



Patti Sakurai Oral History Interview, March 2, 2015

Title

“Ethnic Studies at OSU from the Beginning”

Date

March 2, 2015

Location

Valley Library, Oregon State University.

Summary

In the interview, Sakurai recounts her family background, including her extended family's experiences with internment during World War II. She also discusses her activities and interests growing up, with a particular focus paid to the development of her identity as a Japanese American living in southern California.

Sakurai next reflects on her undergraduate experience as a Literature and Economics student at Claremont McKenna College before turning her attentions to her doctoral studies at SUNY-Stony Brook. In noting her years in New York, Sakurai speaks in particular of her attraction to literary works authored by people of color and her eventual gravitation toward the field of Ethnic Studies.

After outlining her participation in fellowships at three different universities, Sakurai shares her memories of arriving at Oregon State University in 1996. She discusses the background behind the creation of Ethnic Studies at OSU, the environment in what was then a department consisting of two faculty members, the eventual growth of the department, and her work in shaping components of its curriculum. She likewise speaks of her role in organizing a successful workshop on Japanese American internment, the progression of her scholarly work on Japanese American identity, her involvement with a variety of projects in film and community radio, and her current interests in the cultural impact of Korean drama and popular music.

As it nears its conclusion, the session shifts focus to the current state and forward movement of the Ethnic Studies department at Oregon State. The interview ends with Sakurai's thoughts on the environment faced by students of color on the OSU campus and the important role played at OSU by the university's cultural centers.

Interviewee

Patti Sakurai

Interviewer

Chris Petersen

Website

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

Transcript

Chris Petersen: Okay Patti, if you would please introduce yourself with your name and today's date and our location?

Patti Sakurai: Sure. Patti Sakurai, it is March 2nd, 2015, and we are in the Oregon State library.

CP: Terrific. So, we're going to talk a lot about the evolution of your career and your association with OSU as a longtime member of the Ethnic Studies Department, but we'll start at the beginning. You were born in Los Angeles, is that correct?

PS: I was born in Van Nuys, a valley girl by birth. We spent some time—our house was in Granada Hills and then at seven we moved to Orange County, behind the Orange Curtain, so to speak.

CP: So, you were never technically in LA growing up?

PS: So, it was I guess the LA area, but it's technically in the valley.

CP: What is your family background?

PS: So, mostly I'm third generation Japanese American, but with a caveat: my maternal grandmother was actually born in Hawaii, so it's kind of a mix, so three-quarters third generation and one quarter *Yonsei*, or fourth generation Japanese American.

CP: And mostly in Southern California, then?

PS: Yeah. So, born and raised Southern California, which is undergraduate in Claremont, Southern California.

CP: What were your parents' occupations?

PS: So, my dad worked for McDonnell Douglas, or Douglas when it was first Douglas, and then it became McDonnell Douglas. So, he was a mechanical engineer, so he worked in a, I guess a materials testing lab, and it would have open house every once in a while, and that's the only reason I have any vague idea of what he did. And then my mother was predominantly, at least for part of my childhood, worked at home, so I just remember her, she had taken whatever kind of work, so typing, or I remember at one point we were doing macramé beading at home, and then eventually I guess probably around the time we moved to Mission Viejo, she ended up working I think at the department store around town and then Saddleback College. She had a number of different jobs, but most of her kind of end of career she was at Saddleback College in the registrar's office, and then I think it was international students services office, I don't know.

CP: So, being a third generation Japanese American, was there any connection with internment in your family?

PS: Yeah, so actually in terms of my parents themselves, neither were interned. My father actually was born and raised in Colorado and did farm work kind of in that general area in Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, and then they settled in, I guess it would Brighton-Greeley area, Kersey area. And then my mom's family were living in Santa Monica when the war hit, and my grandfather, I guess kind of reading what was happening, decided that whatever was going to happen wasn't going to be good, so he basically sent my mother ahead with some cousins and other family on a train, packed what he could in a pick-up truck, and that's how they ended up in Denver. So, they left actually just prior to the first internment. And then I have extended family, though, who did spend time in Tule Lake.

CP: So, it was primarily, at least on our side of the country, the west coast Japanese Americans that were directly impacted by this?

PS: Yeah. So the military zone, this almost coincided with the California, Oregon and Washington state borders, with the exception of Ontario and kind of Oregon, it didn't quite. There's some places where it kind of did some, went off a little bit. So, it was really about west coast Japanese Americans who were considered a threat, and that is where the populations tended to be, so we were higher concentrations settling there.

CP: Was that a story that was talked about in the family much?

PS: You know, not a whole lot. Actually, I think as a kid, just your associations; you would be around extended family or family gatherings or when they meet someone new, once in a while the question would come up; were you in camp? And just the way they talked about it you knew they weren't talking about summer camp, so it had this kind of mystical—and then when I met people who—I never really actually went to camp myself, so when I met other kids who had very different senses of what camp meant, it was like going to summer camp. And then yeah, I realized something was definitely different. So, it did come up then, and people were kind of like "oh, you were in Rohwer, you were in da da da," and kind of in the muted tones, you know.

So, it came up in that sense. My family really didn't talk about it a whole lot. Certainly there would be mention of extended family if they were in camp. But I had kind of an odd experience, I actually facilitated a panel way after that when I was in Colorado, or soon after I left, but it was back in Colorado in conjunction with the traveling Smithsonian exhibit on the internment, and I had, oh, I think it was technically she would be a cousin, but someone I would consider an auntie was on the panel. And so, she starts talking about this story of extended family and they're in a truck and they were being chased by a group of white folks, and clearly not the friendliest situation, and so basically kind of talking about the situations that I guess my mother's first cousin had some sort of incident, broke his arm or had some sort of injury on their way in, and as I realize she's talking about my mother's family and my jaw hit the ground, and in front of a hundred and something people she turns to me, she's like "you've never heard this story before, have you?"

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So, it's one of those things, I think it just isn't something that comes up casually, and in an odd way, yeah, trying to figure out how do you get those oral histories from your own family members, you know, their perception is "oh, it's nothing important," or it just, I think it's hard for a lot of that generation to talk about, too. I think there was certainly a perception of wanting to shield my generation from it, to some extent.

CP: Well, kind of on that same line of questioning, I'm interested in was there a strong sense of Japanese culture in the family, or anyplace growing up, or was it more of a desire to fit in and be, in quotes, "American"?

PS: I think both. I saw your question; I was trying to think about that. I think there are mixed reactions, but I think for my parents yeah, the idea was to try to assimilate as much as possible, and I think the hard lessons of the war were if you're too—you know, the term that got tossed out was "Japanesey"; if you're too Japanesey this is what happens to you. So, they put us in the Brownies and the Girl Scouts and tried to do what they could to have that kind of, I guess, all-American, however that's defined, background. Moving to the suburbs, Mission Viejo, I think was part of it. But at the same time, I think they were very tied to, not necessarily Japanese culture as much as Japanese American community.

So, because the other thing I just remember is we were Buddhist in the family and then we were Presbyterian in Orange County. It's like oh, okay. And it was the same, they—we went from "yes, Buddha loves me" to "yes, Jesus loves me" in Sunday church. And it just so happened that the kind of closest Japanese American church that my cousins, who were kind of in the Orange County area, went to—and it was quite a drive—but it happened to be Presbyterian, so we were Presbyterian all the sudden. So, I think it was important to my, I think probably mostly my mother, that we still had contact with Japanese American community, beyond just our extended family. We certainly had the big family gatherings for holidays and so forth, but I think she just wanted us to have also regular contact, I think, especially being in a place like Orange County, it's [shakes head], especially right then was not the most diverse place.

CP: Yeah. That's interesting, sort of this idea of religion as a vehicle for community building.

PS: Yeah.

CP: Well, what sorts of things were you interested in growing up?

