, if we had a series, like the Chicana feminisms project that Aida had. But we had a variety of different, weekly, or every two weeks, Thursday talks for the CLRC. And we would encourage people to work it up as a paper. So part of the process was to produce a paper for the working paper series. And also, we had conferences. That was another source. But also people had projects that they wanted to share, that was the site.

I think it was pretty good. I don't remember how many different series we had of the papers, but I know I have at least one or two there [in the CLRC working paper series]. So I think most people went through that process. And it was a way to encourage people to get their work out, let it circulate, and get feedback.

**Zepeda:** So was that also a mentoring tool, do you think?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, I don't think so much mentoring, although it might have happened with some graduate students. I think it was more of a sharing and a collaboration, like opening up your paper, which is maybe rooted in a particular discipline, but seeing how people outside of your discipline might respond, or what kinds of gaps, or what kinds of issues they might come up with. So, I think that was really a strength. So, for example, when I did my work on the charreada, it was wonderful to get people who were doing film, who were doing

history, who were doing feminism, or whatever, that could bring something, to make sure that in my coverage I was being attentive to various perspectives. So that was really enriching, I think.

**Zepeda:** So it reflects back the strength of the Chicano/Latino Research Center.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah, that pulling together of people who were very sensitive to differences but also well informed in their own disciplines and could bring that to each other. We had, I thought, very, very good dialogues and we had a lot of very interesting projects. I think that crossdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and transborder kind of perspective came at a really good time for us. And like I said, it even generated a new vision for the Latin American studies program. So it was just a really wonderful idea.

**Zepeda:** So I wonder now—I mean, probably the working paper series is not happening.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Right.

**Zepeda:** That's probably at a pause because the Center is at a pause.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Right, so everything is at a pause. I really have to hand it to Gabi for stretching the last few pennies that we had to make it possible to keep the CLRC open as long as it did, because it was open all the way into the fall [of 2012]. And then we officially went on a hiatus. But by this time she was really operating with a shoestring budget. Because there used to be some monies through UCOP that were the first monies. And as I said before, Norma Klahn and Pedro Castillo heard about those monies and said, "We should use them."

So that's how we came up with the CLRC. So that was a big part of the money. And then we got support from the dean of humanities and the dean of social sciences, and then the graduate dean. And slowly, over the years, those monies have disappeared, to the point of zero, at this moment. It's really sad, really, really sad.<sup>8</sup>

**Zepeda:** It is. Because it's such an asset.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** It really—I think for its small money, it was very generative. It was a good use of money.

**Zepeda:** Yes, especially because sometimes, like you're saying, all it took was gathering people in a space to collaborate and bringing those minds of people who were rooted in their strengths, together.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Right, and then that's when the mentoring aspect really kicked in, because we were able to mentor younger scholars. We were able to mentor our graduate students, who benefitted a lot, I think, and they always say that. And then even the undergraduates, through the URAP program.

**Zepeda:** Exactly. So I wanted to now shift gears. You have two amazing research-based documentaries and I wanted to ask you about the connection

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<sup>8</sup> CLRC opened again in Fall 2013 under the leadership of Cat Ramirez—Editor.

between your fieldwork, your fieldwork in Mexico, and then your documentaries?

### Documentary Projects

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Okay. Well, actually they're not connected to the original research, not to previous research. I did the documentary on charrería in the early nineties. And that was really because I had this idea about Mexican rodeo and how important it was. And, of course, it's related a little bit to folklórico in terms of the Jalisco region, the costumes, and things like that. But I had a brother-in-law who was a practicing charro. And because I teach classes on popular culture and folklore, I thought, we need material, visual material, so I could show the students what it looks like, these lived practices, that they're not just something that happened in the past or that you see in movies. They're still active and some of them even being brought up again, sort of recuperated.

So through my—he's my compadre—through him, I met the community here. But I had this idea that maybe I should do a documentary because I thought this would be great. I know why I came up with the documentary. I had worked with someone on a folklórico video and I was the consultant to produce the research. I did a lot of research and gave it to them. I was not happy with the results. It was not the way I would have done a project. But I thought, well, I did what I was contracted to do and fine. It got a lot of exposure because they put it on TV. I think they went through PBS, or something. And people that I hadn't talked to in a lot of years actually saw it. I actually never saw it on TV, curiously, but this was based in Texas, so maybe it just aired there.

In any case, it did give me the idea that documentaries were wonderful ways of making the research available to a broader audience. I thought, this would be great. And I thought, because it's so action-filled, it would be nice to produce a documentary where I could capture how it looks, what it feels like—the music, and the whole scenario. I thought, it would really be a wonderful component to the larger research on charrería, because I ended up writing a variety of articles that were related to the practice.

So anyway, I encountered a man that was at Kerr Hall, and he happened to be a film[maker]. He was a little bit assertive but I naively took him up on his offer to work with me. So I started writing for funds and did the project proposal and all of that. And I ended up getting funded from UC MEXUS, ten thousand dollars, but still, it was more than I had. So I felt like I needed to get started. I was, in the meantime, trying to write grants and trying to do the project.

The other component was I was still untenured. This is when I was also working on a book. So I don't know what I was thinking, to do a completely different project— And I had Elisa [my daughter]—I mean, I think she was like, two. And I had eye surgery because I found out I had cataracts. I remember that when I was typing up the UC MEXUS proposal my sister had to help me because I couldn't really see. I was having eye surgery. And then because my doctor was leaving within a month, they did the other eye within a month. And here I was thinking I was going to wait until the summer.

So anyway, all these complicating factors. But I got the grant and so I thought, okay, let's get started. So I started doing the project and the base was here in

Sunol, which is right near the Livermore area. So it was something I could go to. And the practice, they had their charreadas held on Sundays. So I would go and interview people, sometimes off camera, sometimes with the camera. And that got me connected to the statewide and it got me connected to the nationals, which were in Las Cruces. So through that, mostly the camera work was done in Sunol. And then they invited us to go to the nationals—well, they didn't invite us—they said they were doing the nationals and I asked if we could go and they said yes.

