

University of Washington
Women Who Rock Oral History Project

Transcript

Maylei Blackwell

Narrator: Dr. Maylei Blackwell

Interviewed by: Dr. Michelle Habell-Pallan

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Date: February 19, 2011

Place: Dr. Michelle Habell-Pallan's home, Seattle, WA

Maylei Blackwell (MB): I'll just say it, so I'm Maylei Blackwell and I'm an Assistant Professor of Chicano/Chicana Studies at UCLA, an affiliate also in Women Studies at UCLA.

Michelle Habell-Pallan (MHP): And do you consent to this interview?

MB: I consent to this interview and I just request that any final materials I be able to review them before they have public release. (laughs)

MHP: Can you just describe your research just generally first?

MB: So, I study social movements, women's organizing in the US and Mexico and cross-border organizing and I came into wanting to study that as an activist 'cuz very much movements were either here or there. And we didn't have an analysis or very few people had an analysis or organizing strategy to talk about how conditions created in Latin America or Mexico internationally were related to immigration here, racism, neoliberalism. So that's what I wanted to study when I went into a PhD and that's what I do. I study the question of difference, sexuality, race, and how those differences are articulated in women's organizing. So I've been working on a 20-year project documenting the emergence of feminism in the Chicano Movement and I study early women of color feminism. I have another project with the Third World Women's Alliance, kind of understanding, you know, women of color feminism, it's roots. And then I also, in Mexico

have been working with indigenous social movements, indigenous women's organizing since its revitalization in the 90's. So I studied the National Network of Indigenous Women of Mexico. I originally wanted to do a dissertation that studied, you know, lesbians, indigenous, like sexuality, race, you know, all these axes of difference. But the Indigenous Rights Movement was so vibrant in the 90's when I was doing my research, it just kinda took over. And so now I'm working with indigenous migrants, indigenous women who are leading bi-national organizations and who are organizing an "Indigenous LA" which is increasingly Oaxacan. There's 120,000 Oaxacans living in Los Angeles in Pico Union and on the West Side and also a lot of Mayans from Guatemala, so it's very urgent right now 'cuz the LAPD just shot a native Quiché, a Mayan man. Just like here in Seattle right? They just killed someone who wasn't quote-un-quote 'immigrant' right, another native man. But that's been really important for the community to mobilize and think about not just what it looks like for immigrant communities here but for the communities, the wife and the kids and the community that sent that man, right, and the kind of conditions he was suffering you know because the loan he took out to come, the interest rate was like 40%, and now they say even with... even when you die the debt gets passed onto the family. So, yeah that's what I've been working on lately...in LA.

MHP: So, can you talk about the importance of oral history and maybe how that is... even if you've navigated that both within the institution and outside the institution?

MB: So oral history is an important methodology, right? It's a methodology that recognizes that people in social movements, people in community, are the producers of knowledge. And that our job is to listen, right? Not to impose our theoretical models or the newest theories, but to listen deeply to what people are saying and how they theorize and make sense of their own lives. So oral history is a tool of listening. Right? It's a methodology of relating to people. Early on, a lot of early oral historians, especially women's oral history, would be about: "to give voice to the people," and you know, the people already have a voice (laugh). They have a voice. It's just that our academic apparatus, our knowledge of apparatus, doesn't know how to listen. And so, even though we use oral history, we still have to recognize it as a deeply mediated process. It still has power relationships. And so learning that it's also not a romantic tool in which the true voice and the authentic could be heard, you know? So, it's balancing both: it's a process that's deeply mediated, but it's a process that's took to listen and to respect that the people themselves have an analysis that's not just our own, you know the academics, you know, in the ivory tower who have the analysis. So it's what oral historians call the 'shared authority,' the interpretative authority. We have the 'shared authority' within our narrators, right? We're not the only ones who assign meaning, you know. If oral historians are to listen, and to discover meaning with the narrators. So, I started as an undergraduate student, Women of Color feminist activist, 20 years ago. And I started to interview Chicanos who were active in the Chicano Movement and I went to Cal State, Long Beach, and these women were active at Cal State, Long Beach, and then spread their activism into the greater LA area, and then

nationally. So, I've been working 20 years to document their histories, and listen. And at first when I heard their histories, I was like: "Oh shit" 'cuz basically what they were saying was going to change the way the Chicano Movement history had been written, and the way the Women's Movement understood feminism. That feminism could only happen in a movement called the Feminist Movement instead of in all these other places. So Women of Color feminism happens in labor movements, it happens in civil rights, it happens in Black Power, it happens in the Chicano Movement (sigh). So, it helped me listen to their stories so I could better understand these kinda multiple feminist insurgencies. So, that's, you know, one project. Then I went on to interview a lot of indigenous women activists, lesbian activists, folks who were organizing in this kinda anti-globalization movement, cross-border, mequila workers, you know. So, I've taken it with me and it's interesting to kinda think about all these innovations in technology. And now I have a project with indigenous women migrants who are organizing and interviewing. I'm teaching them how to interview each other and the power of social movements is the power of our stories and how we can use our stories to become visible in the policy arena, in the political arena, so that's been really interesting: that I'm not just the historian, that I'm helping to teach people how to utilize their stories and the power of their stories.

