



José-Antonio Orosco Oral History Interview, June 25, 2015

Title

“Teaching and Practicing Engaged Philosophy at OSU”

Date

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Location

Centro Cultural César Chávez, Oregon State University.

Summary

In the interview, Orosco discusses his family background, upbringing in New Mexico, early interest in philosophy, and undergraduate experience at Reed College. He then describes his years as a graduate student at UC-Riverside, his stint living in Texas, his experiences as a union organizer and student activist, and the ways in which these experiences informed his perspective on "engaged philosophy."

Orosco then reflects on his arrival at OSU in 2001, his initial impressions of the community and university, and the state of the Philosophy and Religion department at that time. He likewise notes the impact that his predecessor, Manuel Pacheco, had made on OSU's Philosophy students, his involvement with OSU's Ethnic Studies program, and his definition of political philosophy. From there, Orosco outlines his co-founding of the Anarres Project for Alternative Futures and his continuing interests as an activist within academia.

Orosco next details the history of his association with the Peace Studies program at OSU, discusses his research on César Chávez, and shares his perspective on the importance and the impact of Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/Chicana de Aztlan. As the session nears its end, Orosco shares his thoughts on changes in the environment for the Latino community at OSU, provides an overview of his participation in multicultural programming, and recalls his appearances on *Philosophy Talk*. The interview concludes with Orosco's broader thoughts on his years of association with Oregon State University.

Interviewee

José-Antonio Orosco

Interviewer

Janice Dilg

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/orosco/>

Transcript

Janice Dilg: Great, if you wouldn't mind introducing yourself, please.

José-Antonio Orosco: My name is José-Antonio Orosco, I am an associate professor of philosophy in the School of History, Philosophy and Religion here at OSU.

JD: And my name is Janice Dilg, I'm one of the oral historians for the OSU Sesquicentennial Oral History Project, today is June 25th, 2015 and we are recording this interview at the Centro Cultural César Chávez. And welcome, thank you for taking the time to do your interview with us.

JAO: Thank you for inviting me.

JD: If you would just give a brief background of where you're from and a little of your early life history.

JAO: I was born in Quito, Ecuador. My mother was an exchange student in Ecuador for many years and fell in love with the place and lived there for a while. But she came back when I was rather young, and I grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico. So, I consider, actually, Albuquerque to be my spiritual home, in some sense. And so, I grew up in New Mexico and I came to the Pacific Northwest in 1988 to go to college in Portland, Oregon at Reed College, and I fell in love with the Northwest at that point. I lived here for about five years, graduated from Reed and then lived and Portland for about a year, working at an independent bookseller, and also I was a social services manager for a catholic church in northwest Portland for about a year before I decided to go to graduate school in southern California.

JD: So, you're on campus, you're teaching and having community with young students who are deciding what they want to do with their lives and embracing new ideas, do you remember what your thoughts were about college and whether you would go or where you would go when you were at this age?

JAO: I'm constantly amazed at how well-directed and self-motivated my students are. I can't imagine myself being so mature and so just driven in the way that they are most of the time. So, I'm astounded by some of my students here at OSU. But I knew that I wanted to go to a college that focused on the liberal arts in particular, and so I found Reed College. In particular, I enjoyed their focus on western civilization. I knew immediately that I wanted to be a philosophy major. So, I can remember from fifth grade being given a copy of Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy*, which was, at the time in the 1950s or so, this book was a trade paperback and it was published quite widely, and it was meant to sort of popularize the history of western philosophy.

And I got a used copy somewhere and I just started reading it, and I remember being in fifth grade and just falling in love with these great ideas and these thinkers thinking about the nature of reality and what was real and how we could live our lives to be better people. And so, from a very early age I was really entranced with these ideas about people spending time thinking about these kinds of thoughts. And I wanted to find a place where that was sort of a part of the dedicated field of study. And so, I knew immediately going into Reed that that's what I wanted to do. I found out that it was a lot harder than I had been led to believe earlier on, and so I struggled the first couple years, trying to get my grasp of philosophy, but I continued to just enjoy what I was doing. And I started to study political philosophy at that particular time, and that brought together different aspects of things I love, which were thinking about politics and the nature of justice and my love of philosophy. And so, I started to do political philosophy, my last two years of Reed College, and I've been doing it ever since.

JD: And so, I looked at one panel that you were on, and you made, I think, a joke about that when you finished Reed College you weren't really qualified to do anything. When did you decide okay, if I get advanced degrees, or that I can actually be involved in philosophy as part of my life, as my work as well.

JAO: Yeah, I think Reed College, if anyone doesn't know about this, is a very small liberal arts college in Portland, and my experience was that it's essentially boot camp for graduate school. Graduate school was significantly less challenging than my undergraduate experience at Reed was. And so, I was given quite a lot of academic training at Reed. And so, when I graduated there, I did sort of joke I didn't really know what else to do with myself other than to continue going on. And I sort of wanted to do that anyways, because I wanted to get into teaching, I wanted to get into reading and

researching even more. And so—but teaching was something that I wanted to get into quite a bit more, and so I decided that graduate school was probably where I wanted to go. I wanted to be able to continue talking with young people about some of the ideas that I had learned to share, some of the interests that I had.

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JD: So, your mother had been an exchange student; was going to college part of your family culture? Or what were your expectations and thoughts around that?

JAO: My mother was the first to go to college in the family, and so our family had spent a long time in New Mexico, and so we're not exactly sure when the family came over from Mexico and to New Mexico, so we have probably about three or four generations in New Mexico. And so, this is something, actually, that sort of separates from a lot of my students here at OSU, because many of them are much more recent immigrants, and so Mexican immigration to Oregon is older than a lot of people think, but many of the communities that are here are usually first or second generation. I, in fact, had a graduate student who was trying to locate third generations in Oregon and he had a very hard time trying to find people who had more than three generations here in Oregon.

And so, my family, though, has about three or four generations. In fact, we don't even know where we came from in Mexico any longer. But my mother was the first to go to college, and when I was growing up she always encouraged me to think about going to school. She was an avid reader, still is today. She encouraged me to have books all over the house, even if they were really trashy, awful books. Some of my favorite times were just going to the grocery store to wander around the trade book section just finding all these awful, awful sort of horror and science fiction novels, but she would encourage whatever I wanted to read. And so, we always had a culture of books around the house. And one of the things that studies have been, that show that one of the best sort of indicators for academic success for children of color, in particular, is encouraging them to have books and to read and doing that, and that's definitely something my mother did, is she encouraged that idea.

And so, there was no other sort of question in my mind when I was growing up, that high school was not going to be it for me. We were going to continue on. And I was lucky at the time to go to a public school that encouraged that in young people of color, and so there was a lot of preparation for college, even amongst folks who weren't, for instance, in advanced placement classes and so forth, encouragement to continue thinking about going to school. So, I think I was very lucky to have sort of institutional support as well, to think about going on.

JD: Well, and Albuquerque and New Mexico, in general, is much more diverse culturally, but it's nice to hear that there was that encouragement for all students.

JAO: Yeah, I think that it was unique. I mean, I think about some of my friends who I graduated with and some of them are now writers, doctors, lawyers, ministers, people—professionals in many different ways, and so there was a unique moment in which many of us were sort of encouraged to continue on thinking about professional careers in life, and so it was a very, it was an encouraging time period. Things are much harder of course, now, I think, in Albuquerque for many folks of color, from what I've heard, and so things are different, so I consider myself very lucky.

JD: So, I think it's a universal question after college, or even advanced degrees, kind of what—can you talk a little about making that transition from graduating to post college, early career?

JAO: I spent a lot of time, actually, in graduate school, probably not as long as some, but I was in graduate school for about eight years. I finished my coursework at the University of California, Riverside, and began my dissertation, and at that point I moved to Austin, Texas to live with my then girlfriend at the time. And I started teaching at a couple of universities there and also became a union organizer at the time, in Texas, which is very difficult, because Texas is a non-union state, and so we faced a lot of sort of uphill battles. But in that sense, it sort of solidified a lot of work for me.