So I flew a small crew of three people and we went to Las Cruces. But one of the problems was that I was very inexperienced and the cameraman, who had done previous documentaries, wanted his vision to be the lead. And I said, "No. I'm hiring you. I will pay you but it's going to be my way. If I flop, I'm going to flop on my terms. I'm not going to do it your way. It's not your project."

So we had—every time I went to do these interviews I felt so bad. I would come home just a nervous wreck because he really would not listen to me. And the last straw was when—well, that wasn't the last straw, but one of the times that was very difficult was when we were in New Mexico and he did not want to go do an interview at this man's house. I said, "Yes, we need to go. I want to do it." He just didn't think it was important. I said, "Look, I'm not asking for your opinion. I'm asking you to follow through with the contract, which is you came to do the film and so you film what I ask you to film, and never mind if you think it's a good idea or not." He was just very stubborn and I was very inexperienced, as I said. But luckily, the woman that he had selected to come with us to do the

lighting was on better terms and she basically said, "Come on, don't be a fool." Por no decir peor. So he reluctantly went. And, of course, it turned out to be a wonderful opportunity. This man had a lot to say and was very comfortable in front of the camera and he is featured very much in the film.

So anyway, so we did that. And it was just going downhill. He used to store my material in the Social Science Media Lab, because he was part of it in some way. I needed my material and he goes, "Well, let me see if I can get to it." So finally I thought, you know what? I'm done. I want that material and I'm going to get it right now. And I don't want any excuses, like I have to go through you to get permission to get my material. So I just went, put everything in my car, and I just said, "It's over." I told myself, if I have to shelve it for years that's just too bad.

So I left it, literally, on my bookshelf and resumed my other activities, which were teaching and my book. And then I started feeling guilty, because when you get a grant you're supposed to write a report to tell them how you spent the money. (laughs) And I thought, oh, my god, I'm going to get in trouble. I really better do something with it.

So after it was dormant for a year I hired one of our graduate students, who didn't really know about charros, but she knew about Mexico; she had lived there. And she was a photographer, in her sort of side job and had been a journalist. So I thought, well, I need somebody who has a fresh eye. So I hired her and our job was to put together a rough cut. This was a year after it had been laying on my shelf. It was in analog so we worked hours and hours over the

summer and managed to pull together some version of a rough draft. I didn't know what to do next. And she went and did whatever she needed to do.

But I needed to figure out the next step. So I decided to contact people whose work I admired and one of them was Paul Espinosa. I'd never met the man, even though he actually had been on campus for talks and for some reason I'd just never met him. And so I emailed him and told him what I was doing and could he give me some suggestions? I said, "I have a rough cut. I don't know how good it is. My goal is to get it to here. And in the meanwhile I'm trying to get money." I also had gotten little core grants in the social sciences division, little grants.

He recommended that I send it to a PBS station and let someone there look at it and give me their opinion. I said, okay. And he said, "Well, actually I know a man at KTEH in San Jose and you could contact him and tell him I recommended that he speak to you." So I called him up and he said, "Okay, well, send me the rough cut and I'll let you know what I think." I was really just asking for criticism, constructive criticism, and to figure out what the next step was.

So he contacted me and said, "You know, actually, I find it very interesting. It does need work. Right now it's a lot of talking heads. But I would encourage you to continue." I said, "Well, that's great. I just need to get some funding." Anyway, to make a long story short, he basically offered to finance the editing part, which they would do at KTEH, and we would do it through them. He said, "We don't have anything on Chicanos. We don't have anything on local area residents and this would be a good project for the station."

So we started collaborating. He was very, very, very busy. But we'd squeeze in moments here and there. And so that's how we ended up getting the project done. And then I thought, okay, now what do I do? I need to sell it or something. I looked through the University Extension and they offered to distribute it for \$300 and I thought, no! The community will never get it.

So we ended up getting it launched on PBS and that was with the help of Danny McGuire. He said, "Well, you know, we don't really do this but every now and then we distribute some films. So we can do it at cost." I had said I don't want make any profit. And I went to the university and they said, "Well, if you sell it we're going to be entitled to 50 percent." I said, "Okay, well since we're only selling it at cost, there is no profit. We're just selling it for the price it takes to produce the (back then it was video) to get the video and to duplicate it and to mail it." So that's all. We were just doing it at cost. So I was able to sell it for under twenty bucks. And they'd distribute it for me. So it was a little bit tedious because it wasn't like they had a flashy distributor. But at the end of the video it said, "To purchase this copy, contact KTEH." And then I announced it over email and I even gave people permission to copy it right off the TV when it aired.

So that was project number one. And then I thought, I will never do this project again. I am done. (laughs)

**Zepeda:** (laughs)

**Nájera-Ramírez:** So that was project number one. And then the second project emerged because I really admired the work of Maestro Zamarripa. He had influenced so many people, but he was also conscious of his artistic endeavor

and was someone who could really tell us how this all came about. He had trained with the master teachers of the time and was around when folklorico as a performance form was being developed. I thought, oh, my god. I told him that he should write his story. People were curious about who this man was. Those of us who knew him, knew him from personal experience and contact, but there really wasn't anything written on him.

And he says, "You know, Olga, a lot of people have approached me and usually they come up with a one-page summary for the newspaper. But I personally don't have time because I'm an artist and I dedicate my second half of life to the dancing and the directorship," that he had at the university. But he said, "But you should do it. You're a writer and an anthropologist. This could be a project for you if you want to do it."

I thought, no way. I was flattered that he thought I could do it but I was intimidated by the fact that—you know, if I wrote something he would read it. (laughs) And if I did a bad job, I would embarrass him.

Years passed. This was in 1997 when we had this conversation. And the more I thought about it, the more I thought, you know, nobody's writing anything. And it would be a shame to lose all of his knowledge and all of this. So I conceived of a project to tell the story of how folklorico emerged as a genre and that Zamarripa would be the person who I would tap for information, while interviewing others, but that he would be the character that would move the story along.

It turned out to be a great idea because he was very well informed, very willing to do the interviews with me, and so many people knew him that I could think of millions of people that I could interview. I had contacted my previous instructors in Guadalajara who had danced with him in the days he started the university group. They were very generous—"Oh, yes, come!" One of my teachers, who I had not seen in years, gave me, I swear she gave me twenty or more names of people that were potential [narrators]. So I amassed this large list between what she gave me and what I thought.