MHP: Does that involve digital technology?

MB: It does, so we're using flip cameras... mhhm.

MB: So with the digital technology we're using flip cameras and we just started... 'cuz we had ~so I had a digital storytelling project with indigenous women migrant activists in the ("Indigenous Front for Bi-National Organizing" in Spanish) which is the Indigenous Front for Bi-National Organizing and they wanted to be able to talk about women's empowerment and you know what my idea of empowerment is or what some mestiza's idea of empowerment is, might be really different from theirs. So, they thought that their empowerment was located in their cooking right? And the kind of culinary knowledge they had, and the kind of cultural knowledge it brought with them, right? That sometimes people were losing that knowledge like Oaxacan cuisine is very specific and it has a lot of mole and grinding and you know, 32 different spices and one recipe or... so we were doing a project called, "Recipes for Change." And I noticed that, you know, we got... that the organization got a camera guy, and you know, and all these things, and we went to interview... But I noticed that the guy would shoot, you know, the women grinding at the stone. And it's a very traditional posture for indigenous women on her knees grinding, and he would shoot her from standing up and make her look really small right? So I was realizing that with the flip camera, that the people who could produce the food could also produce the visual and that it would be from a lower angle it would be down... with, you know, from all different angles, not just like looking down. And somehow freezing that, not just that camera angle but also that it's a relation of power, like looking down on someone

on their knees grinding. And especially because that symbol of an indigenous woman on her knees grinding corn or the symbol... like indigenous people are seen as the backward part of Mexico and it's getting wrapped into this gender narrative where we see women's liberation as part of modernity and so indigenous women are posited as being backward. So all women who want to be free or emancipated don't want to be in the kitchen grinding corn like that. But I was really interested to see how they saw that as a place of empowerment. And here they're cooking, and have their own businesses, and making their own money and sending their kids to school and college on that money. And so you know this really iconic position of a woman on her knees grinding is a source of empowerment and I would have never assigned that meaning to them, I mean you know? So listening, that's what deep listening is. Seeing where they see that and understanding how they see cooking as a different way of making social relationships. So I was like, (laughs) you know like wow. Yeah.

MHP: Let's talk about deep listening. Is that part of your method? You talked about oral history as a method...

MB: Right

MHP: ...Can you talk more about the method that you've been developing?

MB: Well I was trained by Sherna Gluck. I was trained by that first generation of oral historians-pioneers really and the-you know Sherna had many oral history projects, the first you know. they were the generation to go interview the Suffragettes and get those... that generation of 1920's women who fought for the right to vote. And, they were part of a generation that said that the knowledge that was created in the public sphere wasn't the only knowledge, that there was a knowledge within the private sphere, that there was a knowledge of women's lives that was intrinsically of value and had historical significance. And so they really celebrated, you know, women's words. And they were also a generation who helped become more critical about that celebratory posture. But yeah, oral history... it's hard to listen sometimes, it's not as easy as you think. You know, you think 'oh well you know of course listening's easy' but sometimes you notice even in a conversation that you're already crafting in your head the next thing you wanted to say and so you're not actually present in listening (laughs). So it's a practice, it requires a lot of stillness. It requires presence and sometimes it's a little disarming 'cuz no one's actually been asked their story before. So a lot of times people cry or, you know, to be critically... like we were talking about the critical love or to have that critical witnessing. I don't think... some people have never even been listened to in that way, and that's in itself a gift. Like a lot of different interviews have talked about how, that the process of the interview itself is a healing process because they're witnessed, right? So it's not that I'm doing something for them or to them, it's just that they themselves are hearing their own story and they're being

witnessed. So I think that's the deep listening. So they're either, you know, in their own story of transformation or they're noticing, "wow that was really hard and intense to be the first generation of Chicanas to make a critique about gender oppression within the Chicano Movement. Or "wow" you know... So hearing themselves, I think, tell the story, and you being present as the person who bears that witness or, you know, bears witness to someone giving testimony I think is a very powerful act. And one that we can do for each other always in friendships, in political spaces, in the classroom so...

MHP: Is that method recognized, or I guess deeply in the institution for its value?

MB: Hmm well it's not deeply recognized. It has, you know, its own apparatus, its own legitimacy. But, you know, oral history was really challenged in the field of history as a form of evidence and still kind of suspect as a form of evidence, you know... I just went through a big battle for tenure at UCLA around my book 'cuz they first critiqued it that it was based around oral history and then not enough oral history... that really, that base of evidence, they were questioning, even though most oral historians, you know, every oral historian really looks at other sources of evidence. You know, the archive and... But the archive doesn't talk, and there's missing fragments of the archive, and there's a lot of different oral histories about a different way of knowing, right? So it's not just the kind of evidence, it's like the epistemology of evidence. How you know what you know, and when someone shared that story, it's a different way of knowing 'cuz it involves their emotional registers. It involves listening to silences, what they don't say. It involves a different kind of interpretation right? 'Cuz it's like a memory performance, so it's also like reading what they remember and what they don't remember, what they misremember. So there are a lot of oral historians, internationally even, and there's an Association of Oral History. There's great practitioners, you know, of oral history. But, you know, it's still challenged in the academy. But it is part of broader changes, you know, to the academy, about systems of knowledge and how we know things. But yeah, it's not always... like it should be at this point recognized, but it's not always. (laughs)

MHP: Can you talk about kind of, maybe, what moved you before you even became an oral historian. And how that maybe connected to your, what you were to become?

