

TRANSCRIPTION RE:

**CSUMB Founding Faculty
Oral History Project 1995-98
Rina Benmayor, Project Director**

**Interview with Cecilia O'Leary, Professor Emerita
School of Humanities and Communication
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences**

**Interviewer, Rina Benmayor, Professor Emerita
School of Humanities and Communication
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Transcribed by:

**Carol Roberts
carris.roberts@gmail.com**

Narrator: Cecilia O'Leary
Interviewer: Rina Benmayor

1 **Benmayor:** *Okay. Today is February 10, 2019 and I am interviewing Cecilia O'Leary. I'm Rina*
2 *Benmayor and we're doing this interview for the CSUMB Founding Faculty Oral History Project. So,*
3 *Cecilia do I have your permission to record the interview?*

4 **O'Leary:** Yes, you have my permission to record it and use it any way you want.

5 **Benmayor:** *Okay. Well, I will be sending you a Release Form that has certain things that you*
6 *can after the interview you can decide how you want it to be used.*

7 **O'Leary:** Okay.

8 **Benmayor:** *But anyhow, so can you just start by stating your name and when you came to*
9 *CSUMB?*

10 **O'Leary:** Okay. My name is Cecilia O'Leary and I was hired in 1995, but I waited a year to
11 begin teaching in 1996 because I was at the National Museum of American History and I felt obligated to
12 complete a year. I was on a post doc there. So I asked when I got hired if they would wait for a year. So,
13 hired in '95. Came to teach in '96.

14 **Benmayor:** *A hah. And who hired you and what was your position title?*

15 **O'Leary:** That's really interesting because I went back and looked at my contract and I wasn't
16 hired as a historian, because I'm a cultural historian. I was hired as a multidisciplinary faculty.

17 **Benmayor:** *[Chuckles]*

18 **O'Leary:** Which says a lot about the University. We weren't being pigeon-holed yet into specific
19 areas of discipline. We really were being asked to think beyond our degrees and to see ourselves really as a
20 part of a bigger university community. So Steve Arvizu is who hired me and I can remember after I'd been
21 hired we came out that summer, even though I wasn't going to begin teaching till the next year, and Steve

22 is showing me and my husband Tony around the campus. When I graduated from high school instead of
23 going to college I became a carpenter because Affirmative Action had just been passed. And I kept looking
24 around this campus which was like, you know, the Fort. I kept saying, "Steve, I don't think this is going to
25 be open in time." [Laughs] He said, "We have two months, it's not gonna be a problem." I said, "I think it's
26 a problem." [Laughs] That was one of my first introductions. It was great. I mean here is Steve literally
27 taking us around, you know, from one quonset hut to the next, that are going to be the classrooms. So that
28 was my beginning experience.

29 **Benmayor:** *Aha. Well, let me back you up and say, and ask, how did you first find out about this*
30 *job or about the University?*

31 **O'Leary:** I was looking at the *Chronicle for Higher Education* and I saw this ad for this new
32 university, California State University Monterey Bay. I read it and what stood out to me immediately was
33 training for leadership positions. California State universities do not train mostly working class students to
34 be leaders. They're training for second tier. You work underneath the leaders that are supposed to come
35 from the University of California campuses. But here is a campus saying, "No, no, no. These working
36 class students are going to become the leaders." So that stood out to me right away. Then it was
37 multicultural; the fact it was committed to having many different peoples represented, not just one
38 Eurocentric presentation; the fact that it wanted to introduce technology really struck me as something very
39 cutting edge and that I was interested in. Also that it wanted us to be global citizens, that we were expected
40 as faculty and the students clearly to see ourselves not just located in the United States. So those were the
41 main things that really attracted me. I'd been a community organizer for most of my life and went back to
42 get my Ph.D. as a re-entry student in my early 30's. This is why I had gotten a degree, was to really be able
43 to combine what I'd learned in the university getting my Ph.D. with working with students and seeing
44 praxis, seeing students have knowledge and then put it into practice. So I'd been waiting my life for this.

45 This is what it's about. So I made out the application. And then came out and was interviewed. But that's
46 what struck me. I thought, "Oh, my God. This is the most amazing Vision Statement I've ever read."

47 **Benmayor:** *And when did you make the application and when did you come for the interview?*

48 **O'Leary:** It must have been in '94. Well no, I got the Ph.D. in '95. I was trying to put this
49 together. So if I got my hiring letter in '95 then I must have come out right in the Spring sometime. So I'm
50 not quite sure how to put all the different dates together exactly. But it had to have been in '95 when I came
51 out at some point, is what my guess is.

52 **Benmayor:** *And do you remember your first impressions of coming onto the campus? Or ... it*
53 *wasn't a campus. [Laughs]*

54 **O'Leary:** To the Fort? Yeah, I remember this staff member of Housing, he was responsible -- I
55 don't know if you also met him --, he was living on the campus housing which used to be the old Fort Ord
56 housing. His house had like these hanging plants. He made it look really wonderful. And then the
57 apartment that you stayed in when you were the faculty being interviewed was just, oh it was just really
58 wonderful what they had done to the inside of it! What struck me was not just how nice it looked but the
59 kind of thought and care that had gone into trying to make this ... It was a deserted place, so it was a very
60 inhospitable place to walk into. But here's this guy who'd made his apartment look so beautiful as a
61 welcome, and then how he took so much pride in setting up this place to stay for people who were coming
62 there for a weekend. That might sound like a small thing but it was such a desolate kind of looking place
63 and the fact that here's a person just dealing with housing who is so invested in what this place means and
64 the future of it. So that really struck me. You know, because you don't see that very often, that people
65 would be so proud. And then when I went for the interview with the faculty and [audio freeze] community
66 and student representatives, that was a pretty amazing experience.