I enjoyed teaching, particularly in community college, because I found that many of the students there were folks who wanted to be there and were interested in the work that they were doing. We were reading ancient Greek philosophy about the nature of happiness, and I would have folks who were working nine to five jobs who were coming back to school at

the age of forty and fifty, had life experience, and they were very excited. They just ate the stuff up. They wanted to know about what great people had thought about, in terms of thinking about what makes life meaningful.

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And I was also, like I said, a union organizer, which meant talking to different folks about their working conditions, learning about what dignified work means in a place, or in a state in which it's very difficult for working people to be able to get a voice. And so, it brought together a lot of interests of mine together, and that continued on, on the importance of mass movements, the importance of social movements, the importance of unions, in particular, but also thinking about, you know, for me philosophy has always been something that it's not esoteric or abstract, but it's really about trying to figure out how to think about what makes life meaningful and dignified and worthwhile. And so, I think that my experience in Austin was one of these in which I was able to be able to bring these kinds of experiences together in ways that I think have continued to motivate me now, when I teach in my classes here.

So, I teach philosophy from a perspective that we like to call here at OSU "engaged philosophy." We don't necessarily think of our work as something that's meant simply for other academics or simply for career path choices and so forth, but many of my colleagues and I are interested in that question about how do we use philosophical wisdom to try to improve human lives and to try to help us to be able to understand our communities better.

JD: Well, and I think one example that I ran across, perhaps, of that is the course that you and Tony Vogt taught, at least in 2012, or perhaps more than that, about the Occupy Wall Street Movement. Would that be an example of what you're describing?

JAO: Yeah, absolutely.

JD: And how did that particular topic come about?

JAO: So, that class took place in the winter of 2012. Here in Corvallis, in fall of 2011, there was an offshoot of the Occupy Wall Street Movement that took place. Portland, of course, had a very large encampment that existed for several months in some of the downtown parking areas, and so Eugene, nearby, also had an encampment. And so, here in Corvallis there was not an encampment, but there were many, many people who came together in the spirit of Occupy, wanting to talk about political reforms. And I started attending some of these meetings and seeing what people were talking about, and there was something going on in there that I had not seen before in any kinds of social movements that I had been participating in since I was in high school. These were people who were coming together who perhaps had never been activists before in their lives, had never sort of circulated amongst the different kinds of groups that are active in Corvallis, and were eager to get involved in making a difference in their community.

And so, it struck me that something different was going on here that we had not seen before politically in the United States, and so I sort of wanted to find out more about what was going on. And so, my colleague Tony Vogt, who is in Philosophy and Sociology, and I started talking about the roots of Occupy and where this movement was coming from and why it was attractive to some people. And we started reading and thinking about this together and we decided to put together a course in the winter of 2012 when the Occupy movement was still going on nationwide, even though some of the camps had been disrupted already by this point. And so, we wanted to look at the, what we call the philosophical foundations of it and what were sort of the, kind of the political, philosophical ideas that were circulating amongst the different Occupy encampments and what people were talking about and what ideas encapsulated what was going on in that form of activism.

And so, we did that class, which was quite popular, too. I think we had quite a few folks for a special topics class that was just put together, and some students who were involved in the movements and people who just wanted to find out more about it, and it was one of the best experiences, I think, that I've had teaching here at OSU, just because everyone was just really feeling that this was of the moment, and we were on the wave of trying to figure out something very deep about what was going on in American society.

JD: You mentioned, in talking, about being an activist since you were in high school. What were the issues or mentors or events that sparked you to activism at an early age, at least for some people?

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JAO: I often say that I have to blame my mother for a lot of this, but my mother was not necessarily an activist, but she was involved with groups and with people in Ecuador who were politically active, and so when she would tell me about her time there, she would tell me about the different folks who were working with indigenous communities or political circumstances in Latin America. And it always gave me an interest in that region, in the politics of what was going on there. And so, I, as a high school student in the mid to the late eighties, this was the time period in which the United States was actively involved in Central America and was sending arms to Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala.

And so I was paying attention to all of those issues and trying to find out more about what was going on, and in Albuquerque there was an active chapter of the Central American Solidarity Movement, of folks who were sending brigades to, particularly, Nicaragua, to help with the Sandinista revolution there, building wells and clinics and schools and so forth. So, I started attending meetings of the Solidarity Movement and finding out what was going on there and trying to figure out ways that I could try to support them. And I had a really interesting experience. I had—I remember my junior year, I think in high school, I was in a class, a U.S. history class, and my teacher, Dr. Betty Wong, suggested that I look at the history of American student activism in the 1960s.

And I started reading about the Columbia student takeover in 1968 by the Students for a Democratic Society, and I started reading about what was going on there and I wrote a book report about it, and it just really struck me about how students, it seemed, in the 1960s, were so involved in their campuses, and I was looking around and thinking why isn't stuff going on now, considering the stuff that's going on in Central America, and the fact that the World Court has ruled that the U.S. has done illegal mining of Nicaragua's harbors and all these kinds of things. It just seemed to me that there was a lot of sort of political apathy.

And so, I started attending some of these meetings to see how I could get involved. And during one of these meetings, someone walked in to—it was announced as a speaker, and they said his name, and the name struck me, and I was like I've heard that name before, who is that? And so, he started talking and I started looking at him, and he was older, grayer, a little bit heavier, and then they said his name again, Mark Rudd. And so, I realized that the person who was talking there was Mark Rudd, who was one of the leaders of the Students for a Democratic Society who had been the one who had been behind the takeover of Columbia University in 1968, who later went on to become one of the Weather Underground leaders, and had gone underground for many, many years, and then later surfaced in New Mexico. And so, he, at the time, was a teacher, I believe at a community college there in Albuquerque, after he had been cleared of the charges against him, because of the involvement with the Weathermen.

And so, I went up to him and I introduced myself and told him that I just wrote a book report about him, and I invited him to come to my high school to talk about student activism, and that started a many-decade friendship that I had with Mark Rudd, who has been someone who has talked to me, mentored me for many, many years about student activism and what was involved with their thinking, as young people, that turned them to engage in essentially violent, leftwing terrorism in the United States. And so, that was a period of his life that he deeply regrets. He thinks that he was misled by his own sort of theoretical musings about the need for social change and social transformation. But his friendship with me was very, very key, just making me think about the nature of violence and nonviolence and what it takes to engage in social change today.

And so, we're still very good friends and he's still actively involved in politics in New Mexico. But it was that experience, I think, as a young person, meeting someone like that who I had read about, who I quite admired and realized that he was still around and thinking about his own youth that made me think that social change is a long-term process, and something that is a process in which deep reflection is always really important, and to think about. And so, I think that was a really sort of formative experience for me. I think it made me think about wanting to be a social activist.

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JD: And then, were there particular movements that you remained active in throughout your college years and your graduate years?

JAO: I think that I became most active in graduate school. At the time, I helped to organize graduate students, graduate student workers for the United Auto Workers. And so, in the middle 1990s, the UAW had tried to organize graduate student teaching assistants and researchers numbering in the tens of thousands through the University of California system for quite some time, and they decided to open up an organizing effort in the University of California Riverside, where I was going to graduate school.

And so, I remember attending a meeting with about ten people who were interested, perhaps, in the idea of unionizing the graduate students, and we all looked around and we thought we have to organize hundreds of people in a very, very short time. And we looked around and there was only, like I said, about ten of us around the table. But it was an amazing experience for me, because within eight weeks, we had managed to create an organization of six hundred members who were on the verge of voting to strike and call the administration's bluff on our need to have attention paid to our working conditions. And so, we—that experience was one of countless meetings, of being involved in door-to-door organizing and just talking to people on their front doors, telling, asking them about what their conditions were as workers, as students.