PS: Oh, probably the typical things, just kind of, again, we were in Brownies and Girl Scouts, so did that kind of thing. Again, I shudder to think, probably ponies, and I know we collected the little figures, like a lot of people, and the horses, I had an obsession with horses. So, that kind of thing. When I was really young I think, and again, I definitely had an appreciation for music, so kind of did the piano and all of that pretty early on. But I think yeah, but high school I think kind of, certainly, I don't know if it would be interests, but just happened to be fortunate I had a group of friends that I

think all of us were kind of skeptical and skeptics and so kind of yeah, I don't know how to describe it, probably not the—we did the kind of mainstream things but also kind of just did our own thing as well. And that's—I'm not sure how to answer that.

CP: Well, I guess I'm interested in—so much of your work has been kind of an exploration of identity, and it sounds like maybe that started to appear a little bit in high school, or is that...

PS: Probably. I think again, just kind of seeing the world in—I think being in a place like Mission Viejo, and I don't know if you're familiar, but it's a planned community that was founded by a Mission Viejo corporation. I don't think it was lost on us that it was kind of a strange place. Even though we couldn't put our finger on it, you drove up the I-5 and see billboards for "The California Promise: living in Mission Viejo," and I think at that time already we were like "really?" with those, like "what is going on?" And I think thinking about just kind of those questions and kind of Southern California at the time, the kind of contrast between appearances and realities, and kind of thinking about the disparities, you know. Again, I wouldn't put it in that language at that time, but it certainly wasn't the California promise, and we were kind of thinking about just even the hierarchies within our high school and kind of issues around class. Even if you couldn't name it, you certainly—my mom made a lot of our own clothes, it was like certainly the emphasis on designer wear and labels was I think true to a lot of people in terms of junior high and high school is kind of when it hits and those kinds of symbols of status that I think, like I said, fortunate enough that my circle of friends, all of us kind of thought and questioned stuff.

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CP: Yeah, clothing is actually something that you devoted some scholarly effort to much later on in life.

PS: Yeah, in terms of, well, a film, kind of those layers.

CP: So, I gather there was probably an emphasis on education in your family, given your parents, their lines of work.

PS: Yeah. So, what I think—you know again, so my dad actually grew up in farming and was able to go to college because of the GI Bill. So, I think he was well aware of the privilege of what a college education meant. We grew up constantly hearing how spoiled we were and kind of basically to make the most of what opportunities we had. So, it was never a question of whether we're going to college or not. It was kind of more where you're going, and certainly an emphasis on grades, so I think which is not atypical for this generation.

CP: Yeah. So, as high school started to wind up, did you have a sense of what you wanted to do in college?

PS: Actually yeah, I thought I was going to be a lawyer. I had no idea what that meant, but it was like "oh, okay, fight for justice." And then again I think the more I learned about the legal profession and the limitations, yeah, I think quickly I pulled away from that.

CP: But you were developing sort of this idealistic desire to fight for justice?

PS: Yeah, probably, yeah. I think just kind of thinking and not being aware of yeah, there is this thing called the law and law of limitations, so what lawyers can and cannot do within that. Not to say that, again, in hindsight, I think maybe we shouldn't—wouldn't have done quite the 180 that I did then, but I think just it just wasn't quite what I thought. And then also, I think being at Claremont it was an eye-opener in terms of even—and you know, I liked literature. I mean, this is the other side; it was kind of push and pull, and the draw of the literature courses that I was taking.

CP: So, you mention you went to Claremont McKenna College, was the decision—it was close to where you grew up, is that, I assume, part of it?

PS: Yeah, so I think I was part of the first year of something called the McKenna Scholars, and so was fortunate enough to get a scholarship, and I think—my understanding after the fact; I don't know that I could substantiate it—was part of it was to kind of also be able to recruit students in terms of the academic standing of the college in general. So back to my dad, I think it was certainly not lost on him that one of his children would be able to go to a private school that I think would have been out of reach otherwise. I was planning to go to one of the UC's. So yeah, that decision, the questions I

would have asked had I known, but I was seventeen and it was just like "okay," and certainly my parents were excited and thrilled that I had gotten accepted and had the scholarship. But yeah, I had actually been accepted to Berkeley and UCLA as well. So, I'd have to say, in hindsight, it was probably very formative, so yeah, everything happens for a reason.

CP: Well, you gravitated towards literature during that time, it sounds like.

PS: Yeah, so that was a lifeline. Claremont was very conservative, had not that long ago, by the time I had gotten there, had transitioned from an all-male college to co-ed but was still 70% male. And yeah, it was just a—I went I think pretty naïve and had no idea what to expect, and it was a challenge in some ways.

CP: Was there any class or professor in particular that helped you sort of find some direction?

PS: It's so funny; so I was just trying to look up my former professors. So, there was, you know, several in the English Department; Professor Quinones, Elsbree, and then my last year I had a poetry workshop, Professor Wendy Owen, who I think was just there for a couple years, but definitely, again, a lifeline. I loved the workshop and I think just, you know, I was really drawn to those faculty that were teaching classes that confirmed, I guess, my understanding of the world, because everything else beyond those classes, in I guess the world of that particular college, yeah, it was just not quite in sync with that. But yeah, she was definitely I think key in keeping me in school and encouraging. I think I always had a love-hate relationship with academia and somehow managed to stay on this side of staying in it. But it certainly got close there, and she was very encouraging and basically said "stick it out, just get your degree, get a five year, and then"—

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CP: Yeah, well you finished in three years.

PS: Yeah, so I kind of pushed through. So, that was definitely a strong motivation to basically take advantage of what AP credits, and I think I had taken some summer school at community colleges. So, not having planned it that way, but it certainly worked out. And so, loaded up, I think I ended with a pretty major overload in my last term there, in order to finish up.

CP: Well, you finished, did you at that point have an idea that you wanted to pursue a career as an academic?

PS: I feel like I'm the not [?]of academia; I feel like it was really just get out, get the degree, and I felt like I kind of just got spat out. The students now are so much more on top of things that they're planning. I had no idea what I was doing. Again, lit, econ, I ended up moving back home. I didn't have a job, I didn't hit the job market when I was kind of heading out. I just wanted to graduate, I think, is really my main focus, and again, with an overload of courses. And just finishing up, of course my folks are looking at me like "really?" with this; "you have your degree and you're going to move back home and not have a job?" So, I did anything and everything I could. I did a temp agency, I was a "Cali girl" and ended up placed at a soils engineering geotechnical firm, and again, everything happens for a reason, and it definitely grew me into the idea that this is not what I want to do, just even a 9-to-5 kind of private sector work, and certainly there was questions; should I take advantage of the econ part of my degree, and I think that pretty much sealed it that that wasn't for me.

I just, I don't even recall making a conscious decision to become an academic in the sense of a teacher or any of that. It was more I'm living at home, my parents are looking at me like "what are you going to do," so grad school sounded like a good idea, and I was like I love literature, so I'll apply to English programs. And again, I think I'm just the don't [?], it's just been—I've been very fortunate, and I think I happened to mention—and I applied only to masters programs, and again, just had no idea, I just didn't understand how that worked. I assumed you had to have a master's degree before you could then apply at a PhD program, and just happened to mention that I planned to pursue a PhD down the line in my personal statement, and Stony Brook calls up and says "we noticed you sent this, so are you applying to the right program?" and you know, it just—yeah, I was very fortunate, and so I was admitted to the PhD program instead.

CP: Yeah, so you wound up in a place very different from Southern California.

PS: Yeah, well I was very that—I wanted the opposite a climate as I could get, I have to say, not to bash on Claremont McKenna College. I'm sure it's much better and changed now. But yeah, I wanted to go to the east coast, I wanted as big

a public institution as I could get, so that was my strategy. And I definitely wanted to get out of California. I just sort of figured enough is enough and wanted to see other parts of the country.

CP: What was that adjustment like for you?

PS: Culture shock, I have to say, really—it was a good thing, because yeah, because I didn't know how different. I had never been further east than Colorado, and we would spend summers there for family vacation, so I just had no idea that there were that many kind of regional differences. And I think being out on Long Island, especially, was a culture shock, and made me appreciate home. I have to say, it was a big "I wish"—that was the shock to me, on top of it, it was just that, you know, here I am thinking "I'm going to be so independent, go to New York and da da da," and then all the sudden I was homesick within a month and kind of whining on the phone, and just missing the beach, like a real beach. So, they took me to the beach and it was the Long Island Sound and I just started sobbing and "this is not the beach, there's no waves, and there's green things that are not seaweed. I don't understand." Yeah, it was definitely an eye-opener. And just, again, the culture was just different; how people interact, and it definitely took some adjustment. But it was a good experience overall.

