

Interviewee: Meryl Lou Cabio
Interviewers: Zoe Clark, Gordan Liu
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Transcribed by: Sonia He, Tian-Tian He
Edited by: Kelly Liao
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Background: Meryl Lou Cabio was born in the Philippines in 1985. She briefly lived in Saudi Arabia with her family and then they immigrated to the U.S. when she was nine years old. In the U.S. she worked different jobs and is currently working as a compliance specialist. Cabio is most passionate about her work as a street artist who creates murals and other artworks using various media such as spray paint. Cabio is also deeply interested in spirituality and reconnecting with her Filipino heritage and ancestors.

Setting: This interview was conducted in a Fondren Library study room in the evening on March 11, 2020. Zoe Clark and Gordan Liu interviewed Meryl Lou Cabio who shared her journey as a Filipino immigrant and artist.

Key:

MLC: Meryl Lou Cabio

ZC: Zoe Clark

GL: Gordan Liu

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off, pause

Italics: emphasis

[Brackets]: Actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

Interview transcript:

ZC: Okay. [pause] Okay. Are you just checking?

GL: Yeah, I check it every once in a while.

ZC: Yeah, just to make—it shouldn't die, but make sure like the battery is full right? Okay... So, good evening. Today is March 11th. We are interviewing Meryl Lou Cabio, um and in Fondren Library for the Houston Asian American Archive. I'm Zoe Clark.

GL: And I'm Gordan Liu.

ZC: And let's get started. So when and where were you born?

MLC: I was born in Makati, Metro Manila, in the Philippines in 19—November 1985. Yeah.

ZC: Can you tell us about your family?

MLC: Um, my family is here in the United States with me. They're my only immediate—they're my only family here in the United States. Um, I have an older—I have—I'm the oldest, my brother is couple years younger than me. And then I have a 22 year old little sister. And my dad is an architect, and my mom, um, was a stay-at-home mom for a while, but worked in—in...I don't really—she worked in the kitchen in a, like a retirement home. Yeah. Yeah.

GL: What was that like, growing up as the oldest sibling?

MLC: Um, there was a lot of pressure on me. Uh, my mom and dad had, um, expectations of, you know, the regular Asian expectations. [laughs] Uh, well for Filipinos, it would be for me to be a nurse, etcetera, um or something in engineering. Um, but being the oldest there was a lot of pressure and a lot of, um, obligation to be like, a good example for my brothers and sisters, yeah. But I wasn't. [laughs] I wasn't a good example, but they did take it as an example, like don't be like her. [laughs] And you know they're successful so that's good. But I am too so that's okay. That's good too. [laughs] [**GL:** For sure.] Yeah.

ZC: Can you tell us about a distinct childhood memory?

MLC: Um, yeah. There is a childhood memory of coming—living in Saudi Arabia. We, um, come from a Catholic culture and moving to Saudi Arabia, it was a Muslim culture. So—and they even had religious police. So we couldn't celebrate Christmas or, um, any religious holidays in the Christian faith, and we couldn't eat pork. Um, and so one memory that I have is whenever my mom brought out—brought with her Christmas lights and Christmas decorations, um, in her luggage, and then she made like a little Christmas tree as a pattern with the lights on the wall. And so that's where we would put the presents so we couldn't have Christmas trees because they didn't have any motifs or like decorations for Christmas. So my mom made a—a light tree on the wall. Yeah.

ZC: How old were you when you lived in Saudi Arabia?

MLC: Um, I was there between—I turned seven there and then we left when I was nine. Yeah, so three years.

GL: What brought you guys to Saudi Arabia?

MLC: My dad, um, was an overseas Filipino worker. So he, um, right when he got married to my mom, he—like probably a month later, he flew to Saudi Arabia to work there as, um, as an engineer slash architect. And, um, he lived there for 14 years and only came back twice a year to visit my mom. Um we grew up not really knowing my dad, but the way that they communicated back then, since long distance phone calls were really expensive, they would, they would send cassette tapes, like recordings of themselves. And that's how they would instead of like write—well, they would write letters too, but they sent cassette tapes talking about their day. So my dad heard us grow up on those voice tapes. Um, and then 14 years later, my brother was growing up, I was growing up too, and he realized like, I need to have my family with me. So he sponsored for us to go to Saudi Arabia with him, yeah.

ZC: Cool. So what was your life like in the Philippines?

MLC: Um, it was...I really enjoyed it. I mean I went to, I went to Catholic school. I went to like an all-girls school. Um, I found it to be like a really pleasing childhood and, um, you know my mom found work while my dad was working. So my aunt and my uncles like stayed with my mom just to help support her while she went to go look for work. Um, and then we took public transportation at all times. We didn't have a phone. Um, but I didn't feel deprived of anything. Like I think I had a really good childhood. I enjoyed it, and growing up in Saudi Arabia, that was like realizing the differences in culture, and just growing up with different kids too, and going to school outside of like an all-girls school was a culture shock for me. Yeah.

ZC: And then did you—so after you lived in Saudi Arabia, did you and your family moved to the US?

MLC: Oh, yes. We moved here in 1995. Um, there was a downturn in my dad's industry, which was the metal building industry, and they started laying off a lot of people. They employed like thousands of people, and whenever you get laid off, you have to go back to your country of origin. My dad didn't want to go back to the Philippines. Um, so instead he talked to his friend who moved to Canada, and his friend told him that he can, you know, apply for a visa to go to Canada, maybe he could find a job in Canada. And so my dad said okay, but he also had a close friend who was getting laid off with him and was like, he said, "I'm moving back to Texas and I'm starting my own company. I'd like for you to come work for me and we could, you know, you could be like the head of engineering and you can find whoever you want to come with us. And we—I can sponsor their visas and bring their families." So my dad chose Texas because it was, it was like a sure—it was a sure bet. Whereas if we went to Canada, he'd still be looking for a job. Yeah. Yeah.

ZC: So did you guys—did you know English when you immigrated?

MLC: Yes, but it was like choppy English, kind of proper English that people don't really talk that way. Uh, and I didn't know that it was choppy until kids were making fun of me about my English. Um, I would say words that weren't really the words that I was meaning and they would make fun of that. So, so that's when I was like, "Okay, maybe I don't know English that well." Yeah. [laughs]

ZC: And what was your experience like transitioning into like American culture?