And so, that was a really, really important experience for me, in terms of thinking about what grassroots social change is all about. And like I said, I later went on to live in Austin, Texas, and I became an organizer for the American Federation of Teachers, trying to unionize the contingent faculty at ACC, Austin Community College. And so, there we didn't have formal bargaining rights, because of state law, but we were able to be an advocacy chapter and to sort of speak for thousands of employees throughout the entire system. And I worked on political campaigns, on phone banking, and so I got a real sense of trying to be involved actively in the sort of political process of union work in Texas, which is quite intense. It's something I haven't actually ever seen in a lot of places.

But union organizing and that kind of advocacy continues on today. I'm currently the president of the American Association of University Professors here at OSU, which is an advocacy group with a chapter that's tied to the National AAUP, and we seek to try to be a voice for faculty and for academic freedom nationwide.

JD: So, you've had all these various experiences, academic, real-life, community organizing, labor organizing, what drew you to Oregon State University in 2001?

JAO: I was just finishing my dissertation around that time period and starting to go in the job market, and I received a letter of an invitation from the Philosophy department here. They were looking for someone to do political philosophy—they teach political philosophy here—but in particular they were looking for someone who would be able to teach Latin American and Latino thought, particularly Mexican American thought. There was a faculty member who had tragically just passed away about a year before by the name of Manuel Pacheco, and he was quite a force here at OSU. He was involved not only in helping to establish the Centro here, but also was involved in the work getting Ethnic Studies as a department status here at OSU. And so, he was just quite a presence, had nurtured numerous students and broadened different kinds of faculty and was considered quite a potent force here on campus. And he passed away, unfortunately, from brain cancer.

And so, he had only passed away I think about a year or so before they decided to start searching, but they wanted someone to continue this role, particularly someone who did political philosophy and Latin American thought, which was exactly what I wanted to do. And so, I immediately jumped at the chance.

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And so, I was living in Texas in Austin, which is a, Austin's a beautiful place, but it's in the middle of Texas. Not that there's anything wrong with Texas in general, I suppose, but growing up in New Mexico, I'd always been told to stay out of Texas as much as possible. So, when the job opportunity opened up here in Oregon again, I wanted to get back to the west coast, and so it seemed like a perfect fit, so I applied and had a great interview here. It seemed like a really exciting place. and what drew me in particular was the idea that so many of the students here are first generation college students coming from many, many different kinds of backgrounds, a lot of working class folk, a lot of particularly Latino students who are first in their families to go to school. And so, I wanted to continue working with some of those populations.

JD: And what were some of your first impressions of the campus and the college when you came for your interview, or when you first had joined the faculty?

JAO: I was, you know, I was familiar with Oregon, having lived here just a few years prior to coming back here, and so—but I had never, except I think on just two or three occasions, ever left Portland. So, Reed is a very sort of interesting kind of silo; we're a bubble in the middle of southeast Portland, so most of the time people sort of know Portland but they don't know anything else around Oregon. So, I never knew anything outside of Oregon. I never knew that Corvallis existed, and so this was an interesting opportunity to learn more about Oregon. And I have to admit it was a bit of a learning curve for me to live here in Corvallis for a few years, because this was the smallest place I had ever lived in my life. And I never lived in a small city of this size, and getting used to that was difficult, I think, originally. And particularly because I had just come from very, very ethnically and cultural diverse places in southern California and in Texas, previously. And so, coming here was difficult.

But I think that I started to come to appreciate that Corvallis has many, many different kinds of social and cultural amenities that are quite great for a city of its size. And because of the university here, there's a lot of diversity that you might not find in any other places. And so, I've lived in much bigger cities in which there was quite a lot less, civically, going on than there is in Corvallis, in fact. So, when students tell me—I'll frequently have students from bigger cities like Los Angeles telling me about how they hate living here, and I always have to tell them to sort of pay attention a little bit more to what is good about this place. And so, I've come to appreciate quite a lot about what's going on and the kind of role that OSU plays, particularly in making this to be a very sort of diverse and energetic place.

JD: And I guess I would ask a similar question about your first impressions of the Philosophy department, or I'm not sure when they all merged and became History, Philosophy and Religion.

JAO: So, when I first came here, we were the Philosophy department, and they had had a merger, I think about maybe fifteen or so years before, Philosophy and Religion. And so, the department that I moved into at the time was Philosophy with some Religious Studies faculty that had been saved from termination at the time the state had decided to terminate the Religious Studies program.

And so, it was a very exciting program, because like I said, we had originally, you know, before coming in here, the faculty had always thought of themselves as being actively involved in the life of the community and the life of the university. My favorite impression, I think, of the Philosophy department here at OSU was when I was being interviewed and I was given a tour of campus by Kathleen Moore, the noted environmental writer and philosopher, and she was taking me around campus, and so she said that in her opinion the Philosophy department, its mission was to attempt to try to be the moral conscience of the university, and I just liked the way that she framed that, in thinking about as being a department who takes philosophy seriously and wants to try to use the skills and the tools of philosophy to think about places and where people are actually situated, and thinking about what it means to improve people's lives. And so, that sort of struck me, that the Philosophy department wanted to be involved in the life of the university and the life of the community and to think about those kinds of problems, to be engaged in the world. And so, I think that that was a big selling point for me, in terms of coming to the OSU Philosophy department.

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JD: And you mentioned that you were following the shoes of someone quite revered and who had been doing very important and engaging work. I guess kind of a two-part question is was that intimidating, and how out of that start did you sort of form your own goals and ideas about where you wanted to take the position, your position here as well as part of the Philosophy department and the university community?

JAO: Right. Well, it's a good question. I think yeah, when I first came here I met many of Manuel's students and they were always telling me about what an enormous presence he was for them and how he mentored them and how he helped them to think of their lives in entirely different ways. And this was, for a young person, this was entirely intimidating to think that I was stepping into his position. And so, I constantly had to tell people that I was not attempting to try to replace him, but I was trying to keep open the space that he had opened up here and to try to work with Latino students as much as possible, to introduce them to philosophical ideas and to think about how philosophy could be used as a way for them to think about alternatives in their lives.

And so, I tried to work closely with the Ethnic Studies department, the program that he helped create, and to make sure that I kept ties open with them to work with them as much as possible, and with their faculty. And I came to do what I

did. Some of the emphasis in Philosophy, Latin American Philosophy that I do were not the kinds of things he did, and so he was very interested particularly in indigenous Mayan thought, which is something that I had never really known very much about, and so I didn't presume to sort of try to replace everything that he did, but I chose my own sort of themes that I wanted to do in Latin American thought.

So that was, it was intimidating, but I found that people were very understanding, that they didn't expect me to be Manuel Pacheco, but I wanted to make sure to honor him, and so in the first few years that I was here, I was helped to create the Manuel Pacheco Award in the Philosophy department. So, the Philosophy department offers various awards at the end of the year to its students. And so, I decided that it would be a good idea to propose an award in his name. And so, every year now since about 2003 or so, I believe, the Philosophy department gives an award at the end of the year to a student in our program who excels in the study and the practice of diversity and social justice. So, I wanted to make sure that his name lives on as a legacy in the department as someone that had important values that the Philosophy department continues to try to explore and to put forward.

JD: And you've mentioned that he was part of the group that started the Ethnic Studies program, which was still relatively new by the time that you came. What were some of the issues that created the Ethnic Studies program, and sort of where was it when you came, and how did you help move it forward and become more integrated into the university?

JAO: Yeah, the program started, I believe, in 1996, I believe was the first year that it got underway here under the leadership of Dr. Erlinda Gonzalez-Berry, from New Mexico as well. And so, from what I understood of the time period, it was a period in which there was a lot of intense student activism, and that was being encouraged by Manuel Pacheco. Students were rallying and marching on campus to try to get Ethnic Studies here on campus. There was a movement to rename this center that used to be the Hispanic Student Union, I believe, and students were actively involved in getting it to honor César Chávez. And so, many of Manuel's students were behind a lot of these efforts, and they were not ashamed of being confrontational.

