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Moe Abugan Oral History

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46:01

Interviewee: Moe Abugan

Interviewer: Samantha Pagdilao

Transcribed by: Samantha Pagdilao

[Generating and Reclaiming our Wisdoms \(GROW\):
A Collection of AAPI Community Stories at UC San Diego](#)

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Time	Transcription
0:03	Samantha Pagdilao: Okay! My name is Samantha Pagdilao. Today is Monday, March 4, 2024, and I am interviewing Moe Abugan through a Zoom call for the University of California, San Diego, Generating and Reclaiming Our Wisdoms Project. Moe, do you agree to grant the university permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?
0:26	Moe Abugan: Yes.
0:28	Samantha Pagdilao: Alright, thank you. So who are you? What is your current position and tell me about yourself?
0:39	Moe Abugan: Hello, Sam. My name is Moe Abugan. My pronouns are she and they. I'm a writer and creative professional or multimedia artist. I was born and raised in National City and Valencia Park in Southeast San Diego. Today I work as a content producer and UX advocate in the healthcare field and I'm involved with Healthcare Workers for Palestine San Diego. Should I go into my undergrad background at all?
1:24	Samantha Pagdilao: Yeah! You can lead us into that.
1:27	Moe Abugan: Okay. During my undergraduate career at UCSD, I double majored in visual art and communication. Later I earned my master's degree in leadership studies at the University of San Diego. Just a quick summary of the different activities I was involved in: Summer Summit and OASIS Summer Bridge, Kaibigang Pilipino, the Student Affirmative Action Committee, the Cross-Cultural Center, Kamalayan Kollektive, and SPACES. I've also participated in a few directed group studies efforts through Kamalayan, namely the Pinay Studies course in spring 2010, with Carmela. and the Pinay Studies: Political Art Theory and Practice course in spring 2012, with Gail.
2:30	Samantha Pagdilao: Alright. Okay, so why did you choose UCSD for undergrad?
2:39	Moe Abugan: I first came to UCSD as a high school student in 2006. At the time, my older sister was a third year at UCSD, and she told me about a weekend overnight opportunity called Summer Summit, and today I believe it's known as SIAPS Summer Summit, and it's coordinated through SPACES. But at the time I was a junior in high school, I'd already been considering UCSD because they recently created Sixth College and the theme "Culture, Art, Technology" sounded really appealing and interdisciplinary to me. The only other schools I really considered were private art schools which today feels really weird to say um, but it

	<p>was...it was just a very interesting time, I think, high school. But during Summer Summit my RA was Janice. We had a one to one during the program, like a check in meeting, and I don't quite remember all the details of what we talked about, but I do remember that by the end of it I felt just a lot more confident and comfortable about the possibility of choosing UCSD.</p>
4:07	<p>Samantha Pagdilao: Yeah, thank you. Um, you listed a bunch of different spaces that you are part of and I only recalled a few before we met. So, what- again, like if you, if you could like, run us through each of the spaces, and how you got involved with them, the activities that you participated in, and how did they differ from each other?</p>
4:36	<p>Moe Abugan: Mhm. Well after I officially submitted my intent to register — and it was after Summer Summit and everything, so this is end of senior year, about to enter summer before first year — I was accepted to Summer Bridge through OASIS or— there will be a lot of acronyms *laughs* as I'm speaking which-</p>
5:05	<p>Samantha Pagdilao: Yes. *laughs*</p>
5:07	<p>Moe Abugan: *laughs* –I'll try to spell them out as I'm saying them, but they also could have changed by today, so hopefully, it's making sense. But, I participated in the Summer Bridge program through the Office of Academic Support and Instructional Services known as OASIS. And really, that is what kicked off my college experience. I think it was just so special and created some meaningful opportunities for community-based learning and practical skills specifically for students who come from historically underrepresented communities. That's something that I hadn't experienced before, growing up in Southeast, so that was tremendously valuable to me throughout college. I would actually go back to work for Summer Bridge as a clerk after my first year, as an Academic Transition Counselor, and then also as a Resource Counselor. It's a program that has a special place in my heart. And that's... why I continued to go back, you know, it's just really easy to want to give back too, because you can see firsthand how students are learning and building connections. And just getting a better feel for what it's like to be in an institution of higher education. Another space that I listed was KP. My first experience with KP was actually, when I was still a high school student. So, as I mentioned before, my sister was also a student at UCSD, and she had been involved, and when I was in high school my sister had invited me to house parties with her friends, so from day one KP, for me, has always been associated with a lot of people who are looking to socialize and create friendships. Right?</p>
7:42	<p>Samantha Pagdilao: Yeah. *laughs*</p>
7:44	<p>Moe Abugan: *Laughs*</p>

