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## La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra: Sites of Public Memory

Judith F. Baca

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*La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra:*  
**Sites of Public Memory**

by Judith F. Baca

Foreseeable Futures #8  
Position Papers from

*Imagining*  
**America**  
*Artists and Scholars in Public Life*



Dear Reader,

The pages that follow contain a quarter of the images and two thirds of the words that constituted muralist Judith F. Baca's keynote address at Imagining America's 2008 national conference, *Public Engagement in a Diverse America: Layers of Place, Movements of People*. The text explores an idea that is deceptively simple: the land has memory. But look closely at the images that form the spine of the argument, photographs of a mural along a flood control channel in the San Fernando Valley. Baca created this *Great Wall of Los Angeles* with people hungry to know forgotten histories of their land and inscribe them for the future. Each of these images excavates another layer of a complex story.

Baca has been putting inclusive mural-making teams together for over three decades. In 1974, she founded the City of Los Angeles' first mural program, which produced over 400 murals and employed thousands of local participants. In 1976, she co-founded the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), which continues to promote community-based, participatory public arts projects. In 1980, she became a professor at the University of California, and since 1996, she has fully integrated her public art projects into her university teaching. Indeed, SPARC became part of UCLA, as the Cesar Chavez Digital Mural Lab; students go to SPARC, in Venice, for class. Their campus-community collaboration is the epitome of reciprocity. The university enables the most up-to-date, innovative technology, which Baca and her partners use to open up new avenues of creativity, such as the digital restoration of murals that have been vandalized.

Baca is a guiding light to many of us who seek to bring our community practice into the academy. Her images are not only aesthetically rich, but also a repository of knowledge. Indeed, Baca's murals exemplify Imagining America director emerita Julie Ellison and research director Tim Eatman's argument that higher education should "expand what counts" in assessing scholarly and creative work. This relies on a "continuum of artifacts" exemplified here by the translation of research into both words and pictorial form.

Baca's murals, like much activist art, are as much about the process of how they're made as they are about the end result. Her art, she has written, is shaped by an interactive relationship among history, people, and place that marks the dignity of hidden historical precedents, restores connections, and stimulates new relationships into the future. Her murals embody the revelation of diverse peoples' struggles for their rights and affirmation of the connections of each community to that place. Baca gives form to monuments that rise up out of neighborhoods, rather than being imposed upon them. She and the people who live there co-create places that become "sites of public memory."

*(continued on following page)*

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We urge you to share this compelling essay with faculty and staff colleagues, community partners, and students. And, please, visit SPARC's web site to see the murals in color—[www.sparcmurals.org](http://www.sparcmurals.org) and [www.judybaca.com](http://www.judybaca.com). I thank Judy Baca and the SPARC staff for allowing us to reprint these images. I also thank George Sanchez for hosting the conference at the University of Southern California and suggesting Baca for our keynote from the start. We hope you'll visit our web site, too—[www.imaginingamerica.org](http://www.imaginingamerica.org).

*Jan Cohen-Cruz*

Jan Cohen-Cruz

Director, Imagining America



**Judith F. Baca**

*Artist, Educator, Scholar/Activist,  
and Community Arts Pioneer*

One of America's leading muralists, Judy Baca has been creating public art since 1970. Powerful in size and subject matter, Baca's works bring art to where people live and work so that they can see themselves reflected in public space. In 1974, Baca founded the City of Los Angeles' first mural program, which has produced thousands of murals employing youth and local participants. In 1976, she co-founded the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), which promotes community-based, participatory public arts projects ([sparcmurals.org](http://sparcmurals.org)). For nearly three decades, Baca has also been a professor with the University of California, since 1996 serving as senior professor in UCLA's Chicano/a Studies and World Arts and Cultures Departments and overseeing the UCLA/SPARC Cesar Chavez Digital Mural Lab community partnership she founded.

# *La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra:* **Sites of Public Memory**

I want to acknowledge the sponsors of this conference for the opportunity to address you and for gathering so many practitioners in the field of community cultural development and engaged scholarship here today.