MLC: Ooh, that's hard. It was pretty difficult because the kids are so mean! They're so mean. Um, they make fun of everything. They make fun of what we brought home from—from, like we brought to school from home, like, our lunch. And so I made my mom stop making me lunch and got like school lunch instead, which was not even that good but I didn't—to risk being made fun of, I ate like the slop versus my mom's Filipino cooking. Um and uh, and back then I was a like popular—not popular, but like, but I had friends and I was confident as a kid because, you know, I was amongst my peers who we had so much in common with. But coming to America, it's like I was like the weird kid, you know. Um, so I remember meeting the kids in fourth grade, the teacher introduced me and they—she said I was from the Philippines, and somebody asked me if that was in China. And then, [laughs] and then, I met this kid who had been there like for a year now, but he was Romanian, and he was the weird kid. Because he spoke really choppy English and I remember make—having the intention like, I don't want to be that kid. Um, so I feel like, I like forced myself to assimilate. Plus my parents kind of were like telling me to speak more English at home so I can get used to speaking English. And it was like this fear of being otherized, so that was, that was, difficult, yeah.

ZC: Did it, um—what part of Texas did you guys settle in?

MLC: Oh, we've lived here in Houston ever since. I actually lived—my—our original, where we lived in was like Northwest side of Houston in the Willowbrook area, and I just moved closer into town three years ago with my husband.

ZC: Oh and going back to when you were talking about you being a bad example for your siblings [all laugh] could you like elaborate on that?

MLC: Um, so my parents had—well, my mom really, she had this like path that she wanted for me to take. Like go to college, I dropped out of college. Like go to nursing school, I didn't go. Um, art is just a hobby, but now it's like encompassing half of my life. Um, she is, she told me to marry a Filipino man, I

married a Mexican man. Um and—and I never got my degree and worked my way up from, you know, scanning sheets and administrative assistant to like an analyst. Um so, and also as a bad example, my parents are very strict and hovered over everything we did. We couldn't have friends, and so I snuck out a lot, like couldn't have friends in the house. So I would go hang out with my friends all the time and they considered that very rebellious. So even the small things that I thought were just like normal things that kids did at my age was like rebelling against my parents. So it was considered a bad example and my brother and sister like followed the rules and I just didn't, because the rules were just too like unreasonable. Yeah.

ZC: So what was your experience like in the US? Like what is your experience like in totality like ever since you...like how has like your, how do I say it, how has Houston changed or the US changed I guess for you?

MLC: Um, I see things from a really, I feel like disconnected—I feel disconnected from my origin country. And it's not really, like I can't help it. I feel like everybody who's lived here long enough becomes Americanized. But um, I'm seeing things from a perspective of more privilege and back then I couldn't see it that way. I feel like now I have more of a leeway to explore myself as a person, and my culture, my interests and everything. Whereas like people that I know in the Philippines or my cousins or anybody, it just feels like still survival mode. Not like surviving from war or anything, but it's just so much like stress from taking two-hour commutes to and from work because it's just gridlock traffic at all times of the day, you know, the financial instability. That's something that they feel like it's a cause of stress. Um, and so now living here, I feel really privileged. I—I make art while I have a job and I get to build community with the Filipinx artists of Houston, and I have more time to myself. Yeah.

GL: How did you get your first job in America?

MLC: Mm. Illegally. [laughs] Um I really wanted a job so-so bad, but we didn't have a green card until I was 18 years old. But my parents didn't provide me with like, like ample allowance. So, you know, I was so envious of my friends who are like 14, 15, 16 getting their first job, doing things like getting paid to do things like work at the haunted houses or whatever, or like, you know, call centers. So one time my friend was like, "Hey, I got this job at this call center selling, carpet cleaning." And then she's like, "Yeah, it's like six dollars an hour," and to me that was like, oh my god that's a lot of money! And then I'm like, "But I don't have a green card or I don't have like a license to prove that I can work," and she's like, "It's okay, they pay under the table," or whatever.

So I'm like, "Okay," so I walked with her, didn't even have a car, we walked to this place and they gave me this thing. I was immediately hired. [laughs] But they gave me the sheet of paper to read to these people but at the time it was, it was a call center and everybody there was like in their 40s and 50s and I was only like 14. And everybody smokes, like they were just like smoking inside close quarters like this, and I was like selling carpet cleaner. And I came home during lunch break and my mom's like, "Where the hell have you been?" I'm like, "I'm working now mom," but she smelled me and she thought that I was like doing something much worse. And she's like, "You're not going back there, I don't know where you've been! You smell like cigarettes!" So that was my first job and I quit it the same day that I got the job. [laughs] Yeah.

ZC: Did you think—did you learn anything from your first job? [laughs]

MLC: Um, I learned that I needed like papers to work, like legitimate papers to get a good job that was actually like paying me a paycheck. Um, and then it was just like I learned that I had to be patient to get our green card, yeah.

ZC: When did you end up getting your green card?

MLC: Um, I got it at 18. And so when you get a green card, they—that means you can also get a driver's license. So I got my driver's license later than my friends, I got my job later than my friends. Um and uh, yeah, 18.

ZC: And um, so you started your job at Pei Wei and—

MLC: Oh, that was the first legitimate job. [laughs] Yeah.

ZC: Can you talk about that job?

MLC: Um that was—I was so excited about it because it was like my—like, it was \$7.50 an hour and I'm like, "Oh my god, everybody I know is getting like \$5.50!" But I also like and that's when I learned like tips, and being more like customer-friendly. Um, I had friends that work there, but I also valued more freedom on the weekends because I wanted to hang out with like my boyfriend. So I would ask for weekends off and they didn't like that so they—they let me go. But I ended up working at Wendy's afterwards.

ZC: Oh, okay. [**MLC:** Yeah.] How long did you work at Wendy's?

MLC: Um, I—retail service industry which is like very soul sucking, so that lasted three months. Um, the first day, they told me to wash the dishes but I'm only like five foot one, and the sink is like this tall and it's like this—it's so deep. And I got sick on my first day because I had to like stand on something and my—I was basically halfway submerged washing dishes. And so I took off like the next day because I was sick. [laughs] It was like my second day of the job. It was not good. [laughs]

ZC: What other jobs have you had?

