

PROYECTO MISSION MURALS
Oral History Audio Transcripts

NANCY “PILI” HERNÁNDEZ ORAL HISTORY
San Francisco, July 6, 2021

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This is an oral history of artist and activist Nancy “Pili” Hernández for the *Mission Murals Project*. I’m Camilo Garzón. It was recorded on July 6, 2021, on a very windy San Francisco evening, at the Excelsior Strong Hub of San Francisco. The voices you’ll hear will be those of production assistant Natalia de la Rosa, me, and Nancy.

Before we began, Nancy showed Natalia and me around the hub, including a program she leads that has given sixty-eight bikes to people from the community, and showed us some instant photographs of a ride the members had taken a few days prior to this meeting. As we sat down, she talked about her love of sci-fi and zombie books, especially in a time like the COVID-19 pandemic, and said she was “hella ready” for this zombie apocalypse if it were to happen.

This oral history delves into the facets of Nancy’s personal life and her work as an activist, especially related to her activism with the *Resist* banner in Washington, DC, after the 2016 US presidential election, and what led to her career as an artist, detailing her foray into murals and street art. It also goes into her work with muralists like Susan Cervantes, and with Estria Miyashiro on projects like the Water Writes project.

Nancy takes us on a journey through the expanse of public art and activism she generated throughout the years, her role in preserving and amplifying Chicanx heritage, and her legacy.

Here is the oral history.

Esta es una historia oral de la artista y activista Nancy “Pili” Hernández para el Mission Murals Project. Soy Camilo Garzón. Se grabó el 6 de julio de 2021, durante un atardecer de San Francisco muy ventoso, en el Excelsior Strong Hub de San Francisco. Las voces que oirás serán las de la asistente de producción Natalia De La Rosa, la de Nancy y la mía.

Antes de que comenzáramos, Nancy nos dio un recorrido a Natalia y mí por el centro de actividades, incluido un programa que ella dirige a través del cual se han obsequiado hasta la fecha sesenta y ocho bicicletas a personas de la comunidad, y nos mostró unas fotografías instantáneas de una rodada que habían hecho los miembros unos días previos a esta reunión. Mientras nos sentábamos, habló de su amor por los libros de ciencia ficción y de zombis, especialmente en una época como la de la pandemia del COVID-19, y dijo que estaba «listísima» para este apocalipsis zombi si sucediera. Esta historia oral ahonda en las facetas de la vida personal de Nancy y de su trabajo como activista, especialmente con respecto a su activismo con la pancarta Resist en Washington, D.C., después de la elección presidencial de los EE. UU. en 2016; y en qué la condujo a su profesión como artista, además de puntualizar su incursión en los murales y el arte callejero. También se entra en materia sobre su trabajo con muralistas como Susan Cervantes y con Estria Miyashiro en proyectos como el de Water Writes.

Nancy nos lleva de viaje por la extensión del arte público y del activismo que generó a través de los años, su papel en conservar y divulgar la herencia chicana y su propio legado.

Aquí está la historia oral.

CAMILO GARZÓN: Today is July 6, 2021, and I'm here with Nancy "Pili" Hernández, and I'm also here with my production assistant, Natalia de la Rosa. [*laughs*] And Natalia de la Rosa—it's her first time working here with the mic.

So, we're talking to you on behalf of the *Mission Murals Project*. If you can just say your full name and where were you born, Nancy?

NANCY "PILI" HERNÁNDEZ: My name is Nancy "Pili" Hernández. I am from the Bay Area in California. We are currently in the Excelsior District of San Francisco, and I'm very happy to get to share some stories with you about murals that I have seen and been a part of creating.

CG: That is great. And when you think of your upbringing here in the Bay Area, how was it growing up here, and what are the things that you remember the most from growing up?

NPH: Well, there's a lot, I guess, that I would say. On the topic of growing up in the Bay Area and seeing art everywhere, I think that I believed that murals were normal, like the bus. And it wasn't until I left California and visited other places that I realized that murals are both a connector between cities and also a hot topic in some places. I've been able to go some places where murals are huge and on walls everywhere, and I've gone to some places where murals are illegal and not encouraged.

CG: When you think of the comparison, right? Because sometimes *tenemos que ir a otros lados* [we have to go to other places] so that then we get like, oh, my God, look at the wealth of culture and beauty that we had at home. When you compared those two experiences, what are the lessons, the takeaways that you have?

NPH: I would say that one of the things that I have noticed traveling and paying attention to street art the way that I have is that the streets are a museum for the people. And buildings cannot only serve as places that house information but can also have information and stories painted on the outside in an accessible way. So in the same way that we think of art galleries being places that house fine art, a lot of the alleys and streets here in San Francisco—and in

many communities [where] people of color have found sanctuary—the walls can actually also be our art galleries.

CG: And they are art galleries, because they also show who we are. They're not just, like, impromptu—that they just became a thing, right? They are representations of who we want to see—people that look like us, or people that are from Central America, South America, from the Caribbean. A place like the Mission is special because of those things. When I think of the Mission—I've been asking this question to other people, and they have a specific answer—but to you, Nancy, what does the Mission mean? Or what is the Mission to you?

NPH: Well, I would say the Mission has been a historically Irish and Latino community, and it has been a historically working class community. So to me, it's felt like home, because I'm half Irish and half Mexican and working class on both sides. So my family has helped to build some of the houses that are here in the neighborhood and done a lot of construction and cleaning on many of the houses here. And then my generation, we've painted a lot of houses here.

