

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education  
Oral History Project

**Francisco X. Alarcón**

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Alexis Mendoza and Reyna Angeles  
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Transcription by Jessi Hernandez and Technitype Transcripts

**Angeles** Today is June 10, 2015, and we are interviewing Professor Alarcón for the Sacramento Oral Histories Project. Let us begin. So the first question is, please say your full name.

[00:00:10]

**Alarcón** Francisco X. Alarcon, and I was born on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1954, in Wilmington, California, where my mother also was born and where her family arrived in 1919. Then when I was six years old, my family moved to Mexico, so I was also brought up in Mexico, but I would come back to visit my grandma and my great-grandmother, who never left Wilmington. So I'm a bilingual person, bicultural. I was raised both in the United States and also in Mexico.

**Angeles** Please provide your marital status.

[00:00:51]

**Alarcón** Well, I'm married. My partner is Javier Pinson. We got married just before Proposition 8 took place, because we knew that somehow that was going to pass, and so I'm very happy that I'm married.

**Angeles** And do you have children?

[00:01:10]

**Alarcón** No, I don't have children.

**Mendoza** So my name is Alexis Mendoza. So you answered where you were born and raised. Can you answer what your parents did for a living?

[00:01:26]

**Alarcón** My parents, they were working-class parents. My mother worked in a cannery, in the fish canneries in Terminal Island right there in San Pedro nearby Wilmington, and my father also worked in the cannery, but he was a little more educated because when we moved to Mexico, he worked in a bank, so he actually had a white-collar job.

My mother, I think she finished maybe third grade, but she spoke both English and Spanish. My father only spoke Spanish. Then in terms of my brothers and sisters, we're a family of seven, five brothers and two sisters. In many ways, my experience is not unique, but is sort of different from a lot of Chicanos because I was six years old when my family moved to Mexico, and we did have problems in Mexico when we moved, because we were considered *pochos*. We had a very difficult time when went to public school in Guadalajara, so my grandma had to pull us out from school and taught us how to read and write in Spanish. So that's how I was able to read and write in Spanish, and basically taught us some survival skills so we could survive in the public school system in Mexico.

So we went back after maybe about two months of training with my grandma and my grandfather. So in many ways, that was Spanish for Native Speakers from the

beginning, and it was very good that we were then able to read and to write in Spanish and that we were able to survive.

Later on, we came back to the States and my parents, they really encouraged us to go to school. All seven of us, we went to college. I have a brother who's a doctor. I have another brother who's an architect. I'm the third in the family; I'm the writer, the poet. And then I have another brother who's a priest, a Catholic priest. I have a sister who's a dentist, another one is an engineer, and the youngest, Estella, is a freelance publicist that works in Spanish. So in many ways the idea of being bilingual really helped us, and I think we were able to fulfill our dream when we came back in the States. We were named many years ago as the Latino Family of L.A. County because even though we were a working-class family, we were able to fulfill our dream of being educated.

**Mendoza** Did you complete your education in Mexico?

[00:04:20]

**Alarcón** I did finish my high school in Mexico, and then I came back and I went to Cal State Long Beach for my BA. Then I went to Stanford University for my grad studies.

**Mendoza** Just in terms of your family experience, can you describe your experiences as a child, elaborate a little more?

[00:04:43]

**Alarcón** Well, like I said, I was aware of the cultural differences early on, and so even though we were Mexican in California, we were not truly Mexican in a way

the same as other Mexicans in Jalisco, and so this cultural difference was very painful for us, because we were called names and we had to basically defend ourselves.

Then coming back, I had to learn English, I had to learn also to adapt myself to the system. My father was a gambler and so he lost everything, and the family had no money whatsoever, so when I was only eighteen years old, I became the main provider to my family, so I had to work and I had to go to school at the same time.

Then my family lives like a movie, you know. I went to pick up my mother to Tijuana, and she had just a bundle of sheets together with my younger brothers and sisters, because they had no money, basically. So we were able to survive. So I'm not ashamed saying that my mother basically was a person that really helped us a lot. She's still alive, she's ninety-three years old, a survivor and an inspiration to all of us.

So the family then had these difficult experiences both in Mexico and then coming back, but I believe by having those experiences, our family was able to learn something and the idea that you have to basically be a survivor, you have to fight for your own, stand and to open the door yourself, because nobody else was going to do it for you. So that's what we did.