I met several students who were quite proud of what they did at the time, which was to burn President Risser in effigy in front of the administration, which is a kind of activism I can't even imagine going on here at OSU anymore, but they actually built that effigy, they took it down to Kerr Administration and they burned it in front of the hall and insisted that there needed to be Chicano Latino Studies here at OSU. And so, there were attempts then to try to get it formulized and regularized, and so the program came out of that kind of sense of student urgency, and that's a long legacy of Ethnic Studies. I mean, Critical Ethnic Studies comes out of student activism in San Francisco in the Bay area as well, and so that's something that I think the Ethnic Studies department has followed suit here at OSU.

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And under Erlinda's leadership in the first few years, it was a program really trying to get really good people and many different areas, focusing on African American, Asian American, Indian Studies and so forth. And so, I think she built the framework for a very strong program here. And I taught for a few years while they were searching for a permanent person to teach Chicano Studies. I taught in the program half time in Philosophy and in Ethnic Studies, and that was a marvelous experience, to have that kind of interaction with Latino students. I don't often have as many Latino students in my courses in philosophy as I'd like to. Students, in general though, but in particular Latino students, I think are very practically-oriented and are not always sure about studying things in the humanities, but something, particularly in philosophy, can be something that's useful and going to pay off in the end.

But those few years that I was teaching in Ethnic Studies, I was able to transition folks from my classes back and forth with one another, encourage many of them to either minor in Philosophy or to major in Philosophy or at least take a few Philosophy courses with me. And so, I really enjoyed the time that I had in Ethnic Studies to expose people to a different kind of discipline. So, many of the folks who are in Ethnic Studies now come either from a social science or a literature background, and that's pretty typical for a lot of ethnic studies. It's very rare to have someone who is in philosophy, for instance, be in a critical ethnic studies program.

JD: That raises interesting questions, and also, as you're talking about the ethnicity or race of students that are in certain disciplines and whether they intersect or not, and just, I'm not sure if I know how to frame this question, but how—

you're approach, whether teaching philosophy or one of your Ethnic Studies courses, the different reactions, I guess, from students who are from white culture or—I'm not sure if that's a good way to ask that question, but...

JAO: I think all of the disciplines have different kinds of emphases and attract different kinds of students, both in terms of motivation and in attitudes and so forth. So for instance, I've sat in on political science courses, and there's a certain kind of student that takes political science classes. They're very, very driven, they're very, very eager and very frequently very well-dressed and poised. You can see the budding politician in many of them and they're very eager to try to do things. Frequently my philosophy students are sort of outsiders and disdain the mainstream and they're kind of rebels, and so there's distinct kinds of types that attach themselves, I think, to different fields of study.

But this past term, spring 2015, I was invited again to teach another course in the Ethnic Studies department, and it was a contemporary Latino Studies course. And so, I wanted to try to be able to build a course in such a way so that it would introduce students to some Latino philosophy as well. And so, what I did with this course in particular is I began by looking at what's called by sociologists "the Latino threat narrative," the idea that there's a certain kind of way of talking through kind of discourse and political and academic circles that Latinos pose a particular kind of threat to the stability and well-being of the United States. And so, we looked at various authors who taught about this and why Latinos may be a dangerous presence in the United States and what that possibly might mean.

And what I told them is that we're going to study this for a couple of weeks, we're going to look and try to understand this viewpoint. And then what we're going to do for the next seven or so weeks is to study the history and the background and the culture of three different Latina communities in the United States; Mexican Americans, Cubans and Puerto Ricans, to try to understand the basic question: why are there so many Latinos in the United States, and secondly are they indeed a threat to the wellbeing and stability of the United States. And so, part of that was looking at the history of why these three different Latino communities have any relationship whatsoever to the United States. So, we looked at the war of—the Mexican American War of 1846 to 1848, we looked at the Cuban and Puerto Rican annexations in 1898 and started to—many people started to see that the United States has had these relationships to Latin America in a way that they never sort of studied before. And they didn't know some of these perspectives on history from a different kind of viewpoint.

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So for instance, we looked at the idea of the Alamo and who were the folks at the Alamo in that particular battle, and we looked at the mainstream perspective that this was a battle for liberty and freedom of Americans from Mexican tyranny. And then we started to look to see who exactly was there, and these were people that had left the United States, had renounced their American citizenship and become Mexican citizens and decided that they didn't want to obey the laws of Mexico, particularly having to do with the abolition of slavery, and when they decided that they didn't want to obey the law, the Mexican government sent its military to quell them, in their quite, sort of reasonable perspective, and that was the battle. And some of my students had never heard of this, and so they were quite astounded.

And so, we sort of tried to understand what history might mean from the Latino perspective, and I ended the course by saying "okay, now that we've looked at these different sort of questions about history, we've read some Latino intellectuals and some philosophers from these communities, now," I said, "you have some tools and resources to be able to answer the question whether or not Latinos are indeed a threat to the wellbeing and stability of the United States." And so, that was their final paper, was to try to respond. And so, I told them, you know, "I'm not saying that you have to disagree with it, but the question is, what is your response, what's your best sort of well-reasoned response to this particular perspective? What would you say and how would you look at the history of these three different groups?"

And so my approach, I think, to Latino Studies and to Philosophy is to try to do sort of an integrated study of history and intellectual thought so that people can have, like I said, the tools and resources and the skills to be able to respond to the kinds of perspectives that are quite active in political circles today, and political discourse today, and so that they can have the resources to be able to make informed civic opinions about where they stand on issues.

JD: You've referred to political philosophy as something you studied, something you liked to teach and engage in, can you give your definition of what that is?

JAO: Political philosophy I think is the study of the concepts that are involved in the political world. So, it's a philosophical reflection on ideas of power, of justice and what those ideas mean and how they are instantiated, how they are instituted, how they get played out in the political field. And so, I tend to think of philosophy as kind of sustained reflection of any form of human life. And so, there's philosophy in many different kinds of things. There's a philosophy of sport, and you might ask well, what is the philosophy of sport? And so, if you think about what sports are, what games are, there's all sorts of questions about what constitutes, for instance, a game.

When I start sometimes, when we're talking introduction to philosophy, it's like well, you know, I tell them "there's something called Philosophy of Sport, what do you think that is?" And they sort of hem and haw and they don't really know, and I say "well, answer this question: what exactly is a game? What's the definition of a game? What's the point of a game?" and they say "well, it's some sort of competition." So, I ask them "well, are there games that are perhaps not competitive? Would they not be games?" And so, we sort of ask these kinds of questions and go back and forth, and so I tell them, you know, frequently we end up at a point where they go "I don't even know what a game is anymore," and I say "that's the point at which philosophy has worked, is when you don't know what you think you knew beforehand."

And so, I think that philosophy is really just kind of a way of studying the activities that human beings engage in on a regular basis and sort of looking at what we take for granted in those practices. So, political philosophy is this field of study looking at our political world and ideas of power and so forth, and engaging that sort of way of dealing with our collective life. The thing that I think of as different, though, from the way, for instance, that political scientists might study politics is something like this: I think the political scientists are interested in trying to create theories to explain why people do what they do, and so you study things like voting behavior or preferences and things like this; why people actually do the things they do in the political world. And I think that political philosophy is interested in this question, about why do people do what they do, but there's another dimension to it, which is the question of "and could things be different? What's a better world."

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And I think that this is something that attracts me to political philosophy, is it's not just concerned about trying to describe why things happen, but asking the question is this the best that it could possibly be? What could be better? And this opens up a kind of a future perspective, a future orientation. And this actually kind of aligns with my other interest in things like science fiction, questions about imagining new and bigger and different kinds of possibilities. So, as a child I really fell in love with *Star Trek*. I used to watch the original series over and over and over again as a kid, and so it deeply impacted, I think, a lot of the ways in which I think about the world. And so, I can geek out lots with my friends about, you know, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, which is better. But I think that there's a kind of an important kind of attitude in science fiction, which is this attitude of thinking about the future possibilities and trying to imagine what life might be like if we changed a few things here and there; what would human beings be like.

