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The Empty Year: An Oral History of the Pandemic(s) of 2020 at UC Santa Cruz

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Publication Date

2021-04-01

THE EMPTY YEAR

**An Oral History of the Pandemic(s) of 2020
at UC Santa Cruz**



Photo by Jaden Schau

**Edited by
Cameron Vanderscoff & Irene Reti**

The Empty Year

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An Oral History of the
Pandemic(s) of 2020 at UC Santa Cruz



Bridge to Oakes College. Photo by Irene Reti.

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University Library, UC Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, California

The Empty Year: An Oral History of the Pandemic(s) of 2020 at UC Santa Cruz. Edited by Cameron Vanderscoff and Irene Reti.
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ISBN: 978-1678091439

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For more on the Regional History Project see:
<https://library.ucsc.edu/regional-history-project>

Printed in the United States of America by Lulu.com



Window, 2020. Photo by Irene Reti.

To the UCSC Community



The Road to Merrill College, UCSC. Photo by Irene Reti.

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Photos by Shmuel Thaler

Introduction



An Empty Campus. Photo by Shmuel Thaler

2020: A Year of Pandemic(s)

The unseen presence of COVID's droplets transfigures our habits and hopes. While the pandemic can be mapped and tracked and tallied with numbers, for it to be understood and felt for many, if not most people, we need stories.¹ What happened in 2020 has been unpredictable, at times incomprehensible, leaving us with at-best fragmented narratives of what's happening in us and around us. COVID-19's pandemic tide scatters us, sweeps us away from not only our routines, but from one another and from our interdependent sense of normalcy and self. Such splintered stories call for the deep listening of another to bind and cohere into something more whole, something more sustainable. In a time of great isolation, we—and our stories—need connection more than ever.

At UCSC and across the world, 2020 was a year of not just a pandemic, but pandemics, plural, at times running parallel, at other times crashing together, and other times still tearing apart, as different crises have gained national cultural primacy at different times. Sometimes it has felt out of control, supermassive

and rushing, like multiple rivers in cramped, intersecting canyons. Other times, paradoxically it has been stagnant, still, and, for some of us, suffocating. But it has always been more than one pandemic, more than one layer.

In fact, COVID-19, billed by some early commentators as “the Great Equalizer,” instead became “The Great Divider,” its unforgiving light laying bare other, more perennial American crises, longstanding realities that cannot be waylaid by a mask or inoculated by a vaccine. In order to construct a COVID-19 oral history project, we had to make space to speak explicitly of adjacent and overlapping pandemics.

This collection of twenty-two interviews gathered by University of California, Santa Cruz students under the auspices of the Regional History Project at the UCSC Library is by no means an exhaustive survey of a single subject; instead, it is an impressionistic illustration of an unstable present, exploring a range of ways people have encountered and interpreted this time. Some narrators speak primarily of racism and racial justice; for others, COVID -19 and its public health consequences are in the extreme foreground; others raise questions of economic justice in America; others still focus on the disruption of the pandemic and its lockdowns in their personal and social lives; and many speak across these topics and interweave them. Inflections of identities in race, class, gender, sexuality, community, work, physical location, and other markers of intersectional difference bring with them many combinations of perspective and knowledge.

The theme of racial justice is especially salient, since, in 2020, the national conversation about COVID-19 ran alongside, and overlapping with, a resurgent national conversation about race. Long before the first contract tracing of COVID-19 hit American shores, the 400-year pandemic of American systemic racism rendered historically marginalized and mistreated communities vulnerable to the disease. Hospitalizations and deaths from COVID-19 have been disproportionately high—sometimes double and triple those of white Americans—for Americans of color, especially Indigenous/ American Indian, Black, and Latino communities. In this pained,

charged context, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and other Black Americans launched a huge wave of protests and social action. Many of our narrators joined these protests and their experiences form a central part of the story presented here.

In addition, at UC Santa Cruz COVID-19 arrived in the midst of a massive labor action. In late December 2019, over 250 graduate students, along with their allies, launched a “Cost of Living Adjustment” (COLA) wildcat strike by refusing to submit fall-quarter grades for about 20 percent of undergraduate student courses. Santa Cruz, a beautiful beach-and-redwood-forest community just commuting distance over the hill from Silicon Valley, is one of the most expensive real estate areas in the country. This burden has fallen hard on many, including undergraduate and graduate student renters; stories abound of young people paying astronomical prices for substandard and cramped living situations, or of students becoming homeless and living in their cars. The cost of living in Santa Cruz is a serious barrier for working students in particular and a major problem—especially in the context of a public university like UCSC—and graduate students demanded a cost of living raise of \$1412 a month.

By early February 2020, the protest to do something about these working and living conditions boiled over into almost constant picket lines blocking the entrance of campus, marches, and arrests. The administration dug in, and it became a standoff. The campus—faculty, staff, students—was riven between those who supported the movement’s demands and those who opposed it, or, in some cases, those who supported the tactics and those who did not. Hundreds of students, staff, and faculty, as well as outside supporters—turned out for the picket line. At times the entrance to campus was completely shut down. Seventeen students were arrested and at least one student experienced police brutality.² On February 5, the administration responded with a crackdown, sending disciplinary warnings to the TA’s who had withheld fall 2019 grades. The Academic Senate voted in favor of the COLA, but the administration ultimately fired eighty-two students.³

It was a fraught chapter and a major event in the history of the campus in its own right—and, in February and early March 2020, it was becoming something far bigger. The small wildcat strike inspired similar strikes across the UC system and was becoming emblematic of nationwide inequities in higher education, especially the growing institutional dependence on grad students and other lecturers, who are paid far less than tenured professors and enjoy limited or no job security, and face an academic job market with collapsing opportunities. Bernie Sanders, then still a frontrunner for the Democratic nomination for president, tweeted his support; *The New York Times* and other media covered it, making it a national story. Santa Cruz and its strike had become a headline; the future was unclear, but the action wasn't going anywhere.

Then COVID-19 swept in, soon ending the picket lines on safety grounds, and isolating both protesters and administrators. From one vantage, the movement waned away. From another perspective—time will tell—it may simply have been forced into hibernation. In any case, the debate, conversation, and conflict about inequity at the university left a community especially primed for and sensitive to another interrelated pandemic that reared up in America: the pandemic of unemployment and economic inequality. Almost all of the narrators in this collection at least mention the strike and/or its related social conditions, in some cases using it as a springboard to understand and analyze issues of class, precarity, and capitalism and power in our community.

Another key variable that shaped our mix of pandemics in Santa Cruz and is reflected in this book is climate change. In August 16, 2020—in between our conception of the project and prior to its execution—a series of devastating lightning storms sparked massive wildfires in Santa Cruz and other areas. Locally, what became known as the “CZU Lightning Complex” exploded across more than 85,000 acres and claimed almost 1500 structures in Santa Cruz and adjacent San Mateo County.⁴

In a harrowing turn, the flames almost claimed the very subject of our oral history project: UC Santa Cruz itself. The blaze came within a mile north of the upper campus, and for a time it was

touch and go with the winds. The campus was evacuated, with those workers and residents who remained on site joining more than 70,000 regional evacuees unsure if they'd be able to return.

This threat was especially profound for UCSC, where the beauty and love of the world-renowned campus—rolling meadows, sweeping redwood forests, architecture weaving in and out of the tree-line, and vistas of the Pacific—is at the very heart of UCSC identity. It goes beyond aesthetics (though those are powerful as well): UCSC's natural environment has inspired extensive academic ecological studies, including around conservation, and has helped shape generations of environmental justice workers. The campus was placed here in large part in the first place because of the potential of learning in such an extraordinary setting. Today, in a university backstory marked by major changes of institutional vision, the land itself has been the greatest thru-line of our history. The existential threat to the campus felt, to many of us, like a potential loss of our home.

For a moment, it was all up in the air. Propitious shifts in the weather and the desperate work of firefighters who dug fire breaks held the inferno at bay at the very edge of the campus. All of us let out a collective breath. But other places and people were not so lucky: one of our narrators describes seeing floating embers on the wind, the destruction and loss of their trailer home, and their new life as a "climate refugee." The fires left an indelible mark on the community, and, arguably, centered climate change as the defining 2020 pandemic in Santa Cruz.⁵ In fact, in a time where there has been much conversation about the "loss of normalcy," the CZU Complex actually reinforced a depressing and dangerous new normal for Santa Cruz and much of the West Coast: an increasingly long and increasingly devastating annual fire season.

The Project & The Content

The Regional History Project, part of Special Collections & Archives at the UC Santa Cruz Library, has been conducting oral histories of UCSC and the broader community since 1963, two years before the founding of the campus. While COVID-19 is in itself a

rupture in local and global history, it's not the first time RHP has launched projects in response to rapidly changing present-tense events. A 1969 collection of interviews with then-students has become, in retrospect, a remarkable cross-section of a charged historical moment: the Vietnam War and the draft, civil rights, Black and Chicano Power, the hippie counterculture, and an era deeply preoccupied with a coupled sense of social crisis and social possibility. Regional History also recorded a series of interviews in the wake of the Loma Prieta Earthquake of 1989, documenting the destruction, damage, and fear of that massive event in our region.⁶

As a result, in that fast-changing spring of 2020 when the project idea first originated with Irene Reti, longtime RHP director and herself a campus alumna (undergraduate and graduate) and area resident, Irene wasn't starting from scratch. She had helped edit the Loma Prieta Earthquake interviews during her very first year with Regional History and had trained students in doing a series of oral histories documenting the history of LGBT students, staff, and faculty at UCSC that resulted in a book called *Out in the Redwoods*.⁷ There was an in-house tradition and template to draw upon for oral histories of social upheaval and natural disasters, as well as student-conducted oral histories.

Irene then partnered with me—a longtime RHP contractor, oral history colleague and mentee, and fellow alum (undergraduate) who now lives in New York City—to co-design and carry out this project. We both were familiar with the Loma Prieta and '69 Student projects, most recently having canvassed them as a part of our work (with co-editor Sarah Rabkin) on *Seeds of Something Different: An Oral History of UC Santa Cruz*.⁸ In fact, that book launched in March and early April, right as the pandemic came down. After five years of work on that volume, the moment *Seeds* was out (it had already been finalized and gone to press some weeks earlier, when COVID-19 was still mostly a dim intimation centered in Wuhan, China) we agreed that we already needed to turn the recorder back on to log these extraordinary, exceptional events, which happened to have fallen just out of the scope of our book.

Modeling ourselves on the Loma Prieta and *Out in the*

Redwoods interviews, we opted, instead of doing the interviews ourselves, to put together a true project community to create a true community project. We put out a call and hired a team of interviewers, consisting of four undergraduates and one graduate student to round out our initial duo of staffer/alum and contractor/alum. We framed this as an applied educational opportunity for our team, and previous experience with oral history was not a strict prerequisite. We looked instead for a certain kind of curiosity, for a conscious way of relating to and interpreting these times, for an emotional engagement, for community awareness and connectivity, and for a tool kit from oral history adjacent fields (radio, anthropology, history, et cetera)—in other words, the basic ingredients for an effective and empathetic interviewer.

Several of our student interviewers were recommended by Professor of Sociology Jenny Reardon and graduate student researcher Dennis Browe (who himself became one of the narrators for this book) of UCSC's Science & Justice Research Center (SJRC). In the spring of 2020, SJRC had sponsored an undergraduate independent study seminar, *SOCY 194: Living and Learning in a Pandemic: The Sociology of COVID-19*.⁹ As summer internships after the course concluded, some of the students created a zine and a podcast about the pandemic, among other projects.¹⁰ Some of the creative works they produced will be archived at Special Collections in the future. This proved to be a talent pool for our project; we are grateful to Reardon and Browe for their collaboration and networking.

After hiring our full team of students, we held two oral history workshops in October of 2020. We trained students in the methodological and ethical fundamentals of the field, and thereafter held biweekly Zoom debriefs where we could share observations, knowledge, and the weight of this work and this time together. Each meeting started with an emotional temperature check, and we encouraged self-care. We also actively solicited student interviewer suggestions—effective questions, something meaningful they learned, interviewing experiences for good or bad—to advance our co-learning experience and project fine-tuning as much

as we could in a tight timeline.

After students completed their first external interviews (by early November), I provided detailed time-coded feedback on their work to apply to their remaining two interviews. In the end, every student completed four sessions as an interviewer: one internal applied-practice interview with a fellow team member, and three external interviews with narrators from outside of the project. All interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom A/V recording.

We were also aware that this is a financially challenging time for many students. Student jobs have been particularly hard hit by COVID-19 and its lockdowns, and students or their families are still expected to pay full tuition for remote education. Participants' time and labor was recognized with a modest stipend.

Irene and I designed the project framework and selected interviewers, but we did not select narrators. Instead, we asked that students choose their three external narrators themselves; as a result, these were not oral history interviews between two strangers meeting for the first time in the session. This felt important given that our subject matter was not light; the scaffolding of an existing relationship, even if that of an acquaintance, seemed better than a cold start, especially on Zoom. The inspiration for this approach came in part from my limited parallel involvement in Columbia University's NYC COVID-19 Oral History, Narrative and Memory Archive, which also asks interviewers to source their own narrators.¹¹

What ensued was a kind of network-building experiment. The project itself makes no claim to be comprehensive—UCSC has almost 20,000 students, let alone faculty and staff. Instead, what has ensued is one composite frame of UCSC community, as defined together by our team members. It seems fitting, as this type of collection is in many ways a microcosm of the global experience of COVID-19 as a whole: our project is both intimate, personal, with many interior accounts of isolation and hardship, and, at the same time, extraordinarily interconnected and far-reaching.

While COVID-19 has placed many of us alone in our homes, feeling disconnected and disoriented, at the same time, people are finding new ways to share and bond with folks all over. It's not

the same, but it's sustenance, even a kind of emotional survival, and it's present in these sessions. The word "intersubjectivity," which is often used in oral history to describe the give-and-take dynamic between interviewer and narrator, extended to the project itself: our efforts became an interactive record of our participants' social worlds.

In 2020 the very concept of community was being redefined remotely in an unprecedented way—and our UCSC community and UCSC collection was no exception. As a result, communication was a major topic in these interviews: how are individuals learning information, where are they learning it, and how are they sharing it? What sources—whether social media, mainstream media, UCSC itself, friends, relatives—do they trust?

Furthermore, in such a distanced atmosphere, how are people maintaining their social ties? While almost all of our narrators had been physically located in the Santa Cruz area when COVID-19 began, as of the time of these sessions—October, November, and December 2020—the majority of them were now situated elsewhere, having moved back with parents, or in with friends or other family, or simply having left for work or other suddenly-accelerated life changes.

It helps the breadth of our "composite frame" that these narrators themselves have a broad range of relationships to UCSC: they are staff, faculty, lecturers, undergraduates, graduates, and alums, each one dealing with their own intersection of pandemics. Since the biggest narrator demographic within this set was students, another major topic within that is the adjustment to remote learning, and, in many cases, the sense of regression that comes with once again living in childhood bedrooms. These students found themselves dealing with—in some cases, coping with—their families and their hometowns, some of which no longer fit the person they had become (or publicly had become) in college. Some of them, in particular those from middle-class families, relate an interruption of a coming-of-age narrative around what it's supposed to mean to go to a four-year college.