So I feel like this neighborhood has been a sanctuary for immigrants coming into San Francisco, and that we have found a way to represent our stories on the murals in the alleys and the streets to reflect who we are as an Indigenous community that has had to travel outside of our homelands.

CG: When I think of your art, I think of one word that I think applies to most of your mural work, your screenprints and everything, is that you're always looking for unity. And I think that word means a lot to different people, especially in a country like this one that sometimes tells us different things, like to—you're not this, you're this.

I feel like you have a very specific approach. And I'm referring to, for example, [your work is] currently in the Smithsonian, which I feel is like a fantastic achievement. They are lucky to have your work.

You have one piece that you worked on with someone else about unity. Do you want to tell us the title of that print? And what does unity mean to you?

NPH: So currently in the Smithsonian, I have a poster that is hanging as a part of an art show of Chicano screenprinters, and I feel very honored to be invited to be a part of such an epic art show with so many people who I consider my heroes and my sheroes. I was included in that because I was a part of a fundraiser with Jesus Barraza of Dignidad Rebelde during the peace and dignity journeys, where we were using our ability to screenprint posters as a way to fundraise to help an Indigenous prayer run that began in Alaska. And [we] traveled down

toward Teotihuacan, Mexico, and simultaneously had another group start in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, and run upward toward—to meet them in Teotihuacan, Mexico.

So it was an amazing effort spearheaded by Indigenous people with a very grassroots effort. So we wanted to support them with some resources, gas money—and we made a poster. The poster is called *Indian Land* and is a silhouette of both the North and South American continents. And I think that the unifying message of that is that there are lots of man-made borders that we are all programmed and accustomed to recognize. But that if we really zoom out and look at the landmass that is Turtle Island—or Abya Yala, or Anahuac, or other names that Indigenous people called it—that this landmass may have lines drawn in the sand by men, but that the way that the land has been formed by the Earth, and by the ocean, and by nature is as a unified continent.

So we have it in our head that there's a North America, a South America, a Central America. We've been taught that there's differences based on geographic lines and languages spoken. But that—as a person who has Indigenous ancestry from this continent, I feel like our connection to this land base is much deeper than the maps and the lines drawn by governments, that we are all connected through our DNA. And more than anything, we are connected by our commitment or our relationship with this planet.

And so I think that this was a call for us to defend land and life, and to think of land and life as something that is sacred and much more important than any geographical boundary created by any government.

CG: That is just beautiful, because it really reflects on not only the print that you did with Dignidad Rebelde. It also reflects on other kinds of work that you've done, also with murals, because you said land—one other thing that has been very important has been water. And you have collaborated in, it seems, ten murals.

NPH: Fourteen.

CG: Fourteen. And why is it that you have gravitated to these things? Why do you think that—you personally?

NPH: I think I was standing in the ocean one time, and I was like, “Man, humans are just fucking up. Like, we need to do something.” And I felt like the ocean was like, “Yeah, bitch, do something.” And I was like, “Oh, shit. I think I should do something.” And the ocean was like, “You need to do something.” And then I walked out of the ocean, and I was like, “I need to do something.”

And then the next day, I got a phone call from a friend who had started a nonprofit arts organization, and who I had known from graffiti days. He was arrested for vandalism, and it got on the news because they were trying to make a model out of him. And SFPD was like, “Let’s teach everybody a lesson by locking this guy up.” But actually what that did was it put his name, and his face, and his graffiti all over the news and caused kind of like a big stir around street art.

And so he was able to create a foundation in his name, and he called it the Estria Foundation for Public Art. And he asked me to come on board for four years and help manage a project that would use people who had been street artists—or had been graffiti artists or had been muralists and had learned the skill of visual communication—and to focus all of our energy into painting a series of large-scale murals about water issues in different cities. And so he entrusted me with this Water Writes project. And we were able to spend the next four years traveling to places and collaborating with local artists in many different cities where water is an issue.

And so you know, here in San Francisco, we were thinking, Oh, well we want to talk about trash being thrown in the garbage, and we want to talk about plastic bags, and we want to talk about water bottles, because those are the things that we’re seeing. But then we traveled to, like, the Klamath, where fish are at risk because of these hydroelectric dams.

And then we traveled to Palestine, where people are at risk because the water is highly salin[e] and very polluted. And then we traveled to places like Arizona, where water is such a finite issue and is being used to process coal, you know. And this process called slurring was fought and outlawed by the Indigenous people there, because they were using this pristine water source just to move coal down a slide. And such a wasteful process, such a resource-extractive process, all in the idea, or the intention, of making money for Peabody [Energy].

And so I think that by traveling to all of these places and being able to use muralism as a way to visually communicate the local issues of water, I personally learned a ton of issues that are going on around water across the country and across the world. And so we documented all of that through [the] hashtag #WaterWrites, W-A-T-E-R W-R-I-T-E-S, and we brought video makers, filmmakers, and artists with us along the way to document what each community was saying.

And so we painted in the Gaza Strip, we painted in the West Bank, we painted in the Philippines. And each of those trips was an amazing, life-changing experience that really showed me that no matter what language people are speaking, no matter how literate or illiterate people are, visuals are a way that we as humans communicate. And as people are

uploading pictures of whatever is going on in their area, if we can lend our skills to make that image more tangible and more legible, [then] their story can carry farther.