And I tend to think that philosophy is actually like science fiction. It's about thinking and about our lives and our world that we live in and trying to imagine what might be different, because after all, I mean one of the early formative texts of political philosophy is Plato's *Republic*. Plato is trying to imagine what would an ideal society look like where there is ideal justice, and the entire dialogue is a discussion about trying to define those terms and then trying to imagine what that world would look like, and it's a world that looks very unlike the world that the Greeks actually lived in at the time. And so, I think there's a certain kind of imaginative component to thinking about political philosophy in that way.

JD: Well, and one of the projects that you've worked, again I believe with Tony Vogt—

JAO: That's right.

JD: The Anarres Project. This would perhaps be a good segue way into why that's important and why the two of you started that project and continue that project.

JAO: This was a project that we started about two years ago, and Anarres is the name of a fictional world in Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed*. So, Ursula is an Oregon writer, has lived here for many, many years, not originally from here, she was born in California but has made Oregon her home for decades now. And *The Dispossessed* is this story of a revolutionary movement on a planet called Urras and there's a civil war that goes on between roughly these kinds of

capitalist, dominating forces and a small, radical anarchist movement. And they come to a sort of standstill and the offer is given to the anarchists that they leave the planet and move to the moon of Urras, which is Anarres, and build their utopia there. And so, they take the bargain and they leave and they go to build this perfect anarchist society on Anarres. And the novel begins after many, many decades of the planet existing and whether or not the revolution succeeded.

And so, it's a case study, in some sense, in terms of trying to imagine what a perfect kind of anarchist political philosophy would be like, or what that kind of world would look like if we really instantiated certain kinds of principles. And Ursula calls it an ambiguous utopia, because everything is not quite as pleasant as you might imagine in the utopian world, and so she tries to explore a lot of political themes in that novel. And so, Tony introduced me to the idea of Anarres and thinking about this, and so we wanted an opportunity to create a forum for the discussion of what we call radical, the radical imagination, trying to think of future possibilities, alternative social arrangements. And so, we decided to get together and create this project that we call The Anarres Project for Alternative Futures, which is housed in the School of History, Philosophy and Religion.

And the idea is just to bring together people to discuss the question of alternative futures, particularly around the themes that are mentioned in Ursula's work, questions about racial, economic, sexual justice, questions about war and peace and materialism and these kinds of things that arise in her work. We try to thematize many of those kinds of discussions and put on discussions and panels about social organizing, community organizing and questions about violence and war and so forth, always from the perspective of trying to imagine how can we move beyond these particular kinds of phenomena going on in the world and imagine a different kind of place.

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And so, we host speakers and forums on campus and we also maintain a website in the past year or so, which houses different kinds of resources for community organizing. We have interviews with different community organizers and we have an active blog where different people comment on issues like racial justice and utopian anarchist thought. And so, it's been quite vibrant, actually. I've been quite astounded that something that literally had no budget whatsoever, that we were able to get together, and we just found that there were a lot of people who wanted to talk about these issues and that there were many different collective groups all across the country who were thinking and working in these kinds of areas. They start to connect with different writers and thinkers who were working in these kinds of areas and who all have affinities for science fiction, oddly enough.

And in particular, we're happy to have been able to connect with a writer here in Oregon by the name of Walidah Imarisha. She's a fantastic social justice organizer. She is up in Portland, but she recently, with a co-editor, put together a collection called *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, which is this collection of social justice organizers, people who are actually activists, and they all wrote science fiction stories with a certain kind of perspective about envisioning a different kind of future, a socially just future, what would that look like. And many of these people were not writers. They were activists, and so she encouraged them to try to sort of put what they had learned, questions that they had, into stories, and has put together this fantastic collection.

And I think that that sort of collection really captures a lot of the kinds of spirit of the Anarres Project as well, because it's trying to get people who are involved in different kinds of community efforts to try to think creatively and imaginatively about what a different world might look like. And so, we're trying to figure out ways to try to encourage that. But excuse me as I frequently say I think that philosophy is science fiction, and some of the best kinds of works that we read about, like Plato's *Republic*, are science fiction stories, and they have that sort of attitude of trying to make sense of our important political ideas, like justice, from the standpoint of a radically different future.

JD: Well, and it struck me that there's just kind of this interesting way that your academic and kind of your activism kind of work together, if that's a fair way to put it. And I know that you write Op-Ed pieces about topical events and issues. I'm not sure how much your coursework changes; is that something that you actively set out, to make sure that those two pieces kind of work together, or that you've kept going on both of those? I guess, perhaps encouraging your students and a broader community, as well as your own personal perspective.

JAO: Yeah, no I think that that's right. I think I try to be actively involved in writing for communities that are not academic, and so I try to write both in print and online and comment on issues that are going on in the moment. So, both

on the Anarres blog and then also I participate in the project out of PSU by Tom Hastings called the Peace Network, which tries to disseminate op-Ed pieces about peace and nonviolence to small newspapers around the country. So, it's this network that tries to get peace and nonviolent thinking into small community papers. So, it's not quite as prestigious, for instance, if you have something like it in the *Huffington Post* or *New York Times* or something or other. But—and some of my colleagues do, and I think that that's really, really kind of important work—but this has a sort of a different angle. This is trying to get into having people read things in small towns, small city newspapers that have maybe a few hundred readers in central Oklahoma or central Iowa or in Tennessee or something like this.

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And so, I've had a couple pieces, particularly one piece that I wrote about Martin Luther King and climate change, and this got disseminated in hundreds of different smaller publications like this that are small community forums. And I think that that's really important kind of work, is to try to be able to talk with ordinary folk in easy, manageable ways, but also not trying to talk down to them, not trying to dumb down things but to critically engage them in thought. And you will get people in those kinds of venues that you're not going to get in the *Washington Post* or anything like that. And that's been an important kind of emphasis, I think, with my work, is trying to figure out how do you talk in those kinds of places.

So, I encourage my students, also, to think about how to be more involved in their own local communities and think about who's making decisions. And for instance, in my critical philosophy course I've had students, one assignment was they had to visit kind of a deliberative political body somewhere in their community and to think about it. So, they could either visit the city council, the county commissioners, the faculty senate, the ASOSU student body, or their hall residence, and just to watch it, participate and to try to analyze it using the philosophical tools that we've been studying in that class. And for many of them, they've never been to any of these kinds of sessions, they've never seen people making these kinds of decisions, and overall it's a very, very interesting observation. Clearly the faculty senate sometimes; I've seen students go in there and go "I can't imagine how anything gets done in this kind of a body." One student wrote quite critically "I thought that the Soviet Union was dead, but it seems that it's alive and well in something like the OSU faculty senate where everything is just rubber-stamped from up above by the people in this room."

And so, some very, very interesting observations about power. And so, what I'm trying to get folks to sort of pay attention to is to think about that there are these bodies that make decisions that affect people's lives, affect them a lot, on an everyday basis, and to get them to think about why we have those institutions and why do they operate, and if they're boring, why are they boring, why do they seem discouraging? And to think about how power circulates around them.

JD: And as you pursue your own activism, does that ever bump up against expectations by the university administration or departmental policies that you've had pushback from?

JAO: No, I've been quite, I wouldn't say necessarily lucky, because I haven't actually ever had to try to avoid conflicts. I think that, for instance, the work that we do with the Anarres Project has always been well supported by my school and we've had good audiences, and so people are receptive to the work that we do here with the project, and so I think that stuff like that has been very key. I've been involved with the OSU AAUP for many, many years and we have fought against many of the different kinds of policies that the administration has put forward, particularly a few years ago when furloughs on academic salaries were instituted; we spoke out against that. I spoke out in the faculty senate, and ultimately we lost that battle, but I've always felt it important to be able to stand up for these kinds of questions and these kinds of issues.