MLC: Um, I worked at Target and I worked at Hollywood Video. And then my dad ended up getting me a job with him in, in an office. So that was like my foot in the door working in an office environment. Um, he wa—he was working in a metal building company and they were looking for administrative assistant who would scan contracts—like sign contracts digitally. So I, that was also very monotonous, just scanning contracts and labeling them online, putting it in folders. And then I worked my way up to be a project coordinator from there. I was, coordinating new projects from sign contracts all the way up to when the project's delivered and directed like the actual buildings. Um, I did all that for a few years, different companies, and then I got laid off in one. And I—then an accounting—oh no. It's called Account Tips, they, they called me and asked me if I was interested in working a temporary job as a, as an analyst. Um, and they found me because they liked my resume, my project management resume, and they didn't have to—they were looking for people who didn't have any experience. So—so that's how I worked my way up to where I am now.

ZC: Okay. So when did you start your position as like an office assistant?

MLC: Um, I was, it was—oh man, that's a long time ago, like probably 2008, I was like 20—20 years old I think. Yeah, 20 or 21. And um, and now I'm 34. I've worked at this company that I'm in now for six years. I'm a compliance specialist in oil and gas. Yeah.

ZC: And um, what do you like about your job, I guess? Yeah.

MLC: Um, I like—so I—it's, it works the technical part of my brain. I do a lot of like analyzation of you know pipelines that—to make sure that none—like I'm basically in pipeline safety and I analyze high consequence areas. And currently since we're transitioning to a new software, I'm looking at procedures that are going to be changing federally. But that's like not my identity. I'm like an artist and so I have to play with this weird liminal space of being the regulatory compliance specialist and like an artist. And it's like, so like separate from each other. [laughs]

ZC: And you did an interview with like *Voyage Houston*. [**MLC:** Mmm.] And you said you were working on a priestesshood?

MLC: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Okay. So [coughs] I am a priestess. I like was taken under my high priestess's wing. She is, um, she is an initiated high priestess in the green witch tradition, but also she's a professor of biology at HCC. [**ZC** laughs] So—so she's also has this weird like separation of her. Um, so she's very magical and it's—I guess not going too much into it, it's like a prac—like a religious practice, but it's more of like, discovering the part of yourself that's, that's wants to connect to your ancestors. So my priesthood is rooted in getting to know my ancestors again. Yeah.

GL: What has that journey been like for you, reconnecting with your ancestors?

MLC: It's been pretty magical. Um, I feel—and it's so weird because usually I'm a pretty logical person talking to other people about it, you know, like “Oh, yeah. It's just you know, meditation and learning about the earth and blah blah blah.” But then with connecting to my ancestors, it really does feel magical. Like things happen because I—the intention. One day I was laying in bed and I was like, I really feel like I need to get to know my ancestors. And there's really not much ancestral like connection in countries that have been colonized because all of our records and everything like that has been destroyed by people who are colonizing the country. Um, so anything that I know about my ancestors are just like feelings and I just have to trust that. But one day I had this intention to research my ancestors and research their spiritual practices, pre-colonial Philippine times. And I found this book called *Ancient Tattoos: the Ancient to Modern*, and it's about Filipino tattoos. Um, it's by Lane Wilkin and I flipped through it. I bought it, got it on Amazon and I was like, this is amazing. I want to like hopefully someday I get to meet this person or I get to fly to Vegas because that's where he's located and like have a tattoo ceremony.

Well anyways a couple years later during the Filipino Food Festival—not even a couple years later, like a year later. A friend of mine, Anthony Guevara, was like, “Hey, you like tattoos, right?” I'm like “Yeah,” and he's like, “Well, my friend is coming into town for the Filipino Food Fest, and he's looking for people to tattoo,” and I'm like, “Who is it?” And then he sent me the link to this person's book and I'm like, “Oh my god, this is crazy, what's happening?!” So we got to know each other, he tattooed me. And then like we stayed connected on Facebook and Instagram and one day he was like, “Hey, we're looking for a place to stay when we come back to Houston. Is it okay if we come stay with you? You get a free tattoo.” And I'm like—and so it was just like, how wild it was for me to have the intention to connect to my ancestors and to buy this book with this guy, and then he's like sleeping on my couch like two years later. So I'm like, this is crazy! So, so that's been my journey. [laughs] And a lot of it is still unfolding. Yeah.

ZC: So I guess, how does your like, your current like, I guess religious spiritual practices [MLC: Tie in.] tie in—well, like you know, relate to your more Catholic upbringing?

MLC: Oh, okay. Um, it...On paper, nothing. It doesn't relate. But like knowing both practices, I see a lot of connections with symbolism. Like the mother is a hu—a big symbol, archetype, that's in both you know practices. Um, and then just the—the discipline that it takes to connect deeply to a higher source. That's a big thing too. And a lot of Catholicism just feels like witchcraft to me. Because you're eating the body of Christ and drinking his blood and then hoping that cleanses you. And we do a lot of that in green witch practices where you take something and it cleanses you, and then you take a cleansing bath with special herbs, and then there's the holy water and then the oils that you anoint yourself with—it's practically magic. [laughs] So, so that's how it relates to me. But you know Catholics might not agree.

ZC: How did you I guess get involved with the green witch—is it green witch?

MLC: Yes, green witch. Okay. Yeah, so that also connects with me, one—that one day when I was like, I need to connect with my ancestors, and then I started reading about books on Shamanism, and then talk—and then the books talk about divination tools. And so I'm like, tarot cards are divination tools. So I bought a divin—like I bought tarot cards. It's been so crazy. [laughs] Because these tarot cards that I picked, like I did a three card pull, and like it was two queens and then, and then two cups, but then they were like this. Like the cups were held like this. So the three cards together, it looked like it was two queens facing each other and then they were like clinking cups together. So I took a picture of that and I posted it on Facebook and I was like, "I've been learning tarot and it's been an interesting synchronistic journey." And then somebody—a Facebook friend was like, "Oh my god, I just started learning tarot too. I started a group page, do you want to join?" And I'm like, "Okay sure." So she added me on it, hoping that I could connect with people who's like, learning about divination and pra—spiritual practices. And that's where I met my high priestess. She's—she—so she was talking about how she's a high priestess and blah blah blah. She takes—she's taken on students. And I'm like, "Oh my god, like this is what I needed," so, so my—I guess my logic was like, I want to learn and be a student of somebody in my, you know, like my ancestral spiritual practices, but I mean, I'm like in Houston, Texas. There—I'm just gonna go with the next closest thing, which is a witch [laughs] you know. Yeah.

