ML: Today is June 24th, 2019, and we are here interviewing Professor Chitra Divakaruni for the Houston Asian American American Archive. My name is Mei Leebron.
CL: My name is Christina Lee.

ML: Okay, so let’s start off with the question: where and when were you born?

CD: I was born in 1956 in Kolkata, India.

ML: Uh, what is your earliest memory?

CD: I remember sitting on my balcony, I had a sore throat, and my mother was painting my throat with medication. It was quite painful and scary.

CL: So, um, you talked just now about your mother, can you describe your family, and your childhood community?

CD: My mother and father were both from the Bengal region of India, which is where Kolkata is, and I have three brothers. My youngest brother was adopted, and um, we grew up in a pretty middle class family. Just regular, not very rich, my father had a good job. But other than that, originally our family was from a rural area, from a village. But we moved to the city of Kolkata. My parents moved, I guess for better jobs and better education for us.

ML: Uh, do you have any siblings?

CD: I have two brothers. Well, I have three brothers and an adopted brother, um, only the oldest one is alive right now.

ML: Um, are—if you’re comfortable answering, um, why is that?

CD: Uh, how did they pass away?

ML: Mhm.

CD: Um, heart attacks.

ML: Oh wow, I’m sorry. [CD: Yeah.] I’m sorry. Um, how did that affect you?

CD: It was very painful, you know, I went, yeah. Yeah. Don’t really want to talk about it.

ML: Okay. Thank you for sharing.

CD: Sure.

CL: Outside of your immediate family, did you have any connections to extended family?

CD: Yes, I was very close to my grandfather and my uncles from my mother’s side. My father was an only child, so he did not have any siblings, but I was connected to my uncles, cousins, and especially my maternal grandfather. He was the only grandfather that was alive, and we spent a lot of—many of my holidays together.

CL: Yeah, um, were there any specific holidays, and what did you guys do to celebrate the holidays together, do you have a favorite one?
CD: Well, um, my mother would send me off to his house for like a summer holidays. So I would be there for like a month. And he lived in the village, which I really, really loved because I lived in the city. But when I went to the village, it was like I could go everywhere, I could do everything, uh, there was so much nature. I think I really developed a love of nature from that.

ML: Uh, where did you attend school when you were young?

CD: I went to Loreto House in Kolkata. It was a school run by Irish nuns. Loreto is actually a famous school in India. They have branches in several of the major cities and I think my mother especially wanted me to go there because she felt an English education would be very useful to me in the world that was opening up.

ML: Um, did you discover your love of writing and literature when you were young?

CD: No. Um, I did discover my love of reading. I read a lot when I was, you know, as far back as I can remember. I was a real bookworm. My mother was always like, “Go out and play!” but I really loved reading. But writing, I only started doing that after I came to this country. Immigration made me into a writer. It gave me a whole need to write about my past and my childhood. I felt I was losing it, and I didn’t want to. My culture became very important after I moved over here. I think those things really got me writing. And immigrant life. I was very interested in immigrant life and how it affects people. So those are all themes of my writing.

CL: What were some of your favorite books that you read when you were younger?

CD: I read a lot of books in my mother tongue, which is Bengali. So I read books by Tagore, who was, um, you know, he’s world-famous but certainly in India he is one of the top writers. And he writes a lot about social conditions and women’s issues, even though he was writing a long time back, like over a hundred and—hundred years ago. But his works, I felt, were very relevant to our times. And I think that really influenced me to write about women’s issues in my own books.

ML: Um, so, what year did you, uh, come to the United States?

CD: I came to the United States in 1976, and I came with the idea of going to graduate school. But when I came here, almost immediately, um, I heard that my father lost his job. So there was no money for me to go to school, so I started working odd jobs in order to save money to go to college, and in about a year, I managed to do that.

ML: So, talking about your odd jobs, so um, we know that you worked as a babysitter, a store clerk, a laboratory assistant, and a dining hall attendant while pursuing your PhD at Berkeley. What was life like during that period of time, and are those experiences reflected in your writing?

CD: Those experiences are not directly reflected in my writing; in fact, my writing has very little that is directly autobiographical. Um, it is fiction, and I choose to keep it that way. I think that leaves my imagination open to go to all kinds of areas and it’s not restricted by my own life and what happened to me. But I think those years left a deep impression on me because I was working very hard. I was working, like, many hours, um, actually even before I came to Berkeley, so that I’d be able to come to Berkeley.
And then, as it happens, I got a scholarship so everything worked out nicely. But I think it gave me a great appreciation for the dignity of labor. Because I saw that no matter what job you do, it’s important to do it well, and no matter what job people do, they should be treated with respect. And I think that has influenced me all my life since then. And I also felt that it was very important for me to stand on my own feet rather than depending on family members, which coming from a typical Indian family, I’d always depended a lot on my own family. But moving to the U.S. really made me very independent.

CL: How did you keep in contact with your family back in India?