And then by this time I had hired Russell [Rodriguez]. And then we decided that we would do some shoots in different sites and try to get a cross-border dialogue involved for the project. I realized that it had to be a documentary because there was no way to showcase his art—maybe for the sculptures I could take pictures—but the choreographies—I thought they're not really going to give full sense of the artistic work that he does.

So it occurred to me that maybe I should visit the documentary world again. But by this time, ten years later, analog was old school and everything was going to digital. So what little I had learned to do in editing was out the window completely. And it's like, okay, now I have to learn a new system. So I thought, well, I'm going to have to learn how to do this. So I thought, this time I'm going to ask a lot of questions before I hire anybody.

So I went back to my friend Danny McGuire, who by this time was at KQED. And we had long conversations. Then I consulted with the Media Lab boys—I call them "the boys"—men. But they're always full of ideas. And then I

acquainted myself more deeply with Gustavo Vásquez, who was a film person on campus. He was a junior scholar. He wasn't even tenured at the time. I went to visit him and he said, "Oh Olga, it's not that hard. You could learn it." I said, "I don't think so." Anyway, he encouraged me to do it. He said, "I'll even help you to learn to do Final Cut [Pro]. It's not that hard."

And so again, this time, learning from my previous mistake, I was going to ask questions, figure out who I was going to hire, and be very clear about what the project is and what I want and what I'm contracting them to do. So the second time I started taking some Final Cut classes at the university. And there was a service—they would come and train faculty for a couple of weeks. It wasn't a lot but I took advantage of every single thing to learn a little bit about it, still thinking I was going to hire an editor. And Gustavo said, "No, Olga. You have to do it. It's going to have to be your voice. I will give you some extra tips and some lessons if you want."

So I thought, okay, here it goes. So I started learning how to do Final Cut, not very well, but enough to where I could actually weave stuff together. Anyway, we went and did the shoots and I had all of this material and with the help of the Social Sciences Media Lab they transferred my tapes onto VHS. And we started doing the transcriptions and the translations, etcetera.

Then it was my job to produce a first rough cut. So I decided I was going to do chapters. First, there are a million chapters. But anyway, so I go through the process. And then it comes to the point where, okay, now it can't just be in my hands because I don't know enough.

So I decided to hire an editor and I wanted Marc Ramos, who was more than willing but the division didn't allow him to work beyond his hours that were contracted for the Social Sciences Media Lab. Marc was very generous. He said, "I'll do it, Olga. I'll do it for free." I said, "No, you're not going to do it for free." I said, "If we do it after 5:00, I'll pay you out of pocket." So he told me what he wanted, very cheap, \$25 an hour. So I said fine, I would just write him a check. And since he was the carpool man for the van, on the days he stayed to work with me I would drive him home, because he didn't have a car. But, to me, it was worth it because I thought, I'm getting somebody who is very interested in my project, who is very respectful and very smart and excited about an opportunity, because he really didn't do this fully. He did small projects. So for him it was exciting, at least that's what he told me, to actually test his skills and learn new ones and everything.

So then I hired Juan Mejia, who was a Soc Doc [Social Documentary] student. I'm not sure if he had already graduated or not. He happened to be married to one of our graduate students. So I figured, well, this is a win-win situation because I'm supporting a graduate student who is connected to one of our grad students. And he was good, sweet, except that his wife started doing fieldwork in Colombia. So first, they moved to New Mexico and we were trying to do this long-distance relationship. Then he moved to Colombia and I thought, this is a disaster, because there was just too much time in between. So we did a little bit of work together and eventually it was just too complicated to do it long distance.

By this time, the university came up with a different scheme, and they allowed me to, if there was time in the Media Lab, that Kevin, his superior, could release him for, I would pay the unit and he could do the work. So we worked out this other system. And he could also do over[time] hours and it was still going back to social sciences. The division approved that process. It didn't mean that Marc made any more money, but he was still getting credit for the work, as if he was working at the Social Sciences Media Lab.

So anyway, then Marc took over. Then Russell, who had been my research assistant, was definitely the man for the music. And so in the meantime he's over here composing music. I'd say, "Russell, I need music that sounds like this—" And we decided that it was better, because of all the copyrighted material, if Russell would come up with some music for me. So he actually created pieces. I said, "I want a song that sounds kind of like it's Santana and I want it to be like this, you know, kind of like this and that." And then he'd go and compose a song for me. So in the 1970s piece—you could only do this if you have an awesomely talented partner—so in the piece for the 1970s I kind of wanted a Santana feel because that was very much the music that was in vogue with the Chicano movement. So Russell created this song and he actually sings it and everything. And he let me hear it! I said, "I need a little bit more of this." He did it! Anyway, so—

**Zepeda:** That's amazing, to create original music—

**Nájera-Ramírez:** I know, to create music. So he was in charge of all the music—he contracted with musicians to record some stuff. I wanted some pieces that

were [interrupted by someone coming into the house] I wanted some mood music too. There's a part when Zamarripa is talking about going to the theater and discovering the Escuela de Artes Plasticas, which is where he started to learn to dance. And so Russell contracted this musician friend of his, because he's very well networked in the Bay Area in particular, but really, all over the place. So he did this very nice—I forget what it's called—but he did a really nice and we put it in for the mood. So it wasn't all folklorico music.

Anyway, to me, the music added so much texture to the film. The one song that Russell had recorded, which is the theme song for the film, the song "El Son del Barrio," he had recorded that when he was in a band called Los Otros. When I first heard that song, I told Russell, "I'm going to do something with that song. I'm going to try to choreograph a dance." Well, I never did the dance but I liked that song and I used it for the theme song for the film. So that was one that he had already recorded. And then there's a piece that we have that Martha Gonzalez from Quetzal did and he hired them to do some of the pieces with him. He was doing all the recording—composing, selecting the artists, recording them, the whole shabang.

And then we sat through, over an entire summer, maybe before summer, to actually figure out where the music fit. So while I'm editing the film and making scenes tighter, Russell is throwing in the music. And Marc is there doing all the actual: here's where it goes, there's where it goes. We had a lot of fun. We bonded a lot over the project. It became a pleasure. I thought, what a difference, when last time I was sweating bullets, I was angry, and that whole thing.