**Angeles** I had a question about *Repatriaciones de Noviembre*. Is that based on your family experiences?

[00::41]

**Alarcón** Yeah, it is. Basically this is the story of my family. That's my mother, Consuelo, and then my great-grandmother, Rosario, and my uncles. So it is a true story, it is a true story, and it is part of the family oral tradition in terms of what took place in that story. I wrote the story in Mexico because I was a Fulbright Scholar in

Mexico, and I remember then my family, in many ways my family had the same experience that I had, even though it's fifty years before, and here we are in the year 2015 and we still have the same problem. We need to be able to have immigration reform so that people can be able to be at ease both in Mexico and here in the States. Cultural misunderstanding takes place, the idea of difficult hardships for the family.

My father basically lost his job because he was Mexican and he was told, even though he was a very good mechanic, in 1932 he was told he could not have a job because he was Mexican. So he tried to get a job and he was unable to get a job, so he had to go to Mexico. My mother and my uncles had never been to Mexico. They'd all been born in the States, and they faced this hardship. They were in a little *ranchito* with no running water and just having a very difficult time in Mexico. 1940s came, and then they all came back to the States and they joined the U.S. military. So my family in many ways reflects what takes place in society overall.

**Angeles** Now moving on, were you a Fellow, Felito, or were you actively involved in the Mexican American Education Project?

[00::44]

**Alarcón** Not in Sacramento. I moved to this area in 1992, but I became aware of the Mexican American Education Project through a friend of mine, Graciela Ramírez, who was very active. She was a professor, a retired professor, of Chicano and Chicana Studies at Sacramento State. So we became very good friends, and that's how I became aware. I actually went to the dinner they had about two years ago at Sacramento State. It was a beautiful event for all the Fellows, part of the oral history that we are part of at this moment.

**Angeles** Then we move on to number four, involvement in the Mexican American Education Project fellowship.

[00::36]

**Alarcón** Like I said, I was not involved directly, but I think in many ways since I was raised in Mexico and then come back to L.A., I was aware of what was taking place. In Long Beach State, for example, I did take courses on Chicano/Chicana Studies at that moment, and, of course, this was 1977, this was part of the Movement, and I became very much aware.

I remember I went to listen to Cesar Chavez speak when he came to Los Angeles. And then later on when I was at UC Santa Cruz, there was a fasting. This was the last fasting that Cesar Chavez did, and so I actually took my students to go and we went to basically be with Cesar Chavez when he ended his fasting. So for me, Cesar Chavez represented basically the Movement, the Chicano Movement, in ways that was very personal, but at the same time very public and also political.

And then the struggle of the workers, basically. I remember that when I was in Santa Cruz, there was a strike of the Watsonville canneries. Basically they were women, Mexican women. I took my students to Watsonville to basically become aware of what was taking place a few miles away from UC Santa Cruz. To tell the truth, it was a very interesting experience because I took a van with the students and then I went to park. I left them by where the strikers were having a picket line, and I went to park. When I came back, I didn't find them, and I said, "What happened to my students?" And I was told that they had been arrested. So it was a very important lesson for them. They were arrested because a judge had said that the picket line

could only have ten people. But they were not pickers; they were students. But for the police, they were Mexican and it didn't matter if they were students or pickers. They were arrested. I did write a poem about it, and the idea of that, I think, was very important for me that here we are showing solidarity to the workers and the students have to face this in their own flesh. So I think it was a very important lesson for all of us.

**Mendoza** So you were talking about the Mexican American Education Project. Did your participation or knowledge of this project influence your career or life's work?

[00:12:38]

**Alarcón** Like I said, since I was not involved, did not live here in Sacramento, I think I will say not necessarily that project, but I think overall the emphasis of the Chicano Movement, because the Chicano Movement cannot be reduced to just one project. It is basically a social movement.

So when I moved to the Bay Area from L.A., I went to Stanford University and I stayed at Stanford for one year, and then I became very much aware of what was taking place. We had another project in there, it was called the Chicano Fellows, I became a Chicano Fellow. I taught a course on basically the Chicano Movement. My mentor was Professor Jose Cuellar, an anthropologist, and so at Casa Zapata it was also very important for me to develop. We had a theme house. Antonio Murciaga, another important, very important writer. I met also Juan Felipe Herrera and a group of writers. So I was totally aware of what was going on.

We formed a group called El Centro Chicano y Latino de Escritores, and a lot of writers came out of that. Important writers like Lorna Dee Cervantes was part of that, Lucha Corpi, Gary Soto was part of that, and indirectly also Ana Castillo was part of that, and Cherríe Moraga. I became aware, and I was friends of L\_\_\_\_ S\_\_\_\_. So for me, the Movement was more personal. It was my involvement as a writer, as a professor, as an activist in society.