Twenty-two individual interviews may not be huge by oral history

collections standards, but even our small composite spanned and connected disparate counties and communities, coasts and countries, illustrating, once again, the paradoxical interconnectedness of this time. These stories travel from Santa Cruz to San Diego, the Chesapeake to Manhattan, and the U.S. to Mexico to Pakistan to Japan. Along the way, they collectively address a question that may seem strange at first: our project wasn't just asking how is the UCSC community (e.g. what have our experiences been), but *where* is the UCSC community, and *what* is the UCSC community? Where are its boundaries? What does it stand for once it becomes a remote concept?

Instead of boundaries, to quote Irene's comadre and theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, we found a kind of "nepantla," a word of Nahuatl origins that is roughly defined as "liminality" or an "in-betweenness." The UCSC community was in limbo, both nowhere to be found (where had everyone gone?) and (it seemed) everywhere. As Anzaldúa defines it, nepantla is a place of dislocation; it can also be a scene of shaping, of change of transformation. "Now let us shift," Anzaldúa writes.¹² The phrase slides straight to the heart. I can think of no better imperative, or motto, for this time of pandemics. There is much shifting in the stories enclosed.

As a result, to speak of a unitary or static UCSC "community experience" of 2020 is difficult. But this reality isn't unique to Santa Cruz; indeed, our country's changes and divisions have been so profound that the very idea of a "national experience" of 2020 is something of a wishful fiction. Certainly, broad parts of the country and our community are bound together in what might be called a shared "national understanding" of this time and its crises; one could explain the state of our current domestic politics as being broadly split between the adherents of two such different macro national understandings (perhaps most fundamentally, whether the disease itself or its cure/response is more dangerous for our society). This collection's pool of narrators, skewing liberal or progressive Californian, trend towards the former understanding. But even these macro "national understandings" show cracks once you zoom in far enough. In the absence of consistent federal guidance,

each of our narrators to some degree improvised and assembled their own set of pandemic protocols, and moved through this time and their space in distinct, constantly evolving ways.

This sense of shift was further amplified by context: these interviews all took place in the final quarter of 2020, and they offer a particularly vivid, varied, and unresolved telling of the turbulent weeks immediately before and after the November presidential election. In that moment, the first national peak of COVID-19 (July) and a summer of racial justice protests were, relatively speaking, in the rearview.

But we were just starting the painful ascent to the far higher second national COVID-19 peak (January), and as our tape rolled, the country set, broke, and set again a series of grim new daily case records. Meanwhile, narrators went through the bitter wind-down of the presidential campaigns, election day, Biden's slightly delayed victory the following weekend, and the previous president's ongoing refusal to concede. The project then wrapped just before a tempestuous late December and early January, marked by a dispute over COVID-19 relief measures in the Congress, and, indelibly, the storming of the U.S. Capitol by a far-right mob on January 6. These interviews record some of the boil up, but not that boiling over. When we stopped the tape in mid-December, Biden's inauguration seemed a long, long month away.

In a word, these sessions give us insight on 2020 and its contradictions: its upsetting cocktail of chaos and stillness; suspended animation and out-of-control events; fear and hope; frustration and boredom; arrested development and soul-searching; and death and banality. Ambivalence was the byword of 2020, and it's shot through many of these interviews. People were both okay and very much not okay, both getting by and struggling with mental health. In reviewing the complete collection, the military term SNAFU (Situation Normal, All Fucked/Fouled Up) comes to mind. Things were routine—or they simply had to be as much as was possible—and things were deeply messed up in a way that was both manifestly self-apparent and partially inexplicable.

The Unknown Future

There are other collections in our archive, such as the '69 student interviews, which take place in fraught historical moments where narrators think sweeping, even revolutionary change will have to come—but in many ways, it simply doesn't. The status quo marches on. Many narrators in this collection talk about a need for change in many ways, from the local to the national—but then again, American history is too often a story of demands unmet and "dreams deferred."¹³

Closer to home, the future is likewise unclear. UCSC was founded specifically as a residential collegiate university in 1965. Its whole vision was oriented around direct, immediate, and personalized education in small classrooms. It was supposed to be an antidote to the industrialized large-scale education of the 50s. While the applied reality of that vision has changed significantly over the years, this current mass remote learning predicament is an unprecedented and radical deviation.

We simply don't know what the future of residential education will be in this country; there are real questions about the future of higher education, period. The current situation—in which many of the narrators herein describe paying full tuition for all-online courses taken remotely from home—seems less than tenable, as in the past this area has been dominated by far cheaper online vocational and technical colleges. Meanwhile, the experience of UCSC in particular has long been linked to the exceptional landscape and the distinct collegiate architectural layout. The idea of a future UCSC with a major remote component suggests a drastic shift from our history.

But in the midst of all the breakages narrated in the collection, there also is a continuity. UCSC likes to promote that it's an unusual and exceptional place (one slogan: "the original authority on questioning authority"). That idea that UCSC is a questioning place, a critical place, can sometimes elide the uphill and very struggles on campus that are faced by activists, such as around racial and economic justice.

But underneath that glossy PR veneer, there is something deeper, something radical and sharp-edged, that appears from time to time in our history. At our best, we place a social, political, even a moral value on asking questions in and of this life—innovative questions, weird questions, provocative questions, different questions. In a way, especially in times like this, they're survival questions for a strange world. It shows up in the best of the experimental and innovative work that comes out of the campus, and lives in the legacies of the most committed of our professors and staff, and in the exceptional duration and courage of, for instance, the pioneering and ongoing struggle for queer rights on campus.

This particular collection of voices, taken as a whole in both meditation and incitation, is an extension of that tradition of asking hard questions and being willing to seek out the answers. It represents something of which our narrators and our community can be proud, and from which we hope future readers will learn.

For now, that's all we know. What comes next is occluded. On July 15, 2020, at a *Seeds of Something Different* remote reading, UCSC Professor Donna Haraway said it best:

There is some really fundamental way in which we can't imagine what it is that we are living. Because if we thought we were living in transformational and transitional times, let's say in 1980, with the appearance of Ronald Reagan in the White House, and then perhaps in 2008 with the extraordinary international financial collapse and its consequences and the radical transformations of living and learning together in places like UCSC, we hardly had a clue for the transformational time we're living in now in all sorts of ways.

I want to evoke what Jim Clifford¹⁴ said about what he felt when he was walking across campus, which is the feeling of emptiness. We are living in a place of no-place....

I don't think we can live in a place of no-place for very long. That said, I think living in a place of no-place helps us cope with the facticity of the power of the transformational moment—and its dangers and possibilities.¹⁵

Conclusion: The Empty Year

Haraway's feeling of emptiness, of no-place, is captured in the main title of this collection, "The Empty Year" which originated with Isabella Crespín, one of our students. At first blush, it can sound dark, even bleak. There's an undeniable haunting quality about it, a year lost, or a year hollowed out and gutted. That fits a project about a calendar year where hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people died in our country and around the world; their loss is absolute, and it is irreducible.

But at the same time, for me, there's something optimistic, or at least open-ended, in the concept of the "Empty Year." Like an empty cup, it's ready to be filled with something—in this case, we hope, with meaning. 2020 was by most measures, for most people, a difficult year in one sense or another, but what this time comes to mean is still an open question, and it comes down to what we do now: what stories will we tell about this time? What and who will we honor?

I was recently having a conversation with my grandfather, who, now 99, was born in the immediate aftermath of the Spanish Flu, another pandemic which has resurfaced in the national consciousness. He recalled when he was a kid in the 1920s, his neighbors in rural Minnesota would sometimes invoke the flu and pay respects to someone who had died in "the influenza." In speaking with Grandpa, and in the course of getting this collection together, I've reflected that the problem, when it comes to these intersecting pandemics, isn't that we haven't been here before. We actually have—many, many times. The problem is that we haven't kept the memory; in our American culture, we have pushed so many essential voices to the dim margins, buried the truths of the time, and tried to leave anything ambivalent or contradictory in our wake and instead look forward.

So when I think of the "Empty Year," it's a perfect name for this year, a cracked, fraught vessel that at times didn't hold. It's up to us now to fill it, to hold it and heal it, and to make meaning from it. It won't be easy to understand this time, because time itself was

a struggle, as is apparent in these interviews. Even grammatical tense was vexed: “What communities are you part of back home? Or were, at least?” asks Crespín in one session, indicating how difficult it is to even speak in the present tense when the now feels so foreign, and so unmoored from past and future. Many narrators share some type of time anxiety, from stress to mortality; other narrators indicate that they now have an abundance of time. Time is leisure, and time is pressure.

Yet another narrator, Professor of History Ben Breen, delves into historical time to make sense of our present, our “empty year,” reminding us that this isn’t novel; in fact, Santa Cruz has been shaped by plague. In the late 18th and early 19th century, many of the indigenous inhabitants of this land—the ancestors of the current Amah Mutsun Tribal Band—sickened and died due to pandemics brought overseas by the Spanish Empire. From that standpoint, Breen points out, we’re already living in a “post-apocalyptic” world—one where then, as now, some communities pay the price, and others reap the proceeds. We have been “here” before.

Today, it’s March 11th, the one-year anniversary of the official declaration of the COVID-19 Pandemic by the World Health Association. Vaccines are becoming more widespread, and, instead of simply more and more COVID-19 particles, it feels suspiciously like hope in the air. That pandemic is being addressed. The other intersecting pandemics, however—racial injustice, climate change, colonialism, economic inequality and more—require different solutions.

For them, and for next time—whatever the next confluence of pandemics might be—we’ll need to find ways to keep this memory. For instance, imagine if the tape could have been rolling back in Santa Cruz in 1920. What if we had an archive of firsthand voices on surviving the Spanish Flu as a community, or of navigating racism after 1919’s “Red Summer,” in which many Black Americans nationwide were subject to an epidemic of white mob and police violence, including just up the highway in San Francisco? Once again, we’ve been here before. And to prevent such fraught years, whether 1920 or 2020, from staying only empty, we need stories.

We hope this collection can be one small step in that direction.

Acknowledgements

Irene and I would like to thank, above all else, our extraordinary group of students. Even though we only had one quarter together, our gatherings became a welcome and reassuring ritual for both of us, and, we hope, for the students. To the students: your insights, your perspicacity, your community bonds, and your readiness to learn, teach, and listen have been an inspiration. You've created a collection that is a credit to the campus, to the field, and your own careers; you quite literally made this project, and we hope you're proud of that—it's no small thing. So a very special thanks to our team of interviewers: Isabella Crespin, Kathia Damian, David Duncan, Maryam Nazir, and Aitanna Parker. A profound thanks also to the twenty-two narrators of this project. It was a privilege to learn from you all; we hope you will keep sharing your stories.

I'd like to thank my colleague, collaborator, mentor, and friend par excellence, Irene Reti, who not only co-designed this project, but did the hard work of securing funding, handling all the institutional-side labor, managing our budgets, and the layout/design and printing prep of this book. She and I collaborated on this project, but now and always, if we were a law firm Irene's name would, rightly so, come first on the letterhead, in boldface. Indeed, Irene's time as director of the Regional History Project and her love of this special place has made her an icon in campus history in her own right, though I don't know if she'd admit that (but it's true). Irene, thank you for holding and keeping and growing the memory of UCSC. This project, taken along with *Seeds* and your anthemic oral history of George Blumenthal, are an extraordinary bookend for an extraordinary career—you're going out with a bang and leaving a legacy.

Thank you to photographers Shmuel Thaler, Jaden Schaul, Irene Reti, and Elizabeth Van Dyke, whose images of 2020 create a powerful visual record of this extraordinary year that accompanies the oral narrative.

Appreciation goes out to Teresa Bergen, who expertly

transcribed the entire collection on a rolling basis. Teresa's involvement is also a kind of poetic bracket; she was one of the team members of the Loma Prieta earthquake oral history project when she was a student at UCSC in 1989. Thank you to student editor, Klytie Xu, for her excellent proofreading assistance. I'd also like to thank Amy Starecheski and the Columbia project team, who were like a parallel community for me, and who helped me think this project through in leading by example.

Thank you to the Radical Resilience Small Grant Award from the UCSC Student Success Equity Research Center; The Humanities Institute, particularly Irena Polić; and the UCSC Library for their financial support. Thank you to the Library's financial wizards, Hiroko Acker and Kim Hughes and to Human Resources specialists Tara Gooden, and Melody Eldridge for helping us navigate the bureaucracy so we could pay our students stipends for their work. Finally, much gratitude to Teresa Mora, the Head of Special Collections & Archives, who deeply believed in and supported this effort.

Copies of this volume are on deposit in Special Collections and in the stacks at the UCSC Library, as well as on the library's website. The Regional History Project is supported administratively by Teresa Mora and University Librarian Elizabeth Cowell.

—Cameron Vanderscoff, *Project Co-Director*

March 11th, 2020

Uptown, New York, New York

Endnotes

¹Those of us in this time are used to the COVID-19 pandemic being measured and communicated in now-familiar numerical ways: in the unemployment statistics, in recoveries and hospitalizations, and, indelibly, in deaths—as of this writing in March 2021, 528,000 and counting in the country, more than 2.6 million in the world.

²<https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2021/01/22/uc-santa-cruz-grad-student-sues-campus-police-alleging-brutality>

³For a complete timeline see: <https://payusmoreucsc.com/campaign-timeline/>

⁴See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CZU_Lightning_Complex_fires

⁵To contextualize this statement, Santa Cruz County has, as of this writing, had about 15,000 cases of COVID-19, and about 200 deaths, out of a population of approximately 273,000. According to March 15 figures from Becker's Hospital Review, California's COVID death rate is 143 per 100,000, meaning Santa Cruz is well below the state average. Nationwide, the lowest death rate per 100,000 is Hawai'i (32) and the highest are New York (249) and New Jersey (269). Santa Cruz, relatively speaking, is on the lower end of the nationwide COVID spectrum. This does not mean the COVID losses have not also been severe; again, we need stories, not just numbers. For instance, one of the very first deaths in Santa Cruz was that of a campus shuttle driver. They were a well-known staff member familiar to countless students members from their routes, and the news of their death spread wide and brought home the reality of COVID-19.

⁶See Randall Jarrell and Irene Reti, editors, *The Loma Prieta Earthquake of October 17, 1989: A UCSC Student Oral History Documentary Project*. ⁷<https://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/oir.exhibit/index>

⁸ <https://guides.library.ucsc.edu/speccoll/seeds>

⁹ <https://news.ucsc.edu/2020/05/outbreak-inquiry.html>

¹⁰ <https://scijust.ucsc.edu/2020/05/08/covid-19-zine/>

¹¹ <https://incite.columbia.edu/covid19-oral-history-project>

¹²See Anzaldúa, Gloria E. 2013. "Now Let Us Shift . . . the Path of Conocimiento . . . Inner Work, Public Acts." In *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, edited by Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, (New York: Routledge 554–92). For Anzaldúa's concept of nepantla, see Gloria Anzaldúa (edited by AnaLouise Keating) *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro*. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015). Reti has written about her experience as Anzaldúa's comadre in writing and housemate in *House of Nepantla: Living with Gloria Anzaldúa* (HerBooks, 2017) available at <https://www.blurb.com/books/8154784-house-of-nepantla> and in *EntreMundos/Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

¹³See Langston Hughes's poem "Dream Deferred." <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/dream-deferred/>

¹⁴UCSC professor emeritus and Dr. Haraway's fellow remote panelist at that July event.

¹⁵ See <https://vimeo.com/439042677>



Barn Theater Sign, 2020. Photo by Irene Reti.



Red-Shouldered Hawk. Photo by Elizabeth Van Dyke.