Anyway, so the process was just so much more fun. We were all engaged and I thought the project was good.

Zamarripa never wanted to see it, even though I kept calling him and getting material. I would call him up and ask him to send me material, or go down and pick up material. One time I went and tried to show him the rough cut and he said he didn't really want to see it. I was a little bit hurt because I thought, I worked my butt off to get the rough cut ready and now he doesn't want to see it. He said he didn't really want to interfere with my artistic process. That's what he told me. I thought, well, I guess I can see that. And it's awfully nice of him to give me full reign.

But by the time it was almost done, I thought, I can't just go show this without him looking at it. So Russell and I caught up with him, made an appointment. He was doing a workshop in Las Cruces, and I thought, well, it's easier for us and cheaper to fly to Las Cruces. And we requested an appointment, which he granted, and we went and showed him the film.

I remember it was in my hotel room and I took an LCD projector so he could see the whole thing on the wall. I had put a chair for him to watch—so I positioned myself between Zamarripa and the wall, so I could watch what he was watching and read his behavior and write his comments down and everything. And in the end, it wasn't completely done but it was pretty close to done, he actually was very positive about it. We talked a little bit about it and then I had to vacate my room.

Then we went out to lunch and we had extensive conversation and he was telling me what he liked about it. He said, "Well, first of all, there's nothing like this. I think it's important that you document this history of folklorico because Amalia Hernandez has already died and the story has not been told, or maybe it's been told but it hasn't been written down or recorded in any other fashion." And then he also liked that I talked to people who knew him, that had been either his dancing partners, or had been members of his group, or his collection of maestros that he trained. And then his current students. He goes, "I think it's nice that it's grounded in people's lived experience as folklorico dancers and not focusing on folklorico or even dance critics."

So we looked at it and I said, "We're going to try to set a date for the premiere and I want you to come to UCSC." So we launched the project in March and he faithfully came and he brought his two assistants and we did the premiere, which was a really exciting thing for me. I didn't want to charge money because I wanted people to come. But at the same time, when I talked to the university ticket people they said, "You know it's really good to charge even a small amount because otherwise people forget that they're coming. They don't take it seriously. So, even if you just charge three dollars, people have a ticket and they'll remember to come. And it's also good for crowd control, because you never know if you're going to get too many people."

So we sold the tickets. The profit was going to be three dollars. So it was six dollars for the tickets to come. Because I wanted to encourage attendance, but at the same time I wanted to recognize the numerous people who had been

supportive, even cheering me on and supporting me. In the Pop Culture [cluster] they had seen a draft of it, and things like that. So about half the tickets went to my friends and colleagues and students. I thought, that's fine, because it wasn't really a money-making project. And then the other half was sold to the public who wanted to come. We sold out. Every seat was taken.

We showed the film and then we did a little reception and then the following day he stayed and did a workshop for Mejicas. Then I drove him to the airport and sent him home.

But when he was here, they were staying at the hotel, the Dream Inn, and he wanted to go to an art store because he's an artist, so to pick up some materials. He asked them to wrap them all up and so the next day—this was Saturday—and then Sunday I was going to pick them up with him, drove him to pick them up. And he showed me this big picture, which was that picture right there. [points at a picture on the wall] I said, "Oh, that's beautiful!" And he goes, "That's for you." I said, "What? When did you get it?" He goes, "I made it. Yesterday when you—" I just started crying. (laughs) Because I always wanted one of his pieces of art. I did buy one picture that has a drummer, because he went to Africa and he painted that when he was there. And I bought a piece of jewelry that he made, because he is also doing jewelry now. But he made that for me and I was so thrilled.

**Zepeda:** So how can we describe this for the tape?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, it's a picture of a woman with flowing hair and I thought it was one of his pictures, just something from his imagination. I said, "How did

you do it so fast?" And he said, "Because I had the idea. I had been developing the concept in my head. So when I bought the paper I just transferred my idea. That's why it was so fast." But people who have come have said, "Who did that painting of you?" I've said, "That's me?" And they go, "Yes!" And I've said, "Oh, I didn't really see it." I guess if you look, there is some resemblance, in the full lips and the kind of wild hair.

**Zepeda:** Yes.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** But I never even realized that that's who it's supposed to be. And everybody tells me, "Of course, Olga. It's an artistic rendition. It's not supposed to be identical. But that's you." I thought, wow! So now I liked the picture even more because I never—you know. It was really cool.

**Zepeda:** Yeah. I wanted to ask a clarifying question. Where's Las Cruces?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Las Cruces, New Mexico.

**Zepeda:** Okay. So Las Cruces was part of your first one and your second one.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yes, actually. I never thought of that connection. The first one, it was because the national charreada competition in the U.S. was going to be in Las Cruces. So whoever wins there gets to go compete in the Mexican nationals. So it happened to be in Las Cruces. But for the Zamarripa project, Las Cruces has a mariachi festival every year. And most mariachi festivals, or many of them, have dance workshops. And, of course, they focus a lot on Jalisco because mariachi is the music for Jalisco. So Las Cruces and Tucson have been featuring

the mariachi festival, with workshops led by Zamarripa. Sometimes they hire other teachers too, but he's always the primary one. So that was the case there.

**Zepeda:** It seems remarkable that you have these two documentaries that are out, and in both cases they're images and histories that haven't been told. So, if I could get your perspective on what it means for you as a Chicana scholar-anthropologist to be doing this work and to see your research out there, but in a visual form—

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, I think it's very gratifying. There was a lot of bitterness with the first film because of the whole fiasco I had with this person. I don't really sever ties with people very often, maybe like three times in my life, and that was one I had to sever. And also, because initially I had a vision of it being an hour long and it became it became sort of a salvage project, trying to salvage what I could.