CG: You're mentioning one of the people that has been involved with you the most, which is Estria Miyashiro, who currently is in Hawaii. And another person that we've been talking to, which I'm very happy to let you know, is Susan Cervantes. And you've been involved with her and with Estria for a long time. And one of the most beautiful things about just, your muralism, *tu muralismo*, is the collaboration. It's the beauty of understanding that this is not about you, and at the same time, you can still put a part of you in it. How has it been for you to collaborate with them, and others as well?

NPH: I think that when I first began to see myself as an artist, it was because I was an activist first. Other than that, I liked to write my name, but I never wanted to. I was never motivated to climb to the top of a building to write my name. But I have been motivated to climb to the top of buildings to write a message. And so I feel like art, for me, has been with the intention of getting out some bigger-than-myself idea, or some call, or slogan, or demand that needs to be said by a group of people, more than I feel the need to write Pili all over the tops of the freeway overpasses.

So I do think that by being able to collaborate with individuals like Estria Miyashiro or Susan Cervantes, or any of the Precita Eyes team, or Susan Greene or any of the Art Forces team—all of our collaborations have really been like the same way. In graft, we would do like a production, and everybody would write their piece together but then have a common background. I think we took that same idea and began to utilize it for public street art murals that would say something.

So we were able to take a symbol, like one time a tree, and give everybody a leaf, and then everybody installed their leaf together. But it all—when you stepped away from it, looked like a cohesive image. But when you zoomed in or stepped forward, you could see that there were so many different stories within each leaf. And that was the Olympia-Rafah mural project. So I feel like that one—they did a really good job of allowing each of us to participate in a facilitated way. So it wasn't just a free-for-all, everybody paint what you want. You only got a six-foot leaf. But in that six-foot leaf, you could do whatever you wanted.

And so I think that they also did a really good job of creating a website to go with that, so that you could mouse over the different segments or call the wall on your phone and listen to the audio recording of each artist talking about what they had painted.

So I feel like what I've learned from collaborating with Susan Cervantes and Estria, and Trust Your Struggle, and the Art Forces squad, have been that people are willing to work together.

And we as artists can provide a format for that to happen in a way that people can feel good about what they participated in, and can make their voices heard, or make their messages seen, and show that we exist.

The same way that a graffiti writer wants to write their name on the top of a billboard to show that they exist, I think that communities feel the same need—and especially now in the pandemic, as people have been isolated, not able to work together. I've been working with David Solnit and a bunch of other artists who are using muralism as a tactic of civil disobedience. And so taking over public spaces and collectively creating large-scale works of art in the street, stopping traffic, and repurposing the sidewalk into a canvas has definitely been a way that we can still maintain six feet of distance apart from each other but participate in working together.

CG: One of the other things in which you have learned to collaborate with people and to let them tell their stories—but also in a sense be touched by their own struggle—is the education aspect of your life, because activism, which you mentioned, graffiti art, muralismo, graphic art, all of those are parts of you. One that I think has been essential about understanding the people involved in these murals in the Mission, or just why is it that it became such a specific place for murals, is also the educational aspect. It's the reaching to the community, making sure that they also know that they can do this. But on top of that, being able to have something left for them, to have some legacy, to have helped someone realize something in themselves.

When you think about education, your teaching more specifically, you've done that in a variety of settings. And you are recognized in the Mission. And you've been called a hood hero, and you've been called many things. And all of those are epithets—those are, like, things that get attributed to you. But you're an educator too. When you think of education, why education? Why have you gravitated toward it, and why is it such an important part of who you are?

NPH: I would say that ethnic studies was something that I was a part of a campaign to fight for while in high school. And I think that what that brought to my life was the idea that although a lot of us were upset and frustrated with the education that we were receiving, ethnic studies really made us feel like we had a place in the education system. And so I was a part of some walkouts that happened in 1994, and the walkouts were a direct response to Proposition 187. At that time, the then-governor, Pete Wilson, was trying to throw immigrants under the bus as he attempted to run for president.

And so he was creating a very anti-immigrant rhetoric and a media fervor against undocumented people, making it seem like kind of similar to how you saw Trump doing,

right? Scapegoating immigrant communities and laying the blame at the door of Latin American countries, when actually it was our fault that there was instability in those places. It's our foreign policy that created those problems. So kind of like burning your neighbor's house down and then blaming them for setting up a tent in your backyard type stuff was happening in 1994, similar to how you guys have seen under Trump's reign.

So as a high school student, trying to advocate for my friends to not be kicked out of school for not having citizenship, we walked out. And then when we came back the next week, we were like, actually, this place sucks and doesn't really help us. So yes, we're fighting to be here, but like, we're fighting to be here and get, like, a second-class education.

So I think that the empowerment that we felt through those walkouts definitely impacted the way that we came back to school after the walkouts, and [we] felt a renewed sense of ownership over the education process. And through that, I think we became scholars instead of just being activists. So we fought for ethnic studies at my high school; we fought for ethnic studies at many different districts throughout the Bay Area. I think we attended at least eleven different school district meetings across the Bay Area to advocate in each of them for the passage of some sort of resolution to include people of color in the curriculum.

We passed a resolution here in San Francisco when I was, like, seventeen or eighteen to include people of color and women in the English curriculum, because there was none at that time. And so now there are at least, you know, women and people of color on the required reading list because of that student-led effort. And I think that experience of advocating for education to fit us and serve us kind of made me accountable to get my degree. So after telling everybody that we should have ethnic studies, I was like, Oh, I guess I have to go to school now and get that. So I did end up going to City College of San Francisco, and then to SF State and getting a BA in Raza studies and a minor in art education.