The Interviewers/Team Members



Rachel Carson College, 2020
Photo by Irene Reti

Isabella Crespin

Interview by Maryam Nazir



Isabella Crespin is an anthropology and film major at UC Santa Cruz. In her letter of application to this project she wrote, "When I decided to major in both anthropology and film I had a strong goal in mind. I always felt that the field of anthropology often ignored the benefits of different mediums besides academic writing. By learning the ways to use media, I knew that I wanted to use that knowledge to make anthropology more accessible and

understandable to those outside of the field. I feel that learning how to properly document oral history is a great stepping stone for me to learn how to use audio as a way to engage with people."

Crespin was living with her parents in San Diego during the pandemic.

Family Background

Nazir: Today is November 9, 2020. I'm going to start off with general questions about yourself. So just tell me a little bit about where you're from.

Crespin: I'm from L.A. I used to live in Long Beach; I lived in Culver City; and now I live in San Diego. I moved in high school. Now I'm back, so that's cool.

Nazir: How long have you lived in California?

Crespin: Oh, my whole life. I never left.

Nazir: (laughs) That's pretty cool. You said you're from SoCal [Southern California]. So you grew up in SoCal your whole life?

Crespin: Yeah, minus college, it's just been SoCal. Two different cities, very different, but the SoCal vibe is the same.

Nazir: What made you choose UC Santa Cruz?

Crespin: Honestly, (laughs) money. They gave me the most financial aid. And it's also the school that's good for both of my majors: film and anthro. So I was like oh, get both in, don't have to go in debt.

Nazir: Yeah. And then what year are you?

Crespin: I'm a third-year.

Nazir: Why did you decide on film and anthropology as your majors?

Crespin: I've always liked anthro. Like, I don't know, *Indiana Jones* is cool. I mean, that's not what you actually do. But *Indiana Jones* is pretty cool. I've always been fascinated with people and I grew up loving film. I love telling stories, not necessarily just through film. I grew up next to Sony Studios.¹ A lot of my friends' parents—I found out later that a lot of them did film stuff—and definitely were rich. I wish I was.

Nazir: Are there any communities that you're involved with down in SoCal?

Crespin: Not recently. I used to volunteer. I volunteered for the

Women's March back when Trump first got elected. I was a security guard. I don't know why. I'm not physically strong. I was sixteen, so that was weird. I did a bunch of college prep stuff for low-income kids. I am still kind of a part of that. I do college guide stuff for the Latino community.

Nazir: Where's your family from, extended family?

Crespín: That's a long question. My mom's from Brazil and my dad is Spanish and Mexican. My mom likes to call us mutts. She's like, "Oh, we're just a mix of everything. So, who knows?"

Nazir: Have you ever visited?

Crespín: I visited Brazil when I was a kid. Last time I was there, I think I was like five. I haven't been back. Whenever I ask my mom, she's like, "I've already been there. I want to go somewhere new." So I guess I'll have to go on my own. I've never been to Mexico, which is kind of weird, because I live on the border. I've seen Mexico from my high school. If you go to the top floor, you can see across the border. But, yeah, only been in America and there.

Nazir: Do you have family near you, or are you guys kind of dispersed?

Crespín: I have some family near me. I have my aunt. I live with my aunt. My dad lives in Anaheim and my grandpa—technically my uncle—I don't really talk to him. Everybody else is in Texas; New York; I found that the other day, England. I don't know, wherever.

Nazir: Do you have any siblings? Do you come from a big or small family?

Crespín: I have a sister. We're like the same person. We have the same voice and it confuses everyone.

Nazir: How old is she?

Crespin: She's eighteen.

Nazir: So she's just going to college? Or did she just graduate?

Crespin: She's starting college. She goes to Irvine. It's all online, so that's definitely a different experience, to start like that.

Nazir: Yeah, (laughs) I have a sister, too. She's the same age. She just started Cal State Pomona all online. Cool. So, did you really enjoy your experience when you were in Santa Cruz back when we were in-person? Did you like it?

Crespin: I liked the opportunities I had, but I definitely am not a Santa Cruz person. You get what I mean? There's a very specific Santa Cruz culture that I don't feel a part of, which is fine. But I liked the people. People tend to be really nice. I came from very competitive schools, so it's different. And the departments I'm in are super chill.

*"People couldn't grasp that life was going
to have to change"*

Nazir: I'm going to go into the COVID-related questions, because I don't have any more big-picture questions. You mentioned you were from SoCal. Are there any communities or groups of people that you're close to that you feel were really impacted by COVID?

Crespin: My grandpa lives in—it's a garbage town—but it's an old-person town. Everyone's a senior citizen. It's called Hemet. It's a desert town. I think it's like a heroin capital or something, I don't know. They always talk about how it's gone to shit when I go there. But their town, surprisingly, takes it pretty seriously. By the time I got home, they were already in lockdown, two weeks before the national panic happened. Whenever there's an uptick, the smallest uptick, they shut down really fast, so they definitely were affected.

My dad works as a chef. Restaurants, (laughs) that's not really a thing. But he runs the Honda Center. It's a hockey stadium. He runs all the restaurants that are related to the stadium, like a conglomerate, or whatever. So all of his places got shut down and he was just working from home. So that was weird. He's always working overtime, works like twenty hours a day, sleeps four hours. It's crazy. My mom worked from home.

My sister was pretty affected because she was a high schooler. So she missed prom; she missed graduation. That sucked. They had a weird walk-through the high school for graduation. You just walk through the front gate of the school and they give you a bag of goodies, and then you pick up your diploma, and there's a place to take pictures. It was pretty lame.

Nazir: Yeah. Have you and any of your friends, people who you were close with in Santa Cruz, been affected by the pandemic? And if so, how?

Crespin: Oh. I lived in the ILC, the International Living Community.² So some people were from China. Because that whole thing started before anyone else really cared, they were kind of like, "Oh, that's something we should be looking at."

I had a roommate from Australia who wanted to stay in America and party. I'm not going to question his judgement—he has bad judgement—but that's what he wanted to do. But his parents forced him to leave in the middle of the night on some late red-eye flight. Some Japanese girls wanted to stay, but their school bought a ticket for them and forced them to come back, because of the government saying they need everyone back home. Oh, and my housemate David, he's from Spain. Madrid was hit pretty hard by COVID, which is where he's from. So he couldn't go back home till the summer, because there were no flights allowed to go. He couldn't even get in the city, if he wanted to. So, yeah, the international students got screwed if they didn't leave right away. But otherwise, everyone else I know just kind of moved back home.

I did have a Turkish friend who stayed on campus until he found some people to find a house off campus.

Nazir: At what point before everything got shut down did it hit you that this was very, very real and it was going to change a lot of things?

Crespin: I'm a paranoid person, first off, so I'm going to warn you about that. I was teaching a class in winter quarter and I had a couple of students who were Chinese from Wuhan. So there were a couple of different classes that we all taught the same stuff and we'd have a group meeting. Some of them were from Wuhan and they were like, "My family's in lockdown." I was like, "Wow, that's bonkers. How's that happening?" They were taking it really seriously. In China, they were not really being open about stuff, so they were freaking out. That made me nervous. But it also was faraway. You know what I mean: "I've never been to China. How's that going to touch me?" Globalism.

So, fast forward—Santa Clara gets its first case, right?³ I remember it was some old rich dude. Of course, it's rich people because they travel everywhere. And the rich community got it. That's when I got concerned. Because rich people play by different rules. They do not care. And nothing was being shut down. New York started getting cases. Then Italy shut down. And I was like, Italy? That's a bit close to home. So those first few cases in California, I was kind of like, yeah, this is going to be a thing. I didn't predict this. I just figured it was like, oh, wash your hands. And that's it. You know, like flu season stuff, or swine flu stuff, or whatever.

But when the school shut down—I don't know what the exact timeline was—but it seemed like one day they were like, "Okay, wash your hands. Don't touch people," and the next day they were, "No gatherings of 200 or more." And the next day was like a 100, and later that day it was like 30. And then they were like, "Just don't have class." All of a sudden, I was like, okay, this is something serious. I should get out.

"I thought it was only going to be like three months because that's how long it took Italy."

Nazir: Did you feel like it was going to pan out this long? What was your initial timeline of how you think it was going to play out?

Crespin: I thought it was only going to be like three months because that's how long it took Italy. I think when Wuhan was shut down, it was like three months. But surprise, people don't believe in science anymore. I'm sad about that. That's depressing.

I just thought it would be three months. So I flew home. That was probably not a smart decision. But it was before anything else got shut down. It was just school shut down. So I flew home. And there was this man—honestly, he probably did have COVID—he was being sickly, coughing, sweating. And he was trying to get up all next to me. I was like, "Sir. The news says stop." Not wearing a mask. I mean, I didn't wear a mask, either. That was before masks were a thing.

And also the San Jose Airport the day before had fifty cases of COVID. So they had to take out all the TSA people and put in new ones. So it was kind of like, you know, the disease is near.

When I got home, no one was really as panicked as me, besides my sister, because she's kind of a hypochondriac. But I forced my dad to come by and buy groceries, an absurd amount. It was like two weeks' supply. Oh, wow, a lot of stuff happened.

Nazir: What were the initial challenges? Like first transitioning to in-person to virtual learning for you?

Crespin: I don't like virtual learning. It's not my favorite thing in the world. But because of the strikes, some of my classes were already online.⁴ And I took an online course in winter, besides those ones that were forced to be put online. So it wasn't that big of a transition for me. I know other people hate it and they can't learn that way.

But I already had my experience. I guess that's a good thing that happened before COVID, all the strikes. They gave us that.

Nazir: What are some challenges that some of the people in your community, or close friends, were facing during this transition?

"Everyone was freaking out and no one knew what was happening."

Crespin: So there were a couple of ones. But let's bring it back to me for a second. (laughs) That sounds selfish. But when I got home, they told everyone to get off campus, right? So I was already back home, because I thought it was like a spring break situation and I'd be able to go back. Not the case. I forced my friend to drive me from San Diego all the way up to Santa Cruz. That was the day where it was the lockdown order, the first one that came out. Everyone was freaking out and no one knew what was happening. We got to Santa Cruz and then we immediately left. I got into the apartment and then I just packed all my shit and got out of there. And one of my roommates, she wouldn't listen to me or my friend that this was actually a serious thing. She wanted to stay in Santa Cruz to see this dude she wasn't even seeing. It was the most bizarre thing to think about when the pandemic was starting. I was just like, there's more serious things.

But what I noticed was that a couple of people couldn't grasp that life was going to have to change. I think that came in waves for some people. People were still partying when I got to Santa Cruz, even though lockdown order was called that day. People were still just doing normal shit, and it was really weird. That girl did not do well with lockdown. But not my problem, really.

Oh, one of my friends when I got back home—a Trump supporter—so that explains some stuff, yeah, I'm not too thrilled about that. But she also didn't get the mask thing. Her mom's a QAnon person. Her mom's a lawyer and should not be a QAnon person. I feel bad, because she was with ninety-year-old grandparents. They're old and her mom acting like the pandemic's not real is not helpful.

It's baffling how so many people took it differently than me. For most of my friends, it's just the struggle of isolation. One of my friends lives in a penthouse. I think that's great. But she hates the loneliness of it, because it's such a big space, which is a rich person problem. But she was like, "It's so hard being alone." I was like, "Okay, you live in a penthouse with a pool. I have nothing to say to that." But for some people, it really takes a toll, despite what they actually do have. We're social animals, so not seeing people face-to-face is really hard.

Nazir: Yeah, totally.

Crespin: I definitely did not answer your questions.

"I took it as an opportunity to cut out people I don't like"

Nazir: Oh, you did, you did. What are some of the ways that you tried to adapt and stay connected during that period of isolation?

Crespin: I took it as an opportunity to cut out people I don't like. (laughs) So my roommate that I mentioned before, I don't talk to her. A bunch of people. You know, in college, it's different from high school, but there still are those people you see all the time for some reason, even though it's a big campus, or people in your major you don't particularly like. I'm grateful I don't have to see those people or talk to them. I only have to talk to people I actually do like. I do Zoom meetings with my friends, Facetime, Snapchat. I use that way more. I do hang out with my family a lot because I live with them. But we have a pretty fun time, because we're kind of a crazy family, so something's always happening. I show up at my house: new furniture. From where? I don't know. Where's the old furniture? I still don't know. That's fun, living with an unpredictable family. But all I really do is be on Zoom.

I did visit one friend, and we went to visit another friend while I was there, not by my choice. They were not really caring about the coronavirus. It was weird. They had like ten people come by. And

I was like, "Nah. I'm leaving. That's too much. I don't know these people. I don't even want to be here." Oh, we did buy a banh mi that was pretty good, but not worth staying there.

For me, it's not that hard. I'm really close to my sister, so that's all I really need. My family's awesome. I know not a lot of people can say that. And as chaotic as it is, it's still entertaining, so it makes the day go by better.

"I was supposed to study abroad this whole year."

Nazir: Did you have any plans, academic or otherwise, that were inevitably perpetually disrupted?

Crespin: Yeah, I was supposed to study abroad this whole year. And what sucks is that the programs didn't cancel, the government canceled, because they were like screw America. I'm not sad about it. It sucks, but I know some people who were like, "Oh, what am I supposed to do without study abroad?" I don't know. Suck it up. Everyone's not doing what they wanted to do this year. No one was like, "Yeah, Zoom, that's all I want to do." So that was a big one. I was supposed to go to two places. That dream's dead.

I was supposed to start a research project while I was studying abroad. But I'm just going to do it next year, or later this year. It's technically a research project. I don't really have many other academic goals.

Nazir: Where did you want to study abroad?

Crespin: I was going to go to Denmark and then Japan. Denmark, it was mostly because they have one of the best anthro schools, and it was going to be basically free, because I could use my financial aid. So I was like, that's cool. And free healthcare, which honestly would have been great, if I could have gone. And then the other one was Japan, Tokyo. I went to a Japanese school, and I've never been to Japan, which I think is bizarre. And a lot of my friends live

in Japan. I was going to go to this school some girl that I grew up with went to. One of my best friends is in Tokyo. She's doing fashion design. She hates living there. I don't know why. Never been, but it would have been cool. I need to go to Japan at some point, I know that. I know too much and I spent too much time with that to not go at this point. So, the future.

Nazir: Yeah, that's cool. That's really interesting. So do you just plan on doing it senior year? Or possibly this summer? When do you feel like it's going to be safe to go?

Crespin: I'm thinking of applying for fall, senior year. But honestly, I'm probably just going to do a summer vacation thing and go. I have other things that might come up next year. I feel like senior year's a hard year to go, especially because I may or may not do grad school. I have to figure that out. But it's kind of hard to do that, and be in another country, and try to do all that.

Nazir: Yeah, totally. Are there any hobbies or anything that you started getting into, with all this free time when we got put at home. Are there any ways that you have been filling up that time?

Crespin: Yeah, I watch a lot of TV, but I'm a film major so I justify it. But I did NaNoWriMo this summer. I don't know if you know what that is, but it's National Writing Month, so you try to write a novel in a month. I only wrote 40,000 words. It's a lot. I did that in July. I don't know, the months blend together. I think it was July. I worked over the summer. I work at the DSI.⁵ It's the tech part of the library. We have free 3D printers. So I learned a lot of different 3D printer stuff. I coded the library website. I learned how to do—I hate that, but Blender, 3D modeling stuff. I learned how to do a lot of that over the summer, got paid for it, so, worth it. And that's about it.