And luckily I have tenure, so I'm not particularly concerned about people's reactions in that kind of way as I'm doing my work and doing it well. I think that many of the kinds of commitments I have as an activist align very well with the work that I'm teaching and the work that we're doing here at OSU. And so, I mean I think the mission of OSU as a land grant university is to try to help the citizens of Oregon gain a critical perspective about their lives and to figure out ways to improve their democracy. And that, I think, is the sort of fundamental commitment I have in all of my sort of political work, and also in my academic work.

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JD: And there's another program within the department, the Peace Studies certificate program, that I know you've been intimately involved with. Could you talk about your participation in that program and why it's important to have it?

JAO: I think this is an underrated program here at OSU and I think it's something that we should be very proud of. OSU had the first Peace Studies degree program in the now defunct Oregon University System. This was a program that was started back in the 1980s, I believe. We were the first created program that gave degrees to undergraduates for the study of peace and nonviolence. And so, Peace Studies is an interesting kind of feel. It's a discipline that is concerned with the question of what is peace, what does a peaceful world look like. There are many disciplines that look at things like war, studying military history and so forth; there are many of my colleagues in the History department who are interested in questions about war, for instance, and there's a really popular class by my colleague Paul Kopperman called Why War?

Peace Studies begins from a different sort of standpoint. Instead of looking at the question about why war or trying to map out military history and strategy and that kind of political history, it begins with the question why not peace? What exactly is peace? When we talk that we want peace, what is it that we're trying to achieve, and what are the obstacles to peace, like war, violence, and how—what are the means that we can use to get to that peaceful world? So, Peace Studies is interested in trying to figure out the conditions for a peaceful and just world.

And so, I was brought into this by my colleague Lani Roberts many years ago. She was approached by the then director of a Peace Studies program, Gregg Walker in the Communications department, and he was interested in leaving the program to pursue other interests and he wanted to make sure that the program would continue, and so he approached Lani about continuing this on. And at the time, she was about three or four years out of retirement and she didn't necessarily want to take on something big like that without some help, so she approached me and asked me if I wanted to be the co-director with her, of this program. And so, I decided to take it on, and once she retired about three years or so later, I became the director of the program.

And it's an undergraduate minor, not a major, but a minor in Peace Studies. And students get the chance to be able to pick and choose from a variety of different courses offered here at OSU to focus their studies on the question about building a peaceful and just world, and what that means. And so, I think it's been a very exciting program and I've got some really, really dedicated and committed students who are very interested in improving the world and making a difference, and so it's always exciting to just be around such energetic young people who are sort of the—riding the crest of the wave of their skills and their abilities and their energy and to see them, to be able to help them to think about how to make a change in the world. It's very, very exciting.

JD: And how did your interest in developing a peaceful and just world come about? You know, you've written extensively and I do want to talk about your book, as well, and perhaps they're intertwined.

JAO: What I usually tell my students is that part of the reason I think I got involved in this is that I just wanted to sort of understand some things that I had seen growing up as a young person. So, I grew up in a place that, at the time, I didn't think, but as I reflect about it more, was particularly violent. So, I grew up in the west side of Albuquerque, which is a predominantly Latino side, particularly working class and poor, and frequently saw the effects of gang violence, of drug use, of spousal and partner abuse, and I saw all of these kinds of things and was always wondering why this was going on. And it did strike me that this was something that shouldn't be going on. It just seemed to be normal.

When I went on to college at Reed and I would talk with my friends about what I had seen growing up, many of them came—many of them were white who came from middle or upper middle class backgrounds, had never seen any of these kinds of things, and they would just look at me astoundedly and say "wow, you grew up in a really dangerous and violent place." And I was like "did I?" You know, it just seemed like home, it didn't seem like anything out of the ordinary. And so, I wanted to understand the nature of violence and social injustice. Why was it that these kinds of things happen to folks in the community where I grew up but didn't seem quite as obvious as to the folks that I was talking with at Reed?

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And through this kind of study, you kind of realize that violence is much more pervasive in our lives than we quite think about. And it's not isolated to communities like the one I grew up with. In speaking with my friends at Reed, I started to realize that there were other forms of violence that were going on in their lives that perhaps they weren't aware of, they

didn't think of as unusual. And so, by studying violence in the way that Peace Studies does and the different kinds of ways in which violence manifests itself in the world, I've come to realize that the world is suffused in a lot of different kinds of forms of violence.

And this aligns with my philosophical concerns too, in political philosophy, because one of the things that we're trying to do, I think, is to think about how to contain violence; how to eliminate violence if it is possible. So, I think that there's a kind of a peace component in a lot of the political philosophy, mainstream political philosophy that I've been trained in as well. So, it's not something that has taken me away from my sort of philosophical work. But I think that was that sort of personal sense and I sort of wanted to understand why I grew up seeing the kinds of things that I did.

JD: And how did you decide to write about César Chávez and his form of nonviolence and his political approach to change?

JAO: I think that during graduate school I was—I started to read the work of Martin Luther King and realize, at the time, that no one was reading Martin Luther King as a philosopher. There were many people who looked at him through the lens of either social sciences, looking at the—or history, in terms of the civil rights movement, or in religious studies, looking at the theology of Martin Luther King. But no one was talking about him philosophically, so I wanted to incorporate some of his thinking into the dissertation I was writing. So, I started looking at Martin Luther King and that started to get me involved in reading the work of different people who were involved in nonviolence: Gandhi, Henry David Thoreau, Tolstoy, lots of other folks, and César Chávez was a name that kept coming up, but it was always mentioning him as a political leader, as an activist, as an organizer.

And so, I started to wonder well, did he have anything interesting philosophically to say, did he write anything? And so, I started to look around, and the same thing was happening with César Chávez, is that people thought of him as an activist, as an organizer. There was some work that looked at his speeches from a religious standpoint, a theological standpoint, but again, no one was taking his ideas of nonviolence in any kind of way seriously. So, I started to look at his writing and his speeches to try to understand him as someone who was offering a unique standpoint about the meaning of nonviolent social change. And so, my book *César Chávez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence* is an attempt to try to think about him as what I call a community intellectual; someone who learned from his activism and was trying to formulate certain kinds of perspectives about how nonviolence can be a tool for social change, and the kind of ideal society that he thought needed to be built up in order to create justice for farm workers and people, working folk.

And so, that was a really—I'm still thinking about his legacy in many different kinds of ways, and the kinds of alternatives that he offered and thinking about how he related particularly to things like the legacy of Martin Luther King and relationships with folks like Gandhi. And so, I still find him to be a sort of neglected figure when people are talking about nonviolence. Many people know about Gandhi, and people know about Martin Luther King, but César Chávez was never, and he's still not, taken as a person who thought about nonviolence.

JD: And do you have thoughts on why that is? Or that difference is?

JAO: I think it's a matter of what might be called the kind of—what my college Lani Roberts calls the null curriculum; that certain things just don't get taught in our schools and certain places. César Chávez has a kind of regional appeal, people from the southwest and the west, in general, sort of know about him here and there. But the legacy of the farmworkers is relatively recent and confronts many, many different kinds of powerful political forces in the United States. One of the things that César Chávez was constantly talking about was the need for people to organize their communities in a way to resist the domination of corporate influences, and he included not only sort of big agricultural forces, but others as well, with his boycotts of grapes and pesticides, and was always constantly talking about the ways in which consumers, but other people too, are affected by the decisions made by big corporate interests.