CD: The family that was back in India, it was really hard, mostly through letters. Because at that time, you know, no internet, no cell phones, no Whatsapp, um, you had to call, and calling was extremely expensive. So we would save our calls for, like, very special occasions, like birthdays or a big feast day or if there was an emergency. So we wrote a lot to each other. Now, some years after, right around the time I came here, my mother was trying to move the rest of the family here. And they did move. So once they moved it was much easier to keep in contact.

CL: Did they also join you in California, or…?

CD: No, they all went to wherever it was—they needed to go. We would see each other probably, you know, when there was a special family occasion we would get together.

ML: So what brought you, uh, to Houston specifically?

CD: Well, about twenty years back, my husband was offered a really good job by Shell. We were in Northern California at that time and he asked me, “What do you think?” And I said, “Ooh (?), it’s a really great opportunity for you, let’s go for it.” And I called the University of Houston and they were able to find me a position, which was really wonderful. So I started teaching fiction in the creative writing program at the University of Houston, and my husband started working for Shell.

CL: What were some of the difficulties you experienced while living in Houston, if you faced any?

CD: Yeah, well, I’d been living in California ever since graduate school, so I had so many friends. I had, like, really deep connections and deep roots in Northern California, and it was very hard to leave all those friends behind, the familiarity of the place. Just the culture of Northern California, which is different from the culture of Houston. Those were really hard things. I didn’t think they would be as hard. And also, you know, just practical things. Over there we had a good doctor, we had a good dentist, we had car mechanic [laughs]. Here we have none of those things. And that was very hard. I think I really, really missed my friends. I particularly missed my women friends because a group of us had started an organization for women in the South Asian community who had faced domestic violence. It’s called Maitri and it’s still doing very well. And we were, like, really tight knit. We had gone through a lot of things together. And when I came here, I literally knew nobody. I knew one family whom I had never met before but they were friends of friends. So I think that part was very difficult. It made me realize how much my community meant to me. But slowly, over the years we made good friends. This is a very—I’ve found Houston very friendly once I got to know some people through them, I got to know other people. People had so many interests, it was just a good place. Now, I love Houston, but it took me a good two years to find my community here.
CD: Part of it I found in the South Asian community in Houston, so once I got to know people I found that they’re a very wonderful, warm, and philanthropic community. I joined a couple of philanthropic organizations. I joined, uh, Daya, which you might know about. It’s, uh, they do the same kind of work with domestic violence, so that was very helpful to me. It gave me a purpose beyond my teaching. And of course, my teaching was wonderful, so um, at the University of Houston in the creative writing program, I found some good friends, and I love my students. They became my community as well.

ML: How have you seen the city of Houston change over time, and has your experience of Houston changed as well?

CD: Houston is always growing. I think what’s wonderful is Houston is growing and is always welcoming to new people. A lot of people constantly move to Houston, of course some move out because of mostly jobs, but—and I’ve talked to a lot of people and they say that Houston seems like a warm and friendly community. That has been my experience over the years as well. Especially if you get involved in organizations. Then you meet a lot of like-minded people with similar values, and there are so many wonderful, um, organizations. Right now I’m involved with CASA, which deals with children who have gone through broken families or they’re in situations of abuse. So, you know, we meet a lot of like-minded people who feel strongly about these problems. So, that’s part of it. Houston is also wonderful because of the arts and culture. I really love our museums. I remember when I came here, uh, one of the first things I started doing was taking my children to the museums. They were young at that time, one was in middle school, one was in elementary school but I wanted them to become used to the idea of going to the museums. So we spent a lot of happy times in [laughs] for instance the Museum of Fine Arts, and the Children’s Museum, and they loved also the Art Car museum. So those are all happy memories for me.

ML: How many children do you have?

CD: I have two sons, they are now twenty-five and twenty-seven.

ML: Uh, how did you meet your husband?

CD: I met him when I was going to college, he—here. Uh, in Ohio, actually, where I started my master’s. His sister was going to the same university as I was, so we met through her.

ML: When did you get married?

CD: I got married in 1979. And I was, you know, in graduate school, so I came back to Ohio from California and I got married, and then we moved out to California once he got a job. I went back to school and then he started looking for jobs. He found a job quite soon.

ML: What are the names of your children?

CD: The older one is called Anand, the younger one is called Abhay, and my husband’s name is Murthy.

CL: And you feel that your children have been raised kinda similarly to the way that you and your siblings were raised?
CD: No, they, they are growing up in a different time and a different country, so they have been raised, you know, with significant differences. I want them to fit into America just as much as feel comfortable with their Indian culture, so we tried to raise them with those things in mind. Certainly with Indian values and Indian customs, but we always encourage them to have friends of all different communities. And they do. I feel that’s very important and that’s an important part of the American experience, which is why I am so happy to live right here in Sugar Land because it is a very integrated community, a very integrated school district, and my children have friends from so many different communities. I feel very happy about that. And I think that started them off well because they went—both of them went to UT Austin to do their undergraduate work and they continued meeting and making friends with people from many different backgrounds.