Then when I moved to San Francisco, I became aware and I became very close to the people in San Francisco. I was editor of a newspaper called *The Tecolote*. *Tecolote* is celebrating forty-five years. It's the forty-fifth anniversary this year. So I was involved with that for many years. I became editor of *El Tecolote Literario*. Then I became aware of the Multicultural Center, and then I became a part of the board of the Multicultural Center, and I was president of the Multicultural Center Board of Directors for almost ten years.

So all this involvement was part of the Chicano Movement through the literary arts, through the visual arts, and also through basically presenting also through poetry and meetings and events. So it was a big time for me. I became editor also of a literary magazine at Stanford called *Vortice*, and *Vortice*, we had a lot of connections with a lot of literary magazines in the States. We had about 800 different projects at that moment. This is 1983. In '78, '79, 1980, it was a big movement of Latino/Chicano literary expression.

Then came Ronald Reagan, and the first thing he did was to cut funding to those projects. So a lot of the literary magazines that were basically very productive in the seventies and eighties disappeared: *Pajarito Publications*, *Mango Publications*,



[unclear], *Maiz*, and I can go on. There were a lot of literary projects happening in the eighties, and that disappeared.

Here locally, you had the Royal Chicano Air Force, the rebel art front, and that was very important. I think it was extremely important. I was not a part of that. Basically, when I arrived in 1992, I asked to join as a board member the La Raza Galeria Posada, and I was part of that, and then I founded a group called Los Escritores Del Nuevo Sol. I think my good friend Graciela wanted me to basically be part of this project to give testimony of the Escritores del Nuevo Sol, and that's what I'm doing now.

**Mendoza** Moving on to number six. Did your study or knowledge of cultural anthropology or your knowledge of cultural issues influence your involvement and participation in the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:17:09]

**Alarcón** Well, of course. Like I said, my mentor at Stanford was Jose Cuellar, and Jose Cuellar is an anthropologist, so, yes, I studied and actually I reviewed the literature available at that moment in terms of the Chicano Movement. So I think it was not just myself. I think overall, that had a tremendous influence on my own self as a writer, as a human being, as a person, and on my own poetry. It reflects, I think, what was taking place in society overall.

**Mendoza** So how did other Mexicans and Mexican Americans or Latinos react to the term *Chicano* or *Movimiento Chicano*?

[00:17:56]

**Alarcón** Well, I think it is interesting, because my mother was born in L.A. and she always criticizes me and says, “You’re not Chicano. You are Mexicano.”

And then I say, “Well, who are you?”

“I’m *pocha*.” [laughs]

So each generation basically establishes a way of identifying, and that’s what I learned also with Jose Cuellar. Every generation basically moves on this continuum. My uncles who joined the U.S. military and participated, they took action in Germany, they identified themselves as Mexican American, and they were involved with that. And then my mother was *pocha* in the 1950s. I think that’s when she came to be. And then I can relate to the Chicano Movement, of course, as a way of having my own self-identity.

And then now it seems like people have moved on to another classification. So now it’s interesting because I think most of my students will not identify themselves as Chicano, even though they were born in California. They will identify themselves as Mexicano, as Salvadoreño, as Guatemalteco, but not necessarily as Chicano. So maybe everything is fluid, like Lorenzo [unclear] said. I think maybe a term that will be used in the future will be something like *mestizo*. I like the title *mestizo*. Nothing is set in stone, I think. So I think *Chicano* is a wonderful name, and the idea of reclaiming the indigenous through the Meshica, Meshicano, and Chicano, I think it makes perfect sense to me. As a poet, as a person, as a human being, I’m very comfortable with the term.

**Mendoza** Had you heard of the Civil Rights Movement at that time?

[00:20:08]

**Alarcón** Of course, of course, I'm in the community. *Chicano* was being used since 1911 by people here in the Southwest, so, yeah. In L.A., of course. I mean, everybody would use it, and it still is used, I think, in L.A. I think it's stronger in Northern Califas because in Northern Califas, it's more multinational, different communities formed by different nationalities. When I was in L.A.—again, I've been in the North for many years—it was very much Chicano. I mean, most of the people were Mexican American or descendants of Mexicans. Now you have a huge Salvadoreño community and also Guatemalteco community, so maybe that's changed also.

**Mendoza** The Civil Rights Movement with African Americans, did that have some influence on your participation in the Chicano Movement?