With charros, it's a very well-known event. The history of charrería has been recorded by the charro practitioners, the officials, the schools. So there are these beautiful coffee table kind of books that talk about charrería, but it's not done academically. So there hadn't been tons of academic studies on charrería. There were a couple that were coming up in Mexico but a lot of them are popular-audience kind of books. And they've been featured in films and all kinds of things. So that history was there to be excavated and published but it really hadn't been done very thoroughly. There were some books, and, of course, in Spanish I found all kinds of stuff. Sadly, I was planning to do a book, but I got scooped. A woman in Arizona or New Mexico wrote a book on charrería. That

was going to be a longer-term goal, but when she published her book I thought, well, there goes my book. I could still do it and it would be different, but—

Anyway, what I did for the first documentary was I published a series of articles. So I figured as a constellation of materials there was a project on charrería, which at some point if I ever really wanted to, I could pull together. So, to me, it was really nice because this history is not available in English, or in the U.S., and when people saw it on TV I got a lot of compliments on it.

I just showed it, of all places, at this Watsonville film festival last year, because they didn't care how old the project was. Some of the people that I know contacted me and said, "Olga, do you want to submit your films?" So I submitted them both and they picked the charro film to screen at the festival. So it was really nice and again it got good feedback. So that felt gratifying.

But I think the one I'm the proudest of is the second project, because I think that I had a very clear idea, much clearer, of what I wanted to accomplish, who I wanted to talk to, and what needed to be in there, and what I wanted for the music. I had a much crisper idea. I think, having done the first one, my concept was much clearer and I knew who to contact to work with me. So I think all the collaborative efforts that were necessary were built around people that I knew. Because I didn't know the charro world. I knew the dance world. So I was able to hook up with all the important components, if you will.

And there's nothing done like this on folklórico. There's no project like this on Amalia Hernández. When I featured it in Mexico—well, I showed it several times in Mexico—but the first time I showed it was awesome. It was where he lives

now. The theater was packed and it was just amazing. To me, it was like, this is my moment of glory. It was like winning the Oscars or something, you know, for me. (laughs) I thought, this has to be one of the highlights of my professional career.

**Zepeda:** (laughs)

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Because I never imagined when I was dancing folklórico and met Zamarripa and had such respect for him that I would one day be sitting right next to him glowing at this thing that I did. I never had that— And Russell was there too, who had known Zamarripa pretty much as long as I had. So it was a really good moment. I remember some of my friends from Guadalajara, with whom I had danced, did a little road trip and came to be there for the event. It was really awesome. We ended up spending the whole weekend together and that was a marvelous moment.

Then I showed it in Guadalajara, and what was significant for me there was that the maestros that I had interviewed in the project, and didn't go to either of the previews or the premieres were there, and they're still running the dance school. They thought, why didn't we think of doing something like this? It's so obvious that this should have been done. Because they're trying to record the history of the school. So this was a big contribution to their efforts. But they thought, we should have thought of interviewing people and documenting. They really liked it and, of course, acknowledged that I had been one of the students there. So that was really nice.

I think the event could have been better organized. For some reason, the man who took this on didn't understand what the project was. So even though he invited us, he was not fully supporting the event. So he didn't do a very good job of promoting it and Zamarripa was a little disappointed. I was disappointed but I was so happy to be with all my friends, I got over it. (laughs)

But every time I show it people react very positively. I just showed it about two weeks ago in Rosa-Linda's class. She really liked the film. The students were engaged. In fact, two of the students decided to—they're doing Wikipedia entries, apparently, for Rosa-Linda's class, and two people selected to do a Wikipedia entry for Zamarripa. They noticed that there was a little paragraph and that's it. So they took it upon themselves to get material. They came to see me and I told them, "Well, there really isn't a lot of material, which is why I was inspired to do this. But I did start a biography which I haven't gotten back to. He's going to be tickled that you guys are doing a Wikipedia entry. This is really cool." So they're using my video as a primary source and they interviewed me. There's a book he gifted to UCSC, a dance critic did one of those coffee table books on his dance group, but of course it features it a little bit about him. It's a beautiful glossy picture book but it doesn't go into depth about anything in particular. But it's still beautiful.

**Zepeda:** So you mentioned Amalia Hernandez.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yes, she is the person who founded the Ballet Folklórico de México. And she is the one who really promoted this vision of doing these theatrical performances based on Mexican folklore. She's not the person to think

of it; she's the one who made it popular in the fifties. Zamarripa trained with her for a period of time. So she's really, if you will, the major figure. I actually wrote an article for this book called *Icons of Mexico*, or something like that, and they asked me to do Ballet Folklórico, and I thought they meant the style of dance, so I did my project. And then the guy who wrote me back goes, "But I wanted you talk about Amalia. That's what I meant by Ballet Folklórico." So I added the Amalia Hernandez portion. She's passed away now. I think she passed away early in this millennium. I can't remember when she died but it wasn't that long ago. Her company is still alive and well. They perform in Bellas Artes for the tourists, I think Wednesdays and Sundays, and then they have a traveling company that tours. She was promoted by the government to start attracting tourism to Mexico. That was back in the late fifties.

**Zepeda:** And the other thing I wanted to ask you about was the visit of Zamarripa with Las Mejicas.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Oh! It was wonderful. He's had back issues lately. But when he came, he brought his two assistants, the assistant director and another assistant teacher. He actually ran the workshop but they were doing all the exercises and getting on the floor. But he's hilarious. He gets the students engaged in doing different—learning how to do body, controlling their body. So he did a lot of those kinds of exercises. And then he was doing some danza stuff. He really wasn't teaching them a particular dance. He was having them work with their bodies. We took a big picture at the end.

**Zepeda:** And did the students make any comments?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Oh, they loved it. They loved it. I think the first time he was here—he received the Tinker from Stanford and was there for a year. That was the time that I brought him to do a lecture and I invited him as our special guest for the 25th anniversary, and that’s when we had that conversation [where] I was telling him, “You should write your story,” and that’s when he told me to do it.

**Zepeda:** The 25th anniversary—

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Las Mejicas had a 25th anniversary celebration in 1997. And Zamarripa happened to be here at Stanford, so I invited him down to do a lecture just for Mejicas, open to the public, but targeting them. Then I invited him to come and be our guest of honor for the 25th anniversary. MRC Greenwood was chancellor at the time and she, at my request, hosted a reception. So she sat next to Zamarripa in the theater. Then he went to the reception. And then he hopped back to Stanford. But he told me later, “Why didn’t you ask me to do a workshop?” I said, “Well, I didn’t want to—you know—bother you.” So at this one I contracted him to do a workshop for the students. And they really liked it. It was really phenomenal.