CL: And how has being a mother changed your perspective?

CD: That’s a very complex question. I think being a mother just makes you more aware of problems in the world, problems that other children are going through, um, it makes you think more about the kinds of issues your own child will be facing, maybe it makes you a little more political for that reason, because you want to leave behind a better world for your children. I think those were some of the big changes. I think having children and also working for the domestic violence organizations made me into a fighter. I was not brought up being, um, very assertive. That was not considered a particularly good quality for women in my culture, at least in my family, I’m sure every family is different. But when I had these people who I felt depended on me, that forced me to find some strength in myself and go out there and fight for causes that I believed in or if I thought someone was being treated badly.

ML: Um, how do you choose to identify yourself? Do you identify as American, Asian-American, Indian, Indian-American?

CD: I think South Asian-American is what I think of most, also Indian-American. [ML: Mhm.] I think those—and the Indian-American parts of my identity are probably about equal. I think I’m more Indian in terms of… maybe like daily habits, and food, and clothing, cultural festivals, things like that, but in a lot of my other values I feel very American. I feel strongly, I believe strongly in a democratic government, I believe strongly in the rights of minorities, and women, and yeah. And I want my voice to be heard, I want my vote to be counted. So—

CL: Do you think, um, do you think these are values that were shaped because you moved to America or did you, do you feel like you had these values when you were in India as well?

CD: Well, remember that when I came to America I was only nineteen. So, you know, I don’t think that that many of my values were formed by that time. I left—lived a pretty sheltered life at home. I think therefore most of my values were formed after I came here, when I went to college, particularly when I was at Berkeley because as you know, Berkeley is very liberal. And so it led me to explore a lot, to learn a lot, to know about the world, things that were going on. So I think things—a lot my values were formed here. Not to say that those values aren’t important to people in India because when I talk to people in India many of my friends say exactly the same thing, that’s what they want. Um, it’s also important for me and for them in India that there should be freedom of speech, obviously as a writer I feel very strongly about that.
ML: So what does it mean to be South Asian-American, and what are some traditions or aspects of culture that remind you of Indi—India?

CD: Well I think again, to be South Asian-American is to balance some of the values that I was talking about. I think the South Asian part of me wants to pass on cultural traditions to my next generation as well. So I’ve actually taught my boys, um, quite a few Indian dishes, which they can cook, and I also feel, you know, that guys should cook as much girls do [laughs]. This is not something I was brought up with, right, so neither was my husband, but we wanted—I wanted to make that happen for the next generation, I want to pass on some of our festivals. Especially we have a Festival of the Goddess that takes place in October, and the boys have been—always, you know, we’ve always celebrated it, and the boys know about all the major festivals. They know about, um, how to do prayers. I think a part—a lot of my Indian culture is, like, religious or spiritual culture. Uh, they went to Indian Sunday school all through growing up, so they got a lot of culture, especially spiritual values from that. So that’s part of the Indian part of the South Asian part of me, I think the American part of me that I’ve tried to pass onto my boys is just to be—to respect people no matter what they do, to respect their rights, um, and to stand up if you see something wrong going on. Don’t participate in it. If possible, stand up against it.

CL: What language does your family speak at home?

CD: We speak a bunch of different languages. My mother tongue is Bengali, um, so the boys know a little bit of that. My husband comes from a different part of India, so his language is completely different, with a different alphabet. India has all these different languages, completely different. His language is Telugu, and uh, we speak a little bit of that. He and I both speak fluent Hindi, which is the national Indian language which we studied, and you know, just picked up on the streets as well in India. The boys went to school and learned some Hindi, and I don’t think they are, like, completely fluent but especially when they go to India, um, they can understand things and a few days in India and I see them understanding a lot more. So—but I always felt when we talk in English that’s our major language of communication. And I always felt that it was important for us to have a common language that we could all—our family could really communicate in. I felt communication was more important than the language in which it happens. Now the boys have read a lot of Indian literature. I’ve just, from the time they were little, I’ve exposed them to a lot of Indian literature. A lot of it translated into English, and some of it written directly in English. So I think that’s been a big and very important way for them to learn about our culture.

CL: Did you feel any cultural disconnect when you moved to the States?