CP: Yeah, well once you settled in a little bit you I assume learned what being an academic is and found your footing a little bit. Tell me about that time in your life.

PS: Yeah, so I think yeah, just kind of adjusting and you know, I think the first couple years were a struggle and just kind of thinking about—because again, I hadn't thought it through as linked to a profession as much as really, again, just loving literature. It sounds very naïve and Pollyannish, but I love literature. And then kind of the tie to kind of professional side of academia was a transition. And I think for me it was actually I guess thinking of all—actually I will say June Jordan was there my first year, and so that was really great to get into poetry workshops with her and stuff, but she ended up leaving during the time I was there, but I did happen to go to class and kind of thinking through African American literature, and so I think at that point I kind of started to feel like I found a niche within kind of thinking about kind of the questions that I was interested in, by all means thinking through what now gets referred to as intersectionality, at that time.

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But again, reading these works by women of color and then certainly kind of thinking about what was going on with Asian American writers during the same time periods, and those communities and kind of how are these types of questions being addressed by them. And that's kind of how I ended up with my dissertation, was kind of looking at contemporaries, looking at things like Maxine Hong Kingston and Frank Chin's work and kind of thinking about how are they addressing kind of what has—again, thinking about how relatively new this concept of this pan-ethnic, Asian American umbrella category was then, and how clearly politicized it was at that time. Right now we just think of it as kind of a descriptor, right. It is what it is, but as opposed to kind of at that point, to say and call up that term Asian American was already politicized. So, it was kind of thinking well, how are these writers and artists and folks kind of grappling with that and trying to reflect that in the literature.

CP: Did you find others that were interested in these similar sorts of topics?

PS: Yeah. Yeah, and clung to them for dear life. So I had a number of folks that—yeah, in grad school. And again, it was a really good experience, and just we'd be able to have those conversations over happy hour and just kind of thinking about these types of questions. So yeah, I'm trying to think. I don't actually remember what their dissertations were, but we certainly, you know, we talked about the kind of issues that we were coming across in our reading every week.

CP: So, it sounds like Stony Brook was a pretty good environment for you in an intellectual way.

PS: Yeah, I would say a real—and again, it's not to say that there aren't the challenges, I think, within any program, certainly if you're not in a more traditional field. So again, very supportive committee members. But they were borrowing my books to head into my oral, which is a kind of interesting moment, because you know the books that were on my reading list were not books that are, at least then, considered canonical. And yeah, so it was, in that sense I think, and why I drew so heavily on my cohort and other classmates was because, as encouraging and supportive and absolutely supportive that my committee members were, it wasn't their—I mean my chair was like eighteenth century Marxist

literary category. So again, he was very encouraging and supportive, but it wasn't his area, per se. And certainly within—I'm trying to think, since this is public, you know, I have to be careful, but yeah, I think there were some faculty that it just wasn't as good of a fit, and so kind of thinking about the ways, the areas I probably would have gone weren't necessarily there in the same way that if I had chosen Falkner to do my dissertation on.

CP: Yeah. I'm trying to, I guess, isolate or locate whether or not you and your peers, not just at Stony Brook, but nationwide, is this sort of the first wave of folks that were really examining these issues as scholars?

PS: Actually, no. So, I would say there was certainly a generation before us, and so kind of thinking about Elaine Kim's work. I guess I shouldn't say a generation—so, like seventies, eighties, in that timeframe, Will Wu's work, I think of Nellie Wong, I think—yeah, I think there were writers, and I guess maybe in terms of academia, probably Elaine Kim, King-Kok Cheung, Su-ling Wong that I drew inspiration from, that were writing about the writers that I was interested in. So, by all means it wasn't—I wasn't in a complete vacuum. And compared to now, I feel like it was pretty still, pretty small and emerging, but it certainly, Asian American Studies was well-established at Berkeley by the time I was coming through, thank goodness, and I think yeah, we're already certainly asking these questions, starting kind of thinking about—not just in terms of Asian American Studies, but works like this *This Bridge Called My Back* or kind of thinking about women of color and other writers that were kind of grappling with what it means to be at these intersections, and especially coming out of a timeframe which I think in some ways is an oversimplification, in hindsight, to think that it was all so simplified in terms of identity politics. But in terms of I guess the main trajectories, the challenges of trying to grapple with heterosexism, sexism, racism simultaneously, when I think because of the political commitments of a lot of these writers, it was very much tied to community.

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And then, so the trajectory of actual activism sometimes would pronounce itself in these kind of singular ways. So, to raise issues of sexism within an activist organization that was focused more on issues of racial justice would be seen as to be somewhat problematic, or it just would be harder to deal with some of those internal—but again, I think it was very reflective of what gets called now kind of intersectional frameworks.

CP: Did you do any teaching at Stony Brook?

PS: I did. So, I actually was—I think that was certainly the other thing that I was very grateful for; it was that we had T lines and they were secure. There was none of this kind of play, which I didn't realize was not the normal everywhere, where pretty much almost all of our incoming class had some either teaching assistantship or a research assistantship. And you pretty much had it for four years unless you really messed up, which definitely changes the framework versus other programs where it's kind of term to term or year to year or half are funded, half are not. And so, getting my offer and saying teaching assistantship, I'm imagining I'm going to be a teaching assistant for another professor; I'll do the grading, attendance, whatever, but no, we walk into orientation and they're talking about our students and our classes and "our," and I realize at twenty-one years old that I'll be teaching a composition class. And yeah, so right off the ground we were teaching. So, they had graduate students in the English program at the time; taught composition for the most part. I think I did a stint in the writing center for a while, just to take a break, but then also had the opportunity to teach an intuitive poetry class. I think it's just the intuitive, there might have been one other lit class.

So, I have to say that is another thing that kept me within academia. If I hadn't had that, I'm not sure that I would have stayed. I actually moved, went clear across and drove across to Santa Barbara as soon as my first year was over and sat on the beach and contemplated whether I was going to go back. But I loved my students, and I had no idea; again, I actually am not that talkative as a student in class and I do get nervous in terms of speaking up, and so I thought "is this going to work?" But since you're in a classroom and you realize "if I don't say something we're all going to sit here staring at each other in silence, so I kind of have to because it's my job." And then we'd just end up just caught up in the moment and having this really just great stimulating discussions, and then I have to say I think my students at the time often were just—I looked forward to it and enjoyed that part of it.

CP: Yeah. So, you took to teaching pretty quickly then, it sounds like.

PS: Yeah, surprisingly.

CP: Well, you had a couple sort of corollary jobs at different institutions, it sounds like, while you were working on your dissertation at Stony Brook, and the first one was at UC Santa Barbara, is that correct?

PS: Yes, for just—

CP: Department of Asian American Studies?

PS: Yep.

CP: You want to tell me about that?

PS: So, it was just for one term; I think I taught two different classes. I think that was the first opportunity I had to teach Asian American Studies specifically, so it was a great experience. It was short, it was just three months, but—so yeah, so one of the friends from grad school, she came out and spent that term there just to kind of take advantage of the southern California resources she was working on. So, a lot of her dissertation I think, at the time. And then was also roommates with Valerie Soe, who's a filmmaker, whose work I very much admire. And so, and just the folks within the department, yeah, it just confirmed that seemed like a good fit, and kind of thinking about the work that I was doing, the questions that I was interested in, in just a very supportive environment.

Sucheng Chan, I think she was very kind of conscious of that, making sure we had two classes so we could pay our rent. You know, I think it was, without even realizing it and kind of thinking about model, how to handle the situations even, because as a grad student it was just like any job is exciting, and let alone to have somebody who was actually thinking about the affordability of Monte Vista, and the area, which is not cheap to live in, it was like wow, that's amazing that she even thought of that, and appreciated it very much. Very supportive environment.