Oh, I did do—I'm part of an anthro club. So we did have a couple of meetings. But besides that, I didn't do anything else, I don't think. I have a summer goals list over here. So let me take a glance at it. Okay, I didn't do anything on there. But I did read a lot. Oh, I

learned sign language. I forgot about that. I learned sign language for two months, forgot. This is all I know. (signs) It's like cereal. I don't know why I need that, but yeah.

Nazir: (laughs) It's very cool. How did you make a new normal? I feel like we're uprooted in all of our routines and stuff. And so, what would you describe as the new normal?

"I feel like we have a rhythm"

Crespin: The new normal is I wake up at seven. I don't know why, but I wake up at seven and I just sit on my phone for a long time. I go to class.

Some of my classes are asynchronous. So what I do is I try to do my asynchronous class materials, I do that like 9:00 AM—try to, at least. Latest, ten AM. Then I get started working. I feel like I have more time to do classwork. So that's basically how my day starts.

My aunt cooks dinner. She's great at cooking or baking. She made a Basque cheesecake the other day. It's a burnt cheesecake. It was so good. I know that sounds weird, but it's a Spanish thing. It's really good. And then my sister's always doing some craft. She embroiders. She's always doing that. Oh, we got a Switch now. So, Switch game time is pretty, it's bad. My mom plays all day. But that's what we do a lot. From 5:00 to 10:00 PM, it's like Animal Crossing time. Yeah, so that's what the new normal is.

Weekends are pretty chill. I do some homework on Sunday. And Saturday we go—not like we go to eat at restaurants or anything—but if we need groceries, we go. Or if they want to go thrifting, they go. I hate thrifting. But if they want to go thrifting, they go. I just don't like the smell of thrifting. I'm all about it in theory. The smell of thrift stores weards me out. I don't know why.

I feel like we have a rhythm, not necessarily a pattern we follow, but it's nice, I guess. It's not a stressful environment.

Nazir: You mentioned that you were a film major. Did you enjoy going to see movies in theaters and stuff? And how are you affected by the fact that we can't do that? And also, I feel like the film industry is really—well, it's just picking up now. But yeah, how did you deal with that?

Crespín: Honestly, I love going to the theater. But I never go. I don't even know why. I was really looking forward to *Tenet*, because I love Christopher Nolan. He makes great movies. And I haven't gone to the theater to watch it—also because it turns out it's apparently a garbage movie and that makes it worse.

What sucks is that a lot of releases that were supposed to come out this year didn't. And what also upset me was 2020 was supposed to be the year that women directors were making the most movies, like blockbusters, anything, which is insane, because two years ago, whenever *Wonder Woman* came out, that was the first movie a woman directed that had a \$100 million budget. That's a normal budget for movies now. For 2018 or whatever to be the first time a woman did that: bonkers.

So this year we were supposed to get all those movies, but we never did. They've been pushed back, which sucks. A lot of the film stuff is leaving California and going to Atlanta for tax reasons—also because in Georgia, they don't care about corona at all. A lot of people are now moving to Georgia and leaving L.A. because it's too expensive. People here take corona actually seriously, which is a good thing. But people are doing that and taking advantage of that, which I don't think is the right thing to do.

And another thing that's interesting is a lot of the stuff wants smaller groups, smaller casts. So a lot of stuff that gets canceled now is things that require too many people. So if you want to do *Game of Thrones* now, you can't. It's too many people. You have to do smaller things. So that's why all those things are getting canceled, which sucks.

Nazir: What do you hope to do with your major in film? Do you want to be in that film industry? And if so, how do you think the film industry's going to come back from what happened?

Crespin: I think film will always come back. People love entertainment. What does what everybody do now? Watch TV. That's what people live for, but now it's worse. I don't really know exactly what I want to do in film. I like writing. I'm in a screenwriting class. I'm not good at it yet, but you've got to start from somewhere. Directing's really cool. The only issue is that it's hard for women to do any of that stuff. Most of film is very male-dominant, but those fields specifically, it's like people don't believe women can be creative somehow, or write. I don't know. I thought women could read. Apparently, I'm wrong.

"I live in an apartment complex—no one wears a mask"

I also think that we're going to see more diversity in film based on all the social activism stuff coming out, which is good, and good for me. The statistics for Latino in film are so sad. It's depressing. Since 2007 or something, there's only been fifteen movies directed by Latinos, and three of them were American Latinos. The rest were from Spain or Mexico. And of those, none were women. So, right? That's a low number. I think that's going to get better soon. All parties, not just Latino, not just Asian, just like everyone. I think people actually are starting to care. At least, I hope so.

Nazir: Yeah. In your direct community, where you live, how do they react to COVID? How are they embracing, or not embracing the mandates and everything?

Crespin: So this is why I hate San Diego. I know there's this theory that all big cities are Left. I wish. But San Diego is rather Republican, or centrist, at least. My dad's from Texas, and he was just like, "Oh, I thought I left hicks in Texas, and I still find them here." Yeah, it's weird. I walk outside my apartment—I live in an apartment complex—no one wears a mask. I've seen one person wear a mask in the past month, besides my family. That's ridiculous! There's also

signs everywhere in the apartment building that say masks are required. Are people illiterate?⁶ I don't know.

And San Diego's was one of the big cities that were anti-mask because our rights are infringed. That still doesn't make sense to me. It's not going to kill you. A lot of those viral videos of people yelling at Starbucks people are from San Diego. Yeah, and all those racists who are trying to attack people from Black Lives Matter for protesting—also from San Diego, sadly. People here think—some people think it's a hoax. And that's obviously a small, loud minority, a small minority of people. But they're very loud.

And then there are other people who are taking it seriously. Barrio Logan is the one that's affected the most. It's a Latino community. Everyone there has essential jobs, or minimum wage workers that can't afford to not work. And then the border has a lot of cases because in Mexico they don't take it that seriously, at least a while ago. So you had a lot of cases from people who are Americans who went to Mexico to party and came back with corona. Or they showed up there with corona and only got sick on their way out. I don't know these people. But, yeah, it's sad to see that.

And we have a problem with tourism. A lot of people in Arizona come here. Arizona's a big hotspot, so you'll see Arizona license plates. The beaches are packed. No mask. Parents are threatening to sue schools for being closed. Well, they should be. I've never been in a class with less than thirty people. And that's already been a problem before corona. And you think it's going to change now? No.

"La Mesa was kind of on fire"

Nazir: How was your community affected by the protests that were happening in the June and July timeframe?

Crespin: In San Diego, we still have protests going on. It's a mix of them. The Black Lives Matter ones were obviously the bigger

ones. I went to a caravan protest. You're in your car and you follow this path. We blocked traffic. If you were actually trying to drive somewhere, it would have been awful. We have a lot of protests about tribal—I don't know the name of the tribe. I think it's Kumeyaay. But they've been protesting a lot because they're trying to build, construct on their land, even though they're not supposed to. And they're taking advantage of corona. People need jobs. No one's out. I mean, no one should be out. So they're taking advantage of that. And there's also a lot of protests at the camps, the immigrant camps. Concentration camps. Especially now that there's that whole forced hysterectomy thing. People are really upset about that because we have such a big Latino population.

The protests are ongoing. When they first started, La Mesa was kind of on fire. They burned a Walgreen's or something. I don't know what it was. The thing was, if anyone watched the actual footage, which no one does, apparently, you could see it was a very peaceful protest and then all of a sudden, the cops started shooting with rubber bullets. Then they shot some lady in the eye with a rubber bullet. And then the crowd got upset. I wonder why? They were just singing. And then the people who did burn down the Walgreen's or whatever weren't even involved in the protest. They just showed up and then burned it.

Oh, and highways were shut down. Protestors would walk onto the highway in the middle of traffic. That's insane. I don't have balls like that. That's crazy. And what was upsetting was that the news *never* showed any of this. On the news, on any of the channels, even the liberal or the left one or whatever, I never saw footage of this. I only found out through livestreams. Like, what is up with that? It upset me. But, Snapchat and Instagram are apparently what we need to rely on now.

"The only person I was worried about was my grandpa."

Nazir: Do you have any friends or family who have had to be essential workers, or nurses that were on the front lines even when everyone was locked down?

Crespin: My Auntie Dee, she's a doctor. She's not a doctor anymore. She's an administrator for a hospital or, I don't really know what it is. She runs the hospital in Orange County. She talks about how awful it is. People come in all the time without a mask. And they have an uptick in cases, because no one there cares. And she was just like, "Yeah, I wish I could turn these people away, but I can't because it's my oath. You take that oath, you have to take care of these people." And she's just like, "It's ridiculous that people are listening to Trump say drink bleach or whatever, or chug it, I don't know what he said, or don't wear a mask." And she's just like, "It's really upsetting that I still have to take care of people that don't even believe what I'm saying because of the president." I feel bad for her. Oh, my other aunt's also a nurse.

Nazir: Yeah. Were you ever worried about their health and their well-being? Did you ever visit them?

Crespin: They take it really seriously. She disinfects herself. The rest of the family quarantines. They don't really leave unless they're getting food. So I do feel bad for them because my cousin, she's like, I don't know how old she is, but she's in second grade or something. I know for young kids it's important to have face-to-face stuff. So it's really hard.

The only person I was worried about was my grandpa. He did take it seriously, but he also goes on vacation to Arizona, of all places, and hangs out with his other old friends. And it's like, "Why are you hanging out with other people in another state that has so many cases?" And yet they take it seriously when they come home.

My dad took it really seriously. He wore gloves. He would sanitize his hands, then put on the gloves, then sanitize that, then go outside. He just does the mask now. I was like, okay. The extreme reaction's gone now.

Nazir: And then did he go back to work, too?

Crespin: Yeah, the restaurant he was working on opening before the pandemic just opened three weeks ago. So he's excited about that. They're putting in a bid to host, because the NHL's probably going to play. Anaheim's going to put in a bid for it because they have all the hotels necessary to house all the people. So he's really hoping that comes through because they made the decision they're not going to have any concerts until September next year.

Nazir: Wow.

Crespin: Yeah, that's a year away, so they're really hoping the NFL things works. They're competing with LA because LA screwed up last time.

Nazir: What are some ways that you perform self-care during times that are really stressful and overwhelming?

"When you read, you can kind of pretend to be someone else."

Crespin: What I do? I read. It's mostly that. When you read, you can kind of pretend to be someone else. It's escapism. So that's really helpful. Or podcasts. Just listen to them and then vibe, I guess. I used to cook a lot at the start of the pandemic. but not as much anymore. That was really a chill thing to do. I do cook on the weekends still. I like cooking because your mind gets busy. You don't focus on other stuff.

Nazir: What are some positives that have come out of moving back home, just staying isolated and stuff?

Nazir: We got a dog, so that's a fun positive. He's spoiled and doesn't like me, but that's okay. He's very cute. So that's a positive. Hanging out with my family is chill. Catching up on TV is fun. I feel like a lot of good stuff has come out of the pandemic for me, which is kind of mean to say, because a lot of people have died. But I still have my job. I like this internship I have. I'm now a media lead for this club. It's a research project, which is really cool. And then I'm

taking this screenwriting studio course. Only fifteen people get in out of the whole major to take it. So I feel like I've gotten lucky to actually get a chance to do things, and get work, because I know people struggle with that.

And I feel like I'm lucky—now I know who my friends are, or who should be my friends. In college you're forced to talk to a lot of people. There are too many people on my Snapchat that I've never talked to, outside of seeing them in person randomly or at the dining hall. So I think taking time and reflecting on what is important has been a positive. I feel like now I kind of have an idea of what that is. I mean, I'm twenty, so I guess that's going to change. But I have an idea of what's important now.

"So many people are hitting a breaking point"

Nazir: Yeah, totally. What do you think has been the most important event that has happened during the pandemic, whether it's adapting or learning about the world? What do you think has been the biggest takeaway from what's happened?

Crespin: That's a good question. I guess my biggest takeaway is how little people care. There are a lot of good people on this earth, but it shocks me that so many people are so selfish. That they think wearing a mask is hurting them. I still don't get that. They don't care. Or people who are just like, "Sacrifice the old." That's messed up. There's been politicians who say that. How's that okay? And anti-vaxxers? Oh, I don't talk to any anti-vaxxers anymore. This one girl from school: anti-vaxxer. I don't talk to her. A good thing is knowing your limits now. I don't mess with that anymore. I don't mess with weird conspiracy theories. People who believe the earth is flat: goodbye.

But it's shocking how obvious it is that people don't care. Like Trump, it's so obvious now, and yet there are still people who believe him. But I feel like so many people are hitting a breaking point, for better or worse. I guess we'll find that out soon. But like with the Black Lives Matter, people were done. I mean, people

have been done, but people finally listened. Or like with the Native Americans, they got absolutely screwed over by the government. They were supposed to get masks and stuff. They didn't. They just got body bags, which is horribly symbolic. But they have been protesting, too. It's not as big.

I think people are reaching a breaking point. People are voting early. Who votes? I mean, I always have voted. But a lot of people don't vote. I think it's crazy the change we'll see soon. I don't know what it's going to be. I have my hopes for what it will be. But I think this pandemic is going to bring a lot of change to society. People are getting armed now like we're in some war. I don't know what that's about.

It's clear technology is so vital also, and a lot of people don't understand it who should. We finally just canceled QAnon on Facebook. Why was that a thing for so long? They thought like pizza was—I don't even know, like some weird child sex ring thing—no, it's pizza, damn.⁷ I text my friends, "Do you want to get Domino's?" It's not much deeper than that. So I think we're going to see a lot of repercussions with tech. I think those people are getting scared and I think regular people like us are finally trying to educate themselves because we have the time. The last pandemic in the twenties brought a lot of social change. And I don't know what happened in 1820, but there was a pandemic. I assume that brought a lot of social change because things have changed since then.

"I think we're going to see some kind of social change"

Nazir: And what are some of your hopes for the future? What do you hope will change going forward?

Crespin: I hope Biden wins, first off. I'm not even religious, but I will pray every day that he wins. I don't think Trump is as healthy as he thinks he is. I know it's a conspiracy theory, I guess, but what 70-year-old gets a pandemic, was put on oxygen, and walks away totally fine? That man wasn't healthy before, either. The man had a

stroke a couple of years ago. So I think, regardless of if he wins or not, he's going to be ill, which is bad. I mean, I don't like the man, but I don't wish that on anyone.

I think we're going to see some kind of social change, I think. In film, specifically, we'll definitely be seeing more diversity. That's been a big push. Authentic diversity. People are trying to get the specific actors for roles. Like now they're not just hiring any Spanish person for a role for someone from South America. They're actually getting South Americans, which is what they should have done anyways.

And my hope is we see an increase in the minimum wage. I hope free health care—that's probably going to happen when I'm like forty. But I think we'll see more access to stuff. I'm pretty sure the corona vaccine will be free for everyone. It should be. That makes no sense if it's not.

If Trump wins, all this goes out the window. But we're going with my dreams and my hopes, and it's Biden and Kamala. And if we go that way, I think AOC's going to be president in a couple of years, because she's awesome.⁸ So, that's just my opinion. Some people don't like her because she's loud. So? She gets stuff done. I know that's what people say about Trump. But she's actually educated.

And I hope education gets better. There's no excuse for people not believing in science. That's just a lack of education. The government has, for a long time, neglected that in a lot of states. In California, I'm very lucky for the education I got. But in Alabama, property tax is so low. There's no money for the schools. It should be a centralized, standardized system. We need that. I found out the other day four million Americans are illiterate. Why? We don't have an excuse for that.

Endnotes

¹Culver City is a major center of the film industry.