MB: Right, so, I was a waitress. I thought I was... It's not that I... when you're young you don't think, "oh I'm gonna be a life-long waitress," but I really didn't have plans to be anything else you know. And so part of the power of the "Women Who Rock" conference is recognizing I think sources of empowerment from my life, 'cuz it had to do with music, you know, and I had... I wanna say I had a punk rock teenage-hood, but you know, you don't really ever become un-punk... I feel like you're punk for life, you know. And so I think, you know, listening to music and tapping into the rage, like female rage helped me create my own sense of agency, helped me be in my body. It helped me craft a different sense of the

self, you know, like having a Mohawk, and I remember I had a long Mohawk, and I would pull the sides down so that when I went to work that all the shaved part was, like, I could tuck it behind and... But I couldn't dye my hair, I couldn't pierce, I couldn't do things that lots of other people or more privileged kids could do who didn't have to work, you know, and look like they could wear a waitress (laughs) uniform and not get fired. So it was always navigating that sense of creativity... Like I guess it's that 'do it yourself' sense of style, like you know, we were poor then suddenly like thrift store shopping you know and making your own clothes or cutting the clothes, you know. I had this great like carpet, it was like a tapestry jacket, that we cut, or finding that crushed velvet jacket, or some old man's, like old jacket. It would be huge. And then we would wear some, you know, poor t-shirt underneath, or your fishnets and your Doc Martins, or even vintage dresses that we could find and they would look really feminine, and that we would wear with boots, you know, with Doc Martins. And I think, you know, I don't know, punk rock, I don't know... Would it be too strong, I feel like I could say punk rock saved my life, you know. Where it made me the woman I am today, in the sense that it gave me a different way... I was really pissed off you know about racism in my school, things I didn't have words for, sexism, being sexualized at a very, very, young age. Being a sexual abuse survivor, and I really didn't have a language for that... But, so punk gave it a container, you know, a mode of expression. And it's also not the easiest lifestyle to have as a young woman, you know. Like we put... I mean I look back... I was like 'wow I put myself in a lot of danger.' I would hang out in that alley with a bunch of guys drinking, and you know LSD or whatever drugs we were doing, and so I feel really blessed and protected too, you know, that as much as that was scary, it was in a community of other young people who really watched out for each other. And I remember we would panhandle to get into Fender's Ballroom, and there was a homeless guy that we always gave him, like, half the money we would gather. And so we like made friends with the guy in the alley, the people... or when we would buy alcohol, you know they would... I mean probably not the most, I dunno, PC thing to do, but also buy him alcohol 'cuz that's what got him through the night, you know? And so it's kinda interesting to think about those things and the community of people we had. And then it was also very queer, you know, without being self-conscious about it's queerness. I don't mean just homo-eroticism, but also it's gender non-conformity, like all my first boyfriends they wore eye liner and, you know, they wore makeup. And Aqua Net and you know... So I... and girls would make out with each other, and you know... So I have just so many beautiful memories of everyone getting ready, and everyone's mohawks being too high, so people would have to drive like this with their, you know, out the window with their mohawks out the window and (laughs)... People would be driving cars and, you know, just the smell of Aqua Net, or the smell of cloves cigarettes, it's just very visceral for me. But I know that punk also... the way I say punk saved my life, is because it helped me embody... be in my body in a different way, and I dunno if this is really common, but sometimes men would pull over on the side where you would walk to school and they would masterbate, and so I

would just feel so deeply sexualized, and it's disgusting, you know. And I remember one time I finally... I was wearing Doc Martins and they were steel toed, and I was so pissed, I dropped all my shit on the side... I walked and I turned around and I just kicked the guys door in, and because I was wearing those steel-toed Doc Martins it dented his car so big, but there he was with his dick in his hand and he couldn't really get out-his pants were down and I'm just like, "Fuck you!" right? And then I went to school and it was like the first time I ever just said, 'no, you will not objectify me' you will not you know make me an object of violence, and that's why, I mean like punk, like that attitude, that 'fuck you' attitude, it saved me, because it allowed me to say no. And you know, girls were not all raised to say no. That's why rape happens. Not that we're the victims of it, but we're trained to not say no, or to be afraid to say no. And so I think that really helped me, and then that helped me have a sense of justice, social justice, and that led to my activism, and that led to me asking different questions, you know. So I think punk, not just as an aesthetic or as a cultural movement, but as a political posture, as a stance in the world, helps you to ask different questions, helps you to question reality, and say, 'is this the reality that I you know that I wanna perpetuate? Is this the only reality that could exist?' And now we have slogans like, "(otro mundo es posible)" or "another world is possible," but I think punk is for me... it helped me imagine another world was possible, because we created it. We created it with our thrift store clothes. We created it with the music. We created it in the way we occupied space. I mean we're so visible as the freaks, you know, the people who were really freaky, the outcasts, but we would band together, so we created that alternative world within a very conforming environment, which was high school. So I feel like that's the root of my life as an activist, as a social person committed to social justice, and as an intellectual, ironically. You know, because in the lyrics of punk songs is an inherent questioning, not just to question authority right, but questioning why does that work that way? has it always worked that way? could it be different? So I think that's, you know, when you're asking me about... I mean in some ways it's the genesis of becoming a critical thinker. Yup critical thinker who moves into being a critical witness but not just witnessing as a passive posture, you know, but it is also building something different and speaking out as well, you know. But that's what we were witnessing, we were witnessing that homeless man who we used to give our money to. He used to be an English professor and we were like, 'what, no way man!' like we couldn't figure it out. And then, you know... But like, we learned about addiction, we learned about poverty we learned about a lot of things, you know. It was like a different kind of school, a punk rock school. We learned how to take care of each other in the pit. Like we would have strategies...

