

NARRATOR: Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez  
Interviewer: Louie Zhao  
Date: Friday May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2024  
Location: UCSD Price Center  
Collection: Race and Oral History Course, Spring 2024  
Length of Interview: 28:46

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Louie Zhao: So my name is Louie. Out today is Friday, May 24, 2024, and I'm entering Mr. Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez through in person. Interview at the University of California, San Diego Race and Oral History Project. You agree to grant the University permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes. Yes.

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Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: great. Let's get started. So, Mr. Jojo, do you? Would you like to give a small introduction about yourself? Who you are? And why you are here today. Yeah. So I'm Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez, folks who knew me here at Ucsd. Before I left they called me Jojo, and my students call me now Professor Jojo. I am an alumni of Ucsd. I graduated 2,008 with a degree in ethnic studies. My interaction with Ucsd actually goes all the way back to my elementary school days when the program we go to South Bay. I went to one elementary school after I came to San Diego. and they brought elementary school students here on campus. And so that was the first time I met the former director of the Cross Cultural Center, Dr. Edwina Welch, as a sixth grader, and then afterwards middle school through high school. I was actually going to the different high school programs and college days. High school conferences actually done by the Asia Pacific Islander Student Alliance. And I began, Filipino actually fell in love with Ucsd. Ended up, going into the first overnight program, the first summer summit through source back then before it became spaces and then went to Summer Bridge, continued on as an undergraduate here and then worked at the Cross cultural center for about 7 and a half years, and then became an advisor for spaces. For about 4 years.

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Louie Zhao: Great. That's great. What caused you to pursue ethnics studies, especially here at Ucsd.

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Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: Actually, my cousins are very instrumental in me. Pursuing ethnic studies as a field. My cous. 2 of my cousins were ethnic studies, majors, and a couple of ones before that were ethnic studies minor. And so I wanted to. Really, first, I wanted to actually pop political science. And then I started getting into ethnic studies started working at the Cross Cultural center working with the Campus Community Center being involved in the Student Affirmative Action Committee and then just continued on and then, now, I'm a professor of

ethnic studies. I work at Southwestern college teaching Asian American studies, peer studies and indigenous studies.

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Louie Zhao: Oh, that's amazing! Great to hear. What? Kinda how are you? Part sorry? How are you? Part of the what is your connection to the raza resource center, as I know you? Or one of the previous advisors. How did that kinda happen?

Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: Yes. So in 2,010 there was a lot of anti black racism that was happening here on campus ranging from a frat party that was done by one of the Greek organizations to Hood Fund in the library to the news. Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: All these sort of racialized and very racist

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Louie Zhao: Great to hear. What? Kinda how are you? Part sorry? How are you? Part of the what is your connection to the raza resource center, as I know you? Or one of the previous advisors. How did that kinda happen?

Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: actions that were going on on campus predominantly targeting black students. And at that time there was a student demand. And so I thought we call it a black winter or 2,010. then that sort of established, the different ethno ethnic specific communities like the Rasa Resource center, Black Resource center. It's a tribal resource center. And then, later on, part of that push was the Asian Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern basic American resource and resource center, which is still in the process of what that center would look like. When the B, when Bsu and Meta had the Bsu Metcha resource center. It was student run, and so we were given a space. But there was no staffing. and so, being part of the Cross Cultural Center, and being the advisor for this Student Affirmative Action Committee as a full time staff, I was sort of designated as the liaison between cross culture center and this A and overall like the diversity programs that are happening here on campus with the students making sure that you know the lights are on. The resources were there. They had ink for their printer. That there was it was clean for events helping them set up, and the same time also being part of the intertribal resource center. Later on the black resource center and the raspberry central establish their own identities and split from each other to create their own separate centers. Oh, that's a lot of history between the words.

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Louie Zhao: I wanted to ask you a more personal question. Why, do you think ethic studies is important for you? And why do you think it is important for us, like as students to be involved and also learn more about what it's about.