ZC: [to GL] Any questions?

GL: Um, I guess why do you think it's important to connect with your ancestors, what does that mean to you?

MLC: Hmm. Um, I feel like it's a...like—it's like a circle, and a broken circle. If you don't know your ancestors, like—like a circle as a whole is pretty strong like, you know. It has that symbol of strength and connection, and when it's broken, like you don't know your past, then how can you move forward to the future? Um, there's also a lot of like scientific like studies about how ancestral trauma is, you know, is passed down through generations. And I feel like to heal that trauma you got to connect with the people who were first traumatized. And so...so I'm seeing the benefits of the work that I'm doing. Like I feel like you elevate your whole family line if you do the work. And it doesn't have to be all of your family. You could just solely shoulder the work and—and you'll see things improve like exponentially within your family tribe. And I think that's the importance and that's why our ancestors connected with their ancestors. That's why they venerated them, because—because like they are all around us. They guide us if we...tune ourselves into their voices, then they could provide us with the advice that we may not have the perspective to see without them. Yeah.

ZC: How do you feel like connecting with your ancestors has like affected your family?

MLC: Um, I had a really turbulent relationship with my mom growing up. I was just like, always like, we were always at each other's throats. And then connecting with my ancestors now, I feel like all of the—that animosity is like melting away. I can have a conversation with her and listen to her and she listens to me. She was actually the one that told me about like—now they like res—like are seeing the value of what I do as an artist instead of like, "You should quit this, what are you doing, you're wasting time." And I see this gradual change of them from being like, "This is silly, a silly hobby," to them actually being proud of me. And so I feel like that's also like my ancestors like sprinkling some magic on my mom. [laughs] Yeah.

ZC: So how did you become involved with the Filipinx artists of Houston?

MLC: Um, my friend Matt. He's also in the archive. He actually put a call out on Facebook after the first Lumikhâ which—which is an art showcase of Filipino artists last year. So I guess we were all very energized, like, "Oh my god, like there's so many Filipino artists in this—in this art show, like why aren't we a thing?" [laughs] So he posted a thing. Uh, he posted a status update saying like, "If—do you guys know any Filipino artists, musicians, literary artists, multidisciplinary, please send them my way." And you know people, artists and non-artists alike were like sending—tagging their Filipino friends in his comments section. Um, and then we had our first meeting last year in June at the Asia Society. So I got involved because it really felt like I was creating in a vacuum. Um, it seems like, I was like a token in some art circles. Like, you know, like oh, she's—she's you know, woman artist that's you know brown, you know, let's put her in there. Um, but now it's like, I didn't know that I needed this kind of community until the community was in—around me. And that's how I got involved, it's like I was all in.

ZC: So I guess what are you currently doing with—with the Filipinx Artists of Houston?

MLC: Um, **Tuesday, I launched our website and that was amazing.** Yesterday we went to support Grace Talusan, which is a Filipino author. She released a book and we—with her book talk at Brazos Bookstore yesterday. And right now I'm not—I'm doing a lot as a community organizer and organizing like—uh, talking about—or organizing meetings, doing the website, but also balancing it out with not completely getting lost in that and still be able to make my art. So I'm doing a community art piece. It's a bike, a painting of B Cycle that correlates to one of my murals in the Sixth Ward. Yeah.

ZC: Um, are you—how involved are you with like the Filipino community in Houston?

MLC: Um, so I used to be a lot more involved, more like a family involvement with my—because my—we're the only people in my family here in Houston or in the country. Um, so it's just me, my mom, my brother and sister, and so we've had to create a community that felt like a family, you know, like cousins and stuff. And that was through my dad's hiring process. So his—uh, the owner of the company told him he could hire anybody he wanted as long as they can help bring up the company. So my dad hired all the people that he worked with in Saudi Arabia who were really good friends and he worked with alongside. So they brought their families, and that created a small Filipino community for us, but I wasn't involved community-wise. It was just like we're hanging out as friends and family. And now I'm more involved in the, in the art, the creative part of it. I'm pretty involved in that and we have affiliates like the Filipino American National History Society. Yeah, FANHS, here in Houston, and then the Filipino Young Professionals. They're affiliates, but I'm not in the group. So I'm pretty involved in building the community we have as creatives.

ZC: Mhm. And um, how did you guys come up with a name like Filipinix Artists of Houston, using like the X?

MLC: Um, so we—so it's very—Filipino, Filipina, those are all gendered terms that came during colonization and it's like, we kind of want to change the narrative. And um, because in my language there is no her or they—you know, her, him. It's like, it's more like you or they, like there is no gendered term. And then we want to come back to those roots, but we have to start very slow. And so we have to use the X, which is basically saying like, all-encompassing, Filipinx, like men, women, young, old, you know, LGBT, heterosexual, whatever, anybody. So it's like an all-encompassing term for anybody who wants to join. Yeah.

ZC: Awesome. So when did you start making art?

MLC: Um, since I recall, making art by accident—well, I drew on my parents' walls when I was younger, and then my mom got me something like crayons and a sketchbook to draw on that instead. It was always considered a hobby with my mom. Like I would make them like little pop-up cards, I would draw them pictures and stuff. Started taking art in high school, but I wasn't really that serious about it until six years ago. Six years ago, I ended up having a—getting an art pen pal in Florida. She—I would post pictures on my Instagram of my charcoal drawings and she asked me if we wanted to trade art as a form of practice. Like, "I'm practicing too, we seem like we're on the same level, would you like to trade art?" And I said sure.

And then one day I went to go to the art store to buy art supplies for that specific art trade, and then I saw a friend who I haven't seen since high school and he was buying spray paint. So I asked him like, "Oh, what are you—what are you gonna do with that?" And he's like, "Oh, you know, I paint illegally." Like he just paints like in the, in the Bayou, and paints like characters. So I'm like, "Okay, well, I want to try that." So he came over to my house, we were painting on cardboard. And then I went to an art store that sold spray paint and they had a practice wall in the back. So I would buy spray paint from there and then practice on the wall, and you know, I improved on that. And then one day I got invited to paint a mural—local mural festival, like it was, it was just for fun, like anybody could come paint. Um, and that's how I'm like, "Oh, wow. I think I can do this." Because I got really good—I received really good feedback and people were amazed that there was a girl who paints with spray paint because it's a male-dominated scene, yeah.

