

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education
Oral History Project

Estella Serrano

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Tiffany Avila
May 24, 2014

Transcription by Betzabet Noriega and Technitype Transcripts

Avila Please state your full name.

[00:00:10]

Serrano Estella Serrano.

Avila And please provide your birthdate.

[00:00:14]

Serrano My birthdate, young lady, should be a national secret, but I'll give it to you: 12/25/36.

Avila What is your marital status?

[00:00:28]

Serrano I am single.

Avila And then do you have children?

[00:00:33]

Serrano No, I don't have biological children, but I've probably had over a thousand just being here on this campus for over forty years.

Avila Where were you born and raised?

[00:00:44]

Serrano I was born and raised in Arizona. I was born exactly in Tucson, which is southern Arizona, but I grew up in the Central Valley, which is called the Valley of the Sun, and believe me, there is, a lot. [laughs]

Avila How was that transition for you from Arizona to the Valley?

[00:01:08]

Serrano You mean to here?

Avila Yeah.

[00:01:11]

Serrano It was quite easy when I came. I mean, I lived through my young adulthood in Arizona going to school, and then when I came here, I found Sacramento a very congenial midsize city, quite friendly, totally different from the environment I grew up in, because I was in a desert area, and here, of course, you know, a city with two rivers and lots of trees. And in those days, it wasn't as hot as it is these days. But the transition was easy.

Avila What did your parents do for a living?

[00:02:00]

Serrano My father was a businessman. He was the owner of a dry-goods store; in other words, a clothing store. He was in business with his brothers. It was kind of a family business. They each had a store in different towns in Arizona, fairly close to one another, but not super close. And my mother, you know, minded her children in her house.

Avila How many brothers and sisters did you have?

[00:02:34]

Serrano I have two brothers.

Avila What were their names? What are they doing now?

[00:02:39]

Serrano Well, my oldest brother is deceased as of about six or seven months ago, Carlos Serrano, Jr., and my younger brother lives in Arizona still. His name is Andres.

Avila Were you a Fellow or Felito during the Mexican American Project?

[00:03:01]

Serrano No, not at all.

Avila What are your earliest memories of events that attracted you to the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:03:08]

Serrano Well, it's probably a little hard to pin down just because quite bit of time has elapsed, but I became more aware and interested in the Chicano Movement, of course, when I was here on campus in the mid-sixties. The civil rights sort of, you know, jarred one's consciousness in terms of inequality and disparate things for different people. I don't know that it was exactly Cesar Chavez that really brought it to home or if it was before that, but it was along those lines. And, of course, in the late sixties then, that's when what you refer to as the Fellows and the Felito Program, and I was somewhat involved in that because I was faculty and we all tried to develop

courses that would be germane to their particular needs and realms of study, so I guess that's kind of where it is.

Avila Did your involvement in the Movimiento Chicano change you personally?

[00:04:43]

Serrano Oh, yeah, absolutely. First of all, when I was in school in Arizona, there were quite a few Mexican Americans in my classes at the university, both universities where I attended, Arizona State and UofA, University of Arizona. But, you know, people didn't talk about *chicanismo* at that time, and if they did, it was sort of with some degree of hesitance, because Chicano, for example, my parents' generation, they saw it as something not so positive. Everybody was proud to be a Mexican or Mexican American, but a Chicano, that was something else. We sort of equated that with—well, well what can I say? Not necessarily the best part of society. So it took me awhile to look beyond that prejudice, you might say, and accept it for what it was and what it hopefully still is.

Avila So you said that for your family it wasn't the greatest thing. How did you deal with that?

[00:06:13]

Serrano Probably minimally, not talk about it too much unless they asked me, and they no doubt didn't. I had more of an opportunity to sort of vent my frustration or my thinking on the whole term with my classmates on campus, so that it wasn't such an issue at home.

Avila What role do you believe that the Chicanas played in the Movimiento?

[00:06:48]

Serrano Chicanas?

Avila Mm-hmm.