I would like to begin my talk today on engaged scholarship with a simple idea. It is a kernel that seeded my life's work and that of SPARC—The Social and Public Art Resource Center—the arts organization where I have worked for thirty-two years and that I have been in partnership with as a professor at UCLA for the last twelve years.

The idea is that the land has memory. Somehow memory is embedded in place and, as artists, scholars, and educators, learning to put our ear to the ground to listen and to understand the spirit of place is one of the most important of all creative, life-affirming activities. For me, it has been the basis for the creation of public monuments.

Of course, learning to listen is more difficult than it seems. Think of the role listening plays in your personal relationships with colleagues, partners, lovers. But if we are successful listeners, we can challenge the cycle of colonization, gentrification, global warming, and anti-historicization of our landscapes and of our minds.

What I want to speak about today is the creation of sites of public memory in a city that disappeared its indigenous, mulatto, and mestizo roots, and the subsequent creation of public monuments that recover the lost stories of indigenous and immigrant peoples. The stories I will tell you today came from the land and the people, and also recount how my students have become partners and collaborators in these endeavors.

My story begins with the river.



*Los Angeles River*

I grew up alongside of the Los Angeles River when it flowed with water.

I am an Angelita, born in the City of Angeles, or more accurately El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora La Reina de Los Angeles de Porciúncula or, as many say, “El Lay,” which is what we called it in Watts, the neighborhood where I was born. “El Lay” is a city of nations.

Despite where we have come from, with our myriad cultural practices, we commonly hold that memory is imbedded in place. It is evident in the appearance of flowers, candles, and photographs used to create the makeshift offerings and altars that appear on the streets when lives have been lost, or in our urge to mark the places where something significant has occurred.

We as humans feel the need to stand where important historical events happened to understand the event, “to feel the story.” It is common across many cultures, and in our city of nations, Los Angeles, we see evidence of it daily as we pass through shifting languages and cultural markers of our city.

The memory of this land begins with the river, as it does with many great cities around the world. Flowing through the heart of the original Pueblo, the river was the lifeblood for the people. People have lived, worked, and followed their dreams along the river. The river continues to connect us to this history. The Los Angeles River serves as a collective memory of shared space and time.

I grew up alongside of this river as it gradually turned to concrete.



*Mission Indians*

There the first Tongva villages had been built under the shade of the trees, which cooled an arid desert landscape with seasonal water.

The river expanded in the winter, contracted in the summer.

The Tongva people (the people of the earth) lived in harmony with the rising and receding waters.

The first settlements of the Spanish missions of mulattos and Mexican people followed the Tongva villages, building mission sites on or near these villages.



*Tongva woman with metate*

But in the '30s, the river lost its sacredness after a particularly bad period of flooding and it was determined by our city fathers that the river had to be tamed. The river had overflowed its allotted space and destroyed valuable real estate, by then Los Angeles' most valuable commodity.





*River being concreted*

As a child I watched as the river, the arteries of the land, turned to concrete.

I think I can trace the beginnings of my career as a political landscape painter to growing up alongside of the Los Angeles River and watching its transition.



*Concreted channel*

I remember the moment in 1976 when I stood on a bridge over a flood control channel with the US Army Corps of Engineers, looking down at the river. The forty-year-long concreting project was complete, making it the largest public works project in America.

Its completion gave rise to the New Aesthetics Recovery Division at the Army Corps of Engineers. Though short-lived, the division was set up to deal with the effects of the concreted arroyos. They were eyesores. They left dirt belts on either side of the channels, divided communities, and gave rise to many other serious consequences relating to the land.

The concreted rivers carried runoff water swiftly to the ocean, bearing pollution from city streets, affecting the Santa Monica Bay, and depriving the aquifer of water replenishment through normal ground seepage. In a sense, the concreting of the river represented the hardening of the arteries of the land. It created disease in the land.

What I saw then was this metaphor: the hundreds of miles of concrete conduits were scars in the land. They recalled the scars I had seen on a young man's body in a Los Angeles barrio. Fernando, my friend and mentee, had suffered multiple stab wounds in East Los Angeles' gang warfare. I asked him how he was feeling after the attack. "My wounds are healing," he said. "But every time I lift my shirt, I see my body as a map of violence." So together we began to design transformative tattoos in an effort to make the ugly marks into something powerful and beautiful.