[00:21:10]

**Alarcón** You know what? It's interesting, because for me, the community in L.A. has had—I think we're coming to terms with that, because there's a lot of misconceptions and there's been friction in the community. I remember when I was a student, I was studying at East L.A. Community College for one semester, I was a student there, and I was going to work. I used to work in a factory, basically heating airplane parts, aluminum parts. So I was going to work by bus, and then all of a sudden, African American students came to the bus and they start hitting everybody, and basically they came to me and they hit me, they broke my glasses and I was on the floor. They had to take me to the hospital. It was racial. It was a racial thing, and the reason why, because some Chicanos had stabbed an African American high school student, and now African Americans were taking on Latinos. So that was my

experience, and I was shocked. I said, “Wow!” To me, when you’re talking about the only reason why I was hit was because I looked Mexicano, and so the tension, it is there.

In Compton, for example, Compton was very African American. Now Compton is Mexicano. So I think a lot of African Americans, they resent also the Latino community because they are losing power in L.A. So we have to come to terms. We had to come to terms and understand that both communities are very important and they could be allies.

When I went to New York, my experience in New York in talking to Latinos in New York, it seems that in New York it was totally different. The Puerto Rican community had very strong ties with the African American. That was not the case with Chicanos. I think we have strong ties with Native Americans. So the same role that Native Americans play in the Chicano community, African Americans play in the Puerto Rican and Latino communities in New York and in the East, maybe in Chicago. Chicago is a lot more—you have a huge African American community and also a huge Mexicano community, so I think people are more able to come to terms. L.A., it was very divided.

**Mendoza** Thank you. Did your involvement in the Movimiento Chicano change you personally?

[00:24:06]

**Alarcón** Totally. To give you a good example, in 1980, it was the tenth anniversary of the Moratorium. The Moratorium in L.A. in 1970, there was a demonstration against the Vietnam War and the community participated, and then one

of the leaders of the community, a journalist, Ruben Salazar, was killed sitting in a bar after the demonstration. That crime was never really solved, and people were very concerned.

So I remember ten years after that, a group of Chicanos went down and I remember Juan Felipe was there, Victor Martinez was there, I myself, and we read poetry in solidarity with what was going on, and it was huge, it was a huge demonstration.

So, yes, this was ten years after the Vietnam War, so I think the Vietnam War also was very important. The idea of the Farmworker Movement also was very important, and the idea of the walkouts that took place in '68, there was a lingering memory. The establishment of Chicano and Latino Studies at the universities, all those things were very important. I think in terms of literature, yes, Chicano literature was very important. People were saying, "We need to have our own publishing houses. We need to have our own literary magazines." And all those things were happening in the eighties.

**Mendoza** What did you personally initiate or help initiate in the Chicano Movement?

[00:26:03]

**Alarcón** Well, like I said, we did hundreds of readings, poetry readings, of events, cultural events in the community. We had something called the Monopoeem Festival, and we used to have readings where we'd have thousands of poets read one poem. This was at La Galeria de La Raza in the Mission District in San Francisco. And then also we had the Floricantos at Stanford for many years, huge gatherings of

writers and poets and dancers and *folklórico* and performers. The idea was to have everyone celebrate their own cultural identity, very important. Then also at the Multicultural Center I was involved as an activist, as an organizer of exhibits, of readings, of cultural events. All those things were important. And then through literature also, publishing literature also.

But it's different from Sacramento because I think San Francisco, it was a lot of things going on. One thing that happened was, for example, we moved en masse—there was a lot of Chicanos that moved to the Mission District and we became aware of the poets in North Beach. So we would go to the poetry readings in North Beach with Jack Hirschman and all the poets, the Beatnik poets.

Then we organized a big conference called the Left Union of Writers, and this was a big gathering of writers in San Francisco against the Ronald Reagan years. We were getting ready because we knew we were going to get it, and we got it for a few years. It was it was desert, it was winter for many years, you know, the cutting of all the literary magazines. So that happened in the 1980s.

And then the crisis took place, another crisis. What was the crisis? Well, AIDS, SIDA, came to the community, and so the poets organized. We were the first project in the nation that dealt with AIDS, and it was funded by poets like Rodrigo Reyes, Juan Felipe, Juan Pablo Gutiérrez, Marco Rodriguez, and we got funded. We got, I think, \$100,000—it was a big chunk of money—to educate our community in order to survive AIDS.

So one of the things I remember that we did immediately was to do a film, *Ojos Que no Ven*. It was a film in Spanish basically to educate our community about

AIDS and how AIDS was transmitted, and this was before even things were taking place in the East. We were doing this in San Francisco. So for us, that was part of our life. So in that that way, San Francisco was a lot more eclectic.

The issues were important. Women issues, they are very much important. The struggle in Central America, for example, I was involved with something called the [Spanish], Culture Brigade in San Francisco. We were aware that something was happening in Central America.