²Residential community for both domestic and international students located on campus at College Nine.

³Early reports from April indicate that the first known U.S. COVID-19 death was in Santa Clara County, on February 6th. However, COVID-19 was not identified as the cause until months later. However, Santa Clara County's first confirmed case was also the first confirmed case in the Bay Area, dated January 31, which made the news at the time. - Editor

⁴The graduate student Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) strike.

⁵Digital Scholarship Innovation Studio.

⁶According to the U.S. Department of Education, about 32 million adults in this country can't read or can't read effectively. Others put the figure higher, especially if literacy is defined at reading effectively above a middle school level. - Editor

⁷In reference to Pizzagate, a false and convoluted conspiracy theory involving a D.C. pizza parlor, child sex trafficking, and Hillary Clinton. It has been conclusively debunked. It has largely been propagated on social media. – Editor

⁸Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

Kathia Damian

Interviewed by Aitanna Parker

Kathia Damian is a fourth-year literature major who is heavily involved with student media on campus, including as News and Talk Director for UCSC's radio station, KZSC. She also worked with UCSC's Science & Justice Research Center (SJRC) to create a podcast about the COVID-19 pandemic. In her letter of application to this project Kathia wrote, "Documenting this moment in time is important, as COVID-19 may be the defining struggle of this generation. Storytelling is especially crucial during this pandemic since the number of deaths and cases ticked on screen don't feel real. Oral history provides a means to understand the information we have been bombarded with." During the pandemic Kathia has been living with her parents in Anaheim, California.

"My heart is good. I've just been skating."

Parker: Kathia, do you want to introduce yourself?

Damian: Yeah, I'm Kathia. I'm a fourth-year literature major, news director for KZSC, and a really big skater.

Parker: Wow, what an icon. So, I want to do a check-in with you. The check-ins that I've been doing recently are—how is your head and how is your heart? So, Kathia, how is your head and how is your heart?

Damian: My head is getting back into stasis. Last week was really crazy. And yesterday, I knocked out some work, so I feel like I have my head above water, finally. My heart is good. I've just been skating. I met someone cool skating, just a little punk with a dog. And I was like, "Hey, that's cool."

Parker: Wow.

Damian: So that's how I am. (laughs)

Parker: Okay, we love a big smile. We love to see you; what an icon. Do you skate all type of wheels, or is it skateboards?

Damian: Roller skates.

Parker: Roller, come on skater icon, yes! I've been trying to get into skating, but she seems difficult, you know?

Damian: Hard, but so satisfying. I would recommend. If you need any advice—

Parker: I've been seeing more videos on Instagram because I've been liking it. And people are dancing with the skating. And I'm like, that's such a vibe!

Damian: Mm-hmm, dance skaters, they're so beautiful. I'm like, you're moving on concrete like if it was water. I love it.

"I'm like, why am I reading 17th century poetry when there's real crazy stuff going on every day?"

Parker: Yes! So can you tell me about your background, anything that means to you? No pressure to answer anything specific.

Damian: Yeah, I feel like I've done this for a while now because when you go to college, people understand people through labels. So I already have my little stuff down.

Parker: Right.

Damian: I'm a first-gen student. I'm Latina. I come from Anacrine.

It's a lower-income part of Orange County.

Parker: Orange County, Land of Crimes?

Damian: "Anacrime," it's actually Anaheim. It's a joke because you know, you can see cholos shaving other cholos' heads in the street. It's actually kind of cute. I'm just like, wow, that's kind of a vibe.

Parker: "Anacrime"—I'm going to tell my friend from Anaheim, and I'm going to see if I'm cool now. Go ahead.

Damian: But yeah, that's who I am, and a Cancer.

Parker: Wow, and how do you feel about being a Cancer.

Damian: I love it. Because I feel like it's not, it's a sign that people like. There's not like anything necessarily bad associated with Cancer. It's just being sensitive. I remember when I was seeing my partner and I had to meet all of her housemates. They're like, "What sign are you?" I was like, "Cancer." And they were like, "We approve."

Parker: Oh, validation, love that—I love that for you.

So how has life been? Let's start with the beginning of the school year. How has it been adjusting to that this year?

Damian: This school year?

Parker: This one, this one.

Damian: This one is good so far. Well actually, no. (laughs) I'm a re-admitted student, so I'm kind of over academia. I don't want to go to grad school. I just need to push through and finish. It just feels unreal sometimes. I'm like, why am I reading 17th century poetry

when there's real crazy stuff going on every day? It just feels kind of removed from my life right now.

Parker: And what does re-admitted mean? Like you left and came back?

Damian: Yeah, I took a year off and then I came back.

Parker: Welcome back. Wait, did you take a year off and then strike?

Damian: Yeah, that was my first year back.

*"And that's when I became kind of
disillusioned with academia."*

Parker: Welcome back! Wow, so you were a part of COLA?¹

Damian: Yeah, I was at the picket with my friends pretty often. I was super frustrated because we were reading anti-capitalist theory, but my teacher was still grading based on attendance. So I was like, "Excuse me, sir, you are a scab. I don't agree with this." (Parker laughs) I walked out, you know. And that's when I became kind of disillusioned with academia. But you know, fair wages—

Parker: And so how has the start of this year been, since January 2020? Let's do pre-COVID.

Damian: Pre-COVID, yeah, it was pretty good. I think I was starting to get into the rhythm of school. It was fun to be able to explore ideas on my own time. Before, I was just working as a barista. People don't want to hear what you actually think. I still tell them, you know, but you have to be more pleasant. And then it was a pretty good change to be able to just read books I wanted to and write essays on them and stuff. So that was nice.

Then March happened. That's when everything went down. I didn't have social media; I didn't have it for a couple of years. So I was kind of out of touch with coronavirus; I wasn't really paying attention to it. Everything got crazy. I moved back home to Anaheim, and I've been here ever since. Which is crazy—it's been so long. (laughs)

Parker: How do you feel about being back home?

"My hope right now is just to finish college and keep my sanity intact."

Damian: (laughs) Uh, not the best. It was okay at first, because it was a little bit of a vacation. And sometimes Santa Cruz just gets to me; it can be kind of alienating. But then, soon after, my brother moved in. We live in a three-bedroom, one-bathroom house that's small, so when that happened, it got pretty tight. I think I might like to move back somewhere, or move out somewhere. But right now, I'm just thankful that I have a place to stay and my parents are relatively chill.

Parker: What are your hopes for right now?

Damian: Honestly, I just want to graduate, get that paper. Because my parents are like, "We are immigrant parents. We came here. We crossed the border so you could get a college education." And I'm like, oh, fuck, I have to do it, you know? So my hope is just to graduate.

Honestly, I've been a fan of Marx for a while, so I think I'm okay being poor. I say this now—but I'm not super concerned about necessarily getting a high-paying job after college. I think that having a college education would give me access to live better than how my parents live. I think that's fine enough for me; just having stability would be fine.

So my hope now is just to finish college and keep my sanity intact.

Parker: How has your childhood influenced who you are right now?

"I think just being lucky is what allowed me to be in college."

Damian: I think a big part of that has to do with where I grew up, which is a super-Latino place. I grew up in an apartment complex that was probably 95 percent Latino, and so was my elementary school.

It starts with being funneled into programs early on. I think it started in preschool because I was one of the only kids in my elementary school who went to preschool. By third grade, I was in the Gifted and Talented Program, which meant that I had access to better teachers and more resources. Then I applied to this magnet school, so I wouldn't have to go to the high school that was closest to me, that wasn't super great.

I think just being lucky is what allowed me to be in college, because now that I'm back home, so many people, maybe 2 to 5 percent of people in my elementary school went to college. So it was just, I think, luck and getting funneled into the right opportunities.

Parker: Yeah, I hear that because my mom literally moved me for high school into a better school, so that I would stay on track. And so what were you like in high school?

Damian: Oh, I was a nerd. It was a magnet school, so we all had to wear uniforms. And I was kind of outcastish because I really loved like punk and rock, and I really loved movies. But everyone in my high school were philistines. They did not understand culture. (laughs) They just cared about school, and it was very academically competitive.

I just did my own thing, hung out with a couple of friends that also liked watching dumb mean videos and weren't super academically inclined, I guess. You know, we liked learning. But yeah, I was just

into my own thing, which was watching a lot of movies every day, being a mediocre student, and tennis and softball.

Parker: (laughs) And how did your parents feel about you going to the magnet school?

Damian: They really wanted it because the school that I was originally supposed to go to was pretty shitty. There were always news vans coming through, because there was always some crazy stuff going down, you know? I don't know if I would have survived that high school. It probably would have been too intense. So they were very adamant about me applying to a magnet school, or a different school outside of the district.

Parker: And they were super influential in why you went to college and why you stay there now?

Damian: Yeah, definitely.

Parker: Definitely. Can I ask your parents' Zodiac signs?

Damian: Huh?

Parker: Your parents' Zodiac signs?

Damian: I don't know. My mom, January birthday.

Parker: Early January or late January?

Damian: January 18.

Parker: Hmm, a Capricorn, lots of pressure. Go ahead.

Damian: And then my dad is, hmm, May—I think May, like May 15.

Parker: Okay, so you have a Capricorn mom and a Taurus dad. Wait, let me think about that. Taurus dad—I know somebody else with a Taurus mom and a Virgo dad, and like the amount of pressure on her— She’s like lowkey; she’s also a Cancer moon and she’s a Virgo. And she is always very anxious, I think because of the amount of pressure that her parents put on her. Her parents are overachievers and also earth signs.

“[My parents are] just like, ‘Oh, do you think I scrubbed toilets for fun? Or was it to give you a better future?’”

Damian: I think there’s like an immigrant guilt complex, also.

Parker: Her parents are also immigrants!

Damian: Yeah, they’re just like, “Oh, do you think I scrubbed toilets for fun? Or was it to give you a better future?” And I’m like, “Oh my God, I’m sorry.”

Parker: Not the guilt trip, not the guilt trip. So what is something that like, as we get older, as we’re all adults—amen, over the age of twenty-two—what do you do for your inner child? I know we talked about self-care and things like that, but sometimes you just want to live out what you wanted to do in your childhood, but now. Does that make sense?

Damian: Yeah, I think that totally makes sense. I think a huge part of that has been skating, because you feel like you’re flying. It’s like a sport but it’s like a hobby. It’s not a highbrow hobby like skiing or anything. You’re just meeting the concrete with your body. I think a lot of people who are part of that community, I feel like there are a lot of artists, and there’s also a lot of people who are the kind of people that don’t necessarily care about achievements, but just think about working enough to survive, and have time to crack open a cold one. (laughs)

Parker: Wow, there's a theme—there's a theme going on. I feel like you're very California, laidback. Like, I'm here to chill; I'm here for a good time, that type of vibe, which is dope. It's so dope. I'm so happy. You seem like such a cool person.

Damian: Thank you. Likewise, I felt that. I'm so glad we finally got this one-on-one time. Because if we were in a class together, you know I'd be like, "Come over for dinner" or whatever.

Parker: That's how we cement friendships, when people cook for me. (laughs) I love it so much, because you can tell so much by how someone cooks for you. Like do they season their food properly? How do they clean? Not that I'm judging, but just like, I know it's real. (laughs)

What are you passionate about besides skating? What keeps you going?

Damian: I don't know. I feel like obviously family is one. I think just trying to do my best while I'm on this planet, like trying to be a person that can be inspiring to other people around me. I don't want to just be one of those people that preaches about certain things. But just someone who walks the walk actually, you know?

Parker: And who taught you that?

Damian: I think my parents did. I'm pretty impressed: they moved when they were twenty. They had a kid. And we slowly, we went from an apartment in a shitty place to a slightly better apartment, to now we live in a house. Even though it's rented, you know, they have been working really hard. It's never been about money, since we're not rich. We're poor. But it's more about family first, like your friends first. That's what matters most. I'm lucky; I mean, they put pressure on me about college, but not about what kind of career I should have. I really do anything I want. They're like, "It makes you happy and you're not hurting anyone."

Parker: That's a philosophy to live by. Let's talk about it: no rules, no regulations, as long as you're happy and not hurting anyone.

Damian: Yeah.

Parker: Put it on a shirt. We need the merch, Kathia.

Damian: No, for real.

Parker: We need merch, we need merch.

The Covid Era

Okay, so what has been getting you through—I hate the phrase “unprecedented times”—these weird times. Like, shut up. But it's weird and it's slowed down. So I'm just going to call it the COVID Era. Let me coin it, so that I now can make money. But since March, what things have you been doing, what hobbies have you picked up?

Damian: Yeah, that's actually pretty funny. I picked up a new one recently, because I also kind of like to be busy. So I was kind of like, I don't know what to do with myself with this much free time, when I first moved back. But I recently picked up ceramics since COVID started. And I love that so much. I think it's made me realize if I could make a living out of freelance journalism or audio editing and ceramics, I would love that existence.

I love crafts. I've been knitting for a while. And I love knitting. But ceramics—you have to focus really hard and you feel—it's a centering activity. Because that's how you make things. And you can get kind of creative with it. It's like, it's not a fine art, I guess, like drawing, where you have to imagine something and create it. Like there's already like pre-described rules to doing ceramics and you can just kind of play within that form.

Parker: Wow. Did somebody teach you or share the passion with you for ceramics?

Damian: I've been interested in it because I like knitting and hand crafts, and then I started taking classes. And so next month, hopefully, I'll get a key to the studio and I'll be able to spend more time in there.

Parker: Wow! We love studio sessions. That's so awesome. I think it's really cool that you have so many passions. I feel like you're also a go-getter. (laughs) I feel like you're so wise and you know everything. And I just wanted to know what type of mentors have you had in your life that have been impactful?

Damian: That's a good question. I feel like I speak about my parents a lot. But when you're a kid, that's kind of your lifeline, especially if you're alienated in high school. But I think a big thing for me was books and movies. I was really into graphic novels in high school, not DC-Marvel, but indie graphic novels where people are all kind of depressed and they write stories about their daily existence. And I was like, oh wow, that hits, you know? I think movies hugely shaped me because I was an introverted kid—or just kind of lonely, I think. I think movies and understanding my human existence through narratives really helped me. And so did books. So I think that played a big part.

And I think just having, once I got to college, having people I looked up to in the radio station that were all like, I'm like, "Wow, they like such cool music, and they look cool!" And I think just having older friends helped also.

Parker: And do you mentor people now?

Damian: I try. I've been a mentor. For the radio station, you get a mentee and you help them get the ropes at KZSC and you introduce them to people. And as news director, I'm doing a lot more of that, of training people and being like, "Welcome, this is a great space.

Thank you for being part of it.” I think that’s mentoring. But it’s hard to see myself in that role, because I am a baby.

Parker: Yeah, that’s real, that’s real. I hear you, it’s weird. But it’s also lowkey, you know how sometimes you just exist and then people look up to you for no reason? I personally have seen that. I’ve just been like, “Not only do I not know your name, I have never met you before. Like, what is this?” Especially being the KZSC director, that’s pretty iconic. I’m really proud of you. I know you have so many people looking up to you and I feel like you just deflect it away—and that’s okay. (laughter) Now I’m here to uplift and support.

I wanted to transition to things that you study. So you studied literature.

Damian: Yeah.

Parker: And you’re a fourth-year. I wanted to know more about what you study.

Damian: Yeah. I think my personal interest in literature doesn’t always align to what I study in class. Because there are certain requirements, like you have to take two pre-1750 classes. That I’m like, I don’t care about this. But I try.