*Young man—East Los Angeles*



*The tattoo on the scar*

That day, overlooking the channel, I dreamed of a tattoo on the scar where the river once ran as a metaphor for healing our city's divisions of race and class and proposed the *Great Wall of Los Angeles*. I dared not speak aloud the words that I am saying today, that the concreting of the river was an act of violence against the earth and healing was needed for both the river and the people.



*Baca at the Wall*

For twelve years, 400 young people worked on the *Wall*, recovering their histories, practicing a connection to each other across racial, class, and gender differences.

We worked to tattoo the scar where the river once ran, in the San Fernando Valley, with images that would remember our dismembered history. Lifelong connections were made there between us all.

I was a participant as well as an artist initiator. The vehicle for this was art. The result: the longest mural in the world.

It was apparent to me then, as it is today, that this decision to concrete the Los Angeles River would affect the people of the city for generations to come, both in terms of subsequent planning and development decisions and in the spiritual discord associated with the land.



*Deportations*

A relationship exists between the disappearance of the river and the people:  
If you can disappear a river how much easier is it to disappear the history of the people?

We painted 2,700 feet of mural, or one half of a mile of imagery, along the river.



*Drawing of deportations*



*Chavez Ravine*

We excavated our own family stories to recover the history left out of history books. Hundreds of artists, scholars, and members of the public contributed time, knowledge, and their own memories toward the creation of the *Great Wall*.

Today, the children of the *Great Wall* are grown and they are returning to work with another generation of *Great Wall* youth.

I am proud to announce that the *Great Wall* has been declared a site of public memory worth preservation by California's Cultural and Historical Endowment and awarded a 1.3-million-dollar grant to preserve the historic sections, now thirty years old.



*Forebearers of civil rights*

It is also important to relate the stories of those who participated in the making of the *Wall*. For example, Ernestine Jimenez was one of the 400 youth who came to the *Wall* to work. She was a fourteen-year-old gang member, pregnant, and in a juvenile detention center at that time.

Two years later, with her son, Rudy, she was a crew chief at the *Wall*.



*Ernestine, age 16*



*Ernestine, age 14*



*Ernestine, 18 years old, as a supervisor at the wall training other kids*



*Ernestine, age 44, with her grown son at the Great Wall*



### *Interpretive Bridge*

New segments of the *Wall* are being developed that draw relationships between healing of the river and the people. These designs, proposed by my UCLA students born in the '80s, are interpreting the '60s. There is a virtual rendition of their designs posted online for public response, allowing the students and the public to view their ideas on a virtual wall available on the internet.

A new interpretive Green Bridge proposed for the site is partially constructed from debris from the river. We are not only preserving its historical sections but developing four more decades of history.

Visualizing the connections between the history of the river and the history of the people, linking environmental history and social history, we at SPARC are putting another generation to work on reclaiming our history and tattooing the scar where the river once ran. The *Great Wall* will be passed on to a new generation.

The *Great Wall* taught me many things. Among the most important are that the greatest classrooms are not necessarily in schools. The river became my classroom. Actually, most of my teaching and learning has not been in classrooms, nor has it been called education, but instead, art and community transformation. I guess my own education in the LA City School System bred in me an aversion to classrooms.

The painting of the river wall led to many other SPARC projects and a model that was widely duplicated. It was centered in youth recovering their history, gaining dignity by telling their story to others in whatever language they speak, including

those that do not include words, but, instead, visual iconography or performance. The *Great Wall* led to a citywide mural program when the mayor of Los Angeles asked for the replication of the *Wall* in every neighborhood of the city. The *Neighborhood Pride: Great Walls Unlimited* program put hundreds of murals in the City of Los Angeles, employing youth and artists to transform their communities with important sites of public memory.

It was the idea of a sixteen-year-old that we should take one section of the wall and use what we learned—working across historic race and class division in our project, taking the local to the global, amplifying community relationship and building to internal relations—that led to the development of the *World Wall*. It led to the addition of a work in each country to which we brought the *World Wall*, in an ongoing narrative on international interdependence and global cooperation.