MHP: Can you talk about that a little bit?

MB: My first gig I was fifteen I was at the Olympic it was a Suicidal Tendencies conference, uh conference, concert, Suicidal Tendencies. It was really violent and they had these huge, I

dunno, they were like fifty foot speakers, and people were like diving off of them, and... I had a boyfriend at the time, and he was really cool, 'cuz a lot of guys would be like, "don't go in the pit" or "if you go in the pit you're asking for it" and so you know like we would go in the pit together, but eventually I would just go on my own with other women. And we would learn how to kinda try to stay connected, to watch out for each other, you know, how to be able to dance and be in the pit, but like also guard the front of you, and you know, like to not wear skirts... not to be impractical you know, not to wear some kind of bondage skirt at a gig you know. You would know to wear pants. You would know to not make certain parts of your body vulnerable, but you would learn how to watch out for each other. So dancing either with your arms hooked together right, and always staying... and then also like being able to guard the front, or places where people would grab you, you know. And then sometimes people would... you could just like elbow someone if they were fucking with you, or just create our own little space, like sometimes we wouldn't even get into the center of it, we would just create our own space. And it's just about having fun, you know, like it's really, really, fun. And yeah, so I think... I mean sometimes I guess punk people think it's like every man for himself, but there were forms of solidarity. There were forms of making community, making things. It wasn't just women, men too, saw that you know, it was not cool to like sexually assault somebody in the pit. That wasn't the point of it. The point was that everyone should have a safe space to blow off some steam, to have fun, to dance, to be angry, to be joyful. It was like joyful rage you know (laughs), it was fun.

MB: Oh you know what I wanted to tell you something-

MHP: -yes-

MB: -I've started working on this poem, it's also so funny about the kind of make-up we would wear you know, 'cuz I feel like we had this like 'chola punk aesthetic' 'cuz what white like what wearing kind of light skinned...

MHP: ...wrote about that... (hard to hear)

MB: Really? Yeah 'cuz like the kind of eyeliner we would wear, and also the lipstick, and what it looked like on white girls verses what it looked like on brown skin. Like you know, we were very attracted to maroon and purple and black as a kind of palette of makeup, or you know, what silver looks like on brown skin? Like I feel like we had a different aesthetic and that that aesthetic was informed by different kinds of other aesthetic practices, so you know Mexican American or Filipino. There's a lot of Filipino kids, Samoan kids, black kids, so yeah what we look like, you know, was really different. And the traditions of using makeup, of altering our looks, you know, was also informed by the communities we came from. So I was just thinking about that... how a lot of goth or punk kids wore, you know, wore really light skin, you know like shades lighter of makeup than... even boys... but how

our skin looked and how our skin looked with maroon lipstick verses other peoples skin. I was thinking about that a lot lately.

MHP: Yeah I was just...the whole thing on Teresa Covarrubias and then her look, the punk chola aesthetic. What is it?

MB: Yeah it was like a little poem I had started a while ago and what it just like what, 'cuz also do it yourself like as in a I dunno like in a ("war-squatch-eh") aesthetic like what we would come up with just 'cuz that's what we had, it was, yeah. But I-we weren't self conscious about making a style.

MHP: Right.

MB: We just 'had it' that's, you know, the arrogance of youth... you're just fabulous and you just don't really know.

MHP: You talked about collectives or being part of a community being part of a collective. Can you also talk about other collectives you were part of that kind of helped empower you in not so safe spaces?