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Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: I think for me, ethnic studies is always the like cross disciplinary intersectional work. About how to tell our stories, or as a community not to get stuck on the history, though history is very important. But sort of how history has a conversation with the President, but thinking about how also how the present, can you imagine a different tomorrow? So ethnic studies is those nonlinear ways of having conversations with each other, with communities, those who might know each other struggle, those who might want to learn about each other's struggles like again identities, and and really pushing the marker to. What does it mean to have our stories in our own ways, in our own voice, the way we want to share it, the way we want to tell it. and though we are in an institution of higher learning, like Ucsd like college and institute and universities who very much structuralize and institutionalize these history books, these contemporary sociologists, book etc, right? Very printed press printed documents. We still have to have the power of the voice, and how we connect with each other

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Louie Zhao: for sure, for sure. Louie Zhao: Speaking on like your personal story, what was kind of like your childhood growing up like. And what was it? Like learning, finding yourself finding your place and like learning more about your identity?

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Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: Yeah. So I'm actually from the Philippines. But I don't really consider myself Filipino. I'm an indigenous person. So under the Philippine constitution, we're a protected community or a class. Louie Zhao: And so in 1991 a volcano erupted, and it was near my village by the town that I was living at, and so, at the age of 5 I was actually evacuated by the Us. Military. So at the I was strapped onto a cargo net. Military air cargo flight from Philippines to Guam bomb to Hawaii, Hawaii to Washington, then Washington to Long Beach. And so my experience as someone coming from the Philippines is already different. Many folks come here through military, through sponsorship, through school meeting, nursing program, etc. But I came here as actually a natural disaster refugee. So my connection through the migration narrative was through refugee communities. And so I've always been connected and always felt that my story narrative is very similar to theirs. Being, you know, taken out of a country because of something, whether we political or did for my case natural disaster and living in another country. And trying to establish our identities and cultures here. The difference between my communities and a lot of indigenous peoples from the Philippines and a lot of ethnic and indigenous peoples around the world when they come to the United States is that we're always clumped up into a national identity, that we might not associate with or be or feel like we're a part of. So I learned actually how to be Filipino in the United States something that my parents was really scared of that we might blend we need to blend into the Filipino community and not necessarily the American community. We started eating the the quote unquote Filipino foods learning, you know the language something that's something that's not part of our community. So it's very unique when it

comes to those sort of race minoritized communities elsewhere in the world.

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Louie Zhao: That's very interesting. I didn't know that much about your backstory. I wanted to ask a bit more about what was it like? Being and in it, and immigrants living in 2 different cultures. And how did that work? How did you kind of learn to like plan, both of them, or and learn to like.

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Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: I think it's always been struggle, because my so my parents are mixed ethnic groups in the Philippines. So you practice some various cultures and so sort there's times that I'm not. I don't know if I'm I forgot I'm in Lokano or I'm in Iran or ensemble though, those are different ethnic communities. And so I think it just blend inside the house. So ironically again, like we're we're practicing these cultural traits specific to our communities inside the house, becoming more Filipino, as we sort of go to the threshold and be part of the Filipino community as a whole, and then be also very much Americanized. So part of my work is, did I learn Filipino culture, or did they learn Filipino American culture, something that was visible already in diaspora that had to adapt to sort of blend in because Filipino culture. What we know in the Philippines is also constantly changing. So when we think about culture, and identity, how much of that is sort of romanticize to never change like culture is stuck in the past or culture is never changing. Culture is very, you know, dynamic. It always grows, changes, adapts to different settings and times and environments. So my culture has always been constantly in change, and there's things that I will never practice. Because, you know, those things will are not allowed anymore or not are not relevant anymore. Right? And I also am building those new identities and constructs as I move and become older in the United States.

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Louie Zhao: Speaking of which, what does that culture kind of mean to you like? You want your culture to be ever changing. You prefer to like stick with what you've learned and what you've grown up with.

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Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: I don't. I don't think culture should ever be stagnant. I think culture constantly changes, and again, depending on the influence of the environment of time. Geopolitical issues, cultural issues. My dad's outside from the info community. Back then, they would go to war, and they would cut people's head after wars like that obviously, is not a tradition anymore. Right? Especially since I'm in diaspor I can't be like. I hate someone and then cut their head off. So you know, what does it mean for us to preserve certain cultures and do away with sub with others. And what are the things that sort of navigate the contemporary issues right? Contemporary times that, you know there

are medicine. Now, there are technology. There's a lot of things that we that are modern quote unquote here in the United States that allows us to have a different framework but also how the cultures back in my village in my communities are also changing. So how much of that is here in the United States are demanding that the culture doesn't change back at home. So do we make sure that people in the Philippines or in Asia stick with tradition as if from thousands of years ago? Or are we allowing them to change and create new cultures as well.