67 **[7:39] Benmayor:** *So can you tell me about that?*

68

69 **O'Leary:** Yeah. Josina Makau, who is one of the founders and also founded Human
70 Communication, the department I was hired into, the Center I was hired into [was the committee chair].
71 Usually for a job talk I never mention that I'd been a community organizer or that I'd done carpentry or any
72 of these different kinds of things. Universities typically want to know your scholarship and your position
73 in the field. I just decided, now this is a campus where it's going to make a difference what kind of
74 connections I've made between communities organizing for social justice and then what I've done in my
75 scholarly work. So I presented it. And that became actually one of the most interesting part of the
76 discussions. It was amazing to have actual people from the community there. There was this elder from the
77 African American community who I just remember because I did lots of work on patriotism. She had a
78 background as a military family. We just got into all these amazing discussions about this University and
79 its new Vision, coming out of a place where wars had been fought. So anyway, all those things combined
80 together to make a very positive impression.

81 **Benmayor:** *Aha. Okay. When you actually came to the campus a year later, could you compare*
82 *what you had seen, because you'd been away for the first year.*

83 **O'Leary:** Right. But I did come back, though. I came back like several times during the course of
84 the year before I started teaching, to go to meetings at Josina's house which you were also a part of,
85 [Chuckles] to just brainstorm. I'm not even sure if we were a department then. We might have been a
86 Center. I'm not exactly sure. What is this thing even gonna look like? And what are we gonna be? So I saw
87 a little bit of change but not much in all honesty. I remember my first day of class when I started teaching,
88 there were no chairs. [Laughter]

89 **Benmayor:** *So where was your first class? In what building?*

90 **O'Leary:** Well, it was in one of the quonset hut-like places. And God, it's hard to remember.

91 **Benmayor:** *In the 80's? The 80's buildings?*

92

93 **O'Leary:** That kind of sounds like the right numbers. Maybe they were more concrete buildings.
94 They weren't the quonset hut ones. But it was actually a great experience because here I am, this is the
95 second year the school has been open and here are the students, these are freshmen, and so we're all out
96 searching for chairs. It really didn't make a difference because we were sitting on the floor. And it was part
97 of that really, I know this sounds like "Oh, my God, you need to have chairs, this is really so disrespectful,"
98 and I suppose it was. But that wasn't the spirit that we took it in. We really felt like we all were building
99 this place. And that's how it felt. It felt like, "Well, okay. Let's just get in there. We're going to create
100 this." I think of what I and everybody else was doing was that we were building this thing. We had that
101 sense of it both physically as well as intellectually, in terms of just all of our lives, what this was going to
102 become. So that was a first day experience.

103 **[11:41] Benmayor:** *So what were you teaching? What was your teaching assignment? I know you said*
104 *that your appointment letter said Multidisciplinary Faculty member, which mine did, too and who knew*
105 *what that was?*

106 **O'Leary:** [Laughs]

107 **Benmayor:** *How did you maneuver, or what was the process of finding the courses that you were*
108 *going to teach?*

109 **O'Leary:** That was totally up to us. You could decide anything you wanted to teach, was
110 basically what you could do. In Human Communication, which was the Center I was in, I was responsible
111 for coming up with, What does history mean and how is it going to be taught? At that point, I was the first
112 and only historian. The next historian hadn't been hired yet, or was going to be hired. Gerald Shenk. So I
113 tried to think, "Well, okay, what do I want to teach?" So cultural history. So I taught "History According to
114 the Movies" and used movies as a way of both critiquing movies as well as an entry into how do you learn
115 history, combining popular culture with scholarly work. And "Multicultural History" That was the first
116 class that I taught. That was fantastic. I treated the students like they were students from UC Berkeley

117 seniors. They had to go out and do original research. I mean, they're literally sitting on the floor and going
118 out and doing UC Berkeley senior level research. Because we really thought anything was possible. There
119 really in my mind was no reason to limit my expectation. I mean obviously I knew these were freshmen so
120 I wasn't going to grade them as if they were seniors, but why shouldn't they be their own historians? Why
121 should they just be studying a textbook? That didn't make sense to me. So it was all extraordinarily
122 exciting because a lot of my students were children of farmworkers, and here they are sitting in and going
123 and doing research on their own communities or going to Cannery Row. Both in Human Communication
124 and in the classes I taught. I knew we were doing something right when I was attacked in the *Washington*
125 *Post*, in an editorial, for saying that everyone could become a historian. There was an attack in the
126 [14:18] *Washington Post* of this new university and this professor, Cecilia O'Leary, who is teaching history
127 saying that we all can become historians, which I meant that there's no reason why students can't both
128 study history and make it. They have a right to go out and be able to research and look at primary
129 documents, whatever forms they might take, and then learn how to do serious evidence-based research
130 papers. So that was part of, I think among the initial attacks on our University.

131 **Benmayor:** *And how did they come up with that? I mean like where did that come from?*

132 **O'Leary:** I don't know. Clearly our University was on the radar. But those beginning years were
133 incredible years.