CP: So, by this point you have kind of decided a little bit where you want to focus, as far as your future career.

PS: Yeah. So, I think in terms of the area of research and teaching, this seemed to make the most sense. Yeah.

CP: You went to Colorado College, as well.

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PS: Yeah. And so then from there on out it's just kind of really, you know, which is the fact of life, right, you take it where you can find it, and certainly back then it was a tight job market, as it is now. I mean there was all sorts of discussion about how things were going to really open up as all the people retire, and it just never happened. So, I just hit the job market, hit it hard and ended up with a one-year sabbatical placement at Colorado College. I was still working on my dissertation, so was very grateful for the opportunity. Not a lot of people would have, necessarily at that stage, been willing to accept that, but it was challenging teaching full time. They were on the block system where students take one class at a time, and from a teaching perspective it's very intensive as well, because you're meeting every day for several hours, and then I would finish up at night and then carve out a few hours to work on my dissertation and finish up.

But again, very supportive, they were just great, and especially for a one-year temp person. I can't believe I'm forgetting her name; there were just several faculty that I can picture in my head that were just so welcoming and supportive of the work I did. So, it was a very good experience.

CP: And from there a post-doc at Emory University?

PS: Yeah, so Atlanta was another adjustment.

CP: Yeah. Is that your first time in the south?

PS: Yeah. Yeah, in terms of living; we had driven through but in terms of spending time there, yeah. So, that was adjustment in terms of as a place to live, Emory University; there I was in a post-doc, so probably less connected with the English Department. I was housed in the English Department, but then I was just fortunate that some grad students, Patti Duncan, who is actually here in the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program now here, we actually met at Emory.

And so, kind of thinking about the community within Atlanta and just kind of thinking about a lifeline within that, and just again, very supportive, I think doing similar work.

CP: Well, in 1996 you came to Oregon State.

PS: Yeah.

CP: You want to tell me about how this came about?

PS: Yeah, so I actually had one more year of my post-doc, so I was pretty selective, which was the first time to have that luxury of not applying to anything and everything. But yeah, I think there was a position at U of O, there was a position here, I think maybe at Willamette, and of course for a lot of us who were doing ethnic studies and Asian American studies were thinking "what's going on in Oregon?" But I think what the attraction for OSU specifically was the idea of starting a brand new department, it just doesn't happen every day, and few and far between. Yeah, so I think seeing that caught my eye, the way the ad was written up.

So, I have to say, again, being on the other side as a search committee and realizing how these things are read and the difference it does make, I actually had a sense of what they were talking about, because I have to say I did do those interviews where they would advertise for an Asian American studies person but clearly not know what that meant, and you're in the middle of the interview and you're kind of like wow, okay, this is probably not going to be a good fit, is it. But OSU—and then when I actually got the call back, I don't know if this is the kind of story you're interested in, but I have to say; so my first part of it was a phone interview and I happened to be at home visiting family. My parents kindly went to the mall to leave me alone, but it just never dawned on me, I'm in my shorts and da da da, just didn't think why would you have to dress up for a phone interview, but psychologically it does make a difference. And so, I'm sitting in the kitchen that they were in the same house from when we moved to Mission Viejo, so I've been in that house since I was eight, seven, eight years old, and the disconnect with sitting in that kitchen at the same kitchen table, having a phone interview for an academic position, and I have to just, I literally, since I got on the phone, I thought I bombed so horribly I took a red pen and I crossed OSU off my list, and I felt so horrible and then was shocked when they called for the campus visit.

And the campus visit was great, the folks that were involved, the fact that they had given so much thought, not just to having ethnic studies at Oregon State, but even kind of had a sense of kind of the crossroads that the field was at at the time, certainly committing to the internship, thinking about the different routes available to them, and Linc Kessler, Manuel Pacheco, I remember Janet Nishihara was part of the search committee. I know it was so many different people, but they were so welcoming. And yeah, it was a very exciting opportunity, so I think that was the big draw.

[0:35:07]

CP: Yeah. What do you remember about your initial impressions of the university and of the community? Again, in a different environment from what you'd been in.

PS: Very different environment. I think, and I hope she doesn't get—Janet was like, Janet Nishihara was the person who picked me up at the Eugene Airport, and she said "don't tell anyone, but I'm going to offer; do you want to see U of O campus?" and I was like "oh, okay," so we drove around Eugene a little bit. She was like "I probably shouldn't do this, you should probably see OSU first." But yeah, I think the idea of being on the west coast, and it just felt a little bit more familiar than the east coast. So, that—and certainly is a beautiful landscape, and kind of thinking about that. And like I said, I think just being on campus, at least the people that I was in contact with were just really welcoming and excited about the prospect of having an Ethnic Studies Department. And that was another thing, having department status; again, few and far between. So, most of the places would have programs, you would often have a joint appointment. And my chair, mentor, was pretty clear, he was like "now that you're going"—this is the one who was borrowing my books to head into the exams, that he was just like "do not—I understand what your area is, but then understand the nature of it; you are likely going to be looking sometimes at joint appointments." And he was like "obviously you can't say no if that's the only offer," but he was pretty clear what it meant to be in a department in a faculty position full time within it. So, I think I appreciated that part of it too.

CP: Yeah, that's interesting.

PS: Yeah, because I think in common promotion and tenure time it often becomes tricky, and also that .5, .5 never works out to 1.0. It usually is the 1.5, the math in terms of the expectations at this point, and understandability, because your two units don't know what the other's asking of you, and so he just said "this is a much better situation to be full time and then have the department status and having that permanency and autonomy."

CP: Well, you mentioned you were joining a department that was being created as you joined it, do you know much about the backstory there as to why OSU decided this was something they wanted to do?

PS: So, my understanding of the backstory, and again I think you're talking to Janet, she'll be able to say on the ground from before I got here, but it really was about faculty, students, community. But I think my understanding is the faculty really kind of helped pave the way. I think Kessler basically gave up his year sabbatical to work on it. When I met him, he was technically on sabbatical, but obviously as he's putting together—I think they tried to do a search for four positions all at once initially. It's a lot of work, and doing the proposal, getting through the faculty senate, get it passed in the Oregon State Legislature.

So, I think—and I have to say, and it's not to say that there wasn't some resistance or arguments that I would find out, I heard about after the fact, but just compared to Emory where they were trying to establish some Asian American Studies Program at the time, and it was very contentious. I mean, there was just no question, you're not getting Asian American Studies. Well, I had done the protest and all of that, and so to get here and kind of what sounded like a very different process was surprising, especially, again, it was not just Emory. I think around the country usually you have to pretty much fight, and it's usually students who lead the way and then put that pressure. So, to hear that it was this coalition, broad-based, was also a plus, because then I'm thinking okay, that's a pleasant surprise.

CP: And by the time you got here, everybody is pretty much onboard then, it sounds like?

PS: Umm...

CP: Or is that an overstatement?

PS: So, I have to say, and again, I don't know what's appropriate for this oral history, but I feel like the cultural adjustment to Oregon in general—so it's not necessarily just OSU—is what I refer to as the culture of niceness. And again, I feel like I came from contexts where people were pretty upfront about where they stood. So yeah, everyone's very polite here, and even when they're having arguments, not to say that there aren't some nasty arguments sometimes, but for the most part it's just—there's a tone and a way that it goes about that has been an adjustment. And so, I will say there was definitely no overt opposition and nothing negative, and again it was really kind of through the grapevine that you would hear certain disgruntlement, or I guess questions about us as a field; are we ghettoizing our areas, and certainly kind of thinking through other disciplines that also grapple with issues of race and ethnicity.

[0:40:04]

And I think those are absolutely legitimate concerns, but I think especially—gosh, this is almost twenty years ago now—I think thinking about carving out a space to have a really focused coursework, curriculum around issues of race and ethnicity, I think there was then and still is that particular need, that our program and our discipline feels.

CP: Well, you mentioned they were trying to search for four people at once and they hired two, so there's a department of two to begin with, you and Kurt Peters, what was that like then?