ZC: Did you have any formal art training?

MLC: Um, just the high school art classes that I had. No actual—I didn't go to college for it. I wouldn't—I took art for three years in high school and I was never serious with it. I just like did the bare minimum that would get me the grade. Which I'm just like, why did I do that? I love art! But, kids.
[laughs]

ZC: Um, how did you choose your artist name?

MLC: Um, it's interesting. It'll make me sound like an alcoholic, but like Crown Royal was like the drink in my family's house. I guess it's kind of like rooted in memories of nostalgia. Um...during my dad's birthday, it would be like he was the godfather. He would stand by the door and people would come in and just gift him a bottle of Crown. And we have—we have a liquor cabinet just full of Crown Royal bottles.

Um, but I also wanted a powerful sounding name, and ambiguous, so people wouldn't think I was a girl or a guy. You know I wanted that different persona. I removed all my pictures from Facebook, because being one of the only girls in a scene that's dominated by men, people were hitting me up to collaborate and they didn't really want to collaborate. [MLC and ZC laugh] And so so I was like, I'm going to rename myself, I'm going to take off my pictures, and it worked. A lot of people thought I was a guy for the longest and it was good. Because I felt like they were kind of giving me—they weren't being very truthful and they didn't provide me with constructive criticism because I think they didn't want to get my feelings hurt cause I was a girl. But when they didn't know I was a girl, they were a lot more honest with what I needed to work on. This was critics on the Internet [laughs] Facebook. Yeah.

ZC: How would you describe your art style?

MLC: Um, illustrative, I do—I use a lot—indigenous futurism is what I want to—is what I landed on. My art is cent—my art centers indigenous peoples, specifically indigenous women. Um, I believe that they carry a lot of the world with them. Um, they're powerful beings. Um they carry—I feel like indigenous women are basically like our connection—they're closely connected with ancestral ways. Um, and just the fact that you know—there's the media and the news portrays a bleak—has a bleak portrayal of the future. Especially black and brown people, and in my Royal universe, I want the narrative to be different. I want technology and futurism to elevate communities of color and that it's—we all benefit from technology, yeah.

GL: Um what is your research process in learning about the cultures you depict?

MLC: The research process? Google a lot—most of the time. I—I'm learning a lot about my culture so I have a lot of books from relating to symbolism and mythology in the Philippines as well as cultural practices of indigenous people from different parts of the country.

And then otherwise, I will look up a lot of professional NatGeo photos of indigenous people and then if I see like what it's this—what that indigenous tribe is, I'll go look it up on Google and then find out their practices and their spiritual rites and then a lot of the things that I've noticed is like weaving is really like medicinal, medicinal—spiritually medicinal. Um, it's all done with intention, so knowing what the motifs are, like—like with some of them shows—show when the sun rises and like harvesting season like all of that is in their weaving practices, and it shows that, that's the stories that they tell. Like in the Philippines, there's motifs of people and there's a story about it—so like each line each shape tells a story, and I want to know that story, and that's part of my research process.

ZC: So I guess, I guess how have you, since you started like spray painting, how has your like I guess artist mission progressed?

MLC: Um, whenever I first started with painting, my—my mission was just to get like—I feel like I didn't have a mission. I wanted to make stuff that looked pretty. Um it didn't really have a message, but I was also just looking for my voice and then try to improve on my craft. So a lot of it was like photo-realistic charcoal drawings of famous people. And it just wan—I wanted to see like, “Oh wow, I drew this. I can draw this well.” But then it was like, kind of empty. I wanted more—I had a lot of thoughts and ideas about—about any—everything. And I always wondered how can I translate this? Um with it—like how can I translate the message without it like getting lost. So I had to really—I don't want to say dumb down, but I had to go—I had to lower whatever—So charcoal draw—charcoal hyperrealistic drawings a lot of people consider that the “expert art” but them my art is more illustrative, I'm using symbolism, there's not a lot of like—like shading. There's a lot of like mistakes in this one, but this one looks I guess to the

untrained eye, this is cool because like it looks expert while this one just looks like “cute-sy.” Or you know it’s really bright, and I like it, there’s not enough value here, or the shadows don’t look right, or whatever. This looks classically trained, this looks like you know just for fun. Um, but the one that looks a lot less classically trained has a lot more deeper meaning to it because it was my message. Yeah.

ZC: So what art styles do you work in or which mediums do you favor?

MLC: Um, I paint with acrylic. I paint with gouache, which is kind of like an in between of acrylic paint and watercolor. I use spray paint and la-latex paint. Recently, I did a pain—I did a mural with a friend from Dallas, and she only—she mostly uses, you know, house paint, and this was actually my first time using things like spray—things like spray paint with house paint. Usually, I just spray with spray paint.

ZC: And when do you work on your art?

MLC: [laughs] When do I work on my art? Um, after work. Um, I’m trying to leave—so I have a serie—a list of things I want to finish before I can make art, and I think I have to stop that. Cause I’m like, “Okay, I have to do these chores. I got to do my budget, I got to prepare for the next day, blah blah blah blah. And then I’ll make art.” But I really should make art first and then do the other things because that is my passion. But yeah, yeah after work. On the weekends.

ZC: Um, what is your unique—what is unique and personal in your artwork?

MLC: Um, I would say that my art has really bright colors. I think that when people see it, they can tell that it’s my work because of the—the contrasting neon type colors. As well as I have a lot of pieces where the people in it are wearing like futuristic goggles, and that’s a symbol I use in my art to show that the future is bright. That’s why the characters are wearing really bright regalia and really bright like shades. Um, or like another symbolism for it is like seeing like the sight, like seeing far into the horizon. Yeah.

ZC: What have been the favorite pieces you’ve created?

MLC: I have—the last commision mural that I have in the Sixth Ward is called *Bringing Home With Us*. That’s one of my favorites, and another one called *Future Tribes* because those ones were commissioned but I could do whatever I wanted. So that’s like completely rare whenever people pay money for art. It’s like, “I want my logo.” or “I want a picture of my dog.” [GL and ZC laugh] And so—so these work, I got to make whatever I want and it was really close to my heart.