MB: Yeah, like at that time, I think it wasn't very... it wasn't a conscious community in the sense that we were self-consciously making it, we just survived. So-and-so's dad would beat him and so he ran away and we would shelter him. Like people would take the bus hours to be together. There's just a very deep sense of solidarity, even before we knew that was solidarity, so people would shield each other from family violence. They would shield each other from rape, unwanted pregnancy. I mean what kids go through is kinda deep, young people... addiction, helping each other stay in school. We would, you know, travel on the bus together, and hang out in malls, or hang out, you know, in alley ways... in all these spaces that don't exist for young people. And those skills of creating a community helped me in college, you know. I became part of an activist community, and I been, you know, figuring out how to make community in those hostile places for a long time. And one of them, the space I met you in, was the women of color research cluster at UCC Santa Cruz. So I shared with you why I decided to go into a PhD, and I went to Cal State Long Beach, you know. I didn't go to a research university I went to, you know, working class university, and no one went on to do a PhD you know. And so I show up to the History of Consciousness program and everyone's from Brown or an Ivy-League and they've been handed knowledge on a silver platter. And I was 'what?' you know. And so creating that research cluster... it was a research cluster for the study of women of color in conflict and collaboration I think... it was really formative for so many of us at the Women Who Rock Conference. Many of us were there, but it was a community in which we survived and we thrived. And not just that, like we didn't just create a community of women of color of graduate students and faculty, you know, to survive at the university, I think what we were learning to do is to

transform the university, even though we felt like we were just surviving. I mean so we were talking last night like how we only got paid on our TA ships once a month so at the end of the month it was pretty slim, and we all lived... you know we were neighbors there in the Beach Flat neighborhood, you know here with Michelle and with our friend Keta Miranda and our friend Julian Bleeker or Joanne Barker or even Kehaulani Kauanui. We would go between what everyone had in their refrigerator and we would make a meal based on the remnants on what (laughs) people had left. And so we really, I mean that's the essential thing about making a community, is collectivizing you know hardship. What's really hard to get through. We made that collective. We would read each other's papers, we would push each other. We didn't always get the best mentorship, so we self-mentored, we collectively mentored each other. So you always gave me your fellowship applications, your job applications, how to do this, how to do that, and I think you had it harder 'cause I think you were one of the ones who went through first, you know, but I'm sure people shared with you or just knowing that people were behind you was important. And I knew we were different, but I really didn't know until I left Santa Cruz and realized that people were so deeply embedded into the kind of competition that the institution thrived on, that they never shared proposals, they never read each other's material, and how sad and alienating that was. You know, not that I mean... the cluster had its drama, it had a lot of drama. Making community is dramatic sometimes (laugh). It can be traumatic sometimes too. And we had a falling outs, people would stop speaking to you and you didn't know why. I mean it wasn't easy to make community, and it wasn't pretty, and it wasn't graceful you know. It was kinda messy, and people brought all of their stuff with them, meaning what they had to offer, and you know their wounds, and the places they were hurt, and people would work out their shit on each other. But we also created a different model of being in the academy together, and really through our mentor Angela Davis you know, who told us, who showed us, that you could be a whole person. You didn't have to be a scholar in one setting and an activist in another. You didn't have to be a woman in one setting and a person of color in another, and a queer person in another. That you could bring your whole self there, and demand that the institution and the spaces be able to accommodate that. So that radical difference we used to be... to be able to make community, but also to educate each other: not everybody was queer, not everybody knew what native politics looked like, not everyone, you know... we had different class stuff going on, you know, so we used that to... our own differences between us, to teach each other. But yeah, just breaking down the individualism was really important, and I still do that with my students. When they have writing blocks, there's a group of students who like they're such deep thinkers they can't get it done in a quarter and I'm like, 'well you have to be in a little writing group together' and they'll help each other until each one of them finishes an incomplete. Or if I have a group of students writing theses, I was like, 'you all have to work together this whole year' and those are strategies I'm learning that helps them, but it also helps me as a professor so I don't have 5 different meetings you know. So it's been a journey of understanding who we

are as the women of color research cluster, the amazing work we did putting on the women of color film and video festival, publishing a journal that women started before us... a few years before us... and we had to reinitiate the cluster. It had kinda fallen... it went dormant and we had to reform it. And that the research cluster still exists, and now we're multi-generational, you know, that they can call on us and we're still part of the same list serve. We send research opportunities and tasks, and I didn't really see that as a kind of the historical legacy of the community we were building, and how long it would last. And it lasted a long time, because Angela was there to continue to mentor generation after generation. And she would say that the cluster itself sometimes would decline in membership until she would teach the Women of Color Feminism class and then there would be this huge influx.

MB: Right.

MHP: So radical difference is the point then is the collaboration-

MB: Right. Well right in being able to teach each other-

MHP: Yeah-

MB: From these different points of difference. But you know from there, like I've always had a writing group. I have one now, I have one in Los Angeles. It's a Women of Color writing group, and you know it has twelve different faculty members from UC Irvine UC Riverside, USC, UCLA. It's huge and slowly everyone's starting to get tenure and we're bringing new members in, and it's important you know. Like when we get here we're like 'there's no community' but what we don't realize is it's upon us to make the community. That's why I loved coming to the Women Who Rock Conference and seeing the community that you are all making here in Seattle through the Fandango through the conference you know. We don't... I mean I don't even technically work on music, but we bring different kinds of knowledges together in community.