PS: Yeah, that was very surreal as well. So, it was my first tenure track position, and so kind of a lot of like "now what?" and especially with just two of us, there's certain things that you don't feel until everyone's onboard, like what kind of decisions to make. We inherited the major and minor requirements, but they were not well thought-out, I think. So, just really we're just now going through the revisions and changing them. It's long overdue but I think certainly it was nice not having to start completely from scratch. Again, the folks that were involved in getting Ethnic Studies approved had done a lot of work ahead of time.

But yeah, so he was the interim chair and it was just the two of us, but in a weird way it was also a fun year because we had small classes and nobody blinked an eye. We actually had classes—we had at that time a little conference room and were able to hold classes there. I got to know my students very well. I will say they're still in some ways, I think—you know, as I age my memory gets worse and worse too, but for whatever reason they're very vivid in my memory. And we would have film and pizza night. And I think too, being brand-new, we didn't know what we could and couldn't do, and I think at the same time things were not quite as regulated either, so buy pizza, fine. Yeah, or just kind of what you could have and do where. So, yeah, it was kind of a fun year in that sense.

CP: Well, you said you had inherited some department infrastructure, but I'm sure you had to establish your curriculum more or less on your own. What was that like?

PS: So, that was a bit of a nightmare of just even trying to figure out. At that time they had these things called X classes. I don't even know if they still even allow those, but until a class was formally approved you ran them as experimental, I guess with the X do for—so, all of our classes were these X classes. And then we tried to navigate the curriculum proposal process, which even to this day baffles me. And at a certain point we're like "at this point we're not going to have any classes that are permanent classes." And I think we were able to get some help and Kurt spoke to some folks and finally we got our classes through. So, that was helpful. But I think just kind of navigating that part of it was a bit of a challenge, and then kind of knowing how to recruit students, how do we get the word out.

I think a lot of it was just—I will say the other person that was amazing—Evelyn Reynolds was our office coordinator and manager at the time and had been at OSU already for quite some time. And if it had not been for her, I think we would have totally been—it would have been chaos, because she knew scheduling, anything; half the time it was always going to her for any kind of questions about "Evelyn, how do we do this" and "I want to have this kind of, students are asking about doing an event, who do we call?" and she, again her familiarity with the university, the ins and outs, there were plenty of times she was here after hours when we were trying to figure out getting a speaker situated, and yeah, she was amazing. And I will say that definitely made a huge difference to have her there too, because—for some reason I can't remember, I don't know the total number of years that she was with Ethnic Studies, but yeah, it was a huge anchor, I think, for all of us.

CP: Was it the second year that the third and fourth faculty were hired? Was it by then you had the full complement?

PS: Yes. So, well our second year we hired Erlinda Gonzales-Berry, and then our third year was Robert Thompson. So, it took us three years, or I guess our third year where we were full up and running. And that's so—at that point then kind of we ended up just sticking with the requirements as they were, but I think certainly the broader questions about electives and curriculum, we finally could kind of hit a lot of those questions, because again with just Kurt and I—and again it's the luxury with just two of you, and again not understanding how rare that is. What do I want to teach? Oh okay, I'll teach this and this. There was no discussion, no one thinking about coverage, it was just other than the kind of core, the 101, the 201, that sort of thing. But yeah, I just realized, especially when we have folks coming to campus to do interviews is when it hits you how much of a luxury that is to just "name your elective, what do you want to teach?" "Oh, I want to teach this." "Okay, sounds good." There's no like, it was—yeah. I mean there are certain things that we do have to cover, but it's a higher proportion that you have as electives.

[0:45:15]

CP: Were there any courses that you prepared that you particularly enjoyed?

PS: Oh my goodness. Gosh, I don't know. That would be a hard one. I'm trying to think of classes, if there are any that I haven't. They've all been a surprise in some ways. I'm just finishing 201. Some of our lower division comparative courses, even though they tend to be larger, I have to say sometimes I really enjoy them because a lot of students are in there for the first time as their first exposure to ethnic studies, and I think just their engagement with the course material, it's just contagious, and it's kind of—and I will say just more broadly that one of the perks of teaching is you get to see things fresh, with fresh eyes every single time, like texts that you've read a million times. And I think it's easy to get jaded on certain things. You're like "oh gosh, this book again?" But I learned the hard way that I'd still have to re-read them as we're reading. I don't care how many times, because I found out the hard way I tend to reassemble in chronological order, and I think the first time I gave away—I did a spoiler. I was like "and then when they died," and the students like

"what? They died?" It was like "oh shoot, I'm so sorry, we didn't get there yet." It was like note to self: I do have to at least remind myself what we're reading.

But it forces the issue, yeah, and you kind of see it and you're reading along with them and kind of, again, experiencing these texts or topics or issues fresh. And like I said—and sometimes it can go the opposite where you're just like oh no; you're in that Groundhog's Day version, ten week version of Groundhog's Day where repetition isn't always positive. But yeah, so I will say—and then the upper division does kind of have small class sizes.

CP: There's traditionally been an internship component to the Ethnic Studies major. What role do you play in helping coordinate that?

PS: So, all of us had individually taken on advisees, and so it really is, I think, it depends on the individual student and where they would like to do their internship and kind of thinking about what connections we have with off-campus communities and how to guide them through that process. And certainly one of the challenges of being in Corvallis is if they aren't mobile then you're kind of, in terms of—especially for Ethnic Studies, kind of thinking about what opportunities and kind of organizations would work out. But by all means, since we first started, the number of places here within Corvallis has definitely gone up, as well. Yeah, so I think it's just to kind of act as a—to help them figure out and locate where they would like to do their internship, to help them navigate who to contact and approaching them, essentially. And then once they're there, ideally checking in. I probably should more than I do, make sure everything's going okay and then finish up with their final papers and their presentation.

CP: Let's talk a little bit about your research and how it has shifted and evolved over time. From looking at your vita, it looks like one of the early landmarks was the Civil Liberties Public Education Fund grant?

PS: Yeah, so that was not a research grant, that was a curriculum development grant, and yeah, I think—

CP: So, this was for a workshop on Japanese internment.

PS: Yeah, so the idea was, I'd have to say I think it was coming out of an Association for Asian American Studies conference where I was asking—I might have the order of this wrong, but somehow it just seemed like the issue of K through 12 education was coming up a lot, and so I think when the call came out for grant proposals, it was just kind of one of those things saying "okay, well what can we do relative to K through 12 education?" And I think constantly hearing from my college students, of kind of like "gosh, how come we didn't learn about this before?" and so forth. So, it just seemed to make a lot of sense, and it was a one-day workshop, open call. I think we gave an option to do for either a certificate or ed credit, so for K through 12 teachers here in Oregon, so that they can draw on that for their, I guess their vita and their file as well. But really kind of a just very intense—we had a panel of former attorneys, we had a number of different educators to kind of look at how one teaches this curriculum and kind of trying to get ideas about how to even think about kind of age-appropriate ways of presenting the material. So yeah, so that was the aim of trying to get as much as possible the lessons of internment into K through 12 classrooms.

CP: And it sounds like it made a pretty big impact?

[0:50:01]

PS: Yeah, I think, you know, certainly would have loved to see more participants. We then ended up having—the folks that were there were great, and again, that was one of the things that you learn I think, trying to figure out the networks and how, in hindsight, were there ways that we could have been much more proactive about how we were recruiting and kind of thinking about getting folks to campus for the whole day. But yeah, I think overall it was a good experience.

CP: And so, in terms of some of your writing, it looks like early on especially that there was, you were focusing kind of as an extension of your dissertation work and the idea of Japanese American identity, but the shift in focus from the dissertations on the seventies; you started to write more in the context of World War II, is that correct?

PS: Yeah. So, I need to dust off those articles—I actually spent some time in the archives in San Bruno and I—it's not a sort of extension of the dissertation as much as kind of, again, I think because of the focus on internment, I was teaching a class on internment and came across the issues of, or the cases of, the citizen renunciation cases, which at that point

had been unprecedented in U.S. history, where people were allowed to—and it was allowed as a special condition—to renounce their citizenship while still on U.S. soil. And at that point you couldn't do that before. It was a mass renunciation and it ended up in a decades-long—well into the I guess late sixties to even get their citizenship reinstated, because the bottom line is the argument, and I think fairly so, was that those citizenships were renounced under duress, in terms of thinking about the condition of the internment camps.