they say, Yeah, America is like a blend of different cultures. How does your culture kind of fit into what America is? Cause, I'm sure, in the area you grew up in, it was not like all, Philip, you know, there's probably multiple different, like ethnic groups. How did I kind of like, how did you kind of learn about others and blend you also incorporate, like what you learned, you know, like I think be. I've been being a refugee here. I was actually you were actually put in a community with a lot of other refugees I was. We were actually in Long Beach, a lot of loud Cambodians predominantly Cambodian community. There's a lot of Samoans grew up with those folks. And then, when it came to San Diego in south in South Bay, San Diego, a lot of Mexican Americans, a lot of African American folks there and other Asians. So it was, you know. I don't think more so that America is a blend or they are having different cultures. I think America is very much an imagined identity that says like what it means for certain individuals, right? Some folks might identify as Americans. Some people might not. Some people might classify American as normally Caucasian, white or European descent, and other folks, or migrant, or even native folks. Don't wanna be part of that, this discourse or that conversation. But for me, that this America has always been sort of an imagined place where folks depending on again your your relationship to the geopolitical issues happening, the social cultural stuff that's going on always fluctuates, and how you sort of address, your Americanness or your Otherness.

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Louie Zhao: How would you consider you address like the Americanness? And I thought.

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Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: I think I one of the things that I know that I'm embodies. I have the agency and privileges of one being a citizen knowing the language. Even when I go to my village or my town back in the Philippines. I'm never seen as part of them anymore. I'm here. But at the same time, being here in the United States. I'm never really part of the American culture as well, and even then I'm not sometimes not even part of the Filipino community as well, cause I'm an indigenous person, so I think I've always been able to navigate my complexities. My contradicting identities with how I know what I am, what my family and my communities. I am, and how I sort of relate to others. And I think that's the beauty of ethnic studies is that we are able to make sure that we. Mmake identity complex. Right? It's never just the standard racialized ethnic boxes like, Are you Chinese, or are you? You know Mexican, are you called El Salvadorian, etc? Right? And so you're not necessarily just

these categories. You're much more. You're you have all these stories that are in you, and ethnic studies allows you to speak that.

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Louie Zhao: Do you think it was difficult growing up to like learn how to learn about the communities, learn about different cultures and like, try to find your personal identity. I think I don't think necessarily it was difficult. I think it was just

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Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: You just have to navigate and, you know, appreciate not knowing who you are again right? And then letting other people know their truth. I think, as a child there was a difference where I thought multiculturalism was more on performing culture dances, your traditional attire. You're weaving your food, and then you later on realize particularly again, this is where ethnic studies is have gives you the ability to be critical. Like, are those identities stagnant. Are those identities actually, part of a bigger picture, like many folks would say things like, Oh, I had. I tried Japanese food, I'm like, Oh, look at you again and like, Oh, I had a spam with Suti like that's not Japanese food. Very much Japanese American, taken from Hawaii and Spam is also a military project that was put into militarized areas. And so that's why ethnic studies. It allows us to be complex. So did I learn culture and identity. Sure what? But ethnic studies gave me the words to make it more complex, and allow the other folks to tell their stories. So you made it more meaningful. And you made it really understand? Like what it means? Yeah, beyond the surface level.

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Louie Zhao: Can you give? Another example of that?

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Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: Yeah. So one of the things that. So for this this past lunar New Year being working with the Aapi Asian American community as a whole in the county. I'm also Commissioner for Asian, American Asian in particular, relations for the county there was a lot of celebrations around with the Vietnamese, Ted, and then Chinese communities when it comes to lunar New Year, Chinese, New Year and one of the communities I really wanted to specifically connect with when north in North County, San Diego was a Tibetan community. So Tibetans are refugees also. But they're not Chinese, but they're part of Chinese like sphere of influence when it comes to the pro the geopolitical framework. But they're also the in diaspora. So what does it mean for them to celebrate winter New Year. As to bet in Americans who cannot check Asia cannot check Chinese as a box, checking other Asian and making sure that their presence is no right. And then also, like really diving into what does it mean to be of diasporic Tibetan community in the predominantly white region of Eskimito. So those are the complex things I like to think about.

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Louie Zhao: for sure, for sure. So what would you think is like a biggest as a professor of ethnic studies? What do you think is a big misconception of ethnic studies?