Literature is super flexible. So you can basically write essays on books that you like, as long as you use like theory that you learned in class. I really like postmodern fiction. It plays with storytelling. It is self-aware. It’s not trying to fool you. I feel like some books—I like it that it is taking me as a reader into account, and that I’m reading this book, instead of trying to immerse me in the book’s experience. It’s like, “We understand that you live this life outside of this.” A lot of postmodern books critique society and the media, especially, which I am super interested in, just 24-hour news cycles, how much signals instead of actual values matter. Values can be sold as commodities now, because if you buy a shirt—like if your shirt says “Patagonia,” then everyone knows that you care about

the earth and you love nature, and you don't necessarily have to be that person. So books that kind of explore that.

And also Theatre of the Absurd, which was these plays in like the 1960s, post-World War II, that were like, "God is dead!" I like those kind of—

Parker: Yeah, that punk rock alternative graphic novel. Yes, (laughs) we love to see it.

Do you have an example of postmodern things? When we were talking I was thinking of Octavia Butler, lowkey.

Damian: Oh, yeah. Well, she's great speculative fiction. I really want to get more into her. I've read *Parable of the Sower*.

Parker: Yeah.

Damian: That is super cool, because it imagines this crazy future that's different. I feel like postmodernism, honestly, I feel like it's kind of white guy edgy, where they're just like—because I was really into *Fight Club* in high school.

Parker: Oh, baby! (laughs)

Damian: I loved it so.

Parker: Yeah, I love *Fast and Furious*. Let's not talk about it. (laughs)

Damian: But just very self-aware. So there's this book that I like called *White Noise*, and it talks about this nuclear event that happened to this community. But it's all kind of told through what the people hear on the radio, instead of what they actually experience.

Parker: Okay, okay, that's pretty cool.

Damian: Yeah.

Parker: That's pretty cool. Wow! So I guess you must get this question a lot. But are you thinking of producing your own work, as in writing your own story?

Damian: I sometimes—I struggle with that. I feel like right now, my future, I'm like, I could do this. It would be cool if I could get paid to write opinion pieces. I think there's some really funny ones. Like a Marxist take on Smash Mouth's "Walking on the Sun," you know?

Parker: Love it, yeah.

Damian: And kind of make it funny. Or to write articles for socialist magazines, maybe?

Parker: Yeah!

Damian: And on the other spectrum, though, recently I've been filming my friends when we skate and editing stuff like that together. Which I think is also powerful, because a lot of my friends are women of color who roller skate, and that's not represented in the skate community. So right now I'm like, oh, it would be fun to do both of those.

Parker: Wow. And so I know I met you at first through the Science & Justice Research Center. I was wondering about your project on that and how it correlated with our work.

Damian: Yeah, so I'm editing the audio for the podcast. I was super into, when Ruha Benjamin came and talked about race and technology, I was like, this is what I want to learn from school. And then I got kind of involved with the SJRC, Science & Justice Research Center. (Parker laughs) And I was also, that's why I like your major, because I was pretty into data and society. And there's the surrogate, or technology. Do you know about *The Surrogate*

Humanity?

Parker: Yeah, it's Neda Atanasoski's book.

Damian: Yes.

Parker: I'm reading that right now. It's a little dense. I love her. Little dense, but somebody explained it to me that she wrote it for ten years, so I'll forgive her.

Damian: Yeah. I remember I was underlining passages. I was like, my brain is like this big right now.

Parker: Yes! (laughs)

Damian: You know? But I like the idea of democratizing this information, because it was so dense, but because it had so many good ideas that I'm just like, the thing about blue collar folk, or when I'm talking to my mom, how do I explain this? So it would be nice to do a podcast that allowed this information that's research-heavy to be distributed to people.

Parker: And that's something that's always been challenging in academia, right? I just had this argument with a friend, but making it accessible—and not like I think people are dumb who are not university-educated. But if I have a university education and it's already dense to me and you're supposed to be training me and it's already hard, why not just say what you mean in the most simple way so that we can all get it and be on the same page?

Damian: Yeah, because so much of it is fluff. And that's what you kind of learn—

Parker: Yes!

Damian: —there's schools of thought, like prescriptive and descriptive grammar. So prescriptive is like—

Parker: Come on, literature!

Damian: —yeah, grammar that tells us how we're supposed to write. But then prescriptive is just compiling how people actually use grammar, you know? And then some people are like, we need to lock this knowledge in an ivory tower and tell people how to practice these ideas so that they can be taken seriously. I feel like that's a big part of academia. But if you don't have good ideas, just adding extra clauses is not going to make it—

Parker: They're really not, they're really not. I really need people to get that out; get that out, abolish that, abolish the university.

Damian: Abolish that. (laughter)

Parker: I took a class in anthropology for the CRES major that actually had pieces that were nonacademic, like Audre Lorde, right? Or people like her who weren't technically trained, but also are referenced so heavily. It was a class about Blackness and stuff like that. And then to have a mixture of things like that, and to be able to read Audre Lorde and not have to sit down and understand what you're saying in between the lines, but what you're telling me is what I have on the plate? Like, thank you. It's refreshing, and it's so much more accessible.

Damian: Yes, because what literature is supposed to do is transmit ideas. But if someone can't read something, how are they going to get that, you know?

Parker: It's annoying and it's difficult and I'm over it. (sighs) Oh, am I a good interviewer? I don't know. I don't even know where to go from there. Because like I could talk about that all day—I could.

I wanted to ask, do you have anything in the works right now that you're looking forward to?

Damian: I guess more ceramics, because since I'm taking a class and I don't have the key to the studio right now, it kind of takes like a month to finish a couple of pieces. Because we do glazing on the last week of the month. And so I've already made some stuff and added some faces; I like adding little faces to stuff. So I'm excited to paint that. In a week or two I'll have my finished pieces, which I'm excited about.

And I guess also more skate video stuff, because I really like doing that. And there are some people that I skate with that are really, really good, but they need more coverage. Because roller skating has become a fad recently. I think it's also problematic that people are like, "Roller skating is back." And I'm like, "The Black community has been doing this forever. You're not acknowledging that," you know?

And so that's become trending. There's some people who, because they have the right aesthetic, are blowing up. But then there's people who genuinely work really hard and try really hard stuff. And I'm like, girl, you need like—

Parker: Yes!

Damian: Yeah, so I'm going to film my friend on Friday, I think. We're going to go to a couple of different places and she's going to do some skate stuff.

Parker: Oh, that's so precious! I'm so proud of you. You're doing great. All right, I think that was great; I think that was a great interview. I want to thank you so much for coming to the interview.

Endnotes

¹Cost of Living Adjustment strikes and other actions.



Surfer Statue, West Cliff Drive, Santa Cruz.
Photo by Shmuel Thaler.

David Duncan

Interviewed by Irene Reti



David Duncan is a third-year PhD student of history at UC Santa Cruz. His dissertation uses oral history to understand and dissect Sausalito, California's 1965 history-making desegregation effort as well as desegregation in other districts in the San Francisco Bay Area. Duncan's Essay, "The Salt and Pepper Talks," is forthcoming in the edited volume, Rights and Lives. The essay is made up of about twenty-five oral history interviews that he conducted during the summer of 2019. Duncan has also served as a volunteer researcher with the COVID-19 Oral History Project at Indiana and Purdue University Indianapolis in collaboration with Arizona State University. Before he came to UCSC he worked for eight years as an Emergency Medical Technician.

Reti: This is Irene Reti with the Regional History Project. Today is October 16, 2020. I'm here with David Duncan, who is my fellow team member on the COVID-19 Oral History Project that the Regional History Project is doing. So, welcome David. Thank you for coming and talking with me today.

Duncan: Absolutely.

Reti: We have about an hour today to talk about the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has affected you. But first we're going to start

by talking a bit about the path that brought you to UC Santa Cruz, because we want a broader context. Life just didn't begin with the pandemic.

Duncan: Sure. I'll try to keep it short; it's a long story. I grew up in Castro Valley, which is a small town in the East Bay. I wanted to be a firefighter, so I went to junior college in Livermore, and then decided I did not want to do that anymore. I worked as an emergency medical technician in the Bay Area for eight years on an ambulance and in a hospital. I did that throughout my junior college career and a little bit into my time at my undergrad at Cal State East Bay. And then I decided that I wanted to get into history. I wasn't sure exactly what kind. So I got my bachelor's at Cal State East Bay and then applied to grad school at Santa Cruz. It was always a dream of mine to come here to UCSC, but I didn't have a reason to if I was going to get into firefighting. So I got into the MA program here, the terminal MA; re-applied last fall for the PhD program and was re-accepted. So here I am.

From EMT to Oral Historian

Reti: Wow. So how does somebody who's working in the field of EMT and firefighting become a history major? Did you always have an interest in history, or did that develop more recently?

Duncan: Back then I would have said I had an interest in history. But looking back, it was a lot of History Channel and just enjoying history classes the most in high school and at my junior college. I do remember a moment when I was in the fire program at Las Positas, the junior college, and I had a professor—he seemed—I remember him having everything put together. I remember his computer being connected to the projector and seeing that he had slides for every week. I thought, wow, he's ready to go for the whole semester. This seems not too hard, and he's got it all set. And then I would find myself daydreaming about teaching when I was on the ambulance, thinking, you know, do I really want to be out here? I'd taught disaster preparedness for the fire department that I was also

a reserve firefighter for. I really liked that. And I was a field training officer on the ambulance and that was one-on-one. I really liked teaching people and always thought I was kind of a better teacher than maybe an actual EMT. And I coached basketball for ten years for a church league. I loved that aspect of teaching, too.

So it dawned on me that a career in EMS was not sustainable. My dad was a firefighter for thirty years. I saw the toll that it took, especially for people I knew that worked on an ambulance for thirty years. I remember working with a few and going jeez, if this is what I'm like when I'm fifty—I don't know if I want to do that. And the pay was terrible and the hours were terrible. So it was a good college gig, but I really wanted to do something else after that time.

Coming to UC Santa Cruz

Reti: And you said that you always had dreamt of coming to UCSC. What was it about UCSC that attracted you?

Duncan: I live in Mount Hermon, which is where I came every summer as a kid for summer camp. And then there was a year where my dad said, "Hey, do you want to see where I went to school?" And he took us to UCSC. I thought oh my God, this place is amazing. It looks like this conference center I've been going to all my life as a kid, but it's a school. It had a great vibe. I always, as someone that grew up in the Bay, we always would come to Santa Cruz for a vacation or a day. I thought, I'm not too far, but I could live in this beautiful place. I even remember my advisor, my undergrad, saying, "You shouldn't just go to Santa Cruz because you think it has good vibes." And I thought well, what else—that's where I want to go. I think I want to go there. It really has worked out in ways I could never have predicted. But that's what drew me to it.

Reti: What did your dad study at UCSC?

Duncan: He was a psychology major. And back when the fire

department had employed students, he was a firefighter there. And then had a job with the government and then ended up going back to firefighting after that, because he loved it.

Reti: Okay, great. Well, so, you were here during the graduate student strike. How involved were you with the strike and how did it affect you?

Duncan: Yeah, I would say limited involvement. I witnessed, I guess, the beginning of the strike, which I was very supportive of. And then, unfortunately, it became very reminiscent of negative union-based action experience that I had had on the ambulance and I got really turned off by it. And unfortunately, it really sent a rupture through the history department that's still going on. The initial, I think, effort of a cost of living adjustment for grad students, I still support. But the way the movement evolved past that really just kind of lost me. My priority—it really came into focus. My priority here is to get my PhD. I put that in front of the COLA “cost of living adjustment” movement and other things in my life, too. So yeah, I'd say that's how it affected me.

The Beginnings of Things Not Being Normal

Reti: Okay. So, now bringing us up to the pandemic, at what point did you become aware of the coronavirus?

Duncan: I think around December with just seeing it on the news, and not thinking a lot about it—really not worrying about it at all, I would say. I was thinking about it the other day. I have a very strong memory of when—I think it was first reported in Washington?¹

Reti: Yeah, I think so.

Duncan: I remember thinking well, if it made it here, that's probably not good. And then thinking we were kind of—it was only a matter of time that it went on from there.

Reti: And at what point do you remember it starting to become something you were worried about in any kind of serious daily way?

Duncan: I have two really kind of interesting memories. Santa Clara County and really most of the Bay Area went on shelter in place before Santa Cruz. I remember thinking it was going to come here—and myself and my girlfriend, who’s also a grad student at UCSC and a few other friends that are in our program, we all went to Shanty Shack Brewery, which is in Santa Cruz, down over by Costco. I think it used to be an oil change place. It’s one of my favorite places. They were doing a live concert. It was really crowded and it was a beautiful night. I remember having a great time, but then also thinking, is this right what we’re doing? Are we being bad, even though there isn’t a shelter in place? I was thinking, this could be a very bad idea. And then the next day, Santa Cruz was on shelter in place.

The other memory, which I guess must have been before that, is because of the grad student strike, I was in the class where I had to write my master’s essay. We’d been meeting at Abbott Square [Market], which I loved, because there was great food right next to class, which was amazing. I remember our very last meeting with Professor Breen, who was teaching the class.² He and I were the only people left in class, talking about the final touches on the master’s. And I shook his hand and I said, “Thank you very much for the quarter.” Then he said, “Oh, we’re really not supposed to do that, are we?” (laughs) I thought, I guess. That’s the last time I saw him in person—and thinking, I’m never going to not shake someone’s hand. That’s so strange. Those two memories surely stand out to me for kind of the last normalcy, or the beginnings of things not being normal.

Reti: And so then what was the communication like in your department as the pandemic started to unfold?

Duncan: Well, things, the communication—you know, it was pretty straightforward. I know some people were unhappy with how it

was, but I thought it was very straightforward. We had already been doing a lot of things online with the strike. I was choosing to do my sections asynchronously because I didn't want to step on anyone's toes politically. I thought, here's my section, look at it if you want to or not. I didn't want to punish people that wanted to participate in the strike, especially since they were undergrads.

Reti: Right. David, can you explain what "asynchronous" means?

Duncan: Sure, yeah. So I was posting the slides from my section in a place where the students could access them at any time. I wasn't hosting in-person Zoom sections, but still having the information I would have had in section available to the students.

Reti: Thank you.

Duncan: Because things were so touchy and I just, for myself and for students, I didn't want to get into it. So that transition for me wasn't terrible.

"I started doing Instacart orders for groceries, which was great."

But then going from winter quarter—and there's always a very short turnaround from winter to spring, which is even less for us grad students, because we're grading—to go from kind of in person, to Zoom, and then immediately into a new quarter on Zoom, that was very jarring. I don't think there's really anything the department could have said to make that better. But that's basically what it came down to.

Reti: So how did your life change in terms of your daily routine once you were sheltering in place?

Duncan: It was very isolating at first. I felt not being able to go anywhere was really—or I felt, at least, like I couldn't go anywhere. I started doing Instacart orders for groceries, which was great.

Actually, it kind of got me into grocery shopping more than doing it in person. (laughs) There was a friend that's also in the program that lives in Scotts Valley, not far from me. We have a standing time where I go over to her place once a week and see her and her roommates. And we both made it clear that I was not leaving the house except to go see them, and they were not leaving their place at all. There were some surreal drives home where there were no cars out. There was a curfew, which I was a little worried about. But nothing—I never got stopped or anything. But it was sort of the one thing we could do and talk about, which also felt like I was doing something wrong. But I felt like we were also being careful about it, so—

And then the other big one is that my parents, who still live in Castro Valley, come and visit about once a month. That went out the window, because they're older—in good health, but they're in their mid to late-sixties—more to my dad thinking my mom and I were being much too cautious and my dad being like let's hold off from seeing one another. I Facetime them about every other day, every few days. So we kept doing that. But that was probably the longest period of time I had gone without seeing them, which was a little strange. I don't have any siblings. I'm an only child. So I was worried about them just kind of being on their own, in a way, even though they're healthy and mobile.