ZC: Which artists are most inspiring to you?

MLC: Um, wow, that’s a good one. My husband [laughs] I’m just going to plug him in here. My husband is very inspiring; he’s an artist as well. He is multidisciplinary. He can paint on canvas, he’s an amazing expert like graffiti writer, street artist. He also break dances, so he has all these forms of art and it like inspires me to see him like put some time away to break dance for two hours, and then after that he’ll be painting something, and then after that, he’ll be on the iPad like drawing something with it. So—so that’s really inspirational for me.

And Matt Manalo, the founder of FilippinX, he inspires me because he’s a very open hearted person. Um he doesn’t care what your level of expertise is; if you consider yourself a Filipino artist, please come join our group and let us get to know you. Let’s work together as a community.

Um, I have an art-artist friend that I last painted with, her name—her art name is Killjoy. And uh, she is an amazing print artist who is Philippino but lived in Mexico for six years because her partner and her were living there— her partner's Mexican—but they've—since separated and now lives in Dallas. She's inspiring in so many ways, I love her—her view in what inspires her as an artist because she also applies mythology, Filipino mythology in her work.

Um, and then the singer Ruby Ibarra, she's a Filipino like hip-hop artist, and she's amazing, and is always elevating like brown women and Filipinos, and so I want to like emulate that for myself. Yeah.

ZC: Do you have a particular space in which you do your art?

MLC: Mmm, I have a studio that I share with three other people, one of them being my husband, but I just like painting at home. Like I will just—my living room is my art space and my living space, so my husband doesn't like it. He's a clean like person. So he'll take all of his art into our other room. But I'll just have the coffee table, it's got like water, it's got—like all the supplies. It's messy. But I watch Netflix when I paint, so—so that's my artspace.

ZC: Did your life in the Philippines have an impact on your work?

MLC: Yeah! Yeah! Most definitely! It didn't use to, but like I said, having that pull to rediscover my roots and connect with my ancestors, I feel like now it seems like I have—in order to for me to connect with them, I need to make art about them. Or about the culture. I feel that helps me connect. And it's more about like—like I'm, I'm making an offering, it's more about my heart and my passion. This is what I love to do, and this is for my ancestors. Yeah.

ZC: What subjects do you use in your art and how do you decide on what subjects to use?

MLC: Um so the, so my last mural, we—that I painted with my friend, we were looking for contrasting things. So we were like, “What can we paint so it's the opposite of each other?” So we were thinking light and dark, night and day, cold and hot, et cetera et cetera. And then she was like, “Well, what if we did something complementary? Like earth and water.” You know, and then we started talking about like how can we anthropomorphize earth and water? And we came up with the idea like, so earth gets eroded by water, but like you know people can be drowned by water. Like somebody's family can be killed by water, but that person isn't going to stop drinking water, you know what I mean. Or isn't going to stop taking a bath. That's like the necessity, but also like the immense power of water, like we need it but also it can kill us. So that was like really powerful, so we painted a woman as water and another woman who's earth, and then the woman—the water is crying over the earth, because it's destroying it, but the earth is growing because wat-water is nourishing it. Um, a lot of my subjects are indigenous aligned or symbolic of—like astrological symbols are prevalent in my art and in—mythology symbols are prevalent in my art.

ZC: Did you have a mentor figure for your artistic growth or...

MLC: Um, I would say a lot of people mentored me. They were—I am very fortunate to know artists who took the time and was patient with me when I asked them so many questions. Um, I didn't have one particular mentor. My husband, he's—since he's been painting with spray paint since he was fifteen, he helps me a lot. Like he teaches me a lot of different techniques. And then I follow different artists' Instagrams, and or I'll save like images from them because their style inspires me.

GL: What do you admire and appreciate about the history of spray paint culture?

MLC: Um, that it was like rebellious in nature and it was birthed out of like feeling disgruntled with society. It's a bunch of kids living in New York who were just communicating with each other through vandalism of trains and so they don't have the means to travel to the other group's like city, but then they'll see their work and so it's like that's how they were communicating. Um, I love that, it went from like vandalism to like fine art now and you'll see it in galleries. And then you'll see these once like vandals who were arrested for vandalism and now they're high art, and they're having these artist talks with all their tattoos in front of all these fancy smancy art collectors. Um, and—and—and it was the resilient and continuous push to take this as an art form. And I don't even think they were doing it on purpose; it was more like, "This is what we love to do, and I'm not going to stop doing it, even though you tell me to stop." And finally the public was like, "Alright, it looks great. Fine. We'll put it in a museum." [laughs]

ZC: Mh. So what was—what was your experience when you first participated in an art show or an art display?

MLC: Aw man, it was surreal. In the beginning, it was just my friends who came to the art show, like "This is cute. I'm in the area, of course I'll stop by." Um, and then so that was like, "Okay, I think I can do this." Because at first, just posting my picture—my images on Facebook was just like validation, like, "OK, like I don't suck." And then somebody—somebody put out a call to have like a mini-art show at her studio, and I'm like, "Can I join?" and she said yes. And then I met other artists there, who—and somebody bought one of my pieces, and I was blown away, that was like so much validation for me. And—and that was inspiring for me to keep going.

ZC: So how often do you participate inside of art shows?

MLC: Um, the last one that I did was in January. I've been like really focused on the community aspect of really growing FilippiniX, so I don't know if I'll be participating a lot this year, but I'm hoping to—cause like I'm make art, hoping for it to be in a solo art show, but then people'll be like, "Hey, do you want to be in an art show with me?" And then I say yes, and then that art gets sold, so then I'm back to zero. [laughs] But maybe like three or four art shows a year. And then I have my website where people buy shirts or what—or whatnot. And then there's also vending opportunities where I can sell shirts and stickers and prints, but I really like the art show aspect of art a lot.

ZC: Why do you like it?

MLC: Because I get to make new art that I want instead of like commissioned work. And that's another thing too that I haven't really been participating is that I've been getting a lot of commissioned work, which takes me away from what I really want to make as an artist. And I'm not complaining about the commission; I'm very thankful but it's like I want—I can't experiment as much, yeah.

ZC: So how do you I guess—I was reading your website, you were talking about valuing your art in terms of monetary value, and like how do you I guess how do you determine how much you want to charge or how much you should be paid?