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Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: I think the biggest thing that I realize when it comes to some of my students at Southwestern College who might not know. And let's just use my framework of Asian American studies is that there's still what they call Orientalist framework of Asian American. It's always this foreign entity or foreign culture. And so have students taking my class thinking like, I wanna talk about the great wall of China, geishas, Korean emperors, pre colonial Philippines, like the induce valley before it became, quote unquote contemporary India. And then I talk about Yuriko Chiama, about the farm workers about Race League bogs. And so they really get confused, because for them Asian American means Asia, and Asia means over there, and never here or in diaspora so unlike, I feel like when it comes to certain communities. Asian American studies still is in the mind of many folks as a perpetual foreign.

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Louie Zhao: for sure. So what do you hope to teach your students like? What do you really hope to take away from like your classes, your courses, and all that.

Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: So one of the things I tell them when it comes to ethnic studies is again the importance of storytelling. So yes, we have our readings. Yes, we have our like, our articles or journals that they're or books that you know they have to synthesize or analyze in class. But their final project actually is how do you take all that? The different theories and themes that we get in class? Write your origins or write your story. Their final is always in first person. Like I need to see. I need to see my. I need to see me in it right and still connecting to the readings. But that allows them to take the theory into practice, and how they can see themselves, not just because, oh, I read this article, and I see that I have a similar struggle. But now actually living that and saying like, I see that struggle because I went through that. So the power of I and ethnic studies, I think it's very important, do you think is a big overlap in history and ethnic studies? I think history is one part of ethnic studies. I think. This is a lot of conversations happening in various fields. Sociology has a claim watching humanities has a claim visual arts, education, studies, cultural studies, media studies, etc. But ethnic studies is not those, but are those as well like they all take from different areas inter so interdisciplinary. Like, I am not a historian. I'm actually cultural studies and media studies. So I look at ethnic studies from a particular lens. While it's important to address the history, I also look at how those history sort of manifest in film, or how those theory struggles back then sort of continue today. And how youth, development and identity politics sort of play in social media. So I've never really just stuck in the past. Also, I really wanna make sure that ethnic studies very much in the present.

And if you're looking at the future, yeah. So what does the future kind of look like for ethnic studies? What do you think it's going to go moving forward, as you know everything you've all. What do you think it's going to? I think ethnic studies? Historically, was very much on the basic, on the racialized groups like African, American, native, American, Asian, Asian, American, or Asian, Pacific Islander, and Chicano, not only Chicano, but then later on, Latino Latinx communities. I think, as ethnic studies starts to evolve me going. I mean, I've gone to various conferences where again, global, indigenous, and ethnic minorities are coming in and also class passing or spirituality are in conversation of what makes race and ethnicity in the United States. Right? If you are a Palestinian or Syrian refugee in East County alcohol, and you come to United States. You're classified under the United Nation and your first couple of years here, Asian. And then all of a sudden, you become as us, citizen, because of us. Laws, you're reclassified as Hawaii. So what does that mean when we sort of also lose and recreate race based on what the Us. Tells us. Right? So again, like more and more folks are coming in. The native American Indigenous Studies Conference this year for the first time, is going to be in Europe. It's in the Norway region with the Sami community, Sami. People are indigenous to the north, out they're not bound to a particular nation state but they're also white passing right? Or white skinned. And so what does that mean for to think about like global identities outside of us constructs of race. I think that's where I feel ethnic studies is gonna start going to really critiquing into transnational frameworks of race and ethnicity.

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Louie Zhao: How do you think you're gonna personally like influence? This change, I know, like one person can can only do so much. But how do you think you? What do you want to see?

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Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: I think that's where things like me. Being a doctoral student, I've had various publications already, presentations and speeches and conferences and events, really thinking about, like again, indigeneity from a global construct indigeneity and indigenouness as a capital. I political identity in different parts of the world, not just as an ethnic minority of me, being an indigenous person, being in these spaces already pushes makes people question about their national identities. A lot of the work that I do is already like pushing the edge for many folks who are very traditionalist when it comes to national identities as ethnic identities. So in the Philippines there's no such thing as a Philippino ethnicity. It's a national identity. There's no such thing as Chinese, you know you're you're Han, your way, your Tibetan. You're eager, your Tagalog in Philippines all these sort of our ethnic based identities. There, that doesn't get translated here and now. More folks are actually thinking about. What does it mean to be? These groups in the United States trying to find their own community and telling their own narratives outside of the Us. Racial construct.