7:45	Samantha Pagdilao: Definitely, it's definitely still that way, too.
7:49	<p>Moe Abugan: Good to hear it's consistent. But- but right? So that was my first experience of it. I ended up joining KP board my second year as community activism coordinator and part of my duties included, being a rep at, I don't know if it still exists, but it was called SAAC board. S.A.A.C. or Student Affirmative Action Committee. And I had also been part of the planning committee that year for the Students of Color Conference. And it was really in those spaces, you know, through my role on KP board and kind of being, I guess, a branch into more political spaces where I made deep connections with folks who are very good critical thinkers and just generally more engaged with... politics, really.</p> <p>By the end of my second year, I didn't feel interested in staying as involved with KP. I wanted to do more intensive personal political work after that. I believe around that time was also when I had been encouraged by some friends to apply for an internship at the Cross-Cultural Center, or just the Cross is what we called it. The year before me, Carmela had actually interned at the Cross with a few other folks in the community that I had looked up to and so I applied, and I was very lucky to be offered an internship. I was on the operations team with Sam and Mindy and our staff lead was Melanie Natividad or Mel. She was also an alum, and I... I didn't realize how emotional I'd get remembering this. But Mel was also a queer Pinay, around the time that I was coming into my own queerness, and she was just funny, thoughtful, and I wanted to be like her. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to stay on as a staff at the Cross. So there was a little bit of a transition our year while we were interns. But I wanted to be sure I named her because she really was just a very special person. Actually, the Cross... felt a lot like how I felt about Mel at the time. It was just very welcoming, very comforting. You could always feel like you belonged right? Or find someone who could create that space for you there. Today, when I think of all the friends who I interned with at the Cross, they're all just some of the fiercest people in the world, in my opinion...It was just a very transformational time and place.</p> <p>I got involved with Kamalayan also in my third year. It was after I'd gotten to know Chris who was an Academic Transition Counselor with me during Summer Bridge. And then I also got to know Gracelynn, who was also involved in Kamalayan, and I had gotten to know her through the Students of Color Conference, and so by the time third year started, I felt like, okay, this is a new space that I could potentially get involved in. And I was... right. I just loved how intimate and thoughtful and collaborative we were. We didn't have a board. It was very organic, and people contributed when and where they could, which was sometimes a challenge, right? Because there are real needs that come with being a student organization or a registered org, I think might be the terminology and, you know,</p>

	like even having someone's name and contact information on the right papers, you know, like—
13:48	Samantha Pagdilao: Yeah.
13:49	<p>Moe Abugan: –that sort of stuff is what we often would have to just deal with, with just a handful of folks. When I first joined Kamalayan, there were probably like 5 or 6 of us that were still pretty involved in doing programming, doing workshops at conferences or hosting our own kind of programs. I remember once, we collaborated with one of our friends whose uncle was Rick Rocamora, a Filipino-American photographer. He had recently at the time published a book on World War II veterans, specifically Filipino-American World War II veterans, and we hosted an event with him. So we did like smaller events like that but they were just so meaningful. And there was often a lot of poetry which I absolutely appreciated, and art and opportunities to read together and learn and dialogue in ways that could help inform the people we wanted to be and the people we wanted to show up as on campus and in our own lives. That's one of the big reasons why I stayed coming back to Kamalayan and creating those spaces my third year, fourth year and my fifth year.</p> <p>I think by the time I was in fifth year I was tired. So I wasn't as deep into the details and day to day of organizing. But I would still make an effort to be present when there were group events going on or when there were Pinay Speaks sessions that we would have. Pinay Speaks used to be a weekly one-hour session that we would have usually at the Cross. In my third year it would usually be [Carmela] or me sometimes facilitating. We'd come prepared with copies of a poem or a reading that we had found that we would want to share, or a question sometimes when we were just really busy. We would just have it be an open space for people to just check in and share where they were at. So we really wanted it to be a space that met folks where they needed to be and we would have students, both undergrad, grad students, sometimes staff members would come and join us. So it was... it was always there for us, and it was like a true form of retention. Even though we were a very small group, you know. Sometimes there would just be 2 of us. Sometimes we would have for those of us who came. It was often what got us through that day or that week. But that's another reason why Kamalayan helped me get through my undergrad.</p> <p>Let me try to see if I missed anything. Oh, SPACES! Did I talk about SPACES already?</p>
18:41	Samantha Pagdilao: With.. like, very minorly. I guess, with the Students of Color Conference. But if you want to go into it a little deeper, that's fine.
18:56	Moe Abugan: Okay, with SPACES. So I believe present-day SPACES has 3 branches: SIAPS for access, SIPHR for attention, and SPICEE for community. I