[And] I then came back and began teaching in the Excelsior, and in the Mission District and also at Pittsburgh High, to share with younger people who look like myself, and come from my community, that we are not, I guess, the people that are portrayed by [the] Pete Wilsons and Trumps, but that we are descendants of folks who built pyramids and that took math. We are descendants of people who painted the entire history of Latin America on walls. We are descendants of people who figured out how to run machines, and build buildings, and create all of the things that you see in front of you, and then clean them.

So I would say that I have spent my time as an adult trying to teach teenagers to have pride in themselves and our culture, and to give them skills that will help them to survive in life. I am trying to pass on the positive information that's been given to me, and the ways that I've been taught to hustle but not to hurt people, and to sell things that are not poisonous but

that are good for our culture and our future generations, and that it's our responsibility to feed our families and take care of ourselves, but not at the cost of the planet.

CG: This that you just did was going to be my next question, which is, like, what is your teaching philosophy? And you gave me not only a teaching philosophy about specifically art education—which yes, you did receive a degree. And there's another CCSF person right here in front of me, holding a mic.

NPH: Hey.

CG: Which is always a nice thing, right? It's also the people that are talking to you knowing what it is that you're talking about. But also understanding that your interests and education—it's not just about art. It's not about just trying to see ourselves in terms of just, like, the representation, the visual aspect. It's the pyramids, it's the astronomy, it's the incredible engineering that we needed to do to create the murals that you also have been creating.

NPH: So much math.

CG: So much math.

NPH: Oh my gosh, so much—

CG: So much measurement.

NPH: If I could tell my twenty-year-old self how many math equations it would take to paint a 6,000-square-foot wall over and over again, oh, my God, I would have paid better attention. Because I was, at the time I was like, Oh, how am I going to use this? And then later I was calculating budgets, making spreadsheets, figuring out how many square feet of buff, and primer, and maybe paint, and then possibly clear coat it'll take to do—oh my goodness, so much math. So I wish I could tell myself to pay better attention to math, because I would end up needing it so much to paint murals all over the world.

CG: When you think of yourself, right? Because this is an interesting thing that we're doing. Oral histories are thought of as like documents, right? And there's future generations and present generations that will be able to benefit from hearing about you, knowing more about you. But even if you could just reach back and just figure out what are some other things that you would be like, Oh, my God, I needed to be doing this more, what were some of those things that you would have told yourself twenty years ago, thirty years ago?

NPH: Ooh, well, it is awesome that you go to City College. How old are you right now?

NATALIA DE LA ROSA: Twenty-three.

NPH: Oh, my God. I was at City College when I was twenty-three. So, I think, when I was twenty-two and I was at City College, I was doing Feed the People, Freedom School Fridays. So we would get up at seven in the morning and work at the food bank, and then we would each get a bag, which we would drop off at the homies 'house, and then go to school. And then we would cook for everybody. And then right after school, we would have like a movie day, or some sort of a popular education workshop. We brought in elders from the Panthers; we brought in Betita Martínez. We brought in [*cross talk*].

NPH: Yes, recently, yes. I'm not over that yet. But we were able to give her a platform to speak to City College students, and then also feed them. And so I definitely learned that food is important for organizing. I also learned how to feed hella people. I then became a vegetarian, because I realized what was happening to the animals in order for us to be fed. And I also realized that I felt healthier when I ate a bean-based, or vegetable-based diet or plant-based diet rather than dairy and meat.

So I guess I would just tell myself back then to trust my gut and not to think I have to fit into the way things were taught to me—because my family eats hella meat, and drinks hella milk, and eats hella cheese, and smokes hella cigarettes. And so I thought, I don't know—I guess I rebelled against them by trying to be healthy.

And I would say that if I could tell myself when I was twenty that that's OK, I would love to just tell myself that. Because I resisted it for a long time, thinking that I have to eat carne asada if I'm Chicana. But I don't really need that in my life. And so, I don't need that in my stomach. So I would love to tell my former self to trust my gut rather than trusting the façade of the matrix that I can see in front of me.

CG: There's two things there that are very important, which is I think you still have trust in your gut. It's just when we think of before—there's moments in which we're like, I should have leaned in more or should have gone more. But there's two things there, which is back in, I think was 2016, maybe 2017, I was living in Washington, DC. And it didn't hit me until I was researching about you that what I saw—

NPH: You hella Googled me, bruh. That's so crazy; this is kind of creepy. [*laughs*]

CG: No, but more than crazy is just, I saw you in the resist—because I was working as a journalist in NPR, and we saw the beautiful banner that you created with the other artists, of course. And it didn't hit me until I was researching, like, Oh, I know Nancy. I've seen Nancy. And not only does that take guts—that takes guts in front of the White House, in front of this person that has been dehumanizing people that have some of your identities. So that's an important thing that I wanted to say, that you were saying you should have trusted your guts more. Like, I think you have. It's just the hard thing of knowing that always—we could have done a little bit more supposedly, but it's with the eyes of the future.

So I think that the one thing that I want to say—and then the other thing is, when you think of your identity, you're saying for example, "*Soy Chicana; necesito comer carne asada.*" (I am Chicana. I need to eat carne asada) I'm Colombiano; I need to drink aguardiente. All of these little things that are part of the matrix, as you are saying, that is in front of you.