[00:06:49]

Serrano Well, the Chicanas were there to do, as we've probably heard several times, all the work, and I mean the nitty-gritty work, start things, continue things, conclude things, and it was all hard work, I won't say necessary manual labor, but it was acts of labor that they participated in, and they seldom, if ever that I recall, were recognized for it.

Avila Do you feel like the work they did should have been valued more than it was?

[00:07:31]

Serrano Of course. Absolutely.

Avila What did you personally initiate or help initiate in this Movimiento Chicano?

[00:07:40]

Serrano Well, what I think that I personally helped initiate was a consciousness on campus and in the city, because I was an educator and because I had certain interest in decimating the awareness of the Mexican culture to the general public, and so I think I sort of contributed in that direction by making, let's say, dramatic presentations both on campus and in the city available for the Spanish speakers of the

city and also for the non-Spanish speakers of the city so that they would know, “Hey, these people know how to do things or they *can* do things. They’re successful in the arts up to a point.” Because I wasn’t trained in drama, but, as I said, I was an educator, and with my training in literature, I did pretty much have a hold of how and what could be done regarding the public to develop their awareness.

Avila You mention that you were an educator. Where did you teach?

[00:09:02]

Serrano Right here.

Avila In Sacramento State University?

[00:09:05]

Serrano Yes.

Avila What were some of the organizations you were involved in?

[00:09:10]

Serrano As a teacher, I participated in the Concilio de Sacramento. I don’t really remember the titles of anything else that I might have been a participant in just because it was a stage or it was a time in life that organizations regarding Chicanos or Mexican Americans was just really beginning, so the organizations I belonged to, really they were more in line with my academic training, which was in Spanish language and Spanish literature. So that’s where that round up.

Avila And how did these changes impact your personal relationships with your family?

[00:10:15]

Serrano Well, I don't know that they changed my relationship with the family much, mostly because I was here, they were in Arizona, and so I might see them once or twice a year and that was pretty much it. So if they asked me what I was doing or if anything came up that I should inform them about, of course I did. You know, you can present something that's less palatable, I suppose, to somebody who isn't that receptive in a more positive way, I mean like talking about *chicanismo*, let's say. I could talk to both my mother and my father about it and try to have them understand the point of view that Chicanos had, even though they didn't necessarily coincide with the terminology. I said to them, "You don't have to accept necessarily the term, but at least look at why or when or how this came about regarding the whole culture thing and the whole disposition of Chicanos" as it was then. I'm talking, you know, thirty to forty years ago, which is a long time.

Avila How would you say these changes have impacted your relationships with your peers and your friends, significant others?

[00:12:12]

Serrano Well, I think most people know pretty much how I operate and how I feel. I don't that there's been any remarkable impact, but as time goes on, you know, we kind of develop some reservation in terms of our activity. It always surprises me to find out how quickly time goes by and what a difference there is. For example, on this campus, I've been away from this campus now nine years, and I was here for forty, so put that together. You're going to see a lot of trees that have been chopped down and not replanted, and by that I mean that, you know, back in the sixties,

seventies, there were the Felitos Program. First they started out with the Fellows Program and the Mexican American whatever, and there was a lot of activity and a lot of awareness, at least on campus, regarding the situation in general for Mexican Americans. And these days, I bet I could count on one hand if there *are* any programs related to anything regarding Chicanos or Hispanics, if you will. And, yes, I suppose I don't know the statistics. I suppose there are a lot of Chicanos students on campus these days, but how many of them are really aware or conscious of the history that led to their presence here now?

Avila And why do you think that is, that so many Chicanos today are not aware of this history?

[00:14:36]

Serrano First of all, the civil rights, that came to sort of pass, right? I mean, things are not perfect by a long shot for any minority, let alone the Black and the Brown and the rest, but things have improved. So as things change, we tend to sort of forget the past or ignore the past, and naturally when you're not directly involved with activities, with actions like the ones that Cesar Chavez took and Dolores Huerta took and some of the people here on campus took, then you know, it's lost. It's not necessarily meaningful anymore. I mean, you don't even know about it.