	<p>first got involved with SPACES work through SIAPS. So I was a student of SIAPS through Summer Summit before it was called SIAPS. They used to be called SIORC. S-I-O-R-C I believe. I ended up being drawn to it back in my fourth year, because I was interested in The Collective Voice, which is the publication that is produced through SPACES. It was I think, one of the only progressive circulations on campus and in a time where we'd often hear of these really racist and offensive things being printed in The Koala, it felt like a necessary space and I think at the time I had just finished, or been close to finishing my internship at the Cross where I was the Common Ground newsletter intern and so I felt like applying for an internship with The Collective Voice would help me to grow that skill set more with with writing and progressive journalism. But that's what got me into SPACES. I think it's worth mentioning that, when my friends and I would talk about the different places and spaces on campus that we'd want to get involved in, SPACES tended to be one of the more challenging places to work at, for a lot of reasons. It was developing, of course, it's student-led, there's like dozens of students right? It could be the case today still, or it could also not be, but there was a lot of scrutiny and a lot of eyeballs on the work—</p>
22:00	Samantha Pagdilao: Yeah.
22:01	Moe Abugan: —that SPACES folks were doing. So I went into it with that in the back of my mind. I was nervous about it, I remember, but I also knew that I had friends who were also looking to work at SPACES. And so I felt like, “Okay, if it's gonna be hard, at least we'll be in it together,” and that's really what it came down to. There was a lot of collective coping while working at SPACES. Of course it's good work, but it is... challenging to be in that environment.
22:58	Samantha Pagdilao: Yeah, of course. Thank you so much. I really appreciate your honesty and vulnerability and sharing, like all these different spaces that you held-
23:11	Moe Abugan: Mhm.
23:12	Samantha Pagdilao: -I can definitely confirm that there's still feelings of tiptoeiness. But there's still students who actively want to have and hold- take and make space for like liberation and activism. And there is still definitely active efforts for students. Although, they go through like different things, like they all share, the same kind of values and cares for students who are underrepresented, who need to, have their voices heard. And so that shared feeling is still, unfortunately, in a sense, unfortunately still on campus, but the fight is still there, fighting spirit is still there.
24:03	Moe Abugan: Mhm.
24:05	Samantha Pagdilao: So thank you. And then let's go to this question. So yeah- we've talked about this. My interest in interviewing you came from the notion of

	<p>knowing that you also heavily participated in art activism. When you visited the GROW space you shared some of the poems that you had for your Pinay Studies with Carm. So what did art activism- What is art activism? And what did that look like and mean to you? And I'll add this to the question, what did that mean to you in your undergraduate experience? And then, how did that carry you now as an advocate for UX?</p>
24:57	<p>Moe Abugan: Correct. Those are great questions–</p>
25:04	<p>Samantha Pagdilao: *laughs”</p>
25:06	<p>Moe Abugan: To be honest, I didn't really think of what I did as art activism. I felt like I was a Vis Arts major, and I wanted to use my projects as opportunities to process what I was confronting or struggling to confront, as a caveat. I also worked on other coping mechanisms at the time, like counseling and other things. But specifically, I was interested in using art to confront these difficult topics, usually to attempt my own personal healing, or to share counter-narratives or narratives or information that isn't very well known.</p> <p>Some examples of what this looked like when I focused on healing, I produced a couple of experimental documentaries about my parents. One was about my mom and her experiences and observations as someone who immigrated to the U.S. from the Philippines. I also produced one about my dad and his decline in health, due to having ALS. While I was a student, I was also a caregiver for him, so that was something I was constantly code-switching between. I would have a full day at work and school right? Because I would often work on campus, and then, after all that, I would go to my dad's facility to help take care of them. So I tried to use my film courses to heal from what was going on.</p> <p>I also co-produced a doc with John called “Real Pain. Real Action.” in 2010 after we had spent maybe almost a month, capturing student-led actions in response to the racist, Compton Cookout event and other surrounding racist events at that time. And so we just went all in on our final projects and said, we're just gonna– well– I said this, I'm just gonna go all in on my final project and try to heal from this as I'm producing this piece.</p> <p>And then for what this type of art looks like when I focused on counter-narratives. For my final project in an installation course in 2011, I actually took over the hallway at the Cross-Cultural Center. I don't know if it's still like this, but back then, it felt like the hallway was just a very dimly lit space, very transitory. Most people would use it just to go to the kitchen and then come back to the lobby or the library, and they didn't really pay attention to what was on the walls. Right? We would have flyers, or sometimes little pieces of art, but I felt like it was an opportunity, because I had recently come across a study from the Department of</p>