CD: Yes, the first few days, first few months, the first couple of years, I think all the time that I spent in Ohio where I was doing my master’s, um I was in Dayton, Ohio, which at that time was a much smaller city than it is now. Now it is more cosmopolitan, there is an Indian temple there, there’s a, you know, significant Asian community there. But at that time there was very little. And I really, really missed my culture, I couldn’t, I couldn’t celebrate any of my festivals, I—there was no one to speak to in my language and I hadn’t realized how much I would miss that. I couldn't listen, I couldn’t hear any songs. I mean, now, in Houston, on the weekends there is South Asian radio, Indian radio, you can just turn it on, and even otherwise like because of the Internet, we are in touch with pretty much everything that’s going on in India, I feel very current now. But at that time I felt very cut off. And I remember I was very homesick. Um, what—something I didn’t realize would happen was that I would miss the weather so
much. In Ohio it was very cold and I came in just as they were having the coldest winters they had had in the last twenty years, so I lived through two of those winters. And when it was time to apply for my PhD, one of the first things I kept in mind was not Harvard, not Yale, I’m going to California. I don’t want to see snow for a long, long time [laughs]. So, but it made me realize that, the climate that you grow up in, the trees, the nature that you see, I really miss those things. When I went to California I remember after all these, you know, after several years I saw actually Indian plants, plants that grew in India, flowers that bloomed in India. It was just such a sense of homecoming. I think it was very emotional for me. And now I try to grow some of those things in my own garden, and Houston is very good that way. Everything, pretty much, that grows in India grows in Houston, so.

ML: So, you mentioned some Indian stories that your sons would read. Do you have any favorite stories?

CD: Well the—the two things that I really wanted to know: the stories of our two major epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and these are very large epics, so there are lots of stories. I mean, you could spend your whole life reading those stories. That was very important to me, because, uh, these epics are kind of at the center of our Indian culture, a lot of our values come out of these epics. A lot of the things that people refer to come out of these epics and I wanted to make sure that the boys would know that. And in fact I myself went on later to write two novels based on these epics. So they’re, like, retellings by the major women characters, so you could say they are feminist retellings of the epics to make us think differently about what went on.

CL: When you were in the process of completing your master’s, did you feel that writing about your culture kind of helped with the homesickness?

CD: Well, I think I wrote just a little bit when I was doing my master’s, I wrote just a little bit when I was doing my PhD, but it was really when I was finishing up my PhD that I decided I had to write about my culture. I think a big impetus was that my grandfather who was in India passed away at that time, and I felt a real need to preserve things and to examine things that I felt I was forgetting. Really, I was so busy with my present-day life and my present-day circumstances that I wasn’t thinking about old times much.

CL: And what did you do your PhD on?

CD: My PhD is in Renaissance literature, and the person I focused on was Christopher Marlowe, and I had a secondary field which was, uh, contemporary literature. So, I really went far away from my PhD thesis, my PhD dissertation.

ML: So, would you say Christopher Mar—Marlowe is one of the authors that have inspired your writing?

CD: In an indirect way, because he writes about very dramatic events and he writes about what people want, so his characters have great desires and goals, which sometimes lands them in difficult places, and in that way I think there is a similarity between my characters and his, but really only tangentially. I’m much more influenced by, um, twentieth-century American and world writing, especially by women. So for example, one of my big influences is Maxine Hong Kingston, I read her autobiography The Woman Warrior and that really made me want to write, like, the stories of the people around me.
ML: So as we know, authors need large stretches of uninterrupted time to write and create. How do you balance the need for long hours of solitude with the demands of being a professor, a wife, and a public figure?

CD: [laughs] It’s very difficult. I’m always struggling for time, and when I’m really in the middle of writing I’m really unsocial, and I get, you know, I just want to stay in my study and write. Um, the University has very—has been very good about my schedule so that I only go into the University a couple days a week, and then the rest of it is my writing time… and preparation time, of course. I mean, I’m very serious about my teaching, I love my students, I understand how important and what a privilege it is to teach young writers. So I want to make sure I have enough time for that, but at least half the week, if I’m—if I’m organized I can focus on my writing. A lot of times it’s difficult to write because you’re stuck or you need to do more research, so you half to stop the writing and you have to work your way through whatever is making you get stuck. So, I think that’s a big challenge. But time is always a challenge, and also as a mother, and a wife, and a community activist, these are all things that are important to me. Timing, balancing, I’m still working on that.

CL: Can you describe your creative process?

CD: It’s very hard to describe because I think it happens, the creative process happens at a subconscious level, but as far as I can talk about it, I’m always thinking of ideas, right, so, uh, whenever I get inspired by an idea I will write it down. And then it’s in the back of my mind percolating while I’m working on whatever my current project is. In some ways that’s the most exciting thing about writing, when I come across a new idea, and I’m like, “Okay, this is going to be my next book,” and then, you know, I’m kind of working on it on the side, just thinking about it, or I start reading up on it while I’m finishing up on whatever project I’m working on. I get inspired by so many things, sometimes I’ll come across something in my real life and that’ll inspire a story. I’ll read things in the news that will inspire a story. Sometimes people—I’ll attend a lecture that’ll— that’ll give me an idea. I’ll read a book. Books often give me ideas for my own books. People will say things, I’ll overhear something, it’s always, uh, amazing and surprising to me where story ideas come from. But then the most important thing is planning it, researching it, and then sitting down and writing it. And keeping on going even when you’re stuck. I think—I tell my students this also. Those are the real challenges. People who can do that will become writers. Talent is really… kind of secondary. I know a lot of talented students who did not go on to write a lot because they didn’t actually sit down and write. So, I tell my students that and I try to do that in my everyday life, to have a discipline.