Reti: Mm hmm. So in your household, do you and your girlfriend live together?

Duncan: No, I live by myself. There's a renter—I should clarify, my parents bought the house I'm living in about six years ago. So I'm sort of their "property manager." There's a gentleman that lives in the unit underneath—it's a split-level home—who also used to work at UCSC in the HAVC department.³ I still saw my girlfriend. She still visited regularly, under the same idea that none of us were going out anyway, so we were pretty certain we didn't have it, COVID. So it didn't change that much.

And then, oh, a huge difference for living in Mount Hermon, which is a conference center, is that usually there's events and conferences going on constantly. There's always people coming, which I like, because it reminds me of when I was here as a kid. I worked on staff as a lifeguard one summer, too, so I know Mount Hermon very well. And it was very, very quiet, in an already very quiet neighborhood that is mostly older people. But I did notice the locals were out and about much more, because I started going on walks. I would see a lot more people walking than I used to see. Everyone was very friendly. So that sort of changed. But I also felt very fortunate to be in this really small, quiet community in a very quiet place that doesn't—I felt like I was kind of in this oasis. And then I'd drive somewhere else and be, oh yeah, a pandemic's going on. It was interesting.

"The toilet paper shortage worried me a little bit."

Reti: I'm curious about you having this experience with working as an EMT and teaching about disaster preparedness. Were you thinking of this as a disaster?

Duncan: Yeah, you know, it's something that I still haven't really wrapped my head around in that sense. I mean, I think about if I was still working on an ambulance, and the amount of effort we went into when we knew a patient had a serious, possibly contagious disease. It was a big effort, and a little stressful. To imagine that happening now on a daily basis for—you know, it's like suiting up for the Super Bowl every day for those people. I was very sympathetic in that regard.

But I was paying more attention to supply chains and grocery stores. And the toilet paper shortage worried me a little bit. And then it felt like there was kind of a meat shortage going on. I sort of thought as long as the lights are on and people can get food, then we're probably going to be okay. It didn't reach disaster level, in my mind, at least from a local perspective. That did change with the fires a little bit, though. But at that time, just thinking

about coronavirus, it felt like something different that I didn't—it definitely, it didn't fit into any of the trainings that I had ever taught or learned about. It was very different.

Reti: Are you still in touch with people who you were an EMT with?

Duncan: Very loosely. We keep an eye on each other over social media. One of my good friends is doing his residency as a doctor in New York City, and I do keep in touch with him fairly regularly. I kind of got a glimpse of what people are going through in the EMS world, just through social media.

*"I feel like I have lost out on time and experience,
as a graduate student, specifically."*

Reti: I would imagine it's been a really rough time.

Duncan: Mm-hmm, definitely.

Reti: Okay. So, what do you think has been the most challenging thing about this time with the pandemic for you?

Duncan: For me, personally, I feel like I have lost out on time and experience, as a graduate student, specifically. My research being oral history-focused that preferably is in an in-person setting—even though I'm glad we have other alternatives that work out just fine. But in terms of my dream of being at UC Santa Cruz, physically going to campus. You know, being a grad student, you're in this really weird place where you're not a faculty member, but you're also a student, and you also do some teaching. It's just really fun. I miss walking into Stevenson College and running into people. Or sitting—depending on what kind of work I had to do when we could go on campus, I would either go to my hiding spot where I didn't want to run into people, (Reti laughs) or if I had a little free time and didn't want to do work, I thought oh, I'll sit here, I'm sure someone will come by. I really miss that. I really do miss that. And I

feel like, especially being in my third year, this is really the last year of me taking classes—it really is unfortunate that we can't be in person for that. But I try to remind myself, I'm still interacting with the people from UCSC, and that's what makes the place. It just happens to be that Santa Cruz and the people are both fantastic. You know, it's something that I just have to keep thinking about as not a total loss. But it does feel that way, somewhat.

Reti: Do you feel vulnerable to getting COVID-19? Have you ever sat around and thought, oh my God, I might die from this?

Duncan: I'd say it's been a roller coaster experience of me thinking wow, this is really bizarre and very serious, and then me thinking, you know, it's just kind of a roll of the dice. I think part of that comes from my medical background. I can think of one time that I know for sure I got norovirus from a patient when I was on the ambulance, which is really not fun. (laughs) I was very sick. And it was pretty gross. But—and I've talked about this a lot with my dad, who I think is probably in this boat more than I am—when you see the amount of people that get sick and die, it doesn't cheapen the value of life. But I think it's less shocking. When we hear things about people dying, we go: people die every day. That's kind of what you had to tell yourself, I think, in that role. You're just like, every day, someone's going to die. And sometimes they have a long list of issues going on, and you go yeah, on paper that makes total sense. Then there's other cases where you're like, wow, I can't believe that person died from this or that. Understanding how disease and viruses work—the lack of information and the sheer spread of the variety of things that we've learned and not learned—it's very confusing. Everything else is very laid out procedurally in medicine, where it can be fairly simple. To have something that is so not understood is really confusing. That's where I kind of go back and forth with going wow, oh, I have a tickle in my throat, this is really bad. Then I read a terrible story about someone young or a child dying, and I go, this is a nightmare. Then I think, well, you know, maybe there was something else going on. So, I don't know. It's just very—it's really up and down for me constantly about how seriously I take it.

And at the same time, thankfully Santa Cruz County has been relatively low, coronavirus-wise, compared to other places, especially the Bay Area. You know, I didn't hesitate to, when things opened up to—like I'll use Shanty Shack as another example. You go there wearing a mask. They take your temperature. They have everyone spaced out. When you sit down at a table, you take your mask off so you can have a beer and eat or whatever. The first time I did that was very strange. Sitting down outside within visual sight of someone else and taking off my mask, I did think, wow, this is really crazy.

Now a few months in through the summer, it's funny hearing your story about the masculinity component of men wearing a mask.⁴ I like wearing a mask. It's like wearing sunglasses, but below the nose for me. I like hiding my face. (laughs) When I don't have one on, I feel really, really strange. I've gotten out of the car a few times without my mask on and I go, oh my gosh, what am I doing?

So every time I do a new experience— Like I went to the dentist back in June, I think, before they closed down on campus at UCSC. Very similar to going to a restaurant where there's a temperature check, make you sign a waiver saying you haven't been exposed or have symptoms. That was, I felt really strange, because you have to take your mask off, obviously, for the dentist to go into your mouth. But then when I went back in September, I hardly think about it. So it's been very inconsistent, I guess, how afraid I am of the virus.

Reti: Mm hmm. And is your dad still working as a firefighter?

Duncan: No. He retired six years ago.

Reti: So you don't have to be worried about him being exposed through his work.

Duncan: No, thankfully. I know my mom is, too. I'm very glad that we're both out of that field at this time.

Reti: Okay. What kinds of things have you been doing to take care of yourself during this time?

"I always get nervous talking in seminar. I think actually having it on Zoom has made it a little easier...Now I'm sitting at my desk that's in my kitchen, with a shirt and my pajama pants on. And I can go, "Yeah, let me give you my two cents on this book."

Duncan: I think the number one thing I can think of is mindset—and starting fall quarter I kind of have to reset how I do this. But when you do all your work at home, especially grad student work, it feels like I'm either not getting enough done, or that I have no reason to stop working on things because I'm at home. If I was on campus from nine to four, and if I came home I was just relaxing, doing whatever I wanted to do. Now I have to remind myself, I've been working eight hours, and it's okay if I'm going to step away from my desk for a little bit. But it still eats away at me a little bit.

And then I think it's keeping in contact with people, whether it's Facetiming my parents, my friends from Castro Valley—we've done some group Facetimes, which we've never done. These are my friends from elementary school, so I've known these guys forever. I think it's actually made us really talk to one another, where usually we get together and just reminisce about high school or middle school or whatever, and tell old funny stories that we've all heard a million times. (Reti laughs) But now, especially with—one just got his PhD from UCI; another one got laid off; another one's been working from home as an engineer. So we all have different experiences. We all know each other's families very well. So we've really actually talked, and it's been really nice. We just do little happy hours and stuff.

And then the other one that I was doing before the pandemic is some of my other friends, we play video games together online. That's just a very mindless way to casually talk. I think we were drawn to that because it wasn't a Zoom happy hour where we're all just sitting here going, "Oh, what's new?" And if you're just doing

something passive, it's like playing darts at a bar with someone. You don't feel like you really have to talk to them, but you're doing something kind of fun. That's been huge, just kind of keeping my fingers on the pulse in Castro Valley and what's going on over there. And then lots of walks. And you know, just try and take advantage of the time, I guess. I really like where I live, so it could be worse.

Reti: Okay. Have you found—this is kind of a weird question (laughs)—but is there anything humorous about this time for you?

Duncan: Um, anything humorous? That's tough, because I find humor in pretty much everything. (Reti laughs) I don't, I mean, it sounds weird, but I guess the way "internet culture," with memes and stuff, has interpreted the pandemic has made me laugh about certain things and certain aspects.

(laughs) I guess the thing I have thought about that is sort of funny is I feel for social events I always have an out now. Besides being a grad student, if I say, "Oh, you know what? I feel really uncomfortable. I don't want to do that, with the virus." I can always get out; no one ever questions that. So that's been pretty nice in that way. (laughter) Yeah. But I'll have to think about that more. I'm sure there's other things.

Reti: Okay. Are you taking classes right now? Or are you mostly TAing and doing your QE prep?

Duncan: I'm actually on fellowship for the year, and I'm in one seminar and in one independent study.

Reti: Okay. So the seminar, is that meeting on Zoom?

Duncan: Yes.

Reti: And how would you evaluate that experience of remote learning?

Duncan: Yeah, I always get nervous talking in seminar. I think actually having it on Zoom has made it a little easier. Initially, I think I was more nervous to talk on Zoom. Now I'm sitting at my desk that's in my kitchen, with a shirt and my pajama pants on. And I can go, "Yeah, let me give you my two cents on this book." If I say something that I think is embarrassing, I can turn my camera off in my living room and think about why I said that. (Reti laughs) So you're not like in a class sitting at a big table, thinking that you have to say something in a certain way. It's easier to hide out if you don't want to talk. You can just sit there and stare at your screen and you don't have a professor looking at you like, come on, you need to say something.

I did TA virtually too, or remotely, which was very nerve-wracking at first. I got very lucky with a fairly talkative group of undergrads. I always joke with people. I say I felt like I was a streamer, like for video games. Because I'd say something, I'd go, "Oh, the chat's really lighting up. Thanks for these comments. Let's hear what—I want to shout out this comment." I always joked. I told my friends here that if I didn't get into the PhD program at Santa Cruz, I was just going to be a video game streamer, and probably make more money than I could ever believe, if I were good at it. So I got to live out that fantasy as a TA online. So in that regard, I actually haven't minded it, even though I do miss being in person.

Initially, I think there was a little—you know, someone always talks over one another because it's hard to gauge if someone's going to say something. But for me, I'm pretty much over that. I don't mind it at all. I absolutely love how many conferences and talks I can go to now that I never would have been able to attend. So, that's been nice. Except for the OHA.⁵ I really wanted to go to Baltimore, because I've never been. But for everything else—I did the Columbia oral history series online, which I know I wouldn't have been able to do before. It's almost too much. I find myself signing up for too many things. So that's been one of the bonuses of online learning, I'd say.

Reti: Yeah. I was going to ask you, along those lines, if there were surprisingly positive things about this time. Can you think of other examples?

“Which makes me worried when things go back to normal, it will be even more terrifying, and we’ll all be kind of socially regressed on how to communicate in an in-person setting.”

Duncan: Besides the conferences and workshops and things, other bonuses? Well, a huge one is I never understood how much time was spent getting ready to go to campus. It takes me about twenty-five minutes from here to get to campus without freeway, which I really like. So no traffic. And then finding parking, which we know at UC Santa Cruz can be an adventure of its own, depending on if I’m going to hike from somewhere else to class, or find a good spot. All that time is now saved, really. I can get up a little later, come in to my desk and be ready to go—and also have a book out and notes out. I can look things up. In that regard, that’s been sort of nice, especially for presentations. The first conference I presented at was virtual. I was nervous. But my girlfriend was watching in the living room. I had all my notes set up here. I thought, well this isn’t really that hard. I don’t have to worry about tripping, walking up to a podium. (laughter) That kind of stuff makes it a little bit easier, I think. Which makes me worried when things go back to normal, if it will be even more terrifying, and we’ll all be kind of socially regressed on how to communicate in an in-person setting. Will it be even more terrifying if I have to present at a conference in person? I don’t know what that’s going to be like. We may all be screen junkies at this point and not want to go back to the real world.

Reti: I hadn’t thought about that.

The CZU Lightning Complex Fire

So you mentioned a little while ago about the fires. So tell me about your experience during the CZU Lightning Complex Fire.

You live in the mountains.

Duncan: I do, yeah. Yeah, it was a little—it was kind of an interesting time. I had some friends come up to camp in Big Basin on, I believe it was a Friday, the day before the lightning storm, which none of us knew it was coming. I remember them coming up; they stopped by our place. It was 105 in Mount Hermon. Being in the woods when it's over 100 is even worse. So they were very upset. They thought, how's it this hot when we're camping? This is terrible. We spent the day with them. They brought their dog to Big Basin and you can camp at a campsite with a dog, but you're not allowed to take a dog on any of the trails, which they did not know. We spent the day with them, had dinner at their campsite until about 9:00 pm. And it was still warm.

Then I remember sleeping with my window open and hearing the thunder and the wind and what I thought was maybe rain here—it could have been leaves, though. I'm still not sure. And thinking oh my God, my poor friends are at Big Basin right now—and not knowing about the fire, either—and thinking, should I drive out there to pick them up? I fell back to sleep. Luckily, they made it out immediately. They were going to leave a day early anyway because they were so miserable.

"I was really scared when UCSC got evacuated. I thought, not only can I not go to campus, now campus may cease to exist."

When I started recognizing places that were being evacuated and places where the fires were, I got very nervous. I remember the friend I mentioned before—where I go over to her place to see her roommates every night—I was there and they mentioned that Boulder Creek was being evacuated. I've been to Boulder Creek many times. I thought well that's—I mean, especially as the crow flies, it's not far from my place at all. So we ended up kind of spontaneously going to another friend's house who lives in Aptos because we thought if we have to get evacuated in the middle of the night—I had actually slept through a residential fire here

at Mount Hermon once. Totally not—didn't wake up at all. So I thought, I really don't want to sleep at my place with the fire that close. So we spent the night there.

I was already making plans to come back to the Bay Area anyway to see my parents. When I came back here, there was ash everywhere. I had burnt, completely charred leaves landing in the backyard. I thought, that's it. I'm leaving anyway. The evacuation order was—it was very close. Felton got evacuated the day after I left. It got within a mile of Mount Hermon. Actually, my neighbor's house here, when I got back, there was like a softball-sized hole burned in their deck from an ember or something, or a leaf. So it got about as close as you can get in terms of that.