And so, when I was getting the archives, which was going through the affidavits and finding kind of situations where, for example, it would be a U.S. born *Nisei* woman, second generation woman, who was married to an *Issei*, or a first generation, who at the time could not become a U.S. citizen, even if they wanted to. And so, it was renounced with the idea that if they stayed different in citizenship status that they would be separated. So part of it in her affidavit was saying "I did this because of the anxiety of the differences," or some were done in anger, some were done in frustration. I mean, there were just a multitude of reasons, and I think kind of thinking about what those cases might say about them, the conditions of the citizenship and what they reflect about how the internees themselves were thinking about citizenship, because by that point citizenship in some ways had become such a sort of signifier. I don't know how else to—again, the meaning of that had lost what stability, clearly, giving the conditions of their internment.

CP: Was this your first archival experience, or among them, for you?

PS: It was, actually. So, it was, at least in terms of a National Archives, and yeah, I just felt so anxious. Everything was like "ahh." And certainly—but again, they were so nice, and certainly they're like "rookie." So, but there were just even the little things, like "don't do double-sided copy," because I was like "I'm saving paper," they're like "you can't do that, you can't do this," like "why?" Yeah, by the time—I went down there for a couple weeks solid, so I got definitely, became a regular and they were very supportive, and down to even like "you need a box," because I was always struggling with things, and it was very sweet, they gave me those really nice kind of hard, you know, it's not even—I mean it's cardboard but they're beyond cardboard, right? I still have them.

CP: That's funny. Do you feel like that your training in English has benefitted you in maybe unexpected ways as an academic in Ethnic Studies? Or hindered you?

PS: I think again, it's like you can't un-know what you know, I guess, in that training. I think it's—I like to think that it helps in certain—but probably folks from other disciplines do not see it helping, but I tend to see things in narrative terms, so even kind of thinking about the demands of Ethnic Studies as an interdisciplinary field means that, you know, our 101 we are looking at historical texts, we are looking at kind of a variety of course material. And I'm very clear with my students, so when we do the introductions I'm like "this is my background and this is how I'm approaching this, and so you need to know that. How a historian might be approaching this might be very different." And so, I am definitely coming at this history as a narrative, and I do see issues around competing narratives, master narratives and some dominant narrative; what are some attempts of having—whose stories are told most commonly, whose stories is this course trying to get at.

So, I think in that sense it's served me well. And the other thing I think too is an odd bit, but even doing the radio program. So, other forms of kind of thinking about structure and kind of the intention as someone that you pay to that. I think whether it's radio, other media forms as well, so radio and film. One of the other collective members is also from English, and we were sitting at 2:00 am at the radio station editing a piece and realizing you know, I have to say I'm actually grateful that—you know, because we were looking at this huge transcript and kind of thinking about how we were able to draw on our lit backgrounds to think about even the order and how to structure that interview so that it would have the most impact. You know; what question should come first, what makes the most sense. So yeah, so I think it implied a connection there as well.

[0:55:44]

CP: Yeah. We'll, let's talk about this a little bit. You started to get into film in 2003, it sounds like. We've referenced briefly before the film about clothes, the title is just *Threads*.

PS: Yeah.

CP: How did that happen? How did that come about?

PS: So that was, actually that was—you know I became a student at Northwest Film Center, I moved up to Portland I think around 2000, and was taking classes. So, one of these days I would like to return and do a better job with that, but I think I at the time was just intrigued with drawing on clothing as a site of intersectionality and just kind of thinking about the ways in which clothing—I guess I just felt like there are just so many different resonances across how we read people relative to their clothes, in terms of class, gender, sexuality, even race; thinking about clothing production and the conditions of that production. So, it was just a short film of trying to explore that and kind of thinking through. I don't know if it's just not disciplined enough, I don't do traditional documentaries, so it is very much, you know, there are interviews within it but it's more impressionistic, I guess, in that sense, in trying to draw juxtapositions and asking people about clothing and how they think about clothing.

CP: What inspired you to seek out this new skillset? I mean you're a tenure-track faculty member and a student at the same time?

PS: That was actually really fun. I have to say, I had always actually been interested in film and it just kind of ended up falling by the wayside. For my senior thesis at Claremont I actually did a screenplay instead of, in lieu of a traditional thesis. And so yeah, I had always been drawn to film, and thinking even in terms of my creative writing, was very fixated on image, so again, I mentioned June Jordan, so in terms of poetry it was constantly struggle—in some ways struggling against the form in and of itself, and I think picking up a camera just made sense. It's not that I just didn't enjoy poetry, but I think there's something about the visual image. So, it just was kind of time—I actually didn't see it as connected to my professional life at all. I've thought that this was going to be the thing to decompress, and this would be my side thing, and then once I got behind the camera realized that I can't not think about these things. So, when we would get assignments or just thinking about film projects, it's like that, you know, it just kind of ended up going that direction.

CP: How does that work play into the promotion and tenure model, I wonder?

PS: So, fortunately what it ended up that the content of the films were segueing me through—I had a lot of support. So again, kind of thinking about the benefits of being a department, and then I think within a college, which I also realize not every place—the kind of being able to think through just different ways of disseminating scholarship and ideas. And at that I've been incredibly grateful for. And it's not to say there weren't challenges going up for promotions, and Jun Xing, who was the chair at the time, was called up to the university and had to explain what a film festival was, what that means to get into the Asian International Film Festival in New York. It's not like—you don't just walk in and say "please show my film." So, try to explain the jury process and kind of thinking—and I understand. I mean, they're just very different forms. So, kind of thinking about trying to even think about how one thinks about that process of screening and juries and the selection process.

CP: You did another film on the Shanghai tunnels.

PS: Yeah, so that was again, it's very experimental, and that was collaboratively with a couple of other classmates at the film school. It's just on VHS. I'm trying to think of like—somebody was—I get every once in a while, I get emails asking for copies, and I need to digitize those at some point. But yeah, it's one of those things about Portland lore, and I think it had the three of us kind of thinking about fact versus fiction, thinking about access to history in itself. So, that was a great learning experience too, because one of them, the people within our group, had done a lot more work with non-digital formats, so 16 millimeter, and actually learned a lot of techniques. Sorry, this is kind of geeking-out, I feel, but techniques from her of actually laying text and kind of thinking about on the physical film.

So, within that piece, being able to play with different formats and merging digital with physical film, translating them back to digital and kind of looking at—because then we were able to draw on archival materials, so old newspaper clippings about abductions and da da da and trying to, again, very; it's not a traditional documentary but the hoped-for suggestion. And we actually did the Shanghai tunnel tour and filmed within that, the three of us. So, trying to kind of play on those juxtapositions of lore and fact, which is fiction, and access.

[1:00:42]

CP: You mentioned the radio program too, *APA Compass*? What's the story there?

PS: Yeah, so again, happy accidents. I feel very fortunate a friend's partner worked at KBOO, community radio. They had a call out for proposals and it was just one of those "wouldn't it be great" moments. So, was asked to "hey, what do you think about trying to propose a program that would look at Asian Pacific American public affairs, various issues?" And so, we put together a proposal, it got accepted, KBOO was very interested in kind of diversifying its programming. Incredibly, I feel like I've said that a million times before in this interview, but incredibly supportive. None of us had radio background, none of us had radio training. They spent the time to help us learn editing, all of technique and learn how to run an engineering board, and I think our second month in we had Margaret Cho in our radio station.

So, it was an amazing experience. I was deep within it for about five years, had to step back, give in to other demands on my time. But yeah, it was great. And just kind of thinking about what that meant, again, of a different way of disseminating. I'd say some of us were academics, some of us were community, worked in community, various organizations, some of us are relatively, I would say, probably skewed toward a few in terms of those of us who were involved in higher ed, but it was a wide range. And I think thinking through the connections that all of us had with various folks in other community organizations being able to kind of think through what issues were important to us and just reaching a very different audience was pretty exciting, and just it was a lot of fun. So, exploring like transnational, transregional adoption, for example, or doing an interview with a writer or culture—someone who's in cultural production...