So now talking to you, I am thinking it's interesting because we had an international perspective of the Movement. What was going on in Central America affected us, and so we did books in response to that. We did an anthology called *Volcano: Central American Poetry in Translation*, and included a lot of poets. I became editor of a very powerful collection of poetry called *Tomorrow Triumphant* by Otto Rene Castillo, a Guatemalan poet who was killed when he was only thirty-three years old, by the military and he was burned to death. So we did the book in English and Spanish. So this was again to put a human face on the struggle that was taking place in Central America. Nicaragua was very important, El Salvador. So all those things were happening in San Francisco and were there in the middle of everything.

**Mendoza** So what role do you believe the Chicanas played in the Movement?

[00:30:36]

**Alarcón** Well, I think Chicanas in San Francisco, very critical. I was very good friends of Cherríe Moraga and also Gloria Anzaldúa, and they opened the door to the discourse, to fresh air to come in, because a lot of the Movement was very sexist,

very patriarchal, extremely homophobic. So here you had to open the door so fresh air would come into our cultural milieu. So, very crucial.

[unclear] that was published in 1984, to me was a groundbreaking book that talks about solidarity among women of color. There's no movement of men of color because men of color, basically, we're foolish. We think somehow we have power in the *familia*, so we need to have solidarity among us, whereas women, I think, the enslavement dialectic, slaves know that they need to have solidarity in order to get liberation.

I always wanted to do an anthology with Gloria Anzaldúa of gay and lesbian writing. We did a call once, and she got tons of submissions by women. I had none basically for men, because gays were basically afraid of coming out, even now. I'm probably one of the few openly gay Chicano poets in the nation, and I had to suffer a lot, let me tell you, because I think a lot of people, we have very homophobic, extremely patriarchal ways of looking at sexual orientation.

**Mendoza** Did the Movimiento Chicano raise your consciousness along social lines?

[00:32:49]

**Alarcón** Well, I do think so. Like I said, for me it is an international movement. It was not reduced just to the Chicano issues; the issues of liberation in Central America, the issue of AIDS, the issue of basically human rights. So the idea that somehow I can put myself and say, "Oh, this is the Chicano," and say, "Yes, but you know what? There's a lot of connections going on." And I think maybe that's the difference between Sacramento and San Francisco. There's a big difference. In



Sacramento, I think it's a lot more focus on Chicanos. In San Francisco, things are connected with a lot of other people. People have to have bridges with other communities. So I was part of that too.

**Mendoza** Did it raise your consciousness along cultural lines and political lines?

[00:34:06]

**Alarcón** Of course. I mean, come on. One of the things that I wanted to do, for example, as part of the Movement, I got involved with writers, and all my books—basically I have thirteen books of poetry—all my books have to do with issues pertaining to Central America, pertaining to human rights.

I was at Stanford and I got a Fulbright Fellowship and I went to Mexico to do research, and I found this manuscript written by Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón in 1629. This is almost 400 years ago. It's a collection of poems, spells, and invocations of indigenous people resisting the conquest in Nahuatl. So my grandmother was a Nahuatl speaker, so I had to learn Nahuatl in order to read those. So what I did, I did a book called *Snake Poems*, and *Snake Poems* is my celebration of resistance going back to the Aztecs. So for me, I take issue. I say, "No, we have to learn the language." So I had to learn the language and I had to go deal with this. So, yes, I had to go back and do that. To me it was very important. I see that as part of the Chicano Movement, my own contribution. I'm probably the only poet that writes in Nahuatl, and so that's part of me, and I'm happy to do this.

When I came back from Mexico, I came out in Mexico as a gay Chicano, not in San Francisco. I found San Francisco too provincial. [laughs] It had to be in Mexico City. And I met all these poets and writers. I met Lia Sandino [phonetic], who

was eighty-three years old, who belonged to a generation of writers that called themselves *Los Contemporaneos*, and they came out after the Mexican Revolution. So I'm tied to that movement of the *Contemporaneos*, the Mexican Revolution, the idea of celebrating themselves. They happen to be all gay men poets doing this, Xavier Villaurrutia, Salvador Novo, Carlos Pellicer. They were already friends of Frida Kahlo. So it was an explosion in Mexico. So he was a survivor because he was a doctor, because basically what happened in 1932, again, in Mexico the big Depression took place, and a lot of those poets, they basically were ostracized by the government. A lot of people committed suicide. That was the end of that cultural explosion. So again what I'm saying to you is that I am connected with a lot of movements, not necessarily just the Chicano Movement.