**Zepeda:** Do they get the depth of who [he is]—I mean, do the Mejicas really—

**Nájera-Ramírez:** I think some of them do and some of them don’t. Because, sadly, a lot of people don’t know the history. Like, a lot of them were dancing choreographies that he did and had no idea he’s the one who choreographed them.

**Zepeda:** Wow.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah, like they're going to do corridos. That is his choreography. And that's the image that I have for my film—like if you see back there—[points to an image hanging on the wall that features a dance scene from the documentary]. He was the first one to do the corridos. Mejicas are dancing it for this spring show. I don't think they really appreciated that this was something that he created and this is what they are dancing. A lot of the Jalisco dances that they do—he was the choreographer.

### **Las Mejicas**

**Zepeda:** So I wonder if you have some words of wisdom to document for Las Mejicas. I know you are their mentor and you're with them a lot right now.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, I encourage them to do several things. One thing I encourage them to do is attend all the conferences that they can, meet with the maestros if they can, and write up what they know. And it's never too early to start even documenting their own experiences. So I say to a lot of folklorico groups, do you even know the history of your dance group? A couple of students have taken that seriously. People have tried over the years to write a little bit about Mejicas. But I thought, even those projects are important projects because they're there. The alums are still here. And this is an opportunity. I encourage all the dance groups: start by documenting the history of your dance group. When did it emerge? Honestly, what's interesting about Mejicas is that, though we were never very large, we are probably the largest university folklorico group in California now.

Zepeda: Wow.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Across the board. No matter what. Not just in the UC system. We're the largest and we're the oldest. Because what's happened to some of the dance groups is they dwindle and they die. Some of them have been revived by later generations. UC Berkeley right now does not have a dance group. It died. I think one of the reasons that Mejicas is able to thrive is because, now that it's offered as a class, it's always visible. But it remains a student-run, student-directed group. So I think we're marrying the best of both worlds. There's institutional support by having me be the institutional memory and the link to administrators and others. But it's still thriving in the hands of the students and they pass on the baton.

We did a folklórico summit this year for the first time and it was hosted by UC Riverside. People look at Las Mejicas as a model that they want to emulate. Which is really amazing. It's really nice that it's reached that status. And it's not because the dancing is perfect. At university groups it's never going to be perfect because generations graduate. If it was one of those permanent groups like Zamarripa's group, where you don't have to be enrolled in university to belong to the company—ours you don't either, but people move on. They go to graduate school or follow a career or something. So our membership is always rotating. But for what it is, I think it's a very good company. It's a good place to learn. It's a good support environment. It's good community-building. It's open to people of all backgrounds. It's open to people who've never danced. You can't ask more than that from a group. And we were selected this year—we're winning the Diversity Award.

**Zepeda:** At UC Santa Cruz?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah, at UC Santa Cruz. The celebration is next week so I'm really excited. It took us forty-one years, but we did it.

**Zepeda:** I wanted to ask you a little bit about the folklorico summit. Does that mean that everybody gathers to share dance?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, that was my idea. I had this idea. I'm the one who came up with this idea of a folklorico summit. We were going to launch it last year. But I had surgery and we were celebrating our fortieth, so it was just too much. So I talked about doing it but then I put it to sleep. And then Maria Luisa [Colmenarez], who is the president of Danzantes Unidos, it's an organization of folklorico groups and she holds a conference every March, out of the blue she calls me in January and starts telling me that she wants to do something to bring students together, because we knew that folklorico groups are dying. And so she wanted to know if I would go on board. I said, "Well, actually I had this idea of doing this thing called a summit." So that's how the name came about. But she was instrumental in gathering the students and we started doing these Google hangouts and organizing. Again, it was decided that the students were going to organize it and we would be assisting. So I was a support person/consultant person. And Maria Luisa, who runs Danzantes Unidos, was able to offer them support as a nonprofit organization so that they could get some monies.

Anyway, students get very ambitious and very eager and very—like, "oh, we have to do all these things!" I said, "You know, I actually recommend starting small and going big." But at the same time, I thought, well, if they're that eager.

Well, long story short, they couldn't do everything they wanted to do because there was some budget cut and it affected the funding. So it ended up being small, much smaller than they had anticipated. But really it was good that it was small, I think, in the end, because it was a manageable size. And the students threw their hearts into it. They made us breakfast and all those things. So it was a weekend at Riverside. They did workshops, and they did panels, and they brought in people who had been in folklorico, maestros here in the state of California. And we had discussions and we threw out ideas and then they did sessions like—they did a session with me about best practices and what kinds of tips I would give. It was two days. We felt very satisfied about what we had come up with. I think they're going to do it again and now there's visions of wanting to make it even bigger. Big is great. It's just that funding and the logistics of getting everybody coordinated is a lot of work.

**Zepeda:** Exactly. So you spoke about how Las Mejicas allows for diverse backgrounds to join.

Nájera-Ramírez: Yes.

**Zepeda:** So what would you say that the representation is right now?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Right now, this year I think there're not as many non-Latino students. But in previous years, since day one there have been Anglo students involved; we've had black students involved; we've had Asian students involved; we've had students that are foreign exchange students involved. I really think it's been completely open. So it's just a matter of if people want to come. When people come, they get connected. Even the non-Chicano students,

they stay in touch with each other, they come to our reunions. Some of them will go to the conferences because they know they get to see Mejicas there.