CP: Were there any themes or issues that surprised you that emerged out of this process?

PS: Things or issues that surprised me...I wouldn't say necessarily surprised me, but I think it was a challenge in terms of even thinking about the editorial process and what ended up on our show and what wasn't. I think, I'm trying to think how to just—there were some authors that we interviewed that actually never made air, and so just kind of thinking about our mission statement and kind of issues around are we—how are we framing what it even means to be an Asian Pacific American public affairs program. I think in some ways we had the fortune of having KBOO's mission statement to fall back on, but yeah, I think the interview was surprising in terms of their viewpoint. So, I don't know what else it was there. I think thinking about those broader questions about just because someone technically identifies as Asian American or Pacific Islander, I mean what does that even mean? And I think we had talked about these questions, but I think on the ground, what that looks like in theory and in practice are two different things. But actually, and I think in terms of enjoyment I did a piece on the honorary degrees for Japanese Americans here at OSU.

CP: Oh yeah.

PS: That was a lot of fun, just having the chance to interview the folks who came here.

CP: Sure. Well, where do your interests lie these days?

PS: So, now I am working on what was originally a focus on Korean dramas, which has been around for a long time, but the kind of so-called Korean Wave has been a kind of pretty huge thing in Asia for the last fifteen years, and then more recently has come to North America in the U.S., Latin America. And so, kind of came again. My eighty year old mother is an avid Korean drama fan, and being home one day it was like what is this? I watched some of it, got her to myself, and now kind of intrigued from a different lens, a very different lens, of kind of thinking about what Korean drama, it's impact, kind of thinking about U.S. audiences in particular and kind of thinking about kind of the layers as culture. Because if you're watching it, I mean definitely kind of thinking about a flattening out in some ways, of kind of this cosmopolitan identity, you're kind of thinking about how these dramas are reflecting back certain aspects of U.S. pop culture, I guess, for the lack of a better word.

[1:05:29]

And I don't want to re-center the U.S. in that sense, but I think there's a long history of relationship of U.S. global media. And so, I think there's been more discussion about Korean drama relative to Asia as alternative to Hollywood, but then how alternative, you know; I think that certain storylines are still pretty entrenched in, I guess for lack of a better—kind of

these neoliberal [?] storylines of even what people are drawing from that. So, I'm looking at Korean drama, I was hoping to avoid K-Pop, which is the music, but I started—

CP: [Laughs] I was going to ask that question.

PS: I'm starting to realize I can't avoid it, because it's starting to shift into potential up at the front as opposed to just what was initially a conference presentation and then an article, because I think again, with much thanks to my current students who've had—been having a lot of conversations about race in pop culture, and one of the readings was kind of asking these hard questions of K-Pop and some pretty unfortunate incidents of blackface, or kind of borrowing this sort of coding. And the article's primarily invested in looking at presentations of African Americans, or black bodies, through the lens of popular media. But let's say now that the U.S. has exported all this, these particular commercial rap images, and now it's getting reflected back through K-Pop.

So, you have these kind of K-Pop girl groups, very cute, but then, I was just showing Dr. Thompson one of them, and they have the kind of trappings and the kind of codings, for lack of a better word, of commercialized blackness. So, this has nothing to do with actual African Americans, but the way in which it's been packaged, and what does that reflection back tell us about our own media as well, because I think certainly and understandably and rightfully so, there have been a lot of criticism of these K-Pop groups and what feels like just a kind of a crass appropriation of these cultures. But I think what ends up getting lost, it starts becoming about a Korean pop and African culture, African American culture debate, and it's like well, this is filtered through U.S. media, and these record labels have made tons of money off of these images, and that filter—sorry, I'm kind of, I want to try to start looking kind of what that filter and what we can learn, kind of thinking through those lenses of that, of K-Drama.

I think there are moments, despite for the most part being pretty not alternative to Hollywood. I think there are moments, though, that I find intriguing, that de-center the U.S. So you know, thinking about some of these dramas, there'll be moments, for example, of voiced resentment of kind of the privilege of learning English, using that in a status way and coding it kind of what get called goose fathers, this phenomenon of fathers who are staying in Korea to work and sending their wives and children abroad to learn English, with the understanding that this is what you do if you're a good father and you can afford it. And yet apparently a recent study's looked at depression and suicide rates among, I think the estimate's about two hundred thousand folks, and again, by all means those split families are happening all over, but how does that get reflected within these dramas as a moment of critique? I mean, I think that's the other thing I'm interested in.

CP: So, you're watching a lot of Korean dramas?

PS: I watch a ton of Korean—more than I care to admit, yeah, so under the excuse of, "this is research." But yeah, I do find—and then they're finding a sizable Latino and African American audience as well, and so I'm kind of thinking about what is it about these dramas and what is their appeal, and I think it's a mixed bag. So, a lot of people will also look at things as less sexuality, less violence and kind of is there an odd appeal to a certain conservatism as well, in these kind of strange—and then fitting also within this kind of multicolored layers. There are just all these layers of thinking through that I'm still just starting to kind of try to work out.

CP: Yeah. It's interesting to think, too, about the—I mean the internet, I'm sure, is enabling most of this—

PS: Yeah.

CP: And entities like Netflix that are serving up Korean dramas to people who would never know they were existing, just flipping through.

PS: Exactly. Yeah, the fact that they have their own genre marking and Netflix and now Hulu as well, and then you have specialty streaming channels like DramaFever and viki.com. And viki.com is a fan-based subtitling as well, and so I think that's also fascinating to me, that folks are willing to devote this kind of time and kind of one of the more recent hits, for example, translated into sixty-six different languages. So, kind of thinking about how broad-based these fan-bases are, and not just in terms of viewership, of viewers who were willing to sit there and actually do subtitling for these shows, on top of that.

CP: Yeah. Well, it sounds like a very rich topic to be investigating.

PS: Yeah.

CP: Well, I want to ask you a little bit about the Ethnic Studies Department. You've been with it since it began, and I'm just kind of broadly interested in your ideas on how it's evolved over the course of its history, how it's changed.

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PS: So, I'm trying to think, I can't, you know, certainly the biggest change has been the university-wide reorganization and kind of thinking about a restructuring, and College of Liberal Arts shifting from I think fourteen departments and programs to these five schools, and then so maybe—and I don't even know what to call us anymore, like are we a program, a unit, within the school of Language, Culture and Society. So, I think that has been a big adjustment. I think certainly you get spoiled just being able to be autonomous. And just even decision making as a small then department, we were very explicitly and firmly committed to working by consensus as much as we could. So, our decision-making process, all of that. And I think we still try to hold to that, but bottom line, a lot of the decisions are no longer around our table, so I think even thinking about what that looks like and how we function within the new school has been an adjustment. But I think we're adjusting. We have two new faculty coming in in the fall, so we're very excited.

CP: For a total of six?

PS: So, we'll have a total of, that'll put us at 5.5 I think, technically, so in terms of who's full time within Ethnic Studies. And then we have Ron Mize who has an appointment to the school, teaches occasionally a course for us there. So yeah, the math tries to get tricky, and I don't know—yeah, in that sense there's a lot more crossover, which that's I think the exciting part of thinking about having the opportunity for more connections with folks both within the school and beyond the school. I think exactly there's been, over the years, faculty who do work in race and ethnic studies and kind of thinking about, you know, in other units. And I think certainly it's always been a challenge just kind of thinking about how do we make those connections and create opportunities for more discussion and kind of cross-fertilization. So, I think with the restructuring that's in some ways helping. So, hopefully we'll see more of that.

So, I'm trying to think what else. Redoing the major and minor I think. I think we're in a pretty major transitional period with that adjustment and kind of thinking about what opportunities have opened up with the restructuring. And then I think thinking about doing Ethnic Studies here at a place like OSU, what the major would look like, what serves our students, and I think also in thinking through the challenges of just the time period relative to ideas around color blindness and so forth, and kind of thinking about what, how do we think about Ethnic Studies within a context of a moment where the broader notion is that race doesn't matter anymore; where we kind of reached that moment we have Obama as president, what's the problem? And I will say, I have to say, at least even now my current students are so much more savvy than maybe my fears would indicate.