MHP: Well yeah-

MB: And when people saw that I was thinking about how amazing it was that you all, Sonnet and you and the folks at the UW, created a place for your graduate students to get feedback... I was calling it 'critical love' on Thursday, 'cuz you know even Quetzal told me 'oh that was so amazing' but that we teach... that what we're teaching is not just 'here's the feedback here's how to improve your project' but we're teaching a way of relating right? So that you know, Daphne Brooks or Sherrie Tucker, or Kehaulani or myself or Andreana Clay, you know, so that this whole cohort of other scholars could come and just reflect back you know to them: 'here's the strengths of your project, here's the other places to develop.' But the way in which we're reflecting, I think is really vital too, and that you know, feedback

isn't about getting torn down, it's also about, you know, it's hard to get feedback. I mean it's traumatic sometimes too, and even, you know, even if you think you're giving critical love, people won't always experience it as love. But that if you continue to create the container that it's safe, you know that's what you can do, and I'm in other communities where people really refuse to create the conversation, like community isn't automatic. So I'm in another formation right now, and I'm really struggling because I'll even bring up, 'like so how are we gonna create' they keep saying, 'a safe space, is this a safe space?' and I was like, 'safe space isn't assumed, safe space is created, and it's created through hard discussion. Like we, some of us don't have tenure some of us do, there's power differentials between us. What are the ground rules for engaging each other? Like I think it's, I dunno, it's so weird like that whole 'safe space' thing. Like it's such a myth, it's an illusion, like it doesn't actually exist. It's a practice you create together and people are unwilling to do the work of creating community, they just wanna assume that it's there. And this group is really using the work of Gloria Anzaldua, which is amazing right, that we should always use... that we have now a multi-generational genealogy of women of color feminism, but we can't just invoke Gloria, or Cherrie Moraga, or Audrey Lord right? Or any you know early of those amazing writers that we have to draw from. That's not enough. You know we have to... they had to do the work to create *This Bridge Called My Back*. They made home out of their exclusion right? But it's not automatic that we trust, and that we are all aware you know? Of how to make someone feel safe. And sometimes it's just, it's lying, we're not safe. We're not safe here and that's ok too, you know, we don't always have to be safe, but it's... I'm realizing that it is work and it is a practice. So community making isn't just like cum-bay-ya we'll all hold hands and feel groovy together, it's a labor. Yeah, so that's what I really appreciated about coming to Seattle and the Women Who Rock Conference, is that the community-making practice is really alive and thriving... mhm. And it's not easy, it's messy and people are like, "why does she act like that? Why is that one so uptight about that?" no? "why is someone so like, you know, forgets all the time to do that?" you know? But I was just pointing out it's different talents..

MHP: Yeah

MB: It's different capacities. You know, some people are crazy organizers, some people are dreamers, visionaries, and usually those kinds of personalities conflict, but you actually need both you know. And you need to appreciate those contributions and labor and hold each other accountable: "Michelle that pisses me off when you do that" (laughs) Or "I don't like that that puts me in a bad position" you know? So that's hard to be able to come to each other with that realness without everyone's shit getting activated you know. So I dunno, we'll see...

MHP: Yeah.

MB: We'll see how it continues to develop.

MHP: Yeah we'll see. I think you're right. It's interesting about... I hadn't really thought about that WOC collective and yeah we were try'na survive an academy. I don't think at all that we were thinking about trying to transform the academy, we were just trying to figure it out.

MB: Mhmm.

MHP: ...I uh none of us really came from any family... I mean I can't remember maybe some of us did but...

MB: I don't think so.

MHP: ...I don't think any of us ever came from family that was part of the institution, so it was all new to us, and so we were just try'na figure it out and I at least felt like... I went to UC San Diego and that was my boot camp... 'cuz I made every mistake in the book, and then when I got to Santa Cruz I could be badass, 'cuz I already knew what to do, right? What not to do, at least I knew what to not do. , but ...

MB: But too, I think there's... it's like how you relate to the institution, but it's also you had a community of people who would see how you related to your own writing. Like I remember going into your house... I think your computer was on a card table. And it would be crazy... like your house would be crazy and there... and I would be like 'where's your... do you have a space just for you?' I mean the radical notion that you should have a writing space. Like we didn't even have the sense of entitlement to know that you should create a space in which to work and that you know? I mean I had to like... writers write. Writers have the place to write, they have the time to write, and they write. I mean, it was just pretty, you know... like when I first got there, I had this like crisis about work... what is work? 'Cuz if I wasn't waitressing I didn't feel like I was at work, until I realized that reading a thousand pages a week for Jim Clifford's seminar that was work, because it didn't feel... it felt like you know, laying on the couch reading and then... but you would feel kinda messed up all the time, 'cuz I couldn't get my brain around that that was work, and so people helped me with that, like, 'that's labor, that's work,' or like, 'oh Michelle you have to eat when you write you can't just like you know stay up for four days (laughing), and you know... and like bust out a chapter. Or if you do, you know, there's health consequences. So sometimes we helped each other just not go off the deep end.

MHP: Yeah, yeah that's true. I'm thinking about your writing group now what that translated into as we moved into the institution as professors and kind of the shock right? The shock that 'oh Santa Cruz really was different wow really...?'

MB: Mmhhm.

MHP: ...People aren't necessary-people don't really share that same idea that we're all we're in it together and we can all move forward together it's more dog-eat-dog-

MB: Mmhm.

MHP:-which you know of course. And...

MB: Yeah, I mean it really sheltered us in some ways.

MHP: Yeah we were sheltered and then we had to learn the hard way how to survive.