	<p>Defense that said 1 in 3 women in the U.S. military are victims of rape or sexual assault. It's an absolutely horrific statistic, but I felt like it was very important for people to confront, especially with San Diego being a military town, quote unquote, and especially with how UCSD campus has about 400 acres of a previous military base. And so I decided to use the hallway at the Cross as a space for my installation. I called it "Rows" like R-O-W-S. But basically I deconstructed hundreds of roses, red and white roses, to use their petals and stems. And I arranged each piece onto the wall to create the image of a barrier fence, like that kind of cross-hatched fence that you see all over, but 1 out of every 3 rose petals was red and the rest were white. And I hung tactical flashlights from the railing so that folks could use them to shed light on it, you know, just any part of the installation, and I exhibited that actually [...] almost exactly 12, 13 years ago on March 8, International Women's Day.</p>
31:23	Samantha Pagdilao: Wow.
31:24	Moe Abugan: It was up for the rest of winter quarter. But at the time I remember getting feedback from people, random people, like it smells so good in the hallway, because it's all decaying rose petals right?
31:41	Samantha Pagdilao: Yeah.
31:42	<p>But then, if they were to take a closer look at the gallery card, they would see what it was symbolic of. But that was one of my biggest installation pieces that focused on counter-narratives.</p> <p>Another one I did was in 2012. I did an exhibit with Gail and Clarissa , who were also Vis students and Pinays. They're my friends, and we did- well I did mostly installations. There was also visual artwork, and Gail did a performance piece, and one of my installations was called Kumeyaay Ground. So I had created this large vinyl detail of lettering that's spelled "Kumeyaay Ground" and I had used the same exact font that they use for Price Center signs. And I installed it just on the ground in our gallery. So it was very simple, very to the point. But these are just some of the types of projects that I would come up with while as an art student in a way that helped me to say what I wanted to say and share what I wanted to share. And I would hope that some folks found at least one of these things meaningful, but it's hard to say.</p> <p>As for how this carries to present-day in my work in UX I think my just relentless desire to make things as– Well, let me think about this actually.</p>
34:13	Samantha Pagdilao: Yeah, go ahead. And I wanted to say as you take this time, like I really appreciate, like you opening up about the kind of works that you participated in. Because I- I can relate to that in a sense, I think the work that I've

	done as an AAPI Studies minor, although like, I was unable to participate in a lot of Vis Arts Like classes myself, I did a lot of like literature classes, and being able to talk about like my family, and my experiences through my own pieces are very grounding towards my own values, and like what really like, pushed me and reminded me, like who I am to my core, what I advocated for and like that mattered–
35:11	Moe Abugan: Mhm.
35:12	Samantha Pagdilao: so I really I I really– I'm like thankful that I had those opportunities and my Ethnic Studies and various like literature classes to be able to do the same thing. Yeah.
35:36	Moe Abugan: [...] Sorry my dog was– I was listening. My dog was just distracting me, but I appreciate–
35:41	Samantha Pagdilao: Yeah yeah that's fine.
35:	Moe Abugan: –that, Sam.
35:41	Samantha Pagdilao: Thank you thank you!
35:43	Moe Abugan: In terms of skill sets, how this carries to present-day, just relentless detail and striving for facts really. I think that would be a thread between what I produced then and what I work towards now. One thing that I think about a lot specifically with UX in healthcare is, so my dad has passed, but I think about the letters he might have received or the instructions, or anything about Medicare, you know, *laugh* like so many different systems and rules that exist that are not easy for most people to understand. And so that's part of why I feel so driven to create experiences that make things as simple as possible and I like– specifically, today, I specialize in Medicare content. So I mean, I guess that would be like the personal connection. From what I did then and today.
37:45	Samantha Pagdilao: Yeah, thank you. I worry about that sometimes. And like my– when I think about like long term and my future. I'm like–
37:56	Moe Abugan: Ahuh.
37:57	Samantha Pagdilao: Well, how will I like– How will I be able to apply all that I've learned from like my AAPI studies into like my future career? And it turns out, I think I've done a lot of groundwork 'cause I want to go to librarianship-
38:16	Moe Abugan: Woo!