How has your identity—because, as you're referencing, there's also the Irish side, there's the back-in-the-day Indigenous peoples that have populated North America, South America, Abya Yala, as you were saying. But there's also the Chicana, which is a term that is very important. All of these are identities. You're also a woman; you're so many things. How has identity or identities changed throughout your life?

NPH: Well, I think I've seen our culture go from people being very comfortable with the term Hispanic to now, when that is kind of a cringey word, right? And I think that when I first heard the word, it was because I was being asked to check a box. And so my first contact with the word was seeing it as a thing I could check and not feeling like an affiliation with it—but then being told I fit there. But also, I think the understanding [of] where that word comes from, and us coming to the understanding that that word was given to us by Nixon, who didn't give us anything good. So we shouldn't trust him. If that's the word that he chose to use for us, that's not the word that we chose to use for ourselves.

And I've seen a lot of people thinking of terminology as either a label that is placed upon us or a term that we use to unite ourselves. And I would say that if we were thinking of the term Hispanic as a uniting term, that is not a strong link to link us together because there's so much disdain for that word.

I've seen us use the word Raza, and I felt good about that one. I felt like I was included in Raza; I felt like I was proud to be part of La Raza. And then I've also seen pushback at universities, like SF State, that changed the major from Raza studies into Latino/Latina studies, which I felt like was a step backward.

And that was definitely impacted by many people from Los Angeles moving up to the Bay Area and working at SF State and having their politics and their terminology. Whereas I feel like the Bay was even more progressive than LA in already forward thinking and calling ourselves something like Raza because of the female pronoun, and trying to understand that for a couple of years we've been under patriarchy and that has lumped us under the *o* and the need to all identify under the *o*. And so a lot of folks when I was in high school were trying to figure out ways that we could all consider ourselves something feminine, rather than having everybody lumped together under something masculine.

And so the term Raza was widely accepted here in the Bay Area for some time. I also saw people using Chicana/Chicano, either with a *Ch* or with an *X*. I also saw people replacing the *a* [or] *o* with the @ so that it was both an *a* and an *o*. And I think that was around the AOL days when we started having chat rooms and typing things. So rather than having the *a* [or] *o*, using the @—which I think was smart and also reflected our communication using the keyboard rather than just words or a typewriter.

And then I've seen people really break down the [term] Chicana and what the word came from and the origins of the word—and, again, trying to replace anything that no longer fits us with an *X*. The same way that we read about Malcolm X removing the Smalls from his last name and replacing it with the *X* for the unknown. I think that we as a people, we keep putting *X*s in our names because there is an unknown. And there is—the unknown factor is that we are Indigenous peoples to this planet who are in the process of colonization and decolonization. And so I think that with the lack of being able to identify widely as—I'm a Purépecha [and] an Irish person. I say Chicana as a way for people to understand who I am, because they don't know what Purépecha is.

And for being here in the Bay Area, where we are so mixed and from so many places, we do need an umbrella terminology that we all fit under to be able to say that we, as a specific type of community, are saying this or saying that, or needing this or needing that. And I don't feel like Latin is that thing. Because if we look at the word Latin, it comes from Europe. And anything that is going to hold us together has to be rooted in this continent. Because the thing that does hold us together is our DNA being rooted in this continent and us being born on this continent. So if we use the Latino/Latina terminology as the chain that unites us, that's a weak link, because that's referencing a dead language that none of us speak.

So why would I say I'm Latin or Latina when I don't—I've never been to Latin? I'm not from Latin, and I don't speak Latin. So connecting ourselves through either Hispanic or Latin is referencing a language system that's not ours as the basis for what holds us together. And now we all speak English, so it's kind of like irrelevant, right? So I don't choose Latino or

Latina as my preferred terminology because I think that continuously roots us in Europe rather than rooting us where we're at.

So I feel like the one thing that I can say about Raza and who we are is that we're complicated. *[laughs]* And that we are evolving, and that we are trying to shed skins that no longer serve us. And so if we look at how snakes and reptiles grow—they let go of whatever shell they use that no longer fits. And so I hope that we keep shedding these skins until we find a terminology that actually does justice to who we are as a people on this planet and what we're here for.

CG: And you hit on the nail most of the things that I think Natalia and I have been talking about for a bit now, which is—

NPH: And did you Google me too? You, like, I feel like y'all stalked me.

CG: The Google machine, for sure.

NPH: Creepy.

CG: What I was going to say is, there's so much written.

NPH: I hope y'all found some dirt. I'm waiting for my FBI agent to write a book, because I feel like it's gonna be some good shit! *[laughs]*

CG: I think there's, like, intentional impact with most things, and intentionally in part dealing with identity, right? Because as you're saying, the intention supposedly is to unify. But by unifying, sometimes we assimilate. And the assimilation can order us in a way that might be detrimental. But you're also suggesting another way of identifying ourselves, which is a reclamation of something. The *x*, for example, in Latinx, for those that choose to identify as that. Chicax, or just the *X* in Xicana when it's spelled like that, or Xicano.

It is very important to have your thoughts on what you just said, because that is reflected also in the place that we're currently in, which is a place that you were giving us a small tour, like, just around just as we came in. And I feel like it's a place that reflects a lot of who you are too. It's the work. And while I do want to talk to you about a couple of murals and other kinds of work that you've done, I think that this also speaks to, as you were saying, a larger part of your adult life.

What is this place? What are some of the things that you want people to know of it? And also where do you see yourself with this specific place that we're in going forward?