That's one of the reasons I see this project as being excellent. I would hope that the university would participate in its economic need to edit and produce this particular study, project. But as I asked Edwin earlier, he says they're not willing to give a dime. And that's where kind of where it is, you know. It used to be that way

with departments too. When you asked for materials or different possibilities to open up but that required a bit of money, the administration was not willing. They didn't have any money for that. I mean, whoever heard giving you money to put on a play? So I think there's ample reason for people not being aware and not remembering necessarily the past, which is, in a way, okay, because we have to live in the present, in my opinion, but on the other hand, knowing your past, your roots might benefit you quite a bit in the long run. So I guess that's kind of where it is.

Avila Could you describe how the Movimiento Chicano impacted community life here in Sacramento?

[00:17:26]

Serrano I'm sorry. Would you ask me that again?

Avila Could you describe how the Movimiento Chicano impacted community life here in Sacramento?

[00:17:35]

Serrano Oh, community life. Well, from my point of view, I think it really did have a fairly strong significance in the community. When I say community, I have to be careful because, you know, I don't know that the dominant community of the city really was influenced or if any of what the Chicanos did mattered, but I know that it drew people together who were from pretty much the same realm of thinking; that is, all of the Spanish speakers, whether they were professionals or nonprofessionals, whether they were students or faculty, they had a good like a network of support to

disseminate information, to interchange ideas. So from that point of view, it was good.

Avila Do you feel like the Movimiento Chicano impacted Sacramento differently than it did to other communities?

[00:19:00]

Serrano I don't think I can know that, dear, because I didn't live anywhere else during that period, so that I can only have somewhat of an awareness here. I don't know what was going on in Arizona, though. I mean, I had brief contact, some contact with people in Arizona, and, yeah, you know, they had a different environment, a different feeling going on than when I was there twenty years before. So it must have done something, but I don't know to what extent.

Avila You said you went into education. Was there something that led you to do that, or what made you make that decision to become a professor?

[00:19:50]

Serrano Well, it's kind of interesting. When I was a graduate student and actually an undergraduate student as well, I was studying Spanish, among other languages, and I thought that I might like to be an interpreter for the United Nations. So I probably could have been, but somewhere along the line, I got involved in what they called a pilot program for kids in the elementary-school level in Arizona, and that pilot program was to teach kids Spanish not during the school, but after school hours, and it was quite successful, I believe, as I recall it. I got to teach second grade and fifth grade, and both levels were really quite fun.

At that point in time, as I said, I was probably an undergraduate becoming a graduate student at the university, and I thought, “Well, if it can that much fun at those levels, surely it can be even better at the university level,” because you’re dealing with people that are little bit more mature, of course, and you’ve got more, according to me, you’ve got more possibilities in influencing people that are older.

So then I started thinking about, “Well, maybe I don’t want to be an interpreter. I’d rather be a teacher, a professor.”

So I accepted a teaching assistantship when I was a graduate student, and for sure, that really cinched it. I really enjoyed being in the classroom and, I guess, commanding the participation of all the students in front of me, made me totally aware that I had to be 100 percent informed on what I was trying to impart to the student, and hope that I can develop a passion for the student to want to study what I thought was just fascinating. So from there, it went on to applying for a job after I graduated.

Avila And then what did you study as a—

[00:22:30]

Serrano I studied Spanish language and literature, and I studied French and German language and literature.

Avila And what do you think are the challenges that the Chicano community has today and for the future?

[00:22:50]

Serrano Well, we live in such a different world, that I don't know if I could name a specific item or activities as a particular challenge to the Chicanos. I think that people have to find their way and a way, in a sense, to be able to participate or develop areas of communication that are still, you might say, on the weaker side of things. Now, when I first came to Sacramento, there was hardly *any* Spanish-speaking person, man or woman. There was nobody on TV and there was maybe one or two on the radio. So that has changed, I think, quite significantly, thank goodness. So it's that kind of thing that has to continue evolving in the communication aspect of life.