*World Wall, Gorky Park*

I want to turn to our work with the university through the formation in 1996 of the UCLA/SPARC Cesar Chavez Digital Mural Lab, a collaboration between university and community, housed at SPARC. In 1993, students led a hunger strike at UCLA, demanding, among other issues, support for a department of Chicano/a Studies. It was an extremely contentious battle and the outcome was the creation of the department with which I am now affiliated. For the first time in my years as a university professor, it became possible for me to bring my community practice together with my university teaching.

Sitting with students in a tent in an encampment they had made on UCLA's campus, I listened to students on the fourteenth day of their hunger strike talk about what they needed to prepare them for their futures. They wanted to know how to work in their own communities. They said that their university achievements were marked by how far they could move away from their barrios. They asked that I come to UCLA and teach the way I worked as an artist engaged with community.



## Witness to Los Angeles History 1996



*BIDDY MASON*



*TOYPORINA*

### *Witness to Los Angeles History 1996 student lab project*

Our first project was *Witness to LA History*. Teams of students worked to recover the histories and contributions of various groups who played an important role in the building of LA. These works consisted of digital murals composed of first source materials and designed into giant murals, printed for outdoor installations. Here you see one of the witness murals, many of which represented the students' own families, installed into California Plaza.



*Francisca*

I am certain that my notion that the land has memory came from Francisca, my grandmother. This is her story.

In her world everything had its place. Even St. Anthony, the patron saint of lost things, had his job. The family story is that she hung him with a rope upside down in the closet for five years until he returned her brother taken by the troops to fight in the revolutions in Mexico. The family was cautioned to ignore his knocks in the closet until he found and returned their loved one.

If something was taken from the land, something was returned. She prayed inaudible words asking the plant's permission when she took a cutting from the ground to replant it, and I watched her make a dried twig bloom green.

Everything had a purpose in Francisca's world. Even what I thought were weeds growing by the water fountain, she turned into exquisite vegetables with frijoles.

The miraculous was a daily occurrence.

It is from this idea that memory is somehow embedded in place and reaches across so many cultures that I derived this mountain, a conceptual model of an excavation of memory in a public artwork. It is a reminder that history does not begin when you arrive.



*Conceptual model*

If you look at the model's base, you see the inherent nature of the site. Let's say that it's Guadalupe, California, where I spent two years working with a farmer. That valley was formed by a glacier, making it one of the most fertile valleys ever in the world for growing fruits and vegetables. The topography of the site might be that it is currently agricultural fields. The spirit nature of the site is really about every living thing, everything that has passed through that landscape. At the next level are the current enactments on the site. Maybe a shopping mall is being built or a development is occurring or something is being placed over a native burial site. That is usually the point at which the artist is asked to enter. And what do we see on the site? With all of this previous knowledge, we can begin to think and interact, but not until we understand all of the layers of being.



*Las Caminantes*

My grandparents came from Mexico to La Junta, Colorado, during the Mexican Revolution. They followed the course traveled by thousands of other Mexican families, from Chihuahua to the United States, through the historic northern territories of Mexico (Texas, New Mexico, Colorado) via the “Ellis Island” of the southwest, El Paso. It is a story that has been little chronicled and one for which I was anxious to create a visual record.

My mother was born in La Junta, educated in Colorado’s segregated school system, and raised in its segregated housing in the 1920s and ’30s. The simple

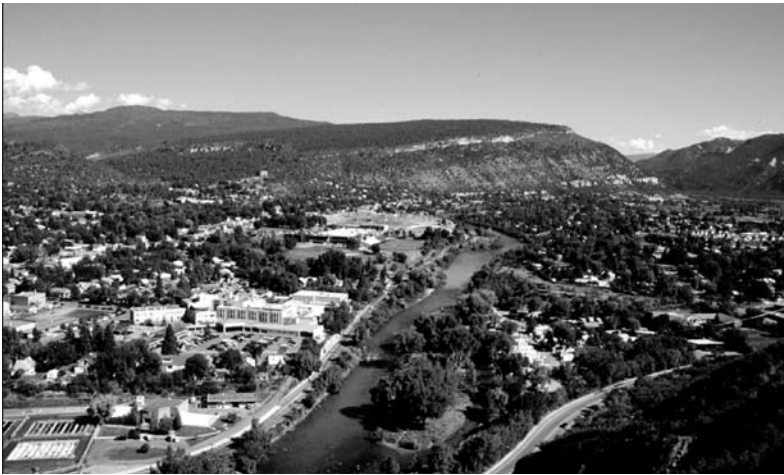


*Denver International Airport*

fact that even in death the bodies of racially different people were required to remain separate was what moved me to create an artwork that would give dignity to the stories of the mestizos and countless others who toiled in the mines, fields, and railroads of Colorado. Not only to