ML: Do you write by hand or do you write electronically?

CD: On the computer. [ML: Okay] I write everything on the computer. Saves a lot of time. I do write by hand when I’m traveling. So, like, if I’m on an airplane or something, I’ll write. I’ll make notes mostly.

ML: What do you think about the lack, uh, or abundance of published Asian-American writers?

CD: One always wishes there would be more. In fact, one wishes there would be more multicultural literature in general. But it is a lot better than before. I think there’s a lot more accurate representation across different Asian-American cultures and a lot of [clears throat] Asian-American, like, second- or third-generation young people writing. And they write very different. Their issues are very different.
don’t wanna write all that immigrant stuff or you know, they don’t wanna write about the culture. They just wanna write stories. So, I think that’s very good. That’s, that’s opened up a whole other side. Yeah, there could always be more but we’re happy with what we have. There's also a—somewhat of a challenge because in our communities, traditionally, writing has not been seen—in our immigrant communities, writing has not been seen as the top profession to encourage your children to go into. I guess any of the arts is not, because—and I completely understand it. Immigrants came, they had to travel; they want their children to have a job that is certain, that is definite and that makes money for them. So—but I think it is changing.

**CL:** Aside from internal obstacles within multicultural communities, do you think there are also obstacles for multicultural aspiring authors in America?

**CD:** Definitely, uh, I think, again, it's getting a little better. But there's a sense that—there's a sense that, okay, if we publish one Asian-American author, we've done our job. We've done our, you know, good deed for the decade or whatever. So it's hard. It's hard for—if a big publishing house has a big name, they're not that keen to look into other names. They're not that keen to… support new authors. So really, the independent presses are the places where many people find their beginning. And this is not just Asian-American communities or South Asian communities. I think the Mexican-American community has the same experience… African-American communities, I think—the African-American communities are now doing much better perhaps because in some cases, they were there earlier, they're more established as part of the American—I don't know, the American landscape of culture and history. So, but I think things are moving in the right direction. I think it's also very important for this to happen not just in literature but in movies, because movies and TV shows, they have such an impact on the public imagination. So I'm glad to see we are seeing a little more of that.

**CL:** What year were you first published and kind of what was your reaction when you found out?

**CD:** I think the first things uh, first—one of the first things that was published was one of my stories came out in a literary magazine on the West Coast called *Zyzzyva*. And I was like, so excited. I was like, beyond excited. I went around making a real pain of myself by telling all my friends, “Look, look my stories are there!” They were like, “Really?” They were not impressed. But I think my first big break was when my first collection of stories, *Arranged Marriage*, came out. Before that, I published books of poetry, but not that many people read poetry. So it wasn't really on the public horizon. But with the publication of *Arranged Marriage*, which went on to win an American Book Award, I think that made a big difference.

**ML:** So, several of your books have been turned into movies. How involved were you in this process?

**CD:** Not particularly involved in terms of movies, because a film is a whole different kind of art. And I knew that I didn't know that much about it. So when I was asked for advice, or suggestions, I'd be happy to give it. I was happy always to talk to the director. And in fact, with *Mistress of Spices*, the director came and spent some time with me in California. And we went and looked at places to do the outdoor shooting. And we talked about the characters. So I think that was when I was most involved. And I've just decided that that's going to be how I do it. It's really no point trying to, for me, trying to control the film. The film is someone else's work. The book is my work. I've got enough going just writing my books. I also realized over the years as I've worked with different directors that the directors also don't have that
much of a say. It's really the producers, the people who are giving them money, that influence a lot of
things unless you're, like, really a director who's one of the best. But for most directors, the practical
considerations have to be taken into account.

CL: And if I’m not mistaken, you have also written an opera before?

CD: Yes [laughs] I wrote—

CL: What inspired you to do this?

CD: Well, the Houston Grand Opera contacted me and they said, “Will you write an opera?” I'm like,
“Really, you want me to?” [laughs]. They said, “Not the music, of course. But we want you to write the
libretto. We want an opera about Indians in Houston.” I said, “I will do that, because I would love for that
to be the subject of an opera.” And uh, it—it was very successful. It was called River of Light. They had
sold-out performances, every performance was sold out. And I think it really made a lot of people who
otherwise don't think about immigrant communities, perhaps, think about how Houston is a city of
immigrants. And really, probably, well you know, I want to qualify that by saying, of course Houston is a
city of immigrants. If you aren't a Native American, you are the descendant of immigrants. A lot of
people forget that. And I want people not to forget that, especially in this political time. We are all pretty
much immigrants. But in any case, I wanted people to see an Indian family. It's—it was a mixed family,
the woman was from India, the husband was from the United States, and the kind of issues they went
through as they went through their relationship and balancing different cultures. And how even when
there's love, if you're not from the same culture, there are some significant challenges that one has to kind
of try and work through.