**Mendoza** And how did these changes impact your personal relationship with family, peers, and significant others?

[00:37:03]

**Alarcón** Well, I think it did change, because I think, you know, basically I became more devoted to projects that I wanted to do in terms of poetry, in terms of cultural arts. And my family sometimes insisted that they want me to do other things. My mother used to say, "Why are you wasting your time doing that? You should be making money like anybody else, like your brother, who's a doctor, and another one. What are you doing?" So I even have a poem about that, called "Consejos de una Madre." So I think it did, but I think I committed myself to my project, and I think it was important for me to do that.

**Mendoza** Can you please describe some of the impacts that your involvement with the Chicano Movement had on your career?

[00:37:55]

**Alarcón** Well, I'm director of something called Spanish for Native Speakers, and the reason why I'm involved with this is because I believe that people should have the ability to maintain their own native tongue. In California, there are 13 million Latinos, and they're all connected in some degree to Spanish, and I believe that it would be important for people to be bilingual. I do write in English and Spanish, in Nahuatl too. I mean, to me, Nahuatl will be the basis of my own personality, but Spanish and English is very important. So I devoted myself to the idea of linguistic maintenance and development.

In 1992, I came here into the Spanish department because they had a struggle here. There were some students that felt discriminated against in this department. They were told that their Spanish was not "real Spanish," that somehow they were cultural deficient and the literature and culture was not at the level of the *peninsulares*, and so they felt discriminated against.

One professor that was here didn't get tenure, so what happened then, there was even a hunger strike of students right here in the Spanish department in 1992.

I was contacted by the vice chancellor of this university, Carol Wall, and Carol Wall said to me, "Francisco, why don't you apply for this position that we have at UC Davis? We want you to establish the same thing you have at UC Santa Cruz." I was very happy in Santa Cruz directing the Spanish for Native Speakers.

So I ended up applying and I got the position, and then when I came in, I was able then to establish a Spanish for Native Speakers program, and I wanted to establish both in Chicano Studies in the Spanish department.

Again, the difference we had is that I did establish a major, we worked with all the professors, people had to take courses in Spanish for Native Speakers, Chicano culture, literature written in Spanish in the United States, and so forth. When I presented this to the faculty in Chicano Studies, they didn't like that. They didn't like it at all. [laughs] So I was basically fired from Chicano Studies here. And I think, to tell the truth, homophobia took place. I was fired.

But when I went to Carl Wall to explain to her, I said to Carol Wall, "The Chicano Studies basically did not want to have the changes that we made in the Spanish department. I came here to solve the problem, not to add to the problem."

And Carol Wall said to me, "Don't worry, Francisco. They never filed the papers, so they could not fire you." [laughs] So that's how life is. That's how life is.

So you know a little bit of history, too, when I became a board member of La Raza Galeria Posada, I became president of the board. They had a beautiful, beautiful mansion that was donated by Wells Fargo Bank that was worth more than \$1 million dollars at one point. I became [unclear] of that, and I said, "We're not going to sell the building until we buy a new building, and then we can take on—this will be for the community." Well, some people did not like that.

I remember meeting the mayor, Joe Serna, and Joe Serna basically had this idea that the building was donated to *them*. And I said, "No, no. It's for the community." And let me tell you, I was overruled. And what happened? They sold

the building to themselves, they [unclear], and they don't have a building now. It was very sad—I have to say this—very sad that the struggle in the community we were overruled by the same people that somehow are at the core of the Chicano Movement, because they thought that the building belonged to them, but it did not belong to them. It belonged to the community.

We had an open meeting, and they came in and they took the building. Now they see me and I think they are ashamed, feel shame. I wanted to protect this for the community, not to sell to yourself so you can make some money out of this. So that tells you that within the community there are issues. I am totally independent. I feel very good who I am. I have no problem whatsoever, and I have my own principles. And sometimes you have to take a stand even against people that somehow should be the guardians of the community, but I believe that it is important to take a stand and to be principled.

Another issue that I was involved with, I became aware there were no books written for children. They were all basically translations from English. So I said, “No, no, no. We need to write our own books.” So I became aware of that and I translated Gloria Anzaldúa's books into Spanish, and that's how I came to be an author for children. I have six titles. I've done six titles, and my books have done very well. I do poetry in Spanish and in English and this sold about 250,000 copies. So if you go to any school in this country, you will find in the school library Francisco Alarcón's poems. I'm part of that now. I'm part of the canon. I said, ‘Yeah. Why not? If they want to learn poetry, come to my books.’ Because I think my poetry, I can say it really reflects who we are, not just me; it's the whole community.

So that's something I was told not to do. I remember the publisher saying, "Oh, no, no, don't write poetry. It doesn't sell. Don't write poetry in Spanish. Do it in English." And so you had to be basically very *terco* and say, "No, I'm going to do it because this is what I believe."