MB: I had my first chair I had never had a male professor be, like as an advisor. So, and I had a chair who was, you know pretty... he was trying to be cool, but his way of being in the world was pretty deeply patriarchal, and I don't even think he was aware that he was trying to be that way, but even how I've had figure out how to relate to him as an authority figure. I was like, 'whoa I've never had a guy trying to like' you know be this kind of father figure something. I was like didn't you know I come from a single house... you know single mom, so I was like, 'I didn't have a dad like that so don't be trying to pull that on me now' you know. But just all these different arrangements. Remember Glen Mimura he used to say we were in 'fruitopia' and so when we left fruitopia we would have to figure out how to be in the quote unquote 'real world.'

MHP: Dog-eat-dog world.

MB: I know but maybe we took our fruitopia with us.

MHP: We did and because you're talking about the... that you have a system wide kinda women of color writing group collective

MB: -uh in LA.

MHP: In LA

MB: Through like greater Los Angeles.

MHP: And so we had to we built one here why-we it's actually called, WIRED

MB: Mmhm.

MHP: Women, it's women of color and their allies, so (Sonnet's) part of it

MB: Oh that's cool

MHP: So women in, women writing about racism and ethnicity I forgot I

MB: What's the D?

MHP: (laughing) I can't remember I'm trying to remember where I can't remember...

MB: (Laughing)

MHP: "WIRED" I'll have to-

MB: -ask somebody

MHP: I can't remember D-

MB: -Our collective-

MHP: -Diversity or something-

MB: Our collective is called, "LOUD."

MHP: Oh LOUD, does it-

MB: It doesn't stand for anything it's the LOUD Collective

MHP: Our's is WIRED so anyway

MB: 'Cuz we always feel you know, like we're too loud in the hallway, we're not wearing the appropriate clothes or-

MHP: Can I tell a story? Am I supposed to tell a story? I'm not but-

MB: Go ahead.

MHP: I will tell a story about that idea of loudness.

MB: Uh-huh.

MHP: the writing retreat and we were there it's... it's interesting, it's a place that is beautiful and very quiet and when we get there and very yeah...

MB: Loud.

MHP: We're not loud we really weren't loud, we were working, but we were a significant number of women of color, African American, Chicanas, Asian American women, and we were not loud, but I think that there was a perception that we were loud.

MB: Mmhm.

MHP: Because-

MB: -unruly.

MHP: Because we have to share a writing space. But the doors closed, I mean it's a it's a house and there's a space where you can close doors. But the other faculty, one other faculty member instead of talking to us, just went directly to the administrative person and said they're being loud.

MB: Mhmm.

MHP: And we really were not being loud. I think there was this perception of there's group... we're not used to these types... they're congregating... and maybe we're talking like this you know, 'oh you have a piece of paper? You have coffee?' or whatever, but it was perceived as very disruptive you know. I think visually we were disrupting.

MB: Yeah.

MHP: And I think it was more about that then the actual volume.

MB: Mhmm.

MHP: So I think it's important that we have to to-

MB: (laughs)

MHP:-claim the loudness (laughs) but also it's take... redefine what the loud is, because I think when we do congregate, we are seen as disruptive, whether we're... but rather than being positive of creating a positive energy in a large group, it's somewhat unsettling for people not used of seeing that.

MB: Yeah. Well I think it's also creative energy right? And so yeah the LOUD collective, we were like "brown-girls-something-something" collective, we were trying all these different names and the one that stuck was LOUD. 'Cuz I guess just to embrace your difference how you occupy space differently. Some of us of course aren't really loud, but it's just even what your saying is even your read as 'loud' when you're not. So..

MHP: Ok do you wanna talk about some of your digital projects 'cuz I think that you've been really the vanguard of incorporating digital technology and your oral histories...

MB: Yeah I feel like I'm doing it backwards, sideways. It doesn't really you know... it's not funded. I try to create it, and it doesn't always fit in the classroom. It doesn't fit the container of the classroom. It's experimental, but you know... But some of the projects are... I created the Chicanopedia. It's like 'Chicano' with the aroba 'pedia' and so students, well our students produce some pretty great research right? So I used to have the zine project you know every student would make a zine at the end of class about their research and then they would put it in the zine format, and they really loved that. But that's kinda old school, pre-digital, but I liked that idea that I would train them to produce... what they'd