134 **Benmayor:** *Um hmm. Those were your first classes. Did you have other job responsibilities?*

135 **O'Leary:** Yeah. We had to do everything. [Laughs] You name it. I was trying to look to see if I
136 could find a specific job description but I think it was our jobs were to create courses, to come up and to
137 define what this department, what the center was going to be in, and we all were involved in collective
138 meetings and then there was a division of labor, what we'd have to write up. I had to come up with what's a
139 description of one of our Learning Requirements inside of our department was going to be around history
140 so what was that going to mean? Also for the University for lower division students because everyone has

141 to have general education requirements to fulfill. So I was responsible to come up for well what kind of
142 history? What is that going to look like and mean? It was just rather endless in terms of what the job
143 description was. And that was really only one part of it.

144 **Benmayor:** *And what was the other part?*

145 **O'Leary:** Well, the other part was everything that we all did to make this University, that was in
146 no job description.

147 **Benmayor:** *[Laughs] Which was?*

148 **O'Leary:** Which was totally outside of the contract, which was everything. Which was meeting
149 with students and helping new student organizations get off the ground. I remember in 1996 there was a
150 Proposition 209 that ended Affirmative Action in California. So this would be the kind of work. In the
151 very first year, here I am, all right, "Oh my God, they're Attacking Affirmative Action, it's going to end!"
152 This has incredible impact on the entire state and our students. Well, we're just this little university that
153 barely has classrooms and an auditorium. There's no way we can really have something that will allow us
154 to have an all day Day of Dialogue. Sacramento State was having a Day of Dialogue since that's the state
155 capitol and all these legislators were coming into the campus and everything. So [our] Vision Statement
156 [emphasized] technology. So I went and talked with the person who is the head of technology. And I said
157 "Well, can't we do it teleconferencing? Why can't we bring in on a huge screen what they are doing at
158 Sacramento State? That way our students get the benefit of hearing the debates and what's happening in the
159 nation's capitol?" So all right, where are we going to have it? So Richard Bains, [head] of our Music
160 Department, had actually one of the only small auditoriums because of music, and we had a big screen. I
161 worked day and night on this. Amalia Mesa Bains, Richard was involved, different people were involved.
162 We got the whole teleconference set up between Sac State, the technology department, organized students
163 to get the word out, got the President at CSU Monterey Bay to say "Okay." And the whole campus was
164 closed down so students could come and be involved in this day of discussing whether Affirmative Action

165 should be ended. So that's not part of any job description but that's like your 24/7 kind of work. I mean we
166 were creating a heart and soul of the University. [audio freeze]. Because the University wasn't about just
167 [18:58] literally our job description contract. It was building a heart and soul of what this place was gonna
168 be about. And that, I think, is what a lot of us were doing non-stop. So what an incredible thing for the
169 students!

170 **Benmayor:** *And what were some of your other contributions as the years went on, where you*
171 *made a big effort?*

172 **O'Leary:** Okay, where I made a big effort. Well, one of the things was -- and this I have no idea
173 how I ended up doing this, except through working with you, I think, and your contacts with Randy Bass at
174 Georgetown University and Bret Eynin, in terms of bringing the New Media Classroom [to campus]. I was
175 fascinated by technology and what that would mean. I think it was not because of technology but being a
176 cultural historian, it's bringing in other modes of learning and ways of seeing which was interesting to me.
177 So again, this is out of the job description. 1996, first year at Monterey we have over 30 faculty from our
178 campus for an all-day workshop. We brought in Bret Eynin and Randy Bass and Donna Thompson from
179 New York to sponsor this day to teach 30 faculty at Monterey how you use new media in a multicultural
180 classroom. What are pedagogies that use all this new media? Then, the very next year we got another major
181 grant where we sponsored two weekend workshops, where we had over 35 faculty from California State
182 University campuses, community college campuses and for two whole days all we did was discuss, "Okay,
183 how do we make a new pedagogy? What does that mean? How do we create it?" So that was pretty
184 exciting! [audio freeze]

185 **Benmayor:** *Yeah. You were key in terms of organizing all of that and writing of grants and just*
186 *making it all happen.*

187 [21:48] **O'Leary:** Yeah. Absolutely. That was huge. And one of the things that also came out of that is
188 there was the Visible Knowledge Project, that not only was studying how you bring new media technology

189 into the classroom but also how your students learn, what's evidence that we can have that students learn. It
190 was this five-year project, multi million dollars. Everything from M.I.T. to community colleges. But from
191 our work on those workshops we were then invited in to be the University as one of the founding campuses
192 as part of this five-year project. And so that was, again, a huge amount of work but something that really
193 made an amazing difference. I mean it grew into this kind of project with digital histories, digital
194 storytelling.

195 **Benmayor:** *I am curious because you were trained as a historian at Berkeley.*

196 **O'Leary:** Right.

197 **Benmayor:** *You got your Ph.D. from Berkeley and you came to this campus, perhaps like me, I*
198 *didn't know anything about pedagogy, what's that? You know? [Laughs]*

199 **O'Leary:** Nothing.

200 **Benmayor:** *[Laughs] And here we are kind of all of a sudden in the midst of this technology*
201 *revolution. How did you think about getting involved in all of that?*

202 **O'Leary:** The thing that made me I think the most excited is cause it's visual.