So, I think by all means there's still a place, but I think it's how do we I guess figure out what Ethnic Studies means within that context. I feel like it does have its own challenges though, that versus twenty years ago or even when, I think it was first founded in the sixties, and kind of thinking about these in very different contexts and how do we adjust and kind of think through. And then there's also the reality, I have to say, of in good conscience, what does a student do with a bachelor's degree in Ethnic Studies. And again, that's no more or less than what does a student do with a bachelor's degree in English or Philosophy or so forth. I think the challenges of the amount of debt and what it costs to come to a university is weighing heavy, I think on all of us.

In good conscience, how do you figure out and how do we responsibly—because not all of our students have the means or desire to go on to graduate school. I think when their idea of going onto graduate school, especially if it's like something tied to a profession, it's a little bit more concrete. Even the pathway to grad school has its anxieties, because it's like okay, here's the reality that if you're going to invest in a PhD, know what you're getting into and do your homework and make sure that you know the risks in the field in which you're going, because I think there's, in the same way when I was a student, of the mystification around what it means to be faculty and teaching and doing his job. So yeah, sorry, long winded ways; I was kind of thinking through all these different questions and through every piece to try to figure out how we best serve our students, because I think especially coming out of this economic downturn, it was really hard.

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And it was like in terms of getting to the, I guess for lack of a better word, guilt management too, of thinking about these students are graduating with huge amounts of debt, whose families have really kind of put all their hopes and asp—on this one student, to hopefully be able to earn money and contribute back to the family, hopefully pull their siblings into college as well and provide the means to do that, and then not getting a job and just realities of economic downturn has been, yeah, it's...other than feeling bad, I feel like if I'm the student it's like "so, you feel bad. Meantime I got rent to pay." So yeah, thinking about those challenges as well.

CP: Yeah. But it's really interesting to hear that, I mean that's a side of considerations that most of the departments probably wouldn't ever even think of.

PS: Well, and you feel torn, because our survival depends on majors. And so I just had a conversation with someone just the other day and just kind of behind closed door, you know, "you have to do what's best for you," and was just kind of talking about the realities of what he was facing. I mean, and we even had a student several years ago who was in an interview for a job, and the person never heard of Ethnic Studies and actually questioned whether this is a legitimate degree or not, and it's horrifying. And I think again, I don't want to discourage any of our students. I honestly, I'm in the field, but I feel like there's an obligation to have some clarity though, around what that means. And when the particular challenges of recognition of that degree versus English, History, Sociology, so forth that has a little bit more, still, at least a little bit more recognition; life after college. But yeah, so kind of thinking about that, also—and again, there I think just in good conscience how you have that balance, because in terms of the pressure's on to recruit students, and obviously we do want students in our classes, but I think just trying to be clear about what that means.

CP: What are you hearing from your students in terms of how they're thinking about race these days and what it means to be a student of color or a community of color at OSU?

PS: I think still some challenges, and I think, I don't want to put words in their mouths, so I think that, I guess for me, my read through the filter of the kind of colorblind idea that, you know—and the thing that's the irony about colorblind is that it's not colorblind, it's about we see race but it doesn't really matter anymore; it's like we can celebrate each other's cultures and adopt each other's I guess cultural codings and however and it's all even. And I think for students trying to explain or clarify their own—and again, obviously each of these students have diverse experiences, and I think that's also probably some of the challenges. There's not definitive African American student experience here at OSU, or Asian American student experience, or again, I think there are students who flourish and do well, but if they happen to be one of those students that aren't and are seeing challenges of being in a predominantly white institution like OSU, I think just getting even the clarity or understanding of where they're coming from is part of the challenge, versus being kind of shut down from the get-go with "I think you're being too s"—which has always been an issue, but I think it's more pronounced now than when I first started teaching here, of like "are you sure you're not being too sensitive? I don't think a thing, I think why do you see race in anything?" or "*you're* the racist," and I think for them it's just like "ahh" sometimes, and kind of thinking about "not only did X, Y or Z happen to me, but when I talk about X, Y or Z, then I'm questioned again, that I don't even have a firm grasp of my own reality."

And I think just that multiplied over several incidences can, it gets wearing. So, thinking about that, I think thinking about...yeah, I think how diversity is fitting within kind of the campus community discussions. Then are there certain types of diversity that are more apt to receive support, I guess, or acknowledgement than others. And I think that too, the push for—it's my words, not theirs—of kind of the issues around intersectional analyses that we bring up, kind of what does it mean and the differences when, thinking about some of my students, when you're the first in your family to go to school, your whole family is kind of pressuring—and I think increasingly I've become more aware of international students within this whole scenario, given the large numbers that are being recruited and some pretty disturbing stories coming through my classroom, you know, having a student just crying the entire class period just because of the pressure.

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I mean just thinking about the pressure that is on the students, the assumption that they're all rich, so what's the big deal, like if you don't get this degree. And it's like in some cases, yes they are from wealthy families, but in other cases their families have put together anything and everything they had, is in this one child overseas. And again, it's just the added pressure to do well and succeed when it's your second language, when there's culture shock, when—I mean it just, it's kind of mind-blowing. So, I feel like that's also a challenge, thinking about students that we're recruiting, what is our

responsibility to them not just in terms of the academic support, but just more holistically, to think about what are their needs and adjustments, and for what is it—and I think that's where the Ethnic Studies part fits in, is just what does it mean, especially when you're coming from a place where you are not a minority.

And I think that's something I've also heard, is like "I—what is this whole thing? I got called a name and I don't know what to do with this," and it's just like again that part of it, and just not having had any discussions prior to this about how one copes with that. And I think just that bafflement, and I think those are the conversations where I think hopefully we can be at least of some assistance or some help to kind of think through how to support the students and how to process through that, because I think it definitely can be a hostile environment in some cases. Not always, though.

CP: Yeah. How have the cultural centers fit into the larger scheme of things in your mind?

PS: Yeah, so I think in the early days it was huge. I think not just for students, I think for faculty; like we would be at those advisory—the advisory board would be called to meet with students, staff at what was then the Asian Culture Center, is now the APCC, and they couldn't shut us up. They were like "we have to start a meeting," because we'd been talking, because it would be our opportunity to connect, and especially kind of thinking about a lot of us come from just different buildings or scattered across campus, and it gave us the excuse to come together, serving on an advisory board, whether it was for APCC or APASU or any of these student groups. So, I think they play a vital role in retention, not just of students but also faculty of color. We would have the big huge potlucks where it was like I'm sure the fire marshal would have been upset.

But it was meaningful, and I think having just that space, it was pretty significant. It certainly has high challenges too, in terms of kind of issues of all of the communities that are so diverse. And so, certainly the tensions in terms of international students not being addressed sufficiently; is it more kind of U.S. student based, is it certain ethnic, Pacific Islanders being left out of the picture? So, there's always been those challenges, by all means, but I think at the same time important conversations are happening around that. Yeah, but I just feel like over the years it's just been a really, a tremendous asset to have those spaces, and I think I'm not, I'm not as familiar with kind of more recent years, but it seemed like there was quite a spell too, where it was really nice to see the way in which staff trainings—and there was so much more interaction among the cultural centers on top of that.

So, having events in each other's cultural centers and kind of thinking through connections and students who were doing programming and events that were trying to look at what are the connections and historical relations between our communities, beyond kind of the superficial or this idea that we're somehow all separate. You know, what are those historical moments that actually fly in the face of that, like do we have certain issues in common, are there historical moments of coalition? Yeah, so I think that's really exciting too.

CP: Well Patti, I want to thank you very much for this, this has been a pleasure for me, and Ethnic Studies sounds like they're doing some evaluation themselves and maybe at a bit of a crossroads right now, but it sounds like hopefully things are headed in the right direction, and I appreciate you sharing your insight with us.

PS: Yeah, no thank you, and I probably rambled way too much, so thank you.

CP: No, it was terrific, thanks very much.

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