I was going to say newspaper writing, but, on the other hand, newspapers seemingly are going out of style, but they're still communication, even the Internet, communications in general to encompass the Spanish speaker and address the issues that Spanish speakers have, and especially the immigrants that, needless to say, don't have it very easy when their legalization is difficult to acquire and everything regarding life with that in mind.

Avila What plays did you help create?

[00:25:02]

Serrano Well, I didn't create the plays. I took two or three one-act plays from the Spanish language, from Spanish playwrights, and urged my students who showed some interest in putting on a play either on campus or off-campus in some nearby area to elicit participation from the Spanish-speaking community to come see those things. So we did that about three years in a row, and I think it was quite successful. Number one, it first brought Spanish-speaking community to the university campus,

which I can almost assure you they had never stepped foot on the campus, and then there was, of course, an occasional non-Spanish speaker that would become involved or at least participate as audience and be aware that there were literary figures in the arts in Spanish and that they needed to have a venue, a place to articulate their creativity.

Avila What would you say was the main purpose of these plays?

[00:26:37]

Serrano The main purpose?

Avila Mm-hmm.

[00:26:39]

Serrano The purpose of the play or the purpose of putting on the play?

Avila Both.

[00:26:44]

Serrano Well, the purpose of the play, of course, depended on the play. And as I said, we first started out with one-act plays, which were just little short vignettes. They didn't take much more than half an hour, forty-five minutes, as opposed to what a lengthy play would take to stage, two or three hours. Some of them, by and large, they were comical, they were entertaining, they were just overall humor, humor that did, I think, allude to the culture of a Spanish speaker. Whether it was Spanish from Spain or Spanish from Mexico didn't matter. They were little incidences that people could relate to and who didn't have any other opportunity to do so.

Avila How were these plays received by the students and by the community?

[00:27:55]

Serrano Well, I believe that the students really enjoyed it and were very happy that they participated, and the ones that didn't participate wanted to participate the next time. I got a lot of comments that spoke to how pleased they were to have something that relevant to their language and to their culture. So I think it was well received by all.

Avila Then how would you say you're contributing to the Chicano community today?

[00:28:34]

Serrano Today? Today I have to say that I'm probably not contributing that much just because I'm retired. I think I've made a considerable contribution in the past. I didn't tell you that or I didn't mention that when we put on these little short plays, I was looking for the university to open up and say we need ethnic theatre on this campus, and that didn't come about for at least, oh, about eight years. Even after we did several of these plays that I'm telling you, the university finally in 1970, I believe it was, and we started these endeavors in '64. So what is that? Six years, eight years? It might have been '72. The university did concede to open a position for a Hispanic individual trained in drama to put on plays just like the university plays today for the community at large, except that this time, some of the presentations would be either in Spanish or they might be bilingual and, hence, they would be addressing the majority or some of the community that otherwise was only going on

something that was pretty amateurish, which is what I call what I did with other people's help, of course.

Avila What would you say would be other contributions you made besides that?

[00:30:39]

Serrano I developed about four classes during the time I was here that spoke to specifically the language needs of Spanish speakers, students who were born either bilingual or just monolingual. Well, of course, if they were at the university, they spoke English as well, but they were born into a home where Spanish was the primary language, but it was just the spoken language. They didn't have an academic training in it. So I developed at least four classes that I can remember that enable students to study the language. Just like most students today will go to the university and they have to study English even though you know English fine, but you have to study English up to a point, right, to become literate in English. Well, that's what I tried to do for students who were Hispanic and who needed some literacy in Spanish.

Avila Who would you say were your bigger inspirations or role models?

[00:32:02]

Serrano My bigger inspirations?

Avila Some people who inspired you.