NPH: Good question. I need to answer that question. [*laughs*] Currently, we are sitting in the Excelsior Resource Hub. We are calling this the Casa de Apoyo. This is a 3,500-square-foot space that was an old flower shop that had been abandoned that we rented during the pandemic, and [we] were able to turn [it] into a full-service center. So every day of the week, you are going to see a line of people out front in the morning and then services being provided throughout the day.

Mondays, we have young people in the space. Tuesdays and Thursdays, we have a squad of amazing service providers who are all experts in giving out resources, and references, and referrals to families who are in need. We have staff who have been trained, and are training others, on how to fill out the California state rental assistance forms so that families who were not able to pay rent during the pandemic are able to qualify for assistance with the back rent.

We are doing a food distribution project here one day a week, where three hundred local families are getting a box of healthy food, not only what the FDA provides; we are supplementing it with culturally competent food that is healthy—and that is an attempt to teach us how to balance our own immune systems using Latino/Raza food. So we've been providing, on top of what the FDA gives, we've been providing about \$1,000 worth of produce, chilies, tomatoes, cilantro, onions, garlic, lemons and limes, and other foods that improve our immune systems and detoxify ourselves. And also providing recipes that show ways that we can make familiar foods that our families love, but by using more plant-based and more healthy ingredients.

We also have a youth component, where people are packaging up supplies that are being delivered to houses so that kids can participate in online classes together as a team. So we are providing, like, art supplies to the youth who are in art classes, cooking supplies to the kids who are in cooking classes. We have a Latino club and a Filipino club, and so we're providing food weekly to those students so that they can be on Zoom together and have all of the ingredients so that they can participate fully in the class.

And then we also have a bike project that we've started downstairs. And we've turned the downstairs basement into a bike shop where we have been distributing—I think we're at seventy bikes right now that we've fixed up and have given out. And the process is just to sign up and tell us that your kid needs a bike. And then we've been able to give out free bikes that come with a helmet, a pair of lights, and a lock. And that's one way that we can

encourage families to live healthier lifestyles and have fun, and get off of their devices and go outside, and also get to work—you know?

We have—our janitor has, we gave him, a bike, and now he can get here without having to take the bus. Others of our staff and clients who need to get here have been reliant on public transportation and have to have money for that. There's a fare evasion enforcement going on right now, where every bus has two armed guards on it checking for whether or not you paid. And so it's a risk for people to jump on the bus right now if they don't have any money. But yet they need to get to places where they can make money. So we've been able to provide bikes as a way for us to give some autonomy to our community.

And we also have a legal clinic here every Friday. So we've been able to work with a group of nonprofit lawyers or lawyers that are at different law firms that have a grant that can provide some of their time pro bono. And we've been providing one-hour consultations for free to families who are in need of lawyers, either for an eviction defense case, a workers' rights complaint, or immigration.

And so we've been able to serve—we're at over two thousand clients, two thousand families that have been served through this space since February 1. We've been able to distribute Mastercards and family funds in over \$200,000. So each family has been able to apply for and take \$1,000 or \$2,000 or \$3,000, depending on how many kids they have and what kind of need they're under. And not to say that that's going to pay back all of the rent that they owe, but it's definitely been able to provide some resources to families who have fallen through the cracks and have not qualified for the stimulus or have not been able to access other kinds of rent relief or resources during the pandemic.

So I would say that this space that we're sitting in is funded by the Latino Task Force and the Department of Public Health, with the intention of empowering local community members to step forward in the time of a crisis and save ourselves.

CG: I think this place, all that you describe, but also what you're doing as the manager—is that the title that you would say that you have here?

NPH: Mm-hmm.

CG: Community manager, I guess, would be the most exact thing. I feel like you're doing so much more than [what] that title describes. That sounds just like—

NPH: Tell my boss that shit! [*laughs*]

CG: You're really helping the community in so many different ways that are all interconnected.

NPH: Hey, Brianna, the interviewer said we need a raise. [*laughs*]

CG: Oh, oh, oh, oh. But think of it like—this is such an unbelievably complex, interdependent, interconnected system that you have all created, all of you, so that there is a way to start chipping away at the troubles that face the communities in the Mission, specifically. And just people that are currently, as you're saying, going to work because they need to make money, but then penalized for not having enough money to pay for the thing [that] is going to take them to work. It's a feedback loop right there.

And you're thinking of all of these things, including the sixty-eight, seventy bikes that we saw, we [were] being told downstairs, that you've been contributing. Those are the ways in which the community gets to do what they can do. And one thing that I wanted to say is, I feel like it's exceptional, the operation that you have had here, because it is not an easy thing to have to have all of those community partners and all of these pro bono lawyers. Those are very complicated, very different things.

And I think it speaks to the same kind of thing that you were saying—even about not only the art, but also these kinds of things that we come from. We are mathematicians, we were architects, we created pyramids—we created all of these things. You're doing the same thing here. It's a multiplicity of talents that is being exhibited, and I want you to know that that, I think, is essential for people to understand. And thank you for giving us that really thorough overview of what this is. What the Excelsior, more importantly—it's such a beautiful word. It's the more, it's what we can achieve, what we can aspire [to].

And I have only a couple more questions. And if anything, I would love to also have Natalia ask a final question, so be prepared for that in a couple of questions. Which is, muralismo, murals—when you think of the Mission and murals, why do you think that you had to be here, that the murals became such an important national and international art form? Because murals have existed. We come from peoples that have done rupestrian art, cave paintings, since thousands of years ago. We keep finding beautiful paintings that still have iconography that we keep seeing. Why murals in San Francisco?