203 **Benmayor:** *Ah!*

204 **O'Leary:** Which so it's not the programming part of the technology, it's how much it brings the
205 visual into all of [audio freeze] a lot to do with -

206 **O'Leary:** Well, it had a lot to do then because it wasn't a technology program part is that because
207 technology is just like we're doing now, it's visual. It's all about a visual world. And in terms of being a
208 cultural historian, my work was on the contest over national identity and who can be considered a loyal
209 American? Particularly after the Civil War, Who was going to be included in definitions of citizenship? I
210 looked at the struggles that culturally took place over that. So I'm looking at visual rituals. What's the
211 enactment of citizenship, the singing, all of these kinds of ways that it came to be defined. Then, working
212 at the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian, because all of my research work was in

213 Washington, D.C., so I very much became a part of public history. That's how do you make history
214 [24:42] available to people. So again that's visual. So the pedagogy in New Media is that it made history
215 available beyond the University, which was really attractive to me. It already allows you to create
216 knowledge that's seen, which very much is like doing cultural history as well as working in a museum
217 because it's all based on artifact and what people see. So those were things that I wanted to do. I wanted
218 whatever I taught to move outside of the classroom. I wanted students to be doing their work in the
219 community. I didn't want them to just be sitting in a classroom. I wanted them to be actual researchers.
220 Again, the new media allows you to create archives, to present your work in new media formats, so it can
221 be seen in the classroom, it can be seen in a larger group of people. And like you, graduating from
222 Berkeley, the only pedagogy at Berkeley is lecture halls. [Chuckles] With hundreds of students. So it was a
223 very big learning curve for me to understand what this thing is called "pedagogy" and "activist learning"
224 and getting students involved in, you know, critical thinking. I mean at Berkeley you are involved in
225 critical thinking obviously but you come and the professor gives you the wisdom and then you go and study
226 and you take your notes. At Monterey, I think all of our commitment was we wanted students who actually
227 are going to go out and do evidence based, particularly in history, research. New media then allowed them
228 a way to take it into new, really fun and exciting ways. To make little movies, to make PowerPoint
229 presentations. So that was why I got involved in it.

230 **Benmayor:** *Was there a downside to all of this stuff for you? A trade-off?*

231 **O'Leary:** Do you mean teaching at Monterey? Just being at Monterey and the trade-off of the
232 pedagogy and everything? Yeah, I think the very big trade-off was, and I really thought about it before I
233 accepted it and I think the main reason I accepted the job was the Vision Statement, is it really meant you
234 weren't at a research university. And that was really a part of my thinking. "Do I really want to go in this
235 direction?" Because if you go in this direction there are people who are amazing and they continue to
236 publish and research as they work at a CSU. But the reality is, at a CSU you are entering a non-research

237 [audio freezes], teaching university. So that means pretty much you are saying, "Okay, I don't think I'm
238 necessarily going to be writing more heavily research-based books." I don't know, I've always felt a little
239 mixed about that decision. But I feel like it was the right decision, particularly in the early years when
240 everything was possible and exciting and experimental, before the bureaucracy of the CSU began to
241 restrain not only what we could do but also restrain, I think, the level of research and knowledge that
242 students were acquiring. Because we were taking them in so many wonderful different directions initially.
243 We could just do, make incredible demands on them and not even realize that it was far beyond what would
244 [28:31] usually be expected. So yeah, that would be one thing that I think was a drawback. I think the
245 other thing was as extraordinarily exciting and fantastic all of this was, is the level of burnout was
246 excruciating.

247 **Benmayor:** *And how was it for you?*

248 **O'Leary:** Well, it didn't help that in 1998 I got diagnosed with breast cancer and went through
249 surgery and chemotherapy and then I was five years on very heavy duty drugs. It's not chemo but it's drugs
250 because it was a very aggressive cancer. So that combination of being physically exhausted and still being
251 expected -- and now I'm just going to job description --, to work, you know, so many hours so hard made it
252 really difficult. But I'd say that within that I still would go back to the sense of trying to make the possible
253 out of the impossible, doing very experimental things, working with faculty across the campus in different
254 ways, that was an extraordinarily rewarding time. Do I regret it? No, I don't. Was it easy? No. But I don't
255 think building anything is easy. You know? I think what we got was the reward of really being able to
256 imagine something that never had been imagined before. And hopefully maybe the residual of what we
257 tried to do [chuckles] might be still influencing what might happen on this campus.

258 **Benmayor:** *You've spoken already about how the Vision Statement was influential, was a draw*
259 *for you, can you say anything more about how it guided your work? Any specific instances?*

260 **O'Leary:** With the students or my research work or in any kinds of ways?

261 **Benmayor:** *Um hmm.*

262 **[30:42] O'Leary:** Oh, okay. I didn't know if you were going to be able to see this or not. [Holds up a
263 photograph to the camera]. This is how it would influence what I was doing in the classroom. Then I'd
264 talk about what I did with the Smithsonian and scholarly work I did during those years, too. Okay, so in
265 terms of being a multicultural campus, one of the things I had students do is they could go out and do oral
266 histories or evidence-based research into archives or documents, whatever they'd want to do. This, again,
267 is a freshman "Introduction to U.S. History." And part of it was how do we broaden our understanding of
268 this area we live in, the broader Monterey area of Salinas and Watsonville and Monterey. And they could
269 come up with any research project. So one of my students was from Hollister, from the farming
270 community of that area. I think her parents were involved in truck driver delivery of chemicals, God help
271 us, to the different agricultural sites. So she went and she did an oral history of her grandmother. I don't
272 know if you will be able to see this. Okay. So. I don't know, is it possible to see that? [Holds up the
273 photograph].

274 **Benmayor:** *Yeah. Uh-huh.*

275 **O'Leary:** Okay. It's in great big meeting hall and there's a bunch of people, right?

276 **Benmayor:** *Yeah.*

277 **O'Leary:** It's like any Grange Hall in a movie. Here's the exact picture. [video freezes].