tell the forgotten stories of people who, like birds or water, traveled back and forth across the land freely—before there was a line that distinguished which side you were from—but to speak to our shared human condition as temporary residents of the earth.

As soon as we completed this work, we started to receive e-mails from high school kids in a place called Durango, Colorado.



*Durango*



*Durango—Mother Mountain*

All the people lived within sight of this mountain, which, depending on when they came, some people called Mother Mountain and others called Silver Mountain.



*Durango drawing*

We set up a series of workshops that replicated what we had developed at the *Great Wall*. High school students, including Anglos and Latinos, all across the differences of this region, created a series of images that are marked by little dots of color. These are some of the drawings that came in over the Internet, from throughout the Indian Reservation. We turned them

into pictographs so they look like they were carved on stone. We found that people had been photographing from the same mountain top for over 100 years. The high school kids said, we want to make our own land and memory piece. Would you paint Mother Mountain? So I painted Mother Mountain.



The photographs were collected from families' albums. You can see a Hispanic wedding, and a beautiful cowboy who is somebody's uncle. You're looking at a cycle of life into which we drop the drawings of the students. Postcards of this work are sold in the local markets. The money from the sales is turned over to keep the mural fresh. In fact, this mural probably could even be changed and added to every few years.



*Carecen: Migration of the Golden People*

This work is called *Carecen*. We are using a timeline process. High school students are working with our students from UCLA to begin to collect stories from the families. It is often the case that those who escape war in foreign countries don't tell their children all of that story. So the notion of actually reclaiming the story, through interviewing their parents, became central to this activity. Photographs were resurrected that came from family albums, which people carried across the borders as they escaped.



*Brainstorming at Carecen*

And one of them was this photograph, which everyone selected as the central figure for our new work, called "Migration of the Golden People." This is the final image. It includes very difficult images, some of the people at the moment they are being disappeared, taken by people who witnessed it. The central figure is the young woman with her child in front of the paramilitary in riot gear. All of the elements to be included have been very carefully chosen and orchestrated by members of the community.





*La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra*

The above mural is on display on the University of Southern California campus. It was the first “memoria” piece that was done with USC students. Through the middle of it is the river turning to concrete. Embedded in the land is the story of Los Angeles hammered into the back of the figure who is coming up by the land, as the border fence is just beginning to be built. Ironically, the site where this mural has been installed is the staging area for most of the workers who clean and repair USC. So they come in at night and pick up their buckets and their cleaning tools, and they do it in the presence of these figures. On the right you can see that out of the blood of the figure comes the history of much of the movements of social justice in this region.

*In closing, I offer these simple truths:*

That the land has memory.

That we must tell our stories, teach the young to tell their stories in any language they speak, including nonverbal languages such as the visual arts or dance.

That we must teach ourselves and others to hear them because it is in the very specificity of the human experience that compassion is taught and tolerance spreads like water on dry ground.

And that, as Francisca knew, the space between imagining and making real is not so large.