CL: So you've written poems, you’ve written novels, you’ve written an opera, um, you’ve written a
variety of different works and genres. What are some of the differences between each kind of genre that
you’ve explored?

CD: Each one is really very different because you're trying to express in such a different way. And
because the form is so different, some are large, so sh—short, some are… multimedia. So you have to
think about the form very carefully before you write a piece. Right now I'm working on a historical novel,
and that's a completely different form, even from other novels, just the process is different. What is
considered important in each form is different. So you just have to be aware. A long form, you have to
have a different kind of pacing. Stories and poems require imagery a lot more. You express a lot
indirectly through imagery. Um, poems often will not have characters in them the way fiction does. When
I was writing the opera, it was really funny because I was talking to, uh, the person who—the composer
for the music and he said, “Remember, there's going to be music. So your lines have to be really short
because there's going to be a lot of music on both sides of that line.” And I'm like, “That's right!” I never
thought of that, that I had to make sure that there was space for the music to come in. So, each form is
different. And they're all wonderful in their own way. But I have to say, right now, I love the novel the
most. I think that's what I've been focusing on for several years. It's such a, such an important and
complicated form. There's so much you can do with it.

ML: What would you say the biggest challenge, um, is that you have faced in your career?
CD: It's hard to say. I think there have been many different things, you know, things at work where maybe the program or the department is doing things in a way that I don't think is right. And overall, our program is just wonderful. And we get along very well. And we're very good at discussing issues. But sometimes, you know, there will be issues where I feel differently, I feel something wasn't done right. And then I have to speak out. Uh, sometimes, with writing, I will have a topic and my agent will be like, “This is going to be a really tough topic to sell.” And I have to stand up and say, “No, this is what I need to write about. This issue is important to me.” So I think those are really challenging things. The whole idea of marketing and publicity is challenging to me because I would really like to just write my novel and finish and not do anything more. But the world of publishing as it is today… most authors have to do a lot of publicity. We have to go out on the road, we have to do a lot of events, we have to be on social media. So, that has been challenging, learning how to do that, trying to balance that with the rest of my life.

ML: What would you say that, uh, what would you say is the most significant change that you have noticed at work when you first started compared to now?

CD: I think uh, the environment is much more multicultural. When I was hired, I was the youngest, I was the youngest woman, and I was the only writer of color in my program. And my program is a wonderful program. It's a nationally-acclaimed program and has been for many, many years. It's—you know, often it shares the top position with another university. Sometimes it is number one. And I was just really shocked because the curriculum was so… not multi—multicultural. And when I tried to promote that, to push that, I faced a lot of resistance. That was very difficult. I also wanted to invite a lot more multicultural students into our graduate program. And I faced a significant resistance at that time, but since then things have changed. You know, the people have changed. A lot of people have retired. And we have a wonderful community of professors right now. And students, much more multicultural. I'm so glad to see that. Multicultural texts are being written, multicultural students are invited to apply. And I think it's made our program a richer, more nuanced program. We have students coming from other countries as well. And that's been wonderful.

CL: What are the effects of a homogenous community, especially in writing and academia as compared to a heterogeneous multicultural one?

CD: Well, the first thing is, if it's a homogenous community, you're just interested in certain issues. And you don't really look beyond that, because that's not your experience. And unless you're in touch with other writers who are looking at those issues, you don't necessarily think about it. Also, you don't know how, as a majority writer, how you relate to those things, how those things are also important to your life. And I think just being in a multicultural classroom, opens all of that up, because we discuss all these things. And then writers are bringing in things from their culture. And we realize, I think, um, Caucasian students in our program begin to realize that they are also writing about a particular culture. They no longer think of it as mainstream or American culture, but it is a culture among the many cultures of America. And I think that makes a big difference. And of course, we read a lot of multicultural, especially in my workshops or my seminars, we read a lot of multicultural writers. Th—there are classes I teach, which are purely multicultural. And if you come to that class, that is what you're going to read. But I always connect what we are studying to their own work. And I say, “Well, this person is trying to express this. How would you express? You know, what are some similar issues, problems, things that come out
of, you know, the culture that you're writing from?” Because everything ultimately comes out of a particular culture, and is influenced by that culture. But when a certain culture is seen as mainstream, all of that is taken for granted, no one really examines it.

CL: You are also, um, a co-founder and former president of Maitri?

CD: Correct.

CL: And if I’m not mistaken, it’s a helpline that addresses the problems that Southeastern Asian women face um, with—especially with domestic abuse. What inspired you to create this nonprofit?