produce in class should be distributed right? So they would always have to make like 5 zines, and I would... I even remember I got in a fight with my TA's last time, 'cuz they're like no... they changed the rules, and they're like, 'no they only have to make one' and I was like, 'the point of making a zine is that the knowledge that you've gathered through the class and your research should be distributed. You know, like the radical notion, 'give that away' you know, spread the word, and... But I was realizing you know, our students are a digital generation, and so I started making the Chicanapedia Project. But it's really hard actually 'cuz the university you know, I've been try'na say 'can we make a portal through our departmental webpage where it has public access?' to marry the mission of Chicano Chicana Studies to be producing community with, producing knowledge with the community and for the community? But you know, there's all these like security protocols and you have to log on, and so they... like the platform that our digital projects are on isn't publicly accessible, and I'm like, 'that defeats the purpose.' So I've been fighting with the office that handles that at my university for years. Like how do I make this... and then on the other hand I don't... you know as a professor, I already kinda have a handful of things to do, and so if I don't have it on that platform, then I have to manage it, and manage the content and all the stuff, and I'm like, 'wow I just wanted the people to, you know, it's about democratizing the knowledge' and getting it out there. I didn't wanna have to manage it. So I'm still experimenting and I've been doing... besides Chicanapedia... digital storytelling projects where students make their own, you know, short videos using still photographs, and voiceover and music, about you know, the figure of the Pachuca or Cholas in their neighborhood. 'Cuz a lot of my students are first generation, not just first generation college students, but first generation Chicanas Chicanos, Latinas, Latinos. So their parents are from El Salvador, or from Oaxaca, or from Guatemala, and they wonder why they made it to college and their brothers and sisters and the kids in their neighborhood, you know, like are addicted to drugs or gang-banging in prison... So I think, you know, they've used the digital storytelling to try to figure that out. Like you know, why some students... why some young people make certain choices and some others don't, and you know how it's kinda accidental. Like I always call myself the accidental academic 'cuz it's not like I was on a path, and I had a career or I even knew I was going to college, and so I think a lot of people struggle with that sense of survival guilt. So through their digital storytelling projects they're being able to work that out, or think about that.

MHP: Is that funded or is that going to be distributed?

MB: No I mean it's on our classroom web

MHP: It's on your classroom...

MB: ...web... web platform. But it's not even... so yeah it's hard, and then even to like... they have to upload through YouTube and then link it and then if their link goes... you know if

their link isn't live... so it's kind of... I like it, but even in my department my former chair got hysterical 'cuz I was making a YouTube channel for my classes... our department... and it was just for my students' projects, and she just... you know I got a very small grant from the Office of Instructional Development, and I got the grant, and I was given the money, and I was trying to get our web designer to make the portal through which people could visit our departmental website and then see our student projects. And I wrote my chair a whole memo of the research I had done for the whole year, and here's some different findings, and nothing had been launched, but we got all the research done, and then she responded so crazy... accusing me of taking departmental resources, and she cc'd like fifteen people and... you know, like hysterical about... I guess about permission and the channel, and the YouTube. And so there's so many different issues with it, like around knowledge and permission and who has the permission and the... like you know, the digital revolution, and giving free 'shareware,' and sharing public access really goes against the values of some people in the institution. And intellectual property, they just get very uptight. So it hasn't been easy, and I'm still like stuck with, you know, really great projects that don't have public access. You know so I'm like, I might just figure out how to put 'em somewhere else I guess. So I'm doing it, but it's uneven and messy and that's why I'm interested in asking other people how they do it. 'Cuz I just wanted to do it. I wanted to give my students the opportunity. They work with a lot of like, "Homies Unidos" other organizations in LA, and those organizations should have access to the research the students produce. But they don't you know, it's like the students go through the org and then you know, like that knowledge should stay with the group, to be able to use it to show their funders or other people in the community, but we haven't worked out all the kinks. I don't know if you have over here? But it's 'cuz I'm doing it by myself I need to get an agent... I'm like I don't know...

MHP: (???)

MB: Ok I'm like, but I guess 'cuz I'm the only one doing it in my department that I'm like... And then I talk to my administration and they're like, "oh my gosh we have all these resources blah blah blah we can work that out" but not really. Or not yet. I still hold out the hope.

MHP: We'll wrap up, but I did... as you were speaking, I remembered one large organization that we tapped into even as we were part of the women of color in collaboration and that's MALCS.

MB: Mhm. Yeah. So MALCS is the Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social, and it is another formation that's been really important. It was founded in the in the 80's by women like Adelisa Sosa Riddel and I was raised in MALCS, I mean I went to my first MALCS meetings as an undergraduate. I gave MALCS a shout out in my book acknowledgements. I was like, "this community was the midwife for my book" my intellectual project. But yeah,

it's a space that a lot of people critique, it's not intellectually vigorous, it's you know, it's not the cool place to be seen at a conference, and...what... it's really a mentoring space. And you know a space where people can really engage your work, people who know your work. But you know, there's always a lot of students, undergrads, and graduate students, and as much as people talk about what they talk about, they don't actually wanna present with students, or you know... So it's a space that breaks down hierarchy, but it's also a space that's now multi-generational so...yeah. It's gonna be in LA this year. Cal State LA is organizing it. Dionne Espinoza is gonna work on it, so I just wrote to Dionne, "hey you know, hey can I help you? What do you guys need? UCLA MALCS chapter is ready to roll" 'cuz you know the structure is all so... it used to be just national, we'd meet in the summer, but now we have campus chapters, which has been really good. Our chapter's pretty active. We brought Susana Baca last year for International Women's Day and ...

MHP: -came up here, piggy backed off that and she came up here...

MB: Yeah! That was amazing yeah. So. It's been good but MALCS is, you know, it's a really vital space and we need to continue to feed it, and nurture it and grow it. It's not something that's gonna sustain without our continued energy. So.

MHP: Thank you Maylei Blackwell.

MB: (laughs)

MB: You're welcome Michelle Habell-Pallan.