278 What you're seeing is several hundred people, in one picture they're all very nice looking white farm
279 working folk with their kids. And the next picture are the same nice farm working folks with their kids all
280 KKK Klans robes. They had just put on their robes. They're in the exact same positions. So she shows me
281 this. She says, "What should I do? I don't know if I feel like I can let people know. This is about my
282 family." So I said to her, "Look, you can do whatever you want. What's important . . . [audio freezes]
283 I told her, you can do whatever you want. I mean this is pretty heavy to learn this is your family! But the
284 Klu Klux Klan actually was very active in the whole Salinas/Watsonville/Monterey area in the 30's, 40's

285 into the 50's. Like parades down through the streets. I said, "What's important is you're an anti-racist.
286 What matters is you. And you've made a decision to be against that kind of racism. That's not who you are.
287 That came from the grandparents in your family. What matters is the position you've taken as an anti-
288 racist." So in terms of the Vision Statement, that was extraordinarily moving because all the students then
289 had to make a PowerPoint presentation of their research. She included that. With the pictures. Not only this
290 massive Grange Hall but that's *her* family sitting there in that Grange Hall. So I think that's very
291 [34:27] important. To be multicultural doesn't just mean, "Oh, we get to hear everybody's different
292 histories." It's also very painful stuff. Both for people whose families, she discovered, had been ardent
293 racists, but also people who grew up experiencing the other end of that racism. To bring honesty and safety
294 among our students in terms of that Vision was the other part of it. That they could feel like this is a safe
295 enough space that they could really look at what the past was. And feel like they could bring it forward and
296 say, "This is where I come from, but this isn't who I am." And to make those kind of alliances were quite
297 extraordinary, where people really passed boundaries, like *real* divisions.

298 **Benmayor:** *Um hmm. Well, that happened in your classroom. Can you talk a little bit about the*
299 *key moments of struggle on the campus and how you might have involved in that? You know, as the camp-*
300 *there were key moments of change and struggle and did any of the campus environment impact you in that*
301 *regard?*

302 **O'Leary:** Well, there is one major struggle over Cecilia Burciaga, who was extraordinary. She
303 was at Stanford University with Tony Burciaga. You would have more of the specifics of it. But they were
304 among, when they were first creating these different centers and dormitories, they were one of the founders
305 and the sponsors of the Chicano [audio gap] came to our campus as the – was she the Assistant Provost?

306 **Benmayor:** *No. She was the Chief of Staff of the President.*

307 **O'Leary:** Okay. Well, she was being forced to leave the University. And that was like a major
308 struggle.

309 **Benmayor:** *Well, actually she was, she was forced out of her job. She was given another job.*

310 **O'Leary:** Okay. She was forced out of the job. But that became symbolic, I think, because she
311 was a rather fierce defender of the Vision Statement. [Chuckles] That was a major moment for me in terms
312 of the campus. Was the campus going to keep someone like her in a leading key position or was she
313 beginning to be edged out? So that was something that took place. I would think the other struggles that
314 had a bad impact on what we were trying to do was this whole issue of FTE's [Full Time Equivalency].
315 That means funding for departments comes from how many students you can get in your classroom. How
316 many students you can get means how much money your department is going to get. So [we moved] from
317 being interdisciplinary faculty and standards of research, where it didn't matter how many students [you
318 had], what mattered is we were doing original scholarship and creating classes where students were
319 vibrantly learning. "Maybe they were in your Center, but over here. . . How might we interconnect with
320 each other?" That began to totally unravel when money started being allocated in terms of how many
321 [38:17] students. And that really put departments and centers at a not-so-subtle war with each other,
322 because you needed money to survive, right? And to grow. So that instead of now being interdisciplinary
323 and working together, departments were being pitted against each other. How many people can you get into
324 your classroom? So it really limited the possibilities. I think it erected barriers that went to the heart of
325 what was needed. The boundaries needed to stay open to make this Vision a possibility, rather than people
326 getting more and more entrenched into one area. So I feel like that was another major struggle, around this
327 whole thing of being more narrowly defined into departments. "Do this, this or the other thing." That was
328 also linked, I think, to the architecture not only of the CSU system that is very FTE driven, but the
329 architecture from the Fort [Ord] also worked against being interdisciplinary because it was a fort.
330 Everything was separated. Because the army knows very well how to divide people and keep them
331 separate, because you have a chain of command and no one is supposed to be – [audio freezes]. Yeah, in
332 the military, you know, you had your regiment here and your regiment there. And the way that the

333 University was set up, then, was based on the architecture of what existed. So for us to go over and talk to
334 another Center meant that we had to walk like 20 minutes to the next building, right?

335 **Benmayor:** *[Laughs]*

336 **O'Leary:** So how were you really going to be able to ... This wasn't a fight, this is the reality of
337 how do we create this Vision? Not only do we have the problem of being narrowed and narrowed and
338 narrowed when the Visions calls for expansiveness, is that our architecture didn't allow us to intermingle
339 with each other because it was always in these separate buildings and it's freezing cold. There's the fog. So
340 that was also an early struggle. I remember when we made out our schedules, Christine Sleeter wanted to
341 have tea time.

342 **Benmayor:** *[Laughs]*

343 **O'Leary:** Yeah. Having an hour where you couldn't have classes. So faculty would literally have
344 a time where they could come together and share their scholarly work, to be able to find out what each
345 other was doing, to create space for scholarship in a university where faculty would come together and be
346 enriched by the work we were doing. So that was lost. So in terms of what I talked to you earlier
347 **[41:14]** about the difficulty of not being in a research based university, I was continuing to do research. I
348 think most people were continuing. Many in spite of not having the time built in for that. But there was
349 then no faculty hour where we could like get re-energized and excited about what each other was doing. So
350 I feel like that was another real struggle that was lost. There were continuous attempts to do it, but it
351 wasn't able to come to fruition. *[pause for noise interruption]* Yeah. So I know I was sort of jumping
352 from one thing to the next but I think those were just different struggles that I think were important in terms
353 of the initial Vision and then the narrowing of that Vision.