CD: Well, you know, I think when it started, when I was in graduate school in Berkeley, I was involved with the Women's Center. And I came across issues of domestic violence, I came across people who were in situations of domestic violence or partner abuse. And I realized what a big problem it was. And then, uh, when I graduated, I continued volunteering for community organizations in the field of domestic violence. And I recognized that the women of our community had a very difficult time going to the mainstream shelters, they just felt extremely uncomfortable, they felt not understood, they were afraid. They couldn't continue, you know, being (?) cultural, eating what they needed to eat, especially for certain religious reasons. They were just not comfortable talking about their families’ stuff to people who were so different. So that's how we started Maitri. There was an—there was an incident in our community where a woman tried to commit suicide, because she felt so alone and she felt so hopeless. And we talked to that woman and we started Maitri soon after that, very small, very small, it did start as a helpline. And the phone line was actually in my home, we just put in an extra line. And I would monitor the phone, and different people would monitor the phone from the remote and take the calls and go, you know, meet up with these women. But now it is a very large organization. It deals with all kinds of things, domestic abuse, trafficking, uh, elder abuse, within the family. So you know, older women who are being abused by the children. It's all kinds of things. But I feel very, very, um, privileged and honored that I was part of the beginning process, I still keep in touch with them. But now because I'm in Houston, I'm very involved with Daya, which does the same thing.

CL: What are some of your responsibilities, um, being involved with Daya?

CD: I am—I was on their board for a while. Now I'm on their advisory board. So a lot of what I do is I talk to people about what Daya does. I also attend the board meetings and help to guide the organization when they ask for my input. And, you know, help raise money for them. But also talk about domestic violence in general, because there are so many taboos about it, there's so many misconceptions about it. From people asking me, “Well, if the woman is abused, why doesn't she just leave?” Which is so much more complicated. And from people saying, “Oh, that problem doesn't exist in our community.” But of course it does. It's just hidden, it's just kept hidden. So those are some of the things that I do. I also write about women's issues.

And I think that's all connected, because part of domestic violence or eradicating domestic violence is helping women to be strong so that they will not put up with the situation of becoming a victim of such behavior. So we do a lot of preventive work. That's some of my favorite things to do. We talk to young people, you know, high school-age people about creating strong positive relationships and not—and recognizing abuse very early and not putting up with it. Just avoiding situations that will lead you to being
a victim of abuse. The—oh, the other thing that I'm very interested in that Daya does, is conflict resolution. A lot of times, especially in our South Asian and Asian communities, we are not taught as—especially as women, but I guess also as men, we're not taught conflict resolution. If there's a conflict, you know, it's not okay to sit down and talk about it, and maybe say, “Yes, you are doing this. And this is not right.” I was certainly not taught how to do that. So that then, you know, things are just held inside, both for men and women, and then they explode. So I think one of the things that Maitri and Daya both do, is talk about con—conflict resolution, especially for young people, talk about conflict resolution, not only in the, um, arena of marriage, but also in the arena of dating, because that, too, is domestic violence. A lot of people live with partners. I think in our South Asian and Asian communities, often, uh, the problem is more complicated, because especially for women, they have a boyfriend, maybe he's not from the culture, they don't tell their parents about it. And now this boyfriend is mistreating them. Now, who are they going to go to? Because you understand the situation.

ML: So, would you say that your involvement with Maitri and Daya is—do you think that is your greatest or proudest accomplishment? [CD: I can't say that, I can't say that.] Or would it be your writing?

CD: I think they're all equally important. [ML: Mhm] I'm very glad I do all of them, including teaching. I think that's a big part of my life. I understand that one contributes in many ways. So trying to do all of those things are really important for me. I feel very passionate about women's issues because, you know, I've just seen a lot of women who have so much talent, who have so much intelligence, who were not given opportunities. And I just don't want that to continue happening. Definitely all over the world, but particularly in my community where I feel I have a special responsibility, perhaps. I mean, that's one of the reasons I volunteer with CASA and working with children, you know, children who are in abusive situations. Now, I don't discuss those things with them. They have counselors, but I hope just by playing or talking or reading to them, I'm just giving them… I don't know, other role models, of how to be as girls and boys.

ML: So speaking of role models, who would you say is your biggest role model?

CD: I think it—at different points in my life, and for different aspects of my life, I have different role models. One of my earliest role models is Mother Teresa. As you might know, she worked in the city of Kolkata. So when I was in college, I volunteered for her. And she really had a big influence on me, she was just an amazing woman. When she walked into the room, you could just feel that aura, that she had given her whole life to making the lives of others better. And I think from her, I learned that that's really important, trying to leave the world a better place to whatever small extent I can. I don't think I'm doing anything huge. But, uh, doing it with our heart. That's what matters. Even if we change one life for the better, and we've done it with heart and we've done it to the best of our possibilities, that’s really (?) better.