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Louie Zhao: Yeah. So for example, you mean, like, yeah, like, because China is such a big place, even though you kind of come from.

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Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: you could speak a completely different language, completely different skin tone. But you still be considered like a Chinese. First. Yes, because Chinese. There is, citizen. It's a national identity here in the United States. It's an ethnic identity in China. You're not Chinese, you're organic or Han, you're Uyghur. You're hue. You're, you know, Chuang. Those are the different ethnic groups who are Chinese because of citizenship and abiding by contemporary borders of a nation, State share your Chinese, regardless of where you're from. Right? Yeah. So do you tell someone who's Tibetan? They're Chinese. You would not get the same reaction right? But they are Chinese citizens. So similar thing. So those are the things I feel like the new trajectories of X studies is gonna start pushing for. Why do you think there's such a big disconnect with like, why do you think we automatically just assume people are from? Because they're from a country they're just Chinese. Whether they're from like India. It comes from a very Western construct because predominantly. Everybody from France is French, everybody from England is English. Everybody from Germany is German, right? So they use that same model of national identities and a in superimpose it on communities that are very complex. India has multiple ethnic groups and linguistic groups say, you know not. All Arabs are the same in the middle, according to Middle East, right? And so you know, those national identities become ethnic identities in the United States. And then we sort of mirror that to the rest of the way, which is again very much a Western construct. So it's very oversimplified here. Yes, plus you, the Us. Would not. I don't think the Us. Is ready to have, like, you know, over 4,000 ethnic groups in their Us. Census, right? Which I mean, I don't see a problem with that necessarily. But again, it needs to classify folks the way you need to classify.

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Louie Zhao: Do you think it's because the United States is like compared to other countries, very young? It's a very young country, and it doesn't have time to really build these countries.

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Louie Zhao: Yes and no. I don't think the time of age is actually there. I think post collide being an independent nation, and it's continuous expansion of territories. I think that to say that the United States is fairly young actually doesn't address. How much United States have grown regardless of what your framework of growth looks like, whether it be negative or positive, or whether you know the historical, like racism, genocides happening by the in the hands of us military in what we considered formal United States and then Territories and Colonies elsewhere. And even today's military and economic presence. I don't think necessarily a country can grow, or all, because again, countries are always changing and to sort of that the United States is a young country

sort of like erases. That's that. It's had generations of struggle, generations of isms that have been happening here.

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Louie Zhao: Okay, for sure, for sure. That makes a lot of sense. What do you think is like a biggest difference between like United States and like other cultures in the world, and like, how and how does like ethics at these kinds of players?

Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: Well, ethics, studies is very much of Us. Politics like us social construct when it comes to race. So we are technically studies. The racialized communities in the Us. Right? Ethnic studies might not have the same relationship if you were, gonna say Canada or Australia. But also because ethnic studies came from student movement in San Francisco Bay Area again. This is where you might, you know, change and differ, depending on where you're from, like school of ethnic studies versus like the field of ethnic studies. But it was student demand right? And so what other disciplines out there in the race? So of the rest of the world that came from students saying, Why aren't we being visible? Why aren't our stories being told? Why aren't we being heard? When other fields were sort of constructed by the institution, by the Government? By sort of powers that be if you couldn't, if you want to say, and never really something that came from grassroots organized

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Louie Zhao: for sure, for sure. Is there we it's been a great interview, so far as I was just wondering if there's anything you wanted to mention about yourself about your story, as we wrap it up very soon.

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Joseph Allen Ruanto Ramirez: I don't know. I think for me again like I it's it's interesting to always come back to you. and, I think there's the the Oral History Project is very necessary and interesting on how we sort of again address the importance of storytelling and story sharing right? And also how sort of you know, being documented and recorded as historical, but doesn't mean that there's moments where, pretty sure later on today, I would have, you know, driving home, I'd be like, oh, shoot! I should have said this right, the Howard of, or what I would call the footnote memories that come that that are sort of left out in this conversation. So I think, for all history, in a very indigenous framework is even though it's documented, written down, or sort of recorded, can also change and ethnic studies, allows us to have that conversation continuously erasing memory, remembering, exaggerating, forgetting all that as part of that cities.

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Louie Zhao: Thank you, Mr. Jojo Ramirez, for doing this interview for the recent Oral History project here at Uc. San Diego. That you're

contribution is greatly appreciated, and I thank you for your time. Thank you. Thank you.