[00:32:06]

Serrano Well, I think Cesar and Dolores, and at least one, if not two, of my academic professors in my training as a student influenced me and they happened to

be Hispanic, which was quite unusual, and they were very accomplished people and they encouraged me to continue studying and to go on my thought of becoming a professor. Fortunately, I was lucky and I did. Actually, one of my teachers who I think grew up in New Mexico and then lived in Arizona, but was trained in North Carolina or somewhere like that, in other words, he'd around, and here he seemed and act and spoke like a very humble individual who didn't presume. He wasn't an egotist. So he was a good influence on me.

Avila Then going back to the plays, what were the names of the plays you put in place, you helped create?

[00:33:55]

Serrano Well, I can give you at least one or two names. I don't know that I remember all of them. I was thinking about it before I came, and I don't even remember what books I got them out of, though I probably have them, not handy. But one of them was called *Puebla de Las Mujeres*.

 Then another one was called—I can only think now of a three-act play which was called *El Color de Nuestra Piel*, and another one that might have been *La Malinche*. That was another one. Now, those last two that I named were no longer the one-act plays. They were pretty formal, pretty demanding to put on when you had a Department of Drama that wasn't very enthusiastic about helping you do it, but anyway, you got it done.

Avila How did you go about getting everyone to getting it done and participating?

[00:35:14]

Serrano [laughter] No, no, no. Well, first of all, you know, students can do marvelous things, and so you get them enthusiastic over something, they're going to try to turn every stone there is to get it done. And there probably were some of my colleagues who, of course, would be as supportive as they could be within their own way, because here we were teaching a full load of our own classes, and then this play business was just kind of a sideline, a serious one, but it wasn't our main focus of the day. So we must have made an impact to some degree, since, as I said, in 1970 or '72—I don't recall the exact date—the university opened up a position for ethnic theatre and they hired a Hispanic young man to come and do classes in drama.

Avila Can you recall what the certain plays you named earlier were about?

[00:36:37]

Serrano Well, *El Color de Nuestra Piel* is a very germane term in, I think I'm going so say, as far as to say in all of the Hispanic culture because color is an important aspect of people regarding the Mexicans, and this was a Mexican play written by a Mexican playwright. It had to do with a family who was fair of color; in other words, they were White. And they had to contend with people who were not necessarily adversary, but were on a scope of life that was different and, hence they were Brown. So to try to bring those two, you might say, factions together, it was quite a scene. So that was very meaningful, I think, for a lot of people who participated in the play to say, "Hey, you know, oh, my god, now I understand why whenever a kid is born, the first thing they ask is, 'What color is it? Is it *blanquito* or

moreno, morenito?” And so I think that did a lot for both the students participating in the play and for the students and the general audience witnessing the play. That was *El Color de Nuestra Piel*.

La Malinche had more to do with, again, the indigenous faces, the conqueror, the Spaniard, and, again, that raised the issue of who's better, what's better.

I don't know which play was better received. I suspect that both were pretty well received. They weren't presented one right after the other. There was probably a couple of years in between the presentation of one and then the other, so there wouldn't be that immediate comparison that you might say could have existed. But again, it was a matter of highlighting the abilities of the indigenous to surpass or survive the dominance of the conqueror.

Avila When you were creating these plays, did they come from literature?

[00:39:52]

Serrano Yes, definitely, definitely, both of them.

Avila How did the process of choosing where they came from work?

[00:39:59]

Serrano Well, there wasn't that much to choose from that was immediately available and that was, I think, germane to the interest of the people. I felt—and I'm the one that made the choices; I don't know that anybody help me make the choices—I felt that they were the ones that most likely would be educationally acceptable, not acceptable necessarily, but successful. And I think I was right. I don't

know that for a fact, but the way that they were received, the way that people talked about them for quite a while, I suspect that they were a success, both of them.

Avila Is there anything else you would like to add?

[00:40:57]

Serrano No, I just appreciate the time, and I'm sorry I can't maybe be more specific on some things that you may want to know. But I think that's enough.

Avila Thank you very much.

[00:41:18]

Serrano Thank you.

[End of interview]