# Judith F. Baca Question and Answer

**Question:** I wonder if you might tell that story you told me about your grandmother.

**Judith F. Baca:** This is a classic moment. I graduated from art school in the early 1970s. At the time, the prevalent notion was that formalism was the highest form of art. I was trained as a minimalist painter. I was taught to do field color studies to create a formal dialogue that only maybe five other people could understand. I got a D in painting once for doing a figurative piece. (I did go back and address my university, and my professor was there at the commencement speech, so I had my moment.) My family had a big celebration, they did it like a baptism, when I was graduating. I was the first to graduate. As we all came together my grandmother sat and said to me in Spanish, “Look, so what is it that you do, all this is happening, what do you do?” I was very proud of this portfolio I had just submitted. I handed it to my grandmother and she started flipping through it and she was very nonjudgmental, she just looked at it. Then she looked up at me and she said, “Well what’s it for?”, and I think that was the thing that set me on this path of trying to determine what it was for, what the art was for. In a sense I spent the next years unlearning what I’d learned, trying to figure out how to make it connect to the civil rights movement that was in progress, and trying to figure out how to make art matter to people that I knew. I still like to tell people the story of taking my father along the *Great Wall*; he was the very first measure of whether I was getting it. He was a factory worker his whole life, very poorly educated, had never read a book in his whole life, except fishing books and things like that. He would go along the wall, and I would ask, okay dad, what do you think about this? And he would say, oh, I remember, that’s FDR and that’s when he made that fair housing, the rule for fair employment; yeah, that really changed things in the factory. Then I would know that I had actually made something that he could know and understand. Then I would bring my art friends along to see if they could see the references I had made to other artists, and I would look at the layers of meaning within the work to see whether it was hitting them, one layer after another. So really the point being, I had to unlearn what the university had taught me.



**Question:** I want to know if you've ever faced this: I'm not Native American, but I live and teach in North Carolina about twenty minutes away from a Cherokee reservation. Through this kind of work, very often there are certain kinds of expectations...for Cherokee, it's been a way to commercialize them, and it's been confining and restrictive. Have you had an experience like that? And how can communities like that get out of it, when their visual iconography is so fixed. Even the young people don't know how to get out of it.

**Judith F. Baca:** I think we need to make a distinction between Native American iconography becoming fixed as commodified concepts of the expectations of a larger public as to what Native American art should look like, and the fixed religious iconography of Native Americans or First Nation peoples used in ritual or religious practice of a "living culture." Artifacts of indigenous people become important as historicized versions of a people's past and often of a larger population's nostalgic view of "disappearing people." It is important for young artists to continually reinterpret their cultural iconography in light of an informed understanding of the current conditions of their community. For example, the Haidas of the Northwest and the First Nation peoples in British Columbia and north to the Queen Charlotte Island areas where the material culture has survived, is still practiced in pole carving, boat building, graphic images used for decorative purposes. Much of that imagery, making reference to certain animals and mythologies that inform a way of life, is fixed, because that actually is related to a constellation of religious practice and making meaning of the land and the people's relationship to it. That's a different thing. Actually, contemporary artists of the region have approached it in really exciting and vital ways, while not violating the tradition in images, for example, that depict the killer whale or raven as the creator figure of the Haida people. Another type of fixed image is often made because of rabid commercialization, and it's what happens when the arts simply become about commercial object making. Artists feel compelled to remake what sold. We all suffer from that as artists in a hyper-corporatized world. It becomes even a measure of success, unfortunately.

Some of our colleagues have been talking about the hyper-corporatization of the arts, which I think is an excellent way of describing our present circumstances as "creative people." Since I heard Dudley [Cocke] talk about it, I thought, this is such a wonderful way of describing what is happening, and to think the whole shift we are experiencing in the United States today, to this corporate power and control, is also happening to the arts.

One of the possibilities that technology brings in image making is that first source material that normally would go into the archives can become part of the actual image-making process. We can actually modify and interpret those images. But it is very important for people to use the actual image of the historical moment charged with all its meaning. So there are some possibilities that are really new and different as we move into this next realm of technology and the making of large-scale images. And not only have we made the work, but there's an archive behind each of the images, and those archives can be shared information with other people doing the recovery, doing stories of their own communities.

**Question:** Thank you for sharing some of your personal stories with us. A lot of people doing this work come from a place of struggle, and I think a lot of times it's hard for us to share that story, when we're out doing the work, of what our personal struggle is, so again I want to thank you for sharing that.