**Zepeda:** A student came to my office hours and shared with me about how she came and was searching for a community and then she joined Las Mejicas. And then everything was okay then for her. She had this huge smile on her face.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, you know, a similar thing happened. Paul Espinosa had a daughter here. I never had met him, like I said. But he was very generous with his time and advice when I was doing my charrería project. He mentioned to me that his daughter was enrolled in school at UCSC and she was very unhappy and wanted to go back and he wanted to encourage her to stay. And he said, “You know, I think if she just made connections.” So we started talking and I said, “What kind of interests does she have?” I said, “I’m a faculty advisor for the Mejicas and I know it’s always been a very positive experience to join the group. Does she dance?” He said, “Well, she used to, like in elementary or high school.” I said, “Well, she should come. It doesn’t matter if she’s not very good at it. They’ll teach her. I started with no experience.” So she joined the group and she became really good friends with somebody in the group and they were palling around forever, and she made it through UCSC. But this was her first year and she was very unhappy. By the second year she joined and she graduated. So—  
(laughs)

**Zepeda:** Well, thank goodness you’re getting the award. Because it’s helping with retention.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** It really is. I think that was the vision to begin with. It was really building community and supporting each other on campus. It wasn't really about performing for people. It was really just getting together. Then it started to get more formal as a performing group. But the retention part has never gone away and now even the recruitment aspect, because students go back to their hometowns and take the group. Or they invite people—a lot of kids—like, for the spring concert Saturday, in particular, is the day that a lot of the families come to watch the students. So the younger generations say, I want to be up there. And the parents say, "Yeah, we're going to have our kids come up and go to UCSC." So it really does work as a recruitment, both through real outreach of going to the towns and then by attracting people and families here to the annual concert. So yeah, my nieces are in there. (laughs)

**Zepeda:** Wow. And what's your role? Do you dance also?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** No, I don't dance. I mean, I could dance at the reunion events if I wanted to. Technically, I suppose, if I really wanted to train it would be open to me, because there's no age limit. But I feel like I've had my day in the sun. There's lots of women, always, more women than there are men. And if I were to dance, I would take up a spot that a younger person could have. I don't want to say my dancing days are over. My performing days are probably over. But I still love to dance.

**Zepeda:** I forgot about that part, that it does mean training. That makes sense. So let's see, anything else that we should mention about Las Mejicas?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** We covered a lot.

## Building a More Sustainable Campus

**Zepeda:** So, one of the questions that I also wanted to ask you was, thinking about your recommendations for campus, thinking big—and Las Mejicas is a beautiful example—but what would you suggest to build a more sustainable campus at UC Santa Cruz, especially for students of color and faculty of color?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, there're a couple of things. Specifically for Mejicas, what they need is a place to store their costumes. It's embarrassing that they have a tiny little shed that they cram all their costumes in. They get destroyed. They get eaten by moths and they get eaten by rats and whatnot. So that would be one thing. And I'm sure that's true for the other groups, students of color performance dance troupes, like the PCC and the ISO and I'm sure others. There's just not enough support there.

But for the campus, I wish they would revive—I'd love to revive the CLRC. I think it was a wonderful space. I don't think people really understood how deeply it impacted, in a positive way, so many people—the faculty, the graduate students, the undergraduate students. It was a vital force. It's really a shame. I feel the absence. I really feel the absence. So I think that it would be wonderful to revive that, or allow it to keep going with some funding.

I'm really upset that they closed down the Social Science Media Lab, because I certainly benefitted personally for my own projects. And in terms of my teaching, when I do the ethnographic methods, it was wonderful to have a lab, so students could learn how to use cameras, figure out what kind of camera they should buy, or recording, or documentary video, DVD, whatever. All of that

equipment that students need to use as anthropologists, I think, was something that is not available anymore. It's very fragmented.

And here, social documentation is still alive and trying to build and trying to reach out to incorporate more faculty and more graduate students, but when it comes to equipment, there's a certain amount they have. So we had a meeting the other day with the affiliated faculty. Ruby [Rich] called us together, and she said, "Well, one of the problems for allowing other students in our classes is the equipment." She said, "Do you think your departments would be open to paying a fee, like a \$200 fee per student to allow them to take our classes. I said, "No. We just don't have the money. Not that we think it's inappropriate for you to ask. We just don't have the money. If we had the Media Lab, that would have resolved that problem right away. But this is what happens. You save fifty thousand dollars here but you're spending so much more to make it cover all—"

The need is not gone. So we're squeezing every last penny to make something happen when it was so much better when it was centralized. We were down to two employees. They hired work-study students. So everything has just been—it's like we threw it up in the wind and it blew in all over the place and it doesn't have the force that it had when it was central[ized]. I feel really bad about that.

I think that one thing that UCSC has, at least now that Rosie [Cabrera] is there, right now there is a strong unity and there are services for undergraduate students. But we don't have anything for graduate students of color. There's no parallel. I've talked to a lot of students of color and I think there is a need for that, which is something that we partially filled through the CLRC, even though

technically that's not what we were doing, but just by bringing the students together they had a place to go. But I have had meetings with graduate students of color, some not even in our department, that feel very disconnected. It's hard when you first come and you're the sole person of color in your department, or one of two or whatever. There's not really a sense of community. There're no real services for students. I think that they need to build on that a little.

**Zepeda:** That makes sense. Those are great recommendations. And so I wanted to ask you about your own future, planned vision for yourself, for your work at UC Santa Cruz with students, for your scholarship.

### Vision for the Future

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well. My future—I don't envision a long future. I would like to retire and devote some time to my mother. We're working on getting her to move in. I don't want to be so absorbed by the university, which happens when you're working full time. So I'm going to start exploring ways of diminishing my time there, maybe remaining in some capacity, I don't know. But that's the stage I'm at. I'm ready for a turning point. My husband is retired. My daughter is all grown. My mother is still healthy enough that I could enjoy some years with her. So that is a future that I see not too far away. So I don't envision myself becoming older at the university. I don't see thirty more years in my current full-time status. I don't envision that.

**Zepeda:** That's wonderful. So that leads me to my next question. Thinking about how you entered in as a local, right?

Nájera-Ramírez: Mm-hmm.

**Zepeda:** What would you suggest to UC Santa Cruz, or thinking of other people who will be in similar positions of being a professor, or even in the recruitment areas—how can we better recruit students from the local area and be able to succeed?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, I'm not sure what kinds of recruitment efforts are in action, to tell you the truth. Whatever they are, they're never enough. Because, for as long as I've been in Santa Cruz, one of my projects that Ronaldo also participates in, is to encourage local students to pursue an education and to consider, even if they go to Cabrillo (not that Cabrillo is the worst thing that could happen), to consider moving beyond Cabrillo and getting into transfer programs. I'm very committed to that. I know that the high schools are underserved. They just don't have the number of counselors necessary and I know they have a big workload. I'm not sure what the situation is on campus, in terms of how they target communities and how aggressively they try to serve them. I've always felt that the local schools do not get as much attention as they need. And as we get more and more working-class students coming in, we really need to show them that a higher education is feasible for them.