**Mendoza** So were there any additional unresolved issues in the Chicano Movement?

[00:44:55]

**Alarcón** Well, It's sort of interesting, because I think that at this moment I see something going on. I think we're almost in a valley. We come from the top to the valley and we're wondering what's going on. [laughs]

I became aware of an issue that is to me very crucial, the issue of immigration reform, and it's something that I believe. I established a Facebook page called Poets Responding to SB-1070. Hundreds of people have responded. We have basically posted about 3,000 poems on our page, and every day, like you go to the page right now, there must be about 30,000 looking at our page every day. It's just incredible, the power of Facebook.

So we did an anthology, inviting other writers, eighty-eight poets, and it's called *Poetry of Persistence*. So I am very political. [laughs] I am very political. I think poetry and politics, they mix. I think we need to get this done. The poetry is basically a way to bring consciousness to people. I think this is the way it is, and I think a lot of poets are very basically—José Montoya used the term—lifers. Some people that go to prison, they're lifers because they're there for their whole life. Well, certain poets and activists are lifers. I think I'm a lifer. I see other people basically

take a break. A lot of the people very much involved in the Chicano Movement as artists, as activists, they got married, they have commitments, and they stop the involvement, and I think maybe that's part of the human development. You go through that stage and people think that, "I can't do that." So I'm totally—maybe when I'm *viejito*, I will be still doing the things that I want to do.

But I think the Movement has gone through changes and I think this is a project to try to bring consciousness in terms of those changes. And the next generation, what's going to happen to the next generation? I think people are very political, but the issues are very different. Immigration reform, very important. The issue of equality education, very important.

I think you know one issue that I really want to bring and I think it's going to be part of this in the future will be cultural and linguistic rights. We need to take a position. I think we need to basically preach for people to be bilingual. This idea that when you go to Chicano events and the only thing they say, "*Buenas tardes! Como estan?*" and then everything takes place in English. You know, it's a disservice to the community, because then people say, "*Bueno es que todo esta en Ingles todo ya, ya estamos conquistados ya nos bajaron ya nos lavaron el coco.*" And I think that idea to me sounds—I'm puzzled. I say, "If you really believe in human rights, well, isn't that a human right to continue your own linguistic and cultural tradition?"

And that's what I do. I go to schools and you have millions of children are Spanish speaking and yet we have a system that is erasing their memory, saying, "Don't speak Spanish. Don't learn about your ancestors. Be ashamed of who you

are.” And then when we get them here at the university, people say, “Oh, so it’s okay to speak Spanish? It’s okay to write Spanish?”

“Yes, it’s okay to do this.”

Just to give you an example, this Thursday I’m having a poetry meeting in a gallery here in Davis. I teach a course. I’m probably the only Chicano that teaches creative writing in Spanish. I have three students. They’ve done beautiful poetry in Spanish, and so they’re going to be reading in a gallery here in Spanish for the first time in their lives. I said “Yes! Why not?” We should do that. For me, it’s no problem, and I think other people should do the same. [laughs]

**Mendoza** Can you describe how the Movimiento Chicano impacted community life here in Sacramento or where you lived?

[00:50:03]

**Alarcón** Well, like I said, I think it basically was able to provide—because I define Chicano Movement as multidimensional, not necessarily one project, because I think the issue of human rights was very important, the issue also for me very important, Cesar Chavez. The nonviolence is something that I really believe, the issue of Martin Luther King’s idea of civil disobedience.

That’s why I became very much moved by the nine students in Phoenix that basically chained themselves to the State Capitol in Phoenix because they were protesting SB-1070, the law that was very anti-immigrant, so they were taking a Gandhi-like action, a Martin Luther King action. So I was very moved. That’s how I responded to that. So I think things like that are very important. The issues, even though they are symbolic, well, symbolic issues are also very important because they



affect people's lives. So Cesar Chavez, very important, Dolores Huerta, very important. When she was protesting the first involvement of war in the Middle East with Bush the son, she was protesting in San Francisco and the police came and they had her on the floor, and she had to go to the hospital. This is Dolores Huerta protesting the war.

So I think those things are very important for me. I take them as an issue, so they affect my life. My own output as a poet is affected by that. I have a new book that just came out by University of Arizona Press called *Canto Ondo*, and in *Canto Ondo* I have a poem dedicated to Dolores Huerta, thinking about that action when she was there, because I was in Santa Cruz and she was going to come to open a mural, and she couldn't come because she had this encounter with the police. So I think things like that are very important.