**Judith F. Baca:** Well thank you for that. I want to say I've spoken about this work for many years. The *Great Wall*, for example, is thirty years old, in its first segments. I only recently have begun to tell Fernando's story, the story of the central metaphor of that work. The reason I did that was because I was approaching an art world that would immediately identify me as a gang member. I became identified with the images of the people that I made. One thing that we suffer from is that if we make work for poor people, or for gang members, or community members, that the association with the people who we are making it for becomes very, very clear, and the work becomes denigrated by virtue of its audience. That is something we really need to look at and begin to address, because why is that the case? Why would you not consider this a higher art form? (applause)

And the story you wanted me to tell, about the creation of these large-scale digital images and the possibility of allowing people to actually mitigate the imagery. The piece—*La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra*—that work is drawn (this is before the invention of the lab) and like sketches, and blue lines and blue prints, locked in stone by an art committee who has reviewed it. If I changed anything in it, it would be a problem. In the work I was painting for the Central American Research and Education Center, and sponsored by them, they were engaged in the whole reclamation of the story. The night before it was to go to print, we had been laboring and laboring to get it done, and we were ready to get it out that next morning. At eleven o'clock at night my team and I were still working in the lab preparing for the print. Huge scale, a tremendous amount of data was in the com-

puter, and we were just praying it wouldn't crash, that it would get to print, that it was going to get done, when a knock came at the door. I opened it and there was a wonderful woman, the director of the Central American Research and Education Center, whose name is Angela Sombrano. Many of you from Los Angeles know her work here with immigrants. She said, "Judy, I have something I have to tell you." I said, "Okay, come in." We sat down and she handed me a little Xerox, a tattered Xerox with the image of a woman on it, and she said, "You have to hold the presses, because I had a dream, and the dream was about this person who was murdered during the war in El Salvador, she herself was very engaged as a fighter in the revolutionary forces there, she came to me in a dream, and we can't do this mural without her. So you have to put her in the mural." (laughter) "I don't care if you have to start over, you have to put her in the mural." So we sat there and tried to figure out how she would appear. She was murdered in her classroom, she was a union organizer, and she is in the mural. We found her as an apparition and she fit nicely, it was almost as if this space was made for her. When Angela saw that it was in its place, she said, "Okay, now I can sleep." So that's the degree to which people can be engaged with you in the process.

**Question:** Since we're asking you to tell stories, would you tell that story of when you were working on *America Tropical*?

**Judith F. Baca:** We were recently at Disney Hall. We produced a work called *La America Tropical*, and I was collaborating with two other professors, Jose Luis Valenzuela and Steve Loza, both from UCLA. We decided that we would try and commemorate the work of the great muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, whose work is here on Olvera Street. You can actually see the remnant of it above the Golondrina, the oldest Mexican restaurant in LA. Above it is a piece of *America Tropical*. It was censored in 1931 and the central image is a figure crucified, a mestizo worker. It's actually Siqueiros predicting essentially what is going to happen to the workers in Los Angeles, but he was told to paint a tropical America, a beautiful Bavarian beer-garden kind of piece. He sends away his workers the last night, and then he paints an odious figure of an indigenous person on the cross, and there is an American eagle above him copied from the dollar. It's very clear what he's saying, and the city fathers immediately took exception to the piece. They wanted it out and within one year it was destroyed. The Getty Museum has been reviving what little is left of that work. It will be open to the public again. It is actually a really important work, the spirit like a giant apparition in the 1970s that started to appear through the white wash and here it is,

this story. And many of us, particularly Chicano muralists, began to see that work as a call to paint on our streets. We reproduced that piece in a digital file, repainted it with my colleague Marta Ramirez who studied with Siqueiros, and we recreated the piece and put it into a film. Together with the Mexican Philharmonic and 175 performers, we produced a work on the story of *America Tropical* with visuals behind the Mexican Philharmonic in Disney Hall. What a glorious night! We called it Mexican Night at Disney. (laughter) It was interesting because none of the typical public relations methods were used. You couldn't go online to Disney Hall and buy tickets, because they didn't even list it, and yet it sold out. So it went through Mexican media, through the radio stations, and it was packed. You couldn't get tickets; people were calling me up at the last moment. It was a great lesson for us all, and we had a marvelous time. Steve Loza wrote a sonnet poem, Jose Luis brought Siqueiros to life on the stage with an actor who did a wonderful reading of his letters, and the whole night became about this piece called *America Tropical*.