38:17	Samantha Pagdilao: And so– Yeah! And I found out through talking to a good amount of people that like even like, if whatever career path that you choose there is always some way for you to be able to come back to who you are–
38:43	Moe Abugan: Mhm.
38:34	Samantha Pagdilao: –and be able to advocate for things that either have occurred to you or matter to you. Whether that be through like activism or representing the communities that you care about–
38:51	Moe Abugan: Mhm.
38:52	Samantha Pagdilao: –there's always some way that you're able to, at least for the people who I've talked, to able to like personalize your experience towards yeah, what you care about.
39:02	Mhm. I would agree with that.
39:06	Samantha Pagdilao: Yeah, thanks. And so, down to 2 more questions. So yeah, what were your greatest takeaways, whether that be memories, advice, anything, from the work you've done on campus? How is– well, I you just answered the how has it helped you and carried you? But yeah, what are some of your greatest takeaways? And I guess, like question of what is your advice to young Filipina, Filipinx undergraduates at UCSD who want to continue student activism?
39:47	<p>Moe Abugan: I think, well, one of the things that I've kept close to heart, all these years later is actually a quote... related to solidarity work and building relationships and community.</p> <p>“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”</p> <p>And I think about this pretty often [...] and it encourages me to keep reading, to keep learning, to keep listening to people's stories and connecting with them one to one. I think it's very easy, once you go into the workforce it's very easy to fall into a stasis where you're okay with charity. You're okay with donations. You're okay with these well-meaning individual acts which do provide results. But I think knowing that there's a deeper shared connection between our different communities is just extra important when it comes to continuing with student activism, whatever that looks like, or liberation work, whatever that looks like. Another takeaway would be the friendships that I've been able to continue from then, especially the ones who are able to speak on that same wavelength, that understand like there are systems of power at work. I feel like the friendships have really been everything for me.</p>

	As for advice, I feel like, know your strengths and know what skills you're willing and able to contribute. Know your coping skills and use them when you need to. And this is especially, I think, something I at least I've seen in Filipina, Filipinx experiences. If you don't know how to set and enforce boundaries, take the time to learn and practice. I wish I had gotten and heeded this advice when I was younger. It's, it's wild. It's wild, how pervasive boundary setting, or the lack thereof can influence and impact our lives so specifically with Filipino, Filipinx experiences. I've just seen that in the family unit, boundaries tend to not be existent, and that spills into everything else. So that would probably be one of my biggest pieces of my advice. But I mean– yeah, I'll just leave it at that.
44:36	Samantha Pagdilao: Yeah, for sure. I think I think I could definitely relate to the boundaries aspect like growing up and like learning about certain like practices. I'm trying to say things like very carefully.
44:53	Moe Abugan: Mhm.
44:55	Samantha Pagdilao: But like certain- certain like tendencies that Filipino families have, and I recognize how they have manifested and sat with me–
45:04	Moe Abugan: Mhm.
45:05	Samantha Pagdilao: –as I've like grown into my undergraduate experience. *laughs* And like why they are toxic. So I-
45:13	Moe Abugan: Mhm.
45:14	Samantha Pagdilao: I definitely resonate.
45:16	Moe Abugan: *laughs*
45:17	Samantha Pagdilao: So thank you.
45:20	Moe Abugan: *laughs* Yeah.
45: 21	Samantha Pagdilao: I find solace in knowing that I'm not crazy or I'm not crazy, or I'm not selfish.
45: 39	Moe Abugan: Mm mm. Mm mm.
45: 31	Samantha Pagilao: But yeah. And that- that's all the questions! So thank you so much, Moe–
45:38	Moe Abugan: Yay!

45:39	Samantha Pagilao: –for allowing me to have this time with you and have this conversation.
45:41	Moe Abugan: Absolutely.
45:43	Samantha Pagdilao: Yeah!
45:44	Moe Abugan: I was happy to help, hopefully. Hopefully, it all makes sense. *laughs*
45:47	Samantha Pagdilao: Yeah, oh no yeah definitely. It- it did.
45:48	Moe Abugan: –it all makes sense. Oh! *laughs*
45:48	Samantha Pagdilao: Oh, it it definitely did. But yeah. And then I'll just go ahead and end this.