NPH: I would say, the oldest mural I've ever seen in real life is in, near the border of, Guatemala. And the entire pyramid was painted on the inside and out with murals. And seeing that and being like, Wow, someone with a paintbrush stood here thousands of years

ago and felt the need to depict what they were seeing in front of them. And how crazy that now, you know, 2021, and we are in San Francisco, and there are murals on as many buildings as we can get them on.

The Mission District has the highest mural per square footage on the planet, as of right now. So we have the densest population of murals of anywhere that we know of. And I think that the reason why that culture has grown here has been because this city has been a sanctuary for people coming, looking for sanctuary. And so many folks who have moved from Latin America and Central America into San Francisco have found a home in the Mission District and have felt the need to reflect some of the histories and traditions and identities that we possess on the walls around us.

I feel like the Mujeres Muralistas paved the way when they took their backyard alley and turned it into a museum and documented the stories of all of these communities that have now blended together in the Mission District, what caused them to leave. And when you walk down Balmy Alley and you see all of the stories of Salvadorean struggle, and war, and displacement, and neoliberal policies, then you can understand like why there are so many Salvadorean middle school students in this district right now.

And I think by that alley surviving as a testament to those stories and [murals] expanding across the different parts of the city and beyond—because as we've been training people to be muralists, they don't just sit still. So many of the families who have grown up in Precita Eyes are muralists who have traveled to other places and been able to paint wherever it is that they go.

So I would say that not only are we seeing murals as a daily storytelling part of our culture, but also we've been developing artists and teaching people how to be visual communicators. And teaching people the tactic of using muralism as a way to come to a collective decision on anything and portray our side of the story—and often portray the underdog side of the story, because we might not have the money to buy billboards that decorate the place and tell us this or that. But we do have the skills and the talent to be able to paint our own billboards, not with the intention of selling things, but with the intention of conveying to the world who we are and why we exist.

CG: That is, I think, essentially what we've been hearing from many of the people that we've also mentioned today, including Susan, or including—we're going to be talking to Estria, it seems, maybe later this week, which we're very excited [about].

NPH: Do you get to go to Hawaii?

CG: I wish, right?

NPH: [*laughs*]

CG: But the nice thing is, we're going to be able to talk to him for a good amount of time, as we are with you. And you're all interconnected too.

And I feel like you just defined also why is it that makes this very concentrated area full of murals what it is. And it is also the people that have done it; it's the people that choose to use a wall, not to just beautify it, but also represent themselves in a way that also creates an effect, some kind of change.

I only have one question left, but I want to leave that last. Natalia, do you want to ask one question?

NDLR: Yes. Your work now that you've done, now since you're teaching other students. I guess—does it fulfill anything in you to know that you're going to leave some resources behind for people to excel in life, or be proud of where they come from? Is there, I guess, a legacy that you want to leave?

CG: That was going to be my last question too.

NPH: [*laughs*] So I would say I definitely have invested many decades that I've had as—my decades that I've had as an adult—I've invested into young people and trying to make sure that I'm always teaching a high school class, or teaching middle school after-school programs, or using art as a way to engage young people. Not just with the intention of teaching them to be artists, but giving them space in their brain to get in the zone of creating art to free them up so that they can process other information.

I think that every one of us as humans should spend a half hour every day doing some sort of creative work, whether it's doodling, or coloring, or painting, or sewing, or screenprinting, or any type of making—because I think our hands need to make. And it is part of our purpose here to create. And when we don't have time or space to do that, I think it creates imbalance in the rest of us. And so I've spent a lot of time trying to make healthy spaces where young people can feel like they can sit down and doodle, or sit down or paint, and sit down and really, like, just focus.

I think that this generation lacks focus in many ways, because of our screen time and television time, and the way that all of the information has been cut up into very small bite-

size morsels to be digested very easily. So I like to create space for young people to get off their phones and create something. And I think that that makes them feel better and allows them to process the other information, which is really what I want to get to them. It's not just about here's how you can color, here's how you can use paints, but it's to really think about who are we and why are we on this planet?

CG: Thank you for that. I have one last question that I have been asking, just because I think it's only fair, which is if you think of anything that I've asked you, or Natalia just asked you or—do you have other times that you've been able to speak your mind, but maybe couldn't? Is there anything else that you would like to say that you haven't been able to say before, about any part of your work or your life—or even as a matter of conclusion?

NPH: Well, I know you brought up Betita Martínez—or brought up Betita Martínez and her role. And I would like to say that not only do I feel like it's important for us to make art that unifies us as Raza, but I think that it is our role as we define who we are as decolonized people. And as we define who we are as whatever name is created by the next evolution of Latinos, or Latinas, or Latinxes, Razas, Chicanos, Latinos—whatever is the next skin that the snake grows into—I would love to see us figuring out ways to shed what no longer serves us. And let go of patriarchy. And let go of resource-extractive industries and dependence on fossil fuels. And find ways that we can survive in the future in balance with this planet, and in balance with ourselves. And rid ourselves of some of the internal colonization that we have absorbed.

So I don't think I just want to teach us art that unifies us, but that is a step in the process. So if we can come to a conclusion or agreement on who we are as Indigenous peoples on this planet and on this continent, then I think it will be easier for us to work with those who are next to us. And I know that it's been our—the instructions given to us that as Latinos, or as Indigenous people—that it's our responsibility to hold up and highlight the needs and the wants of Indigenous peoples on this continent.