MLC: I feel like I raise my prices every year or every time like something big happens. Like a—a—a milestone. Everytime I hit a milestone, I'm like, "I should raise my prices." [laughs] But only with my art, my shirts stay the same price, but with art, it's like I've been into a bunch of these different art shows, I'm experimenting and people are valuing that. And um, recently was in *Houston Chronicle* and this magazine right here *Art Houston*, so I'm like, "This is probably a good time to raise my prices a little

bit.” But I also want to make it affordable; I want to raise prices for—so it’s like a sliding scale. So there’s art that people can afford, and there’s art that people who are more affluent can afford. And I want my art to be for everybody, so I don’t just want to like shut it down and have it specifically for people with like thousands of dollars to spend on art. And most of my, most expensive art commissions have been community murals, so I’m happy with that because it’s for the community, there’s a story behind it, and people enjoy it widely as a whole and not just like somebody has it in their living room. Yeah.

ZC: Yeah, I guess how do you feel—I guess like how does it feel taking money for you art? I don’t know, I feel like some people might [**MLC:** Oh!] feel like conflicted about it.

MLC: Yeah, I know. I was conflicted about it for a long time because there was this weird guilt because I guess somebody told me like, “Well, why are you charging so much if you like doing it?” You know? And that’s such a difficult—that’s such a wrong way of thinking, because doctors can be passionate about taking care and healing the sick, but they get money from it. And I guess—and that was very conflicted but I found myself resenting everytime I said yes to stuff, and then not getting paid what I deserved. Um, and I really didn’t like that. It was making me not do good work. So it’s like at least if I’m not going to like the project, if you pay me, I can make it, you know. Otherwise, resentment just screws up the magic, the energy, and I don’t want to be resentful for what I like doing, so I’m going to price it as how I see is fair. And if people don’t like it, I have to—I have to—I have learned to accept that that’s okay, at least I can make the art that I like. And then somebody will buy that, for sure, at the price that I want. And I’m also, you know, thankful and filled with gratitude that I have a full time job that pays me a reasonable amount, that I can live, and can have the ability to say no to these jobs. Some people are full-time artists and also don’t know how to price their work, and they say yes to things they find resentful and they’re struggling. And so, I’m happy that I can say no as much I can until I find the one that I want, because I already have a job. Yeah.

ZC: Um how do you think artists or minority backgrounds are received as compared to artists in like Houston I guess?

MLC: Hm. It’s funny, I asked this question at the book talk yesterday. “What was something”—I asked her, “What was something you wish you knew when you first started?” And she said that she was like super—she was depressed because she went to school with all these writers and they were all good friends and most of her friends were getting their books published, and she didn’t get anything published for twenty years while whereas most of her friends are getting one published, some of them have two books out, etcetera, etcetera. But then she realized it was because they were all white. Like so she had to navigate the world of literary art a lot more—with like a hundred pound weight on her back you know where she’s like dragging a bunch of stuff whereas her peers are just like running to the finish line with ease, and the whole time she thought, “It’s because I’m a bad author.” And it’s not that; it’s that there is privileges in place and so the question you asked me about navigating as a brown artist thankfully in Houston we are incredibly diverse, there’s only—there’s so many people of color artists but it’s not, it’s just it’s a mixed bag.

You know, a lot of them are hispanic or black or whatever and there’s only two—it’s me and Dandee who are street artists, and we are both Filipino. Um and then—and I mentioned earlier I feel like we’re tokenized whenever s-somebody asks me whenever somebody wants me to be in an art show, they’ll be like, “Hey. Would you like to be in this all women art show?” And I’m like why all women? Like I’m all about feminism but I feel like we keep separating ourselves, like I’m just as good as the male artists why can’t it be—why can’t I be in an artist with men too? Um, why does it have to be like all women etcetera etcetera. So that was annoying and also there’s a term called “founder’s syndrome” where there’s people

in the art scene who refuse to pass the baton to emerging artists and they're holding onto this small group of power, I don't even know what the intention for this is, but they just don't want to share the spotlight and that's one thing that I like noticed and found just frustrating. Yeah.

ZC: So how supportive are members of the FilippiniX Artists of Houston for each other?

MLC: My gosh, it's the most supportive community I've ever been in, like incredibly supportive. We have the like support bombing, where if somebody has an art show, all of us go to it. Like yesterday, twenty people showed up to the book talk, all within the Filippinix art community, and she's not even from here. She's just a Filipino author who's doing a book tour in the United States, she's from Boston. And we're like, we got to support, buy her book. For the Lumikhâ(?) showcase, a lot of people came. Um, somebody has an—an open mic or a small performance at a coffeehouse, like ten of us will be there. Um, it's just like, it's like we ask and it's just like showing up—we call it a “brown-out.” [laughs] And we're just showing up for each other, because nobody's going to do it but us. Um and just to show that like we're not just in this community to like elevate ourselves individually as artists but to help each other evaluate each other too.

GL: How committed are you to staying in Houston? Do you have any thoughts about exploring other art scenes?

MLC: Um, art scenes, I would love to have art shows in different parts of the country, in different parts of the world. Um, but I feel like very rooted in Houston. Um I don't—c-c-cause of my family and the diversity here. I've been to so many different parts of the country and went to different parts of the world, and it seems like every time I come back to Houston, there's like, “Ah, okay I'm back.” Like this is it. Like you—I've been to Denver and Utah, like all beautiful places with amazing nature trails and national parks, but it's like I'm not going to be living in a national park, I'm going to be living amongst a community. And I don't want to feel like I'm an other whenever I'm in those communities, and I never felt that way anywhere else. Living in Houston, I feel very like, okay, I'm amongst my people even though all none of them—like my neighbors are black, my—my down the street neighbor he's Hispanic. My cubicle neighbor is Native American, and next to her is Nigerian, so it's like, it's like, oh, okay, it feels good because we're all like, like there. Um, the only other place that I felt like that was when we were in New Zealand because that is also an international hub. There were like lots of Filipinos there, surprisingly, and Asian people from Asian countries that were staying there too. Um yeah.

ZC: Were you just visiting New Zealand or like...