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And so, I think that there are ways in which that kind of message is becoming more popular, but it's taken a long time for a lot of people to get behind that kind of a message. And so, I think that part of the work is trying to get his legacy out there just so that people know his story and to get it beyond just simply California and Texas and places like that. I think even here in Oregon, I think it's hard sometimes. I mean, we're sitting here in the Centro Cultural César Chávez and

we're in this brand-new building that's only been here a couple of years, but I remember a community conversation that we had when this building was first created about whether or not we wanted to maintain the name César Chávez as part of this building, and there were some young folk who were part of the Latino community here who wanted to change it and wanted this to be the Latino Cultural Center, and they said "well, maybe César Chávez can have a room off to the side that will honor him, but maybe we need to honor other Latino heroes too, and maybe we change the name of this place.

And so, there was a lot of discussions, particular me and myself and other elders, I guess, of the community saying "you don't understand the importance of this figure for our community, and it wasn't just Mexican Americans and it wasn't just Latinos." But this is part of that no curriculum. This history doesn't get taught. The history of the working folk fighting for their rights is often something that does not get talked about in classes. And so—or if it does, there's a paragraph mentioned here, and so I think that more work needs to be done about talking about these kinds of figures, like Dolores Huerta, like César Chávez and folks like that who are doing things that I think that resonate with the concerns of many, many people that are just not part of the official sort of educational process in the United States.

JD: And it seems that in some of your presentations or papers you've tried to move Chávez's name forward and connect his work and his approach. What kinds of receptions do you get as you try and, I guess, negate that null curriculum?

JAO: Yeah, it's exciting because in many cases I'm talking about something that people have never heard about before. So, in talks I have given, particularly say in like Texas or California, people are very eager and excited, because they know the name César Chávez. They don't know very much about the history, they don't know very much about the legacy, and so I'm talking to people in some cases for the first time about some of this stuff. But I was really heartened, I guess, about, I don't know, about six or so years ago when I was doing a book tour for *César Chávez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence*, I was giving a reading in Texas at a bookstore and a gentleman came up to me afterwards and he said "I just want to let you know that I marched with César here in Texas and was involved with the farm workers a lot here in Texas, and what you said about his work and what he was able to accomplish was what we experienced in the activism that we did, and so I just wanted to tell you that you got it right."

And for me, that was one of the highlights of the tour and one of the best receptions, I think, about the book, because I wasn't old enough to be part of the farm worker movements; this was a generation older than I am, and so I was writing about César Chávez from a very sort of distant perspective, in a way. And I didn't grow up in California either, so a lot of those kinds of things didn't touch me. I grew up in the generation that—in the wake of the farm worker movement and the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, and so I benefitted from a lot of the activism that was created by the work of that gentleman who came to see me. And so, for him to tell me that I had—I was able to capture something about what the spirit of that movement was about in my book was really important, and so made me feel that I was doing something worthwhile, worth the academic kind of reasons that I did.

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JD: It's always wonderful to have those affirmations.

JAO: It is. Yeah, absolutely.

JD: And we've talked about the Centro a bit and I know that you're on the advisory board here and you also have been a faculty advisor to another organization, MEChA, which has a branch here on the OSU campus. Can you talk a little about that organization and why that's important for you to be involved with? And for it to be on campus?

JAO: Yeah, both of these institutions here on campus I became involved in very quickly soon after I arrived in 2001 here at OSU. MEChA stands for the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/Chicana de Aztlan, the Chicano student movement of Aztlan. And this is a really old student organization that got its beginnings in the late 1960s, an attempt by Chicano/Chicana students to create an organization that would allow them to institutionalize their campus activism in different kinds of places. So, this is a period in which we have, for instance, the students for a democratic society that we were talking about earlier, and different kinds of campuses. This was an attempt by Chicano/Chicana students to create an organization for themselves that would be a radical advocacy organization for their concerns, to try to transform the university, but also to try to take what they were learning from the university back into their communities.

And so, in the late 1960s, a bunch of them got together, Chicano/Chicana students and faculty members at the University of California Santa Barbara, and drew up a document called the Plan de Santa Bárbara, which follows in a long tradition of *planes*, of different plans, revolutionary manifestos in the Mexican tradition, and the goal was to create this organization called MEChA that would be a focal point for students to be able to get together on their campuses to advocate for Chicano/Chicana concerns, to try to transform their universities to places that would be receptive to that community, and then also to try to bridge between the university and Mexican American communities in the United States.

And what's amazing is that this organization has lasted more than forty years in the United States and there's chapters all across the country and in colleges and universities, and some high schools, even. And it's a focal point for a lot of different kinds of student activism in many, many different kinds of places. And the chapter here at OSU has been active for many, many years and has been recognized by the university as an outstanding civic partner with the university and won many different kinds of awards for the kinds of works that they do, not only student activism but also just trying to encourage young Latinos in Oregon to come to OSU, to think about higher education.

And so, I've been really proud to work with some of these students in different generations of MEChistAs that have come here and have seen them go on and do some fantastic work in the communities now as doctors, as lawyers, as leaders of nonprofits. And you know, it's just amazing that they have sort of continued on this kind of spirit, and I think that that's what MEChA sort of does, is it gives them a sense of responsibility and commitment and a sense to become involved in communities that they live in and try to make a difference there. And so, I think that it's a really worthwhile organization in that kind of sense, and it maintains a kind of revolutionary, radical spirit that has died out in a lot of places on university campuses in the United States. But there's always a constant kind of reminder that that's the legacy of what MEChA does and what it's trying to still accomplish today.

JD: Well, and you spoke earlier about Latino students burning the president of the university in effigy and then these other types of activist organizations, how would you say you've observed kind of Latino student status, or perhaps even faculty, kind of as part of the larger OSU community in the time that you've been there? How has it changed?

JAO: Well, one way that things have changed is that the Latino community in Oregon has increased significantly. The number of Latinos going to OSU has really increased quite significantly, as well. And in the public schools in Oregon, what is it, one in four students now are Latinos. So, the population in Oregon in general is growing and is quite significant already. And so the goal, I think, is really to make sure that those—the twenty-five percent of K through 12 population, continue to get their education, don't drop out of high school, get into universities, but also stay in universities, because the dropout rate at the universities for Latino students is quite significant as well. Almost two-thirds of Latino students that get started don't graduate from college, so the numbers are still pretty small once they even get here.

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And so, I think that part of the job of faculty and administration is to continue trying to make sure that people complete their degrees, and I know that that's now a state initiative, to make sure that completion is a goal for all students. And I think it's particularly important for students of color. And one way I think that the universities can make sure to do that is to continue to increase the number of faculty of color on campuses, and this is something that OSU struggles with. There's always a concern of trying to figure out how to diversify the faculty to get people that will be here to do work, and I've seen many Latino faculty come here and then leave after a few years. So, OSU has a difficulty in retaining faculty of color. It's difficult. So, I think that efforts need to be made in that regard, I think.

But that's part of the sort of overall picture of success, I think, for communities of color, is that it has to be a case that we bring in faculty of color, attract them and make sure that they are folk who want to be committed to the work that they do with communities, because as many of my students say, it doesn't really help to have a person of color here who doesn't want to have anything to do with the communities or with their students in any way, but is focused purely on their careers in some way or another. For many of the students here, they can smell that, they can smell careers. You know, I've been chastised by some of them, as well.

So, the students here try to make sure to keep you honest, so we've talked about how I've been involved in many different kinds of ways, but I've had students tell me "you don't show up to enough of our meetings, you don't come to our events.

We see other faculty of color going to those events, but why aren't you at ours?" And so, it's hard. I mean, to be available for students, I think for faculty of color, is an added burden. And there've been many studies about this, how faculty of color sort of have responsibilities that white faculty don't necessarily have, because of the expectations of students. And I have felt that here at OSU. And so, students are eager, they want people to be mentors for them, but it's very hard to do that with so few members of the faculty that are here. And so, that's been a challenge. And I don't feel that I've been there quite as often as I probably should have been for some of my Latino students.