354 **Benmayor:** *And did that affect you very directly in terms of not just as a faculty member but in*
355 *terms of the things that you were hired to teach?*

356 **O'Leary:** Well, what it affected in terms of teaching is that when it was more interdisciplinary
357 like for example, this stopped happening: Luis Valdez was one of the founders. He and I would do a lot
358 with our different classes. Cause he was working on film. I'm doing History According to the Movies. So
359 we would do switching back and forth of like, at different times. That's just one example. [freeze] ...
360 It wasn't co-teaching but having things be more a part of each other even though if you were in different
361 departments, that just happened informally. I remember I was able to do that more. And that began to
362 happen less and less.

363 **Benmayor:** *Okay.*

364 **O'Leary:** I think the classes still remained very creative, extraordinarily creative.

365 **Benmayor:** *In what way? Why do you say that?*

366 **O'Leary:** Well, moving on to doing two things: One, the digital histories, that what we were
367 talking about, was students were doing archival work or going out and collecting oral histories and then
368 making small movies. I mean, my God, learning how to write scripts, learning how to record what you're
369 doing. Having your history go outside of the classroom, taking it home and showing it to your families and
370 different things like that. Also, I worked with different museums. Like the Maritime Museum. The Colton
371 Hall History Museum of Monterey Bay. One project that was really fantastic that was called, "Sites and
372 Citizens" and there was a whole exhibit because a photographer had taken all these pictures of people in
373 Cannery Row when it was factories and things like that. But they didn't know who the people were. So
374 they invited my class to come in and it was detective work! Because they had the display of all the
375 photographs in the Maritime Museum in Cannery Row, but who were these people? So my students went
376 out and tracked down these people, did oral histories with them and then came back into the museum and
377 were able to share the recordings plus make the typescripts next to the photographs so that people began to
378 have names. What a great semester, right?

379 **Benmayor:** *Yeah. Aha!. [Chuckles]*

380 **[45:05] O'Leary:** And then the other thing was a thing we did: Colton Hall was where the California
381 Constitution was written. The bottom [floor] of it was the Monterey jail. In that they had two really racist
382 cells. One is of a Mexican being hung and the rope literally in the cell. Then the next, right opposite is a
383 happy go lucky Mexican, which is a serape and a guitar behind the bars of the cell. I mean, my God! You
384 know, third grade students are coming to learn California history and they're learning how to be racist, you
385 know? All Mexicans are murderers who need to be hung or they get drunk and play guitars. I mean this is
386 in California. You know. So we worked very hard on trying to get that exhibit changed in Colton Hall. In
387 the end [we] were not successful. But we worked for about three semesters – the person who was head of
388 the museum there and the students doing work. So that was a real life struggle that they were a part of. So
389 doing things like that. Creating online courses which was fantastic, learning how to do an entire course
390 online and making it very active and fun and interesting. So that all stayed. I think I actually remained very
391 innovative. I think the stress really came from outside of the classroom.

392 **Benmayor:** *And you were one of the few faculty who actually didn't live on campus.*

393 **O'Leary:** Yeah.

394 **Benmayor:** *How did that play into your experience? [Laughs]*

395 **O'Leary:** Well, it was really difficult because I live in Berkeley and so I rented a house where I'd
396 stay for five days a week and then go home on the weekends. Then that was just costing so much money,
397 like "Why I am spending all this money on this apartment?" Then I started staying with friends and so that
398 was really great. But it meant I would come down and I would be on campus like three or four days a week.
399 Then I'd go home and, one, the travel was real exhausting. Two, it was really difficult not being able to be
400 at home. But then also what made it really difficult for me is that then I lived in these two worlds. So I
401 wasn't also to having the benefits of really being able to hang out more with my colleagues and have that
402 kind of time where you're not just on the University. So that made it very difficult. It was very hard. So
403 from '96 to when I retired in 2010, I lived two lives between those two worlds.

404 **Benmayor:** *But you weren't the only one who was doing that commuting.*

405 **O'Leary:** No, I wasn't. The best of all worlds would have been if Monterey Bay had been in
406 Berkeley. [Laughter] And then I wouldn't have had a closer relationship with people on the campus. I felt a
407 big loss of that during the time I taught there. I also felt a little schizophrenic, [Chuckles], in terms of these
408 two worlds. So yeah, that was difficult. But there was no way I could ask my husband to move to Monterey
409 Bay where he didn't have a job. Right? It was the reality of the situation. I lived in Berkeley. I had a job in
410 Monterey.