**Question:** How did its research and development happen?

**Judith F. Baca:** That's a big question, isn't it! People don't give you research and development money, what you do is inch out on the ice and hope it doesn't crack. With the research facility, I'm able to actually do experimentation, with University support. The structure is there in which I can do the basic work that funds the key members of my staff and also the facility. Now the problem is, if you're going to build something, you're going to have to do a lot of research and development. Trying to get people to put money into it from the public sector in advance is difficult. But we find that it's worth it in the end because it actually takes care of a lot of problems in advance. You save yourself a lot of trouble by doing it all the way through.

**Question:** You mentioned very briefly how you responded to students who were on a hunger strike in 1993. Some of us have been having conversations about the role of the university. How are those who work there as staff or faculty thinking about these kinds of community connections, what's our role, how much power do we have? Can you talk a little bit about the hunger strike and how you were able to create this lab where this research took place? Here's this place, and hopefully it will be here for a long time to come, but how was it that—you described it as your sense of activism with your work as a teacher, professor—circumstances came together in a way to make that happen?

**Judith F. Baca:** Before that time I was teaching as a studio arts professor at UC-Irvine. I taught almost solely fundamental courses in painting and drawing and I did not ever get to do community work. Every time I tried to infuse community work, I could only do that on top of my regular load. Sometimes I still did it. I took on a health clinic in Santana and produced a series of work for it with my students, but it was not actually considered to be a part of my work. With the hunger strike I had a very key moment of negotiating power, and, as I said, this was a very contentious battle. Even though our chancellor at the time was not disposed to revive Chicano Studies, there were state legislators who were willing to withdraw money from the university, there were public officials that were very high profile who ended up in that encampment on the campus. There were many faculty who degraded and denigrated that activity and said that they thought it was abominable and that maybe Chicano Studies shouldn't exist. But nevertheless, whatever your opinion on that particular action, it brought six new professors into that department. Part of the charge of the department, named for a union organizer, was that it was completely within keeping to think of the possibility of an activist-based art approach, because of the relationship historically between artists and the movement. So, for example, the Cesar Chavez movement was very deeply fueled and energized by the spirit of the arts, in theater, music, and visual arts. So my reach to say I wanted to do this kind of work was not as difficult as it might have been. Not to say it could have happened if there hadn't been an enlightened dean, if there hadn't been a moment in time in which I could make that negotiation. I basically played hardball. I said I'm not coming unless I can have this space in the community and I want to teach in this way. I just made it impossible for them. I said I wanted a twenty-four-hour lab. Think of a University giving you a twenty-four-hour lab. I don't want any surveillance cameras and I want a place in which we can cook and stay up all night. I want a place in which we can actually do a digital lab that isn't a traditional lab, where we can move the computers around, they're not going to be stationary, and I want to be able to paint in that lab at the same time. So in other words I made the circumstances and then I said, "Well, if I can do it and I'm offered a community site, could you allow that to occur?" That's how we began to do it, and it's actually very close to the campus so my students come off campus. It's really good for them to do that. They come into a lab that is set up for this kind of teaching and they have a moment that is different, in which they are working in a collabora-

tive team. It's signaled as a different space and then they take on what I call the mission impossible. We have a community group that would like us to do a piece in twenty weeks. It's a really hard place, it's a low income housing project, one of the most violent housing projects in LA. We're going to look at the history of housing projects, we have to put six pieces up and they have only \$4,000, and that's what we do. So we're able to take those projects that we probably couldn't finance or support in any other way, and through that process my students become the people who are activating the production, they're fueling the production. They're figuring out how to stretch the little tiny dollars that they have to do it.

Thank you.



Judith F. Baca is artistic director and co-founder of the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC).

Photos courtesy of the USC Library Archive and SPARC Archive.



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*La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra at the Denver International Airport, Colorado*

“Collaborative art brings a range of people into conversations about their visions for their neighborhoods and their nations. Finding a place for those ideas in monuments that are constructed of the soil and spirit of the people is the most challenging task for public artists in this time.”

***Judith F. Baca***

*Artist, Educator, Scholar/Activist, and Community Arts Pioneer*