And so as Latinos and as Raza, we are guests here in San Francisco. And this is Ohlone territory that we are on. As long as we benefit from this place and we are in a relationship with this place, we have to hold this place accountable to the wrong that has been done to the Ohlone people. None of the Ohlone tribe right now can qualify for any type of scholarships, or funds, or resources, or first-time [home] buyer programs, or any of the things that should be afforded to a federally recognized tribe, because they're not a recognized tribe. And the one thing that's preventing them from being a recognized tribe is that they do not collectively own land.

So we are on Ohlone land where Ohlone people cannot benefit from any of the services because they do not collectively own any land—because it was all taken. And if we as guests here can see that injustice, I think we have to then feel accountable to do something about it. And so no matter the amount of success that can come to the Latino community, we will never have justice in this space until there is justice for Ohlone people.

And in that same sentence, or in that same breath, I need to say that as long as Black women are oppressed, like, none of us are free. And it's not until Black women are free that all of us are free. And that as Raza, we have to see our role in white supremacy, and we have to see our role in anti-Blackness, and we have to see our role in solidarity with the Black community. And it has to be a focused effort.

Just the same way that Univision invests hella resources and energy into trying to get us to side with the blonde character and see things from the European perspective, we need to put just as much effort and just as much resources into teaching our community to understand that we are a Black and brown people and that we need to be in solidarity with Indigenous and Black folks. And that we need to attack anti-Blackness within our community. That we need to hold ourselves accountable, even though our young people want to make music and use the n-word, like—we have to have hard conversations with them. And we have to teach them about what is our responsibility to our Black siblings—and what is our responsibility to our Palestinian siblings, when we see the type of colonization that is currently going on in the Middle East and can see how similar it is to how the Spanish invaded us. If we can see that going on right now, those of us who have an understanding of history can have a better understanding of current realities.

So I feel like that's part of why it's our intention as artists not only to build unity, but then to take that unity and do something with it. Similar to why I think this space is important—it's because it's not just that we're gathering people who are in need. Everyone who comes into this door is a possible organizer and a possible activist. We are using the term mutual aid, not charity. So there is no line of people standing out in front of this building. There's an organized list of individuals who need food delivered to their homes and an organized list of individuals who have the resources to either have a car or be able to ride an electric bike to deliver that food. Because all of us need food, and all of us also have the capacity to help in some way.

And so this center has been established as a place to provide mutual aid and solidarity, not charity. Everybody who leaves this place leaves here feeling dignified and leaves here feeling like they were seen and heard—very different from the feelings that I felt when I had to stand in food lines or when I had to face an eviction.

So I think that we've made a conscious effort to try to build leaders in this space and see everyone as a possible leader. So I would hope that the legacy that we leave will be that everyone is responsible to fight as hard as they can for themselves and each other.

CG: It is only fitting that you worked on that piece that is currently in the Smithsonian, not only about *unidad* (unity), not only about Indian land, but also about Dignidad Rebelde, which is, I think—

NPH: How many cholas do you know in the Smithsonian?

CG: *Exacto, mira eso. Es que*—and Chicanas, or even just all the time that it took for them to even have these exhibitions. And for, like, the Museum of Latino Chicanos that they're going to finally do, just because they just approved that in this term; it's the fact that it is a kind of *dignidad rebelde*. It's a rebellious dignity that you're giving people the possibility of helping themselves as well. It's not vertical only. It is horizontal and it's vertical, but it's the multiplicity of things that you're presenting in terms of not only what you're doing here, but also all of the other aspects that you were just referencing that do deal with your life and your work.

And I think that I'll leave it at that. And I think you had the last wording in the most beautiful and also *la forma más solidaria* (the most supportive way). And I appreciate your time, Nancy, today. And Natalia and I are very happy that you spoke to us today, and we really appreciate all that you're doing currently for the community.

NPH: Thank you for putting brown people in the MoMA.

CG: *Gracias.*

After the oral history Nancy used some frankincense, incienso, and as we said goodbye that night, she jumped back to work for the community.

Her 2010 screenprint *Indian Land*, which she made with Jesus Barraza and Dignidad Rebelde, is a silhouette of North, Central, and South America and was part of the exhibition titled *Printing the Revolution! The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now* at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC, close to where she marched with the *Resist* banner during the Trump administration.

Her life and work, including how we identify and continue changing these terminologies, reveals to us what unites us, what separates us, and the work that still remains. It becomes clear through this oral history that unity is a connective tissue through every facet of Nancy's

life, her commitment to land and water, and her views regarding the identities Hispanic, Chicanx, Raza, and Latinx.

This oral history of Nancy “Pili” Hernández was a collaborative effort, like murals also are. The team behind it was:

ERICA GANGSEI: Erica Gangsei

MYISA PLANCQ-GRAHAM: Myisa Plancq-Graham

CG: Who served as executive producers.

NDLR: Natalia de la Rosa

CG: Who served as a production assistant.

The rest of the team included:

JAVIER BRIONES: Javier Briones

KEVIN CARR: Kevin Carr

CHAD COERVER: Chad Coerver

CARY CORDOVA: Cary Cordova

STEPHANIE GARCÉS: Stephanie Garcés

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Melissa San Miguel

CG: And it was produced and mixed by me, Camilo Garzón.

The *Mission Murals Project* was organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services.

Thanks for listening.