411 **Benmayor:** *I think one of the other things that you were very involved in, even from the
412 beginning, I wonder if you could talk about, was the creation of the University Learning Requirements?*

413 **[49:09] O'Leary:** Yeah, because I was in the first year faculty hire, both defining the requirements in our
414 Human Communication -- because we all were involved in talking about them and even what they should
415 be --, and then we all were involved in them [learning requirements] in terms of the whole University. The
416 University Learning Requirements are really just what other universities call General Education
417 Requirements. So University Learning Outcomes was supposed to be outcome-based learning. Which is
418 that you would be graded on your outcome, evidence that you could demonstrate that you've learned
419 something. So that's a very difficult thing to measure when you're not in something like a craft field. Like
420 carpentry? Very easy outcome based. You know how to build a house or you can't build a house.
421 [Chuckling] So that's because it's very clearly defined. But when you get into intellectual work, how do
422 you define this requirement in terms of outcomes? And how are students going to meet those outcomes?
423 And how do you prove them? So already in terms of the learning requirements you have this tension
424 between having a totally experimental scholarship of teaching and learning that's taking place, with a need
425 to categorize in very minute ways how you prove that you've met that when in fact the scholarship you are
426 doing is very broad and complicated and complex? But to show that, the outcome has to get reduced into:
427 "Okay, how in this six ways do you demonstrate your knowledge and skills?" So in terms of defining these

428 General Education requirements, the University Learning Outcomes, they immediately had this tension
429 because in terms of defining, it is very bureaucratic, actually. Then you have this very expansive, complex
430 learning that's taking place. So how do you define that? So I was on the initial committee for them [ULRs].
431 I was Chair for History and I was Chair of the whole University Learning Requirements for years. That's
432 the one thing I wish I had never been a part of. I wish I never, ever spent any bit of my time [on that]. In
433 terms of what I regret, looking back on it, it was working on those requirements. Because of that tension. It
434 became more and more and more bureaucratized. We had to have learning requirements. Okay, "What are
435 the outcomes?" And those had to be regimented. Then how do you have courses that can demonstrate that
436 they're meeting them [the outcomes]. Again you have faculty trying to do all these really interesting things.
437 And then all of a sudden you have to say, "Okay, how do I then take this complex research you're doing in
438 terms of say *Sites and Citizens*, finding the identity of these people? You're researching it and you're
439 getting identities in a museum. Well, how do you take that and say, "Okay, this shows how I've met these
440 five things on this piece of paper." I've met it. So the University Learning Requirements then are
441 becoming more and more bureaucratized, out of necessity, because that's by definition what they are. Also
442 then, in terms of the work I was doing, is that students are entering this University. It's a foreign language.
443 Learning requirements, what are these? And everybody is making up different things. One person says one
444 thing. One person says another thing. That's why we had to keep bureaucratizing it, right? Because
445 everybody was doing something different. The students were going crazy. They have no idea what's going
446 on because everyone is telling them different things. So they are coming to me a lot, because I'm the Chair
447 of this, very upset. On the other hand the faculty are very upset because we're trying to reduce what they're
448 doing into outcomes, right? The students want them to be reduced because they have no idea what they're
449 doing. So the whole thing was very stressful. Plus, none of the community colleges were sending us
450 students because they had no idea what we were doing. Because we weren't calling it General Education. I
451 have to say, this is probably just sounding so crazy. We're calling these University Learning Requirements.

452 They really were just the same thing, really just had to be put into a language that everybody could calm
453 down and understand which was a lot what it was about. But also I think along the way, things got
454 increasingly stifled. I do!

455 **[54:30] Benmayor:** *The creativity got stifled?*

456 **O'Leary:** Yeah, I think so. I really do. It had to happen. You're a university. You have to have
457 requirements. And you have to have students that can prove that they've met them. I think what were very
458 experimental outcomes, which I think is fantastic, rather than A, B, C, D, F, to really show a body of
459 evidence, that you could do something, it had to become reductive. So in that way I think there was that
460 tension and things got lost. Now I don't know quite what the state of things are. Hopefully maybe
461 something remained that's still progressive about it. I'm not sure. I don't know if you have any other
462 questions about the learning requirements.

463 **Benmayor:** *Well, the last, really the last area was about what accomplishments, disappointments*
464 *and legacies, basically. So I think we've sort of covered those things.*

465 **O'Leary:** Yeah.

466 **Benmayor:** *But is there anything else that you think that you'd like to add? [*

467 **O'Leary:** Okay. From the time I retired and then I taught for five more years -- you have the
468 situation in the CSU where you can teach one semester and then you have the other semester off; it's a way
469 to phase into full retirement --, what I did during those last five years is I was also a senior advisor to the
470 director of the New Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, that opened
471 in 2016. Lonnie Bunche was who I was working with when I was first hired at CSU Monterey Bay. As I
472 left my work with him, he was the head of Museum Exhibitions at the National Museum of American
473 History. So I felt like there were these two very nice bookends is beginning at the Smithsonian and ending
474 with the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Within those bookends is the
475 beginning of our University and my retirement from it. And so much of what I tried to do in the University

476 was part of building this new institution, I was also part of the new Smithsonian. Bringing to life not only
477 what takes place inside of an institution, both at African American History and Culture and at our
478 University, we both were trying to do that in terms of creating an institution and then feeling a
479 responsibility outside of our institution to the communities that we were a part of, and trying to create
480 reciprocal relationships and where learning is both accessible inside of where we are, whether it's a
481 University or the Smithsonian, but then also taking that out so people don't have to just come to us. Making
482 those kinds of partnerships. So for me I think it really was for 20 years being a part of building something,
483 making it be based in multiculturalism, having it be as cutting edge as possible and whether it's a museum
484 exhibit or technology in the University, and really trying to be true and to face things. Not to like even out
485 the rough edges of what it means to be multicultural, but be willing to take stands. And if you are attacked
486 to really be able to stand up and say, "No, this is why we're doing this, and this is the scholarship and the
487 vision and the heart and soul behind why we're doing what we're doing." So I do feel like that's what my
488 years at the University were.