I think I was also very influenced by my mother who had a similar, um, attitude. My mother was very much into education. Um, she, in later life, she opened a free school in her village. She went back to her village to live. After living in America for some years, she decided to go back and she opened a school for children of the area. Free school for kids who otherwise their parents wouldn't have sent them to school. And she would feed them, which gave their parents and incentive to send them, so she said, “If you if you send your kids, they will get a breakfast and lunch. And if they stay after school and do homework, they will get another meal” [laughs]. So you know, she knew what worked. She was a very practical woman.
And she always pushed me to do my best. She always said, “You know, you can do—if you really want to do it, you can do it.”

And then writers, of course, I think. Uh, Asian-American writers, multicultural writers. They have been such an influence for me. I talked about Maxine Hong Kingston, but also, um, women, contemporaries, not necessarily older: Cristina Garcia, Sandra Cisneros um, Toni Morrison. They have just—Bharati Mukherjee, who came to, you know, some years before me and started writing immigrant literature. They have all been teachers for me, and therefore, and I have a lot of respect for them.

CL: In academia, did you have any mentors or people who really kind of helped you along your career?

CD: I don't think I can think of any particular mentors. I think I learned different things from different people. But I moved around even in my areas, like, I started as an academician. But later, I really wanted to become a writer and a teacher. For a while I, after I graduated from Berkeley, I chose to teach in community colleges, because I felt that that's where I could make a big difference. So I—I just had different mentors. Everywhere I went. No one in particular. I think I've learned a lot from my older colleagues in the community college system in California, where I taught. They were just so caring about their students. They taught for years and years, and these kids would come to us, they would be the first generation going to college. And uh, you know, a lot depended on what we said to them. And a lot of my students went on to four-year university and to graduate school and I feel very blessed that I was in their lives in some small extent.

ML: What are your hopes for the future in general?

CD: We won't get into politics. But uh, I hope—well, one of the things that is really bothering me right now in the United States is it seems like we're going backwards. You know, we're going back into a time against multiculturalism, against immigration, against, like, doing something for people who are maybe not as fortunate as the more rich. And I hope that that change will be reversed. I feel very sad that, uh, the Democrats and the Republicans are kind of in two different corners. And nobody's thinking about America, and what's good about America. So my hope is, we will get a good leader who will bring people together, and who will really consider, again, what America is and what makes America great. That is my hope.

In terms of our communities, I hope for, you know, more multicultural, uh, I don’t know. More multicultural… relationships. Because, yes, we are a multicultural city over here. And yes, especially if we're in good school districts that are multicultural, kids do become friends with each other. But a lot of times the parents stay in their own groups. And a lot of times we stay in our socioeconomic group, we don't feel very comfortable going outside of that. So I would love to see some more mingling. I think in California, I did see much more of that mingling. But maybe it was that time because now when I go back to California, I see a lot of the same issues. So I would like to see that. I would like to see a truly integrated society where people think of being Americans first and everything else second. Also important, but being Americans together, making a wonderful home for ourselves in this country.

I'm also very concerned about our climate change. And so I'm very into things like recycling, composting, things of that kind. I would like to see more in—I think the city of Sugar Land is doing very well, because we are allowed to recycle lots and lots of things. So, I'd like to see more of that.
ML: What advice do you have for future generations?

CD: I'm not sure I'm qualified to give much advice, but I'll tell you what I tell my kids, which is, first and most of all, be good people in the world. Make sure the world is a better place, to some extent, because you have been in it. Just be aware of, you know, other people, their needs, what they're going through, and help wherever you can. Choose a profession that you're really passionate about. We are very blessed in America, because there are so many professions that we can go into. You know, in many third-world countries, if you don't go into a certain profession, your family's going to starve, you don't have a choice. But here we have much more opportunity. So I just say to my sons, and I would say to other young people, “Think carefully about these choices that you're going to make. Don't just make them because, you know, they're there are other people are making them or someone else tells you to make them.” You know, live a—a long time back, a long, long time back, Socrates said that, he said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” So just live an examined life, make your own choices, then they'll be the right ones.

CL: If you could give yourself, um, when you were nineteen years old when you first came to the States, if you could give yourself back then any piece of advice, what would it be?

CD: I think I would say the same thing to myself [laughs]. I wasn't living a very examined life myself at that time. I would also say, “Calm down, because things have a way of working out.” But if you're not calm about it, they generally won't work out well. Because I remember in those early days, and I didn't have any money, I was like, “I came all this way to America, how am I even going to go to school, this is never going to happen.” I was in so much despair. But it all worked out. So that's what I would say to my younger self, and to a lot of young people, including my children, don't get so worked up about things. Calm down. Because when you are calm, you can begin to see openings and opportunities that you cannot see when you're all worked up. So, I guess that's my old-age advice to my own young age.

ML: [To CL] Any more questions?

CL: No, I don't. That was really good.

ML: Thank you so much.

CL: Thank you.

CD: Sure. It's my pleasure. I'm glad that you guys are doing this. It's important. It's important to recognize and record the history of a community.

ML: Yes. Thank you.

[End of Interview]