JD: And you know, we've talked a lot about sort of events and organizations that you assist and work with here on campus, but you also do some broader things within the city of Corvallis as well, and I know one has been the annual Martin Luther King Jr. celebration. Maybe talk a little about either that event or kind of why it's important to be involved with the city of Corvallis. There's certainly a bond or a relationship between them and OSU.

JAO: Yeah, absolutely. So, I'm a member of what's now called the King Legacy Advisory Board. This used to be the Martin Luther King City Commission, and so we've been downgraded from commissioners to advisory board members [laughs], but this is, I think, something that Corvallis should be quite proud of. I think it's probably the only city in Oregon that has a committee dedicated to having some kind of annual city-sponsored commemoration of the legacy of Martin Luther King.

And so, I've been involved in this commission now for three years and the job of the commission is to try to—it was originally just simply to put on an annual celebration, but now the charge is much broader in terms of trying to advise the city on questions of social and economic justice and to try to be an advocate for those kinds of issues before the city. But I think it's a marvelous thing that Corvallis has made this kind of commitment and put money behind it to try to improve the livability of Corvallis and to make sure that Corvallis is living up to the social and economic justice message of Martin Luther King.

And so, with the work that I do in nonviolent studies and political philosophy and the work that I've done writing about Martin Luther King Jr., I wanted to become part of the commission's work, so about three years ago I got involved and worked in bringing different speakers to the city and meeting to try to figure out how to plan events and different kinds of programming here that will involve the citizens of Corvallis, not just the campus community, in commemorating and thinking about a little bit more deeply what it takes to live up to the vision of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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JD: And you've organized some other interesting projects too. I saw that you were like site coordinator for several different programs, kind of along those same lines on campus, and I know from organizing things, those take an enormous amount of effort. What makes it important for you to give your time to do those type of things?

JAO: I have worked with an organization that I was first introduced to, again, by my college Lani Roberts, and it's called the Society for Philosophy in the Contemporary World, and this is a group of philosophers who started meeting a couple of decades ago together, and these were some renegades from the philosophy establishment who would go to the professional philosophy meetings and found very sterile and cold and uninteresting and uninviting to people who wanted to use philosophy to think about the real world. And so, these groups of—this was a small group—people started an annual meeting in the Rocky Mountains to talk about philosophy in the contemporary world.

And so, when I came here to OSU, Lani Roberts introduced me to the group and encouraged me to come out and to meet with some of these people, and they aligned very well with the kind of concerns and thoughts that I had about philosophy and the kind of things that the OSU Philosophy department does here. And so, I started to become involved in that society quite a bit and organized some of the meetings. One in particular was in Morelia, Mexico in 2007, I believe. It was their first international conference. I was the site coordinator for that. And that allowed me to invite that group of folks to a place that I had taught in in 2004, and so I brought them to one of my favorite cities in Mexico, Morelia Michoacán, and exposed them to that part of the world, and we had different philosophers from all over the world come to talk about global justice.

And it was just a—it was exciting to be a host to create the conditions for people to have these kinds of experiences so that they could see where their academic and professional pursuits might make a difference in thinking about real world

problems like poverty or economic inequality. And when we're in a place like Mexico—and so I was very excited to be able to do something like that. And now I'm currently the co-editor for the journal that the society puts together, and I've been doing that now for about three or so years, which is again another general concern of trying to figure out how to make philosophy relevant, solving real-world problems and concerns.

JD: And in the pantheon of all these different opportunities that you have, where does being on *Philosophy Talk* fall?

JAO: *Philosophy Talk*, that was an exciting opportunity. So, *Philosophy Talk* is a syndicated radio program out of Stanford University. And our connection is that one of our faculty members here, Bill Uzgalis, who's a Stanford alum, heard that *Philosophy Talk* was thinking about doing an Oregon roadshow and trying to record in different places, and so he knew one of the hosts, John Perry, who was doing this and invited them to do a live recording here at OSU. And so, this was a couple years before I even did it. So, we've been doing this now for several years, where they will come through Oregon and do different live recordings and interview people, and we've had several members of our philosophy faculty be guests on *Philosophy Talk*. And so, I was invited a few years ago to give a discussion about Latin American philosophy on this program. And it was exciting. This is a nationally syndicated radio program; it gets in lots of different places. I've had people write me from all over the place sort of saying "oh, I heard this or heard that," you know, "you talking about this or that."

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And so, it was a good experience, though it was—you start to realize how tightly scripted things have to be for radio like that. So, there's a script that we had to hit and there were certain points that we had to make sure to get at, and we had to be—I was told, you know, that we had to make sure to make it short and sweet and pithy and have zingers and things like that. Some of my other colleagues who have done this have found that frustrating, because they sort of, they want to do their philosophical thing, "I want to get deep into the issues," but you can't do that on radio, and people don't really want to listen to philosophers talk and go and drone on about things. And so, I think it was a good experience for some of my colleagues, about learning how to figure out how to say soundbite philosophy. And that's a real challenge I think, as we were talking about, to sort of figure out how do we take philosophy in such a way that we can put it into the hands of ordinary people so that they can think a little bit differently about their lives. That's hard.

JD: But an important skill.

JAO: Yeah, I think that it's a skill that we don't learn necessarily in our professional training as philosophers, and it's something that you have to be committed to in a certain kind of way. You certainly don't get very much institutional reward for thinking in that kind of way and for that kind of recognition, but I think it's important kind of work to do, is to think about being involved in the communities that you are a part of and trying to figure out how to take what you're doing professionally in a way that can help people. I mean after all, that's the origins of philosophy in the western tradition really, is it's not—it wasn't cloistered sort of dry work, but it was people being out in the streets talking to people about what they did with their lives.

JD: And was your appearance on that show one of the few times or many times that Latino philosophy has been the focus of their discussion?

JAO: I think it's the only time that they've ever done anything about Latino philosophy. That was the first time that they've talked about Latin American philosophy on that program. So, I don't think that that's a theme that they've talked about. Latin American philosophy is a sort of a new field of study in the United States, it's really only maybe about twenty or so years that people have been talking about this professionally. Now there are newsletters and professional societies dedicated to aspects of Latin American and Latino philosophy, but when I was going to graduate school, this wasn't a field of specialization, this wasn't something that you could readily get involved in, so I had to learn and read and put the stuff together by myself. Now there's more classes on Latin American philosophy in different places around the country that you can get degrees in. This wasn't the case when I was going to school.

JD: Well, we've covered a lot of territory here. I've been asking a lot of questions; this is going to be housed in the university archives, so there will be other people who will come long after we're not around to hear this, so I guess I want

to make sure I give you the opportunity to talk about and capture any topics that I haven't specifically asked about, before we conclude our interview.

JAO: You know, I think my experience at OSU has been a very rich one and I think it's partly because OSU has a legacy of being the land grant university here in Oregon, and that means being one that's concerned with taking scientific and humanistic endeavors and trying to figure out how to improve the lives of the citizens of this state, and I think that OSU tries to take that work seriously, and I know that the Philosophy department, here at OSU at least, has taken that commitment seriously with the idea of trying to be engaged in the world. And so, it's been a really welcoming home for that kind of concern, and I think that that's partly why I got hired here to do what I do. I think that probably my work would not be as well-received at other places. Probably I would not be able to do the kind of work that I do at other places, but OSU has been welcoming in that regard.

That's not to say that I don't think that there's many things that I think OSU could probably improve upon, in terms of how it works with the community, how it treats its own staff and faculty members in various ways, but those have been struggles and things that I've been involved with here at OSU, of trying to improve in various ways. And I think that the folks of OSU and of Corvallis are good people trying to struggle and make their way through to try to make things a better place. And so, I think that that's, in some cases, that's a really good place to be. And so, I think that OSU has a lot to look forward to and I hope that it can continue with that kind of a commitment to trying to be the place in which we take academic, scientific knowledge and to try to make the world a better place to be.

JD: That seems like a great place to say thank you for sharing your recollections.

JAO: Thank you.

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