489 **[58:46] Benmayor:** *So do you think that the University prepared you for this later stage?*

490 **O'Leary:** Yeah. I really do because I came in with an even greater understanding, I think, of how
491 to reach people. Particularly of how to reach different audiences, from having so many different kinds of
492 students. We had an incredible mix of students, in those early years. Particularly, we had a lot of students
493 from the surrounding communities, kids from farm worker families, along with students who were middle
494 class maybe from L.A. -- different kinds of students. They all were in our classrooms and full of energy
495 and learning. I think that made a difference when we'd sit down and talk about, "Okay, if we have an
496 exhibit, how is it going to reach this kind of person or that kind of person?" So that was a direct input, I
497 think, in terms of what I was able to bring from the University to the new African American History and
498 Culture Museum.

499 **Benmayor:** *And just out of curiosity what was your position at the Museum? I mean what was your*
500 *job description?*

501 **O'Leary:** I was a Senior Advisor to the Director, Lonnie Bunche.

502 **Benmayor:** *Which meant what?*

503 **O'Leary:** Oh, well, okay. It was a little bit like our University in that looking at all eleven of the
504 exhibitions. I was tasked with reviewing over five years, all of the different eleven exhibitions. That meant
505 from curators writing their initial scripts, to being in meetings with the designers of what the exhibitions
506 would be, to the architects, through all the different layers of rewriting. Rewriting what stories would be
507 told. To seeing what artifacts were going to be used or not used, and what their stories were. I wasn't a
508 curator myself but to look to see what did I think and to give my feedback on them.

509 **Benmayor:** *Wow, very interesting.*

510 **O'Leary:** Exciting stuff, yeah.

511 **Benmayor:** *Yes, yes, yes. Okay, well I probably could ask you other questions but I know it's been*
512 *more than an hour. You must be exhausted. But okay, so what made you decide to retire?*

513 **[01:01:18] O'Leary:** And then I want to show you one last thing and I don't know if you're going to be
514 able to see it or not. Oh, I'll show it first. I don't know if you can see this. I don't know if you have it.

515 **Benmayor:** *Oh, yes, of course! Yes! A photograph of the early HCOM faculty. One, two, three,*
516 *four, five, six, seven of us. My goodness. [Laughter]*

517 **O'Leary:** Spring 1997. [Laughs]

518 **Benmayor:** *Yeah!*

519 **O'Leary:** The reason I retired was I wanted to be young enough -- I retired when I was 65--, that
520 I could still go on and recreate myself. So that's why I worked at the National Museum of African
521 American History and Culture. I wanted to still be able to go on and do that. And I just was ready. I just
522 was too tired. I couldn't keep doing the University any longer.

523 **Benmayor:** *Yeah. Well, it did burn a lot of us out, yes, indeed. Yeah. The body told you it was time.*

524 *[Chuckles]*

525 **O'Leary:** Yeah. The body told me it's time. Luckily. When you asked me what was I able to
526 take from the University, I was able to take that. To be able to go on and create new lives. Retirement just
527 means that you're moving from one thing to the next. And luckily I was able to continue teaching one
528 semester a year for five years, with online courses.

529 **Benmayor:** *Oh. Yeah, you were one of the first who jumped into online courses.*

530 **O'Leary:** Yeah. Yeah.

531 **[01:02:57] Benmayor:** *What attracted you to that? Was it just the technology part of it?*

532 **O'Leary:** A lot was the technology because it was that there are so many archives that are online
533 that in fact students are already working online. It was really fun making up these assignments where
534 students are going and having to analyze the. . . [audio freeze] of Congress and look at the actual
535 Constitution online.

536 **Benmayor:** *Yeah, that's great. Well, you were definitely a pioneer in online teaching, that's for*
537 *sure.*

538 **O'Leary:** Well, you know, Troy Challenger, who helped us all, he was the Head of Faculty
539 Development Technology, there would be none of this without Troy Challenger. He did give me feedback.
540 He said that if I took my course and I gave it another title it could be on of these big mega courses that are
541 online. So I'm sorry, actually, that the University wasn't interested in doing that. That would have been
542 really fun.

543 **Benmayor:** *Um hmm. Well, there are a lot of things that the University could have done. [Laughs]*
544 *But that's not part of the interview. So anyway, Cecilia, thank you so much. I want to really appreciate*
545 *your reminiscences and I hope that thinking back on these things has been joyful rather than painful.*

546 **O'Leary:** It has been joyful, Rina. And thank you so much for making this project possible. I
547 think it's just incredible. You're going to have this whole project put together by next year?

548 **Benmayor:** *Well, we're supposed to do a number of interviews by September of this year. We're*
549 *having them transcribed, and they're going to be archived both in the transcription form and the videos or*
550 *audios. The Library website has a Digital Commons area, so they will be put into the Digital Commons,*
551 *like every university that has interviews with retiring faculty, and that sort of thing.*

552 **O'Leary:** Great!

553 **Benmayor:** *So these will be the first ones. I don't know if they want to continue because it's been a*
554 *struggle. I don't know if there will be longevity with this. But at least we wanted to get the early years*
555 *down before people really disappear. [Laughter] So that was the impetus. We're selecting. We can't do*
556 *absolutely everybody. But [Zoom] the technological [videoconferencing] platform really enables us to do a*
557 *lot of these interviews that normally we would do face to face. So it's really great in that regard.*

558 **O'Leary:** Right.

559 **Benmayor:** *Anyhow, I'm going to stop the recording but stay online, okay?*

560 **O'Leary:** Okay.

561 **Benmayor:** *I'm going to stop the recording.*

562 (END OF RECORDING)

563 * * *

564