It's interesting because sometimes people say, "Gosh, Olga. Your family is so special because your brother went to Harvard. Your sister went to Stanford. You got your PhD." And I said, "Well, I mean, yes, we worked hard for what we have and we had a lot of encouragement from our family. But what's really interesting is, as small as Davenport is, I can give you [examples of] lots of families in

Davenport, our little population of 200 or whatever, and in every family where a person was given an opportunity to study, they did." I know a family, another family—they have a judge in their family. They have an architect. Another family, right next door, they have a lawyer. I mean, it's nothing magic. It's a matter of opportunity. The intelligence is there. The money is lacking and the path to get there is the one I think that's very obscured. How can it be that a little town of Davenport has doctors, lawyers, judges, architects? (laughs) And yet, we're all working-class Mexicanos. So it's not a dream. It's a reality. But what is hard is financing is very difficult. When you have five or six kids, you know, even getting, even with two kids, the tuition is just getting ridiculous. So I feel like there is a need for more support to get students to pursue higher ed.

**Zepeda:** I like the way that you put it, that working-class students, or people, need that path.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah, people don't see it as a path. And once you—and I've done this personally—once you open people's eyes to, "Look, this is what you need to do next. Here's what you can do. This is a service that you qualify for. Here's how you do your statement." Once you point people in those directions and you offer a little support, because it's like, "What do you mean, a statement of purpose?" They don't know. They do it and they get in. I see them all the time. It's not magic. It's just understanding that a lot of these are first generation students, understanding that it's intimidating when you don't have funding, and sometimes you don't have all the knowledge that it takes to get you there. But

once somebody makes those channels available, you're like, oh, I can do this? And then you see it start to happen.

**Zepeda:** I can imagine that happening also in your classroom and your mentoring with the undergrads, guiding them in that way.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Yeah, encouraging them and saying, "Find what's your passion; find what you really like to do, because this is going to be your life. It's a big part of your life."

**Zepeda:** And what an amazing example you are for them.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** (laughs) I don't know about amazing but I think seeing people that look like them, that come from families like them, to see that—like, I've taken my mom to see Mejicas. That's her favorite thing to do at UCSC. And when I take her there: like, "Oh, she's kind of like us." I think it's important to have that model. So I like serving in that capacity.

### **Lionel Cantú**

**Zepeda:** Yeah. That's powerful. And as a closing, I wanted to ask you a little bit about Lionel [Cantú], if you don't mind, how you saw his contributions on campus.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Well, I think Lionel was really an amazing person. He was a UC postdoc. I did not go to his job talk and I can't remember why, but of course all CLRC and LALS people were very involved, even though it was for sociology. So I remember hearing good reports. People felt, this guy looks like he

could do it. He got the job. And then, because he was a postdoc I think he stayed somewhere. I don't remember him being around that much.

So then he came and taught. And he immediately filled that gap that I was telling you about, for graduate students? Everybody and their aunt was with Lionel, including Elisa Huerta, who was my student, because he had the sense to recognize that the students were hungry for community and did not have any services. So he would invite them over to his house.

He got immersed in everything immediately, head first, and was involved in the CLRC. I think he was really only active one, maybe two years, before he died. It's amazing, because you would think he had been here for a long, long time, the way that he connected with people. And so, I would say that it was probably within a year and a half of his being here, physically present in residence, that he passed away. The impact that that had on the community was just amazing. I remember Elisa Huerta called me and told me what happened. She said, "We're going to the hospital." She was informing me. I said, "I'll go with you." So they came and picked me up and we went and there was community in the waiting room. We stayed there off and on; everybody would take turns. It was never empty— faculty and graduate students and his family. People would rotate. We couldn't see him because he was in intensive care. But we would sit there and get reports and keep each other company and have coffee and pray. We had moments of oh, he's going to make it. And moments of oh, no, it looks horrible. And within a week he died. Within a week he died.

**Zepeda:** Wow. (exhales breath)

**Nájera-Ramírez:** And when he died, it just blew everybody away. It was huge. He was very close to Frank Talamantes. I remember that the parents came and they understood how much of an impact he had on our community, so they allowed us to keep his body and do a funeral here. So we organized a funeral at Holy Cross.

I remember the part that I was involved with was hiring a mariachi so we could do a mariachi mass. That church was full to the gills. I mean, Holy Cross was—you couldn't even get inside the church. I remember the whole service. It was very emotional. And when we left, people were in the courtyard. They just couldn't fit inside the church. That's how many people came. They came regardless of their background or religion. And it was packed.

And then they did another service for him at a funeral home or something. I remember going to that over by Highway One. I don't know why there were those two services, but the one at the church was humongous. And then they did a reception in the Holy Cross hall. And then everybody went to Frank Talamantes's house after that. And they took him to San Antonio and then they did big service over there. I wasn't there but Russell was there and Josie Mendez was there.

So it was—I've never seen so much devotion and so much of an impact, never. It was really amazing. The depth of connections that he established with the community was amazing. Because, really, for two years—I've just never seen anything like it.

**Zepeda:** It's powerful. Thank you for sharing that. I really appreciate it. It's good to get it documented. (sighs) Yeah, thank you, Olga.

So, in closing, I feel like we covered a lot of ground.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** (laughs) Yeah, I think we did.

**Zepeda:** And I'm really excited about how we started with you saying your story, and where you came from: Davenport. And we went back to that at the end, and thinking about other young people from working-class communities that also need to be at UC Santa Cruz. I really am glad that we did that circle there. So I'm wondering if there is anything else that you would like to return to, speak about?

**Nájera-Ramírez:** I can't think of anything but probably when I see the transcript I might see holes. Or I may find that I should have clarified something.

**Zepeda:** Okay. That's perfect, then. So then we'll end there. Thank you, Olga.

**Nájera-Ramírez:** Thank you, Susy.



**About the Interviewer:** In 2012, Susy Zepeda earned her PhD in sociology from UC Santa Cruz, with a designated emphasis in Feminist Studies and Latin American and Latino Studies. She is currently Visiting Assistant Professor, Women and Gender Studies at the University of California, Davis and is a Social Justice Initiative, Mellon Fellow.