**Mendoza** Can you tell us how the Movement impacted your community life?  
[00:52:50]

**Alarcón** My own personal life?

**Mendoza** The life of the community.  
[00:52:50]

**Alarcón** Well, I think, like I said, again, the Movement has to be seen as not necessarily one issue, but several issues. Just to give an example, when I was in Santa Cruz, Chicanas in Watsonville established something called Salud Para la Gente, and Salud Para la Gente was a community clinic. There were several clinics established throughout the state, but the basic idea is to provide care for the people. That affected life, isn't it?

The idea of bilingual education, at one point it was important. I was mesmerized how nobody defended bilingual education when it was dismantled. There was no position taken by Chicano Studies on the issue, and to me, that was an incredible disservice to the community, because now people are saying that we need to defend people and people have to learn, and why not learn two languages? Why not maintain two languages? Very few people in Chicano Studies defends that, and I don't know why. Why is it that nobody does that? Why nobody cares for the children, the Chicanitos that are there being shamed by the teacher saying, "Don't speak Spanish. This is English only"? To me, that's a human right violation.

**Mendoza** So you mentioned Cesar Chavez. So there are many Chicano activists that have passed on. Can you identify anyone else that you had you feel had an impact on the Chicano Movement?

[00:55:02]

**Alarcón** Totally, totally. Like I said, those things are very important, and I teach courses on Chicano culture and we do present issues. There are a lot of issues and a lot of articles on that. Still in 2015, it is important to take a perspective, a historical perspective what Cesar Chavez meant to us, and I think it's very important and also very personal. When he passed, I was in Sacramento, and the community came together. This was 1993. We were celebrating José Montoya's new book, *Information: 20 Years of Joda*, and the group of writers and poets, the Escritores del Nuevo Sol, were named at that moment *el taller literario*. We were gathering in La Galeria Villa Posada, and I remember I walked in about three o'clock, and Joe Serna was talking, the mayor, and people were crying. It was very sad, the same day that he

passed in the morning when the people became aware. Somebody said, “Well, we have to cancel this event.” The book party is going to be cancelled because were very sad.

And a voice in the back said, “No, no, let’s not cancel. Cesar Chavez will continue. Life goes on.” And the person that came to the podium with a guitar was José Montoya. So half an hour later we were laughing with him. So I saw the power of poetry, how things take place. Life goes on. Yes, movements are very important, people are very important, but lives is even more important.

**Mendoza** And last, what do you see as current or future challenges for the Chicano Community, and do you see yourself staying involved in meeting these challenges?

[00:57:05]

**Alarcón** Well, like I said, definitely I think there are different issues that are very important. The issue of education I think is very crucial. We have to stop the dropout rate we have. We need to have access to education, higher education in terms of universities. I just wrote a column that I sent to the *Sacramento Bee*. I hope it gets published. The idea is that as Latinos become a larger part of society, funding for the UC system goes down, so isn’t that sad? The more we are, the less resources we have. So the university is closing down at the same time our numbers are going up, and so that means what? The future is that we are going to be put in the underclass, uneducated, no access to education. We’ll be the ones that serve tables and clean rooms and do manual work. And I can’t take that. We need to say, “No.” We need to have access.

Immigration reform, very crucial. Eleven million people are terrorized in our communities. How can people even think that that they can be deported? People have been here for years and years. So I take that very personal. I say, “No, we can’t take that.”

Access to healthcare, very important. Does it matter if you have papers? No, it’s a human right. You can’t say, “Oh, you don’t have papers, you have no healthcare. You can just be *en la esquinita hasta que te mueras*.” That can’t happen.

The Dreamers, we have difficult times. The same struggle that my grandfather faced in 1932 we are facing in the year 2015, and our political leaders are not very effective, I have to say. They’re not very effective. So I think our political leaders doesn’t reflect the power of the people. So I’m very disappointed. Who do we have as a leader that’s taking this issue? None. They all basically want positions and are very timid and they don’t want to make any waves, because they know that if they make any waves, there will be a reaction and they will smash them. So the people going to have to be very careful, don’t say anything, just try to work within the system and do the best you can.”

**Mendoza** Do you see the Chicano Movement as a continuous movement compared to—

[01:00:13]

**Alarcón** Well, I think it’s been transformed. It’s been transformed, so it’s not the same. Like I said, some people, basically, they join the middle class, and once they join the middle class, they become symbolic, “*Viva La Raza!*” but it’s only like just window-dressing, but not necessarily commitment to change, no, because to

bring about change, you have to have effective political movement, and we have none. We have no movement. I'm sorry to say, but our own Chicano Studies department here has no involvement with politics. Have they taken a position at all with issues? No. Everything is very calm. They're concerned about their careers, and that's fine, but that's where we are.

[End of interview]