MLC: We were there for our honeymoon. [**ZC:** Oh okay!] Yeah, yeah. We visited New Zealand for our honeymoon and noticed like a lot of the Filipinos worked the service industry like here in Houston, a lot—you'll see a lot of Hispanic people from different parts of Latin America, like Salvadorian, Ecuadorian, Mexico etcetera etcetera, but there in New Zealand, it was like Malaysia, Philippines, Japan, China, so that was like their Latin America, you know [laughs] like the service people. Um, and so it felt like a similar vibe. Yeah.

ZC: And what do you think you'll be doing in the next five to ten years?

MLC: Oh my gosh. I journal about this. Like what does my future self look like. Um I'm hoping to have like a committed, a devoted art space specifically for our, for Filippinix Artists of Houston. Like there is the Length(?) of Lengue Houston, which is a community center in the East end for Latin—Latino American artists and whatnot. And I want something like that for Filipinos. Um you know where we can

have meetings and have workshops etcetera. I'm hoping that I'm a lot more established as an artist. Um probably have a few solo art shows I would hope. Um and and I want a container home like I want to build a container home, so hopefully I'll have that [laughs].

ZC: So what do you like to do outside of work and art?

MLC: Um what do I like to do? Okay, so I love reading, I ha—lot of self development, where you know meditation, like learning ways to hack my brain and be a lot more disciplined. Um, I walk my dogs. We, before the coronavirus stuff, we would travel. Traveling was big, I love hiking. And exploring parts of the city that I don't, I've never been to. I love going to eat at new spots. Yeah.

ZC: What part of Houston do you live in now?

MLC: I live in Sunnyside. [**ZC:** Oh okay.] Yeah, yeah. Southside of Houston. I'm like ten minutes from U of H. Yeah.

ZC: Yeah, so how do you manage work life balance?

MLC: Um I have very delicate schedule whi—and an organization app that I use, Trello, where it sinks with my calendar. I'm very like strict on adding things to my calendar, checking it as much as possible, updating it, moving things around. And all of this like triggers flow state, so I also quit Facebook for Lent, so there's like no distractions. And now I'm seeing the benefits based on my—my, you know, like progress in all of my projects and the facts that I'm like super focused on it. So I'm probably not going to get back on as much as I was, but maybe limit myself to an hour of Facebook a day. And then, and then balancing myself with self care. Back then I used to just make art all the time and work all the time, but didn't do anything for myself. Like I didn't exercise or I didn't eat healthy and then I didn't meditate and it was like stressing me out. So making time for that.

ZC: Have you ever travelled back to the Philippines or...?

MLC: Yeah, we travelled in 2017, and that's actually—not 2018, and that's actually when my husband proposed to me when we were in the Philippines. Yeah.

ZC: Can you tell us more about I guess how you met your husband?

MLC: Art! [**ZC** laughs] Um so I the...

ZC: Okay, so tell us how you met your husband.

MLC: Oh so it was from—I was talking earlier about how I first got into painting my very first mural local mural festival, that's how I met him. I was painting a mural, and he was standing behind me observing, and then he was like, "You know if you did this, it would look better. Blah blah blah." And I'm just like, like looked at him, who is this guy, why is he telling me what to do, I don't know him. And I'm like, "Okay, yeah, thanks." And so he—he walked around and I after I finished my mural, I started walking around the area, and I saw a mural, and it was a portrait, and it looked like him. And it turned out he was the artist, I'm like, "Oh my gosh, that guy was an artist, he knew what he was talking about. [**GL** laughs] He wasn't just some guy telling me what to do to be a jer-jerk." [**ZC** laughs] So that's how I met him. Um I started going to more art shows and I started seeing him there more like different art shows and we started talking. Um yeah yeah that's how we met.

ZC: Cool. And these are the last couple of questions. What do you think of like role—the role of artists in society?

MLC: Um, Nina Simone said that the role of artists is to reflect the time so I think I'm reflecting the times not in like popular news but how we're feeling as a collective. Like the rise of indigeneity, decolonization, reindiginization, like empowering women through like their sacred right of—the sacred archetype of a woman. The mother, the provider, the—the creative energy yeah. And a lot of symbolism. I know that a lot of people are getting back into spirituality, but not the traditional sense, but like reconnecting with their ancestors or taking a different path like Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism, witchcraft etcetera. Um and I want to reflect those times, like I think we're in this paradigm shift.

GL: Our last question is how do you want to be remembered?

MLC: Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh, that's a good question. [laughs] I want to be remembered as somebody who's always like searching for new information, things that inspire. I want to be remembered as that person who is open and inviting and I want to be remembered as a person whose art was very healing and touching in their journey. But that is a really deep question that I'm probably going to be pondering on for years because I—it's like wow that's good. And this is an archive, so someday I'll die and this archive will be here, and I just babbled a bunch so. I don't know. I don't know. I want to be rememberable, by my actions and how I treated everybody. Hopefully I'm treating everybody well. And um, I want my work to stand the test of time like my art, I want that to be like something that you could probably see in art books somewhere describing this era of art. I don't know what it is, new contemporary? Um, I want to be in an art book. [laughs] Yeah.

ZC: I actually have one more question for you, I guess what motivated you to sort of explore like indigenous culture and like—like going against colo-colonization and colonialism?

MLC: Um, it didn't feel right anymore that had that pull from my ancestors and then like seeing all these things in the media about like women mur—like missing and murdered indigenous women and I feel like there's something in me that like there's like a pull every time that I—I hear about these things. And then just like looking up the cultures and who I, who I am. It was always like—like my mom, my mom's side of the family is one ethnic tribe or ethnic group and so is my dad. They speak different languages that I can't understand but we're all Filipino. Like that is like interesting to me. Oh! And I also took my 23(?) and me DNA test. It turns out I am not not Sp—like I assumed for the longest time I had his Spaniard blood, because we were colonized for 333 years, but when I got my DNA test back, it said mostly Asian/Native American. And so that was like, “Okay, you weren't colonized, so that means what happened to your family?” Did they go into hiding? Did they escape? Did they fight? And that was like more of like a pull to discover how did we not become Spaniards at one point? Yeah.

ZC: Yeah.

MLC: [laughs] Yeah! Awesome.

ZC: Cool, I think that's a good way to end the interview [MLC: Yay!] Thank you for your time.

MLC: Yeah, thank you! That was an adventure. [laughs] To our things. [all laugh]

[Interview ends]