And living in Mount Hermon the past about three years, it was something that we'd all talked—a few neighbors and friends I have up here, it was something we'd all talk about. Because there's only two roads out of Mount Hermon. There's woods and trees everywhere. It's really hard to create a defensible space around your property the way things are. So it was definitely something that we all were afraid of, and then it came to reality. I packed up—almost didn't pack up my research, don't ask me why. (laughs) But I ended up, I had primary documents, I ended up grabbing those. But I also felt very fortunate that my parents were living in the Bay Area. I had another place to go which I was going to go to anyway, so it wasn't a huge deal.

I actually ended up taking in someone from our cohort that lived on campus in grad student housing, got evacuated. He ended up staying with me at my parents' place for about three weeks because he didn't want to go through the shelter process, which I understand.

Then coming back, it's still, it's very odd when you leave Mount Hermon, you come down this big bridge, and you can see in the mountains in Felton where the fires were. That's still very ominous.

I was really scared when UCSC got evacuated. I thought, not only can I not go to campus, now campus may cease to exist. What a nightmare—I just want to go to this school and enjoy it. And then the fact of not having a place to live, too, I guess maybe in a different sense as well, in that I'm connected to the property, too. It's a place that I visited before I had any idea that I was going to come to UCSC. So that would have been a whole other ordeal, going through that with my family and trying to figure out how to rebuild and things like that. So it was very, very stressful.

But at the same time, when I went to the dentist in September and the receptionist asked what the experience of the fires was, or what my experience with the fire was, I thought well, when was that? I couldn't even think about when it was. The sky was clear. And I thought yeah, that was two weeks ago. It was very bizarre. I remember growing up as a kid and my dad going down to the long-campaign fires. It was always in Southern California. Not until Santa Rosa had I really associated fires with being up here.

So it was a very interesting period, for sure.

Reti: Did you work as a firefighter?

Duncan: I was a reserve firefighter. Besides doing a lot of PR stuff for the department, I worked medical at the county fair. So not any firefighting capacity, so to speak, but that was my title.

Reti: I wondered if your training in firefighting was something that you were bringing to your assessment of what was going on at Mount Hermon and how dangerous that was.

Duncan: A little bit. I had to study fire behavior and wildland firefighting. My dad certainly has a lot more experience with that than I do. We're both sort of on the same page in understanding that. We both thought that if a fire starts in Mount Hermon or got past Felton, it's a total loss. It's a small community and it's not in a defensible space where it would be easy to defend. And it's such a

small amount of homes, too. So we recognized that risk.

Reti: Wow. It's such a crazy, crazy time.

Duncan: Yeah.

Reti: Yeah, and your sense of time. You were talking about how it was just a couple of weeks after the fire and yet it felt like forever. It was hard to even pinpoint when that happened.

Duncan: Yeah.

Reti: I know that's not really a question—but just observing that that's part of what's been going on.

The Political Climate

So, and then what about the political climate? How has that been affecting you during this time?

Duncan: Yeah, I mean, I'm very thankful to live in California. I feel like we're somewhat sheltered from some of the effects that happen in other parts, other places around the country. I'm also thankful to live in Santa Cruz because I think it also, to some way, insulates us from what goes on in the rest of the state. Hearing about other places where masks are a huge issue—I can't remember the last time I saw someone in Santa Cruz without a mask, thankfully. So in that regard, it's been nice.

But it's interesting seeing things online and friends. My mom recently reconnected with a cousin from Upstate New York. The politics and the topics are so completely different around the bubble, the bubble that is California and the Bay Area, too. And it's also hard to gauge, being twenty-eight and being politically aware, maybe ten years ago—that's debatable—but understanding that historically there's been up and down times, and civil unrest in this

way. But it just—I think people would agree, it feels different this time around. Or at least I've never felt just kind of a general anxiety about the direction of the country and how society is operating. A lot of that I try to convey to my parents, who don't spend as much time on the internet. Trying to explain that what you see on the national cable news that you watch every night at 5:30 is very different from some of the things that are being talked about online; trying to explain, just explain what I see and what I read. I think there's a lot of people operating on different factual basis, bases that I don't know. It all feels like that's going to come to a head come November. But it's not eating at me like I think it is for other people, or other people that live in different areas, that live outside of California, maybe. And you know, it's generally frustrating. But yeah, that's what I would say.

"I think that the lessons that we've learned about distancing and mask wearing and sanitation, those are all going to pay dividends in the future, when maybe we face another pandemic of even worse proportions."

Reti: Okay. I know it's hard to imagine the future. But you're now in your third year.

Duncan: Mm-hmm, starting third year.

Reti: Right. Do you think that there's going to be a vaccine and then everything's just going to snap back to normal? When you imagine the future, what do you see?

Duncan: Yeah, I'd say I'm actually fairly optimistic. I think that the lessons that we've learned about distancing and mask wearing and sanitation, those are all going to pay dividends in the future, when maybe we face another pandemic of even worse proportions. I have a lot of friends that work in tech, too. I remember talking to a friend at Twitter. And he had a laptop—this is like eight years ago—he worked on a laptop at the Twitter building in San Francisco. They had an outside area with recliners and a cornhole board.

I asked him, I said, “Why don’t you just do this at home? Why do you have to take BART in?” He’s like, “Well, I don’t know.” I thought, so many of us work from a computer, why are we—I mean, I understand there’s collaboration and communication. But I think hopefully the work/life experience for a lot of people will be better because of this, where they come into the office once a week, or something like that.

I’ve been reading a lot about how they’re going to prioritize vaccines for marginalized people and frontline workers. I think that’s good. I’m okay with the normal we have now. I feel like most places that I want to go, I can go to. It’s just a little different. If I want to go to the grocery store; if I want to go to a brewery; if I want to go to a beach—you know, that’s fine. Going to a movie theater, going on a plane, that’s kind of a different story, things that are only inside. So I think that for the most part, people are maybe going to have to come around to understanding risk and being okay with temperature checks before a concert or something like that. But I think we’ll be better off for it.

I feel much less isolated and, “Oh, I’m so restricted I feel like I can’t do anything”—than I did a while back. I know part of that has to do with how well Santa Cruz has done in terms of corona numbers. Fingers crossed that we don’t have to face something like this again. I don’t know if I have the stomach to restart a whole new shelter in place, vaccine, political drama, all over again. I think the fact that people still talk about this like “when this is over,” “when things are normal,” that’s a good sign. I’m glad we’re not just “in it.” Not thinking about how life will be different would be bad. I’m glad people have their mind to the future in that way.

Reti: So you’re interested in oral history and you’re an oral historian. What inspired you to want to be part of this team to help Regional History document this time?

Duncan: In general, what drew me to oral history is I realized getting out of the medical field that I did miss the one-on-one connection

with talking with patients in hospital and in ambulance. There were quite a lot of opportunities, especially on longer transports in the ambulance, where I would end up hearing someone's life story. It's weird to think about now, why I was even asking those questions. But I guess it's natural curiosity if you're in a situation with someone and you say, "Why do you live in this town?" And then they start talking, and you're off. And being in history, I always thought was this isolating: "Oh, I've got to spend all my time in an archive and never talk to anybody." So this opportunity to actually communicate and deal with memory and emotion, which I think is often left out of history—which is really unfortunate—is what drew me to oral history in general.

And then, with the Regional History Project, which I didn't know really anything about when I first got here; then meeting Cameron, and meeting you, and then seeing the *Seeds of Something Different* book, I'm like, this is amazing. It's an oral history book about a place that I love. I love how it's put together. You don't see too many oral history books really in general. I thought wow, this is really great. And then hearing about a COVID-19 project, which I'd already done a little work with, with a different institution.⁶ I'd spoken to Cameron about this, too, before there was any talk of the project; how oral history is becoming this more important research method and historical process that I think is going to get recognized more through this pandemic.

And a lot of it for me, too, is that I genuinely care about UC Santa Cruz, and I care about Santa Cruz in general. And I think it's really important, no matter any scale. If there was a project about Castro Valley, I would want to be doing that, too. That's an even smaller town.

The same thing with my research with school desegregation.⁷ It's a small place that people who grew up in the Bay Area can't always pinpoint on a map. But I think those are the most important stories, where digging into a community and looking at experience, and naturally I think that connects to a larger narrative that will resonate

with a lot of people inside and outside of Santa Cruz.

Yeah, and anything that says: “oral history,” I’ll sign up for, too, to be honest.

(Reti laughs)

So this hit all the marks for me of wanting to be a part of it. In that way. Absolutely.

Reti: Great. Thank you. Well, is there anything else that I haven’t asked you that you’d like to talk about?

Duncan: Not that I can think of. I guess I would just say it’s very interesting knowing this interview was coming. I was trying to retrace it in my head and it’s very difficult; it’s a difficult thing to try to pinpoint. I hope that people find it useful to try to recall what went on during this time. I kind of mark my years by holidays. I think human beings kind of need a little periodization in their life. And thinking about months—December last year seems like twenty years ago. It’s great to think back through these times. And I’m sure everyone that we interview, including myself, will keep thinking through this too. This is not going to be a static process, to think about this time. So I hope it’s as beneficial for people as it has been for me.

Reti: Thank you so much, David. This has been really great.

Duncan: Sure. Thank you.

Endnotes

¹The Seattle area had an early outbreak of cases.

²Professor Breen was also interviewed for this project, by David Duncan. See his oral history for his account of this event. - Editor

³History of Art and Visual Culture (HAVC), pronounced "havoc." - Editor

⁴See the interview with Irene Reti, where the roles from this interview are reversed. In that interview, Irene describes her sense of the connections between anti-mask ideology and toxic masculinity.

⁵The Oral History Association. Their annual meeting in 2020 was going to be in Baltimore until it was converted to a virtual event.

⁶The COVID-19 Oral History Project, which is based at Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI).

⁷David Duncan's graduate research focuses the history of school segregation and desegregation in Marin City and Sausalito, California. – Editor



Abbott Square, Santa Cruz, after the Pandemic Began.
Photo by Shmuel Thaler.

Maryam Nazir

Interviewed by Isabella Crespin



Since March 2020, Maryam Nazir, a third-year student in philosophy, has been actively seeking out opportunities to engage in community-based support during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Nazir described in her application to this project, she believes in “the simple act of listening, listening to experiences, to new perspectives, and to revolutionary ideas. Every act of mutual aid and community support begins with this radical act of listening. This is why I believe oral history is so

important. The ability for us to gather, document, and distribute pockets of people’s real lives and experiences is the most powerful weapon amidst these unprecedented times, for not only the people of the now, but for people of the future as well.”

During the pandemic Maryam was living with her parents in San Ramon, California. In addition to working as an interviewer for this project, Maryam participated in UCSC’s Science & Justice Research Center’s Pandemicine research project, focusing on bioethics. As Maryam articulates, “Stories like these are what humanize global catastrophes, and allow many looking back to face, not the one-dimensional myriad of statistics and graphs, but the colorful stories of triumph, failure, and perseverance.”

Isabella Crespin: Let’s start with what your name is.

*"I really found my freedom and my home
and my space in Santa Cruz."*

Maryam Nazir: My name is Maryam Nazir.

Crespin: And what year are you?

Nazir: I'm a third year.

Crespin: And where are you from?

Nazir: I'm from originally NorCal. I was born in San Mateo. I've lived in San Ramon my whole life. It's a little city outside San Francisco. But yeah, I've lived in California my whole life.

Crespin: NorCal is a very specific culture, too.

Nazir: Yeah, it is. (laughter)

Crespin: It's weird that we're the same state, SoCal and NorCal. Whatever's up there, who cares? So, what's your major?

Nazir: I'm a philosophy major.

Crespin: Oh, okay. What interests you about philosophy?

Nazir: I want to go to law school. So I was figuring out what major would kind of align with that. I was initially political science. But I didn't even take one political science class. I took an intro to philosophy class and I was like, I'm doing this. Yeah, I think it clicks with me. I think it allows me to showcase my talents and understandings the best.

Crespin: Philosophy always seemed cool. Have you started studying for the LSAT? That's a garbage test.

Nazir: Yeah, I have been studying since June. It's intense. I want to take it in January. So there's been a lot of studying going on.

Crespin: And what made you choose to go to Santa Cruz?

Nazir: I went to a really competitive high school, too. My top college choice was NYU and UC Irvine. I got waitlisted by both. So Santa Cruz was my default. And then they both denied me in August. So it was like, okay, I guess I'm just going to Santa Cruz. (laughs) They also had this three plus one law program, where you could finish your bachelor's in three years and then you could automatically get into Hastings Law School, and basically do your senior year and first year of law school combined. But they took that away my freshman year, so I couldn't even apply for that.

Crespin: Oh, they took that away?

Nazir: Yeah.

Crespin: Oh, that's messed up. But why do you think people think of Santa Cruz as the lesser of them? If you're comfortable answering that.

Nazir: Yeah, I think it definitely stems from elitism and like oh, how hard is it to get into this school? But I think not a lot of people realize it caters to different people. I'm not a STEM person. I don't have any interest going in STEM. So a school like Berkeley, or something, that focuses on medicine, STEM, technology, it is hard to get into. It would be a good school to go to. But it doesn't put me at a disadvantage if I don't go there. But yeah, I think it's just—obviously, who gets to go to Berkeley are the kids who can afford to get SAT prep, college counseling prep, all of that stuff. So I feel like it stems from elitism and classism.

Crespin: Yeah, definitely. I do agree with that. We're spoiled in California with how good our schools are, I think.

Nazir: Yeah.

Crespin: So where are you currently?

Nazir: I'm in San Ramon. So I'm back home. I moved back when everything got shut down.

Crespin: How's that been going?

Nazir: It's a struggle. But I think it's—I just look at it as a test. Just kind of grinding it out until I can go and live my own life and have my own place and stuff.

Crespin: And what's your family like? What's your background?

Nazir: My mom grew up here in California. She grew up in SoCal. My dad grew up in Pakistan. He immigrated to the United States when he was seventeen or eighteen. He immigrated here just to go to college. So he kind of was like half and half. But my whole family's from Pakistan. They all kind of came here when I was born, so now they're all located here. I come from a really big family. My mom has five siblings. My dad has seven siblings and then I have four siblings.

Crespin: That's okay. That's a lot of numbers.

Nazir: Yeah.

Crespin: A lot of people. Yeah, big families are wild.

So with law school, what type of law are you interested in? Because some people like big law, want to sell their soul for a bit.

Nazir: Yeah. (laughs) No, I think I'm definitely very anti-corporate business law. I don't want to be helping corporations. I would be

more on the side of nonprofit pro bono law. Like trying to get really good, adequate legal services to people who don't have them, representing people who don't really have good legal representation.

And so I guess civil rights law is the realm that I would be most interested in. My dream job is to work for those innocence projects where they help people get off of Death Row, help people get off of false convictions.¹ The goal of my career path would be doing the most good for the most amount of people. If I have the opportunity to get to a law school and get to a place where not a lot of people have the money to do, and I'm taking that on, I think, why wouldn't you want to provide those services and help other people?

Crespin: I definitely agree with that. That sounds very Santa Cruz, helping people. So how was your time actually being in Santa Cruz? Like how did you like fit in, you know?

Nazir: Yeah. So, freshman year, I had the opportunity to room with a girl I knew in high school. We weren't like close, but we were in the same community because I'm Muslim and she was also Muslim. So we have our Muslim community where I live at home. And so she was like a part of that. And we were like, oh, that will be cool. We can room together and then we can go home together, visit home. That actually went pretty well, because it was nice to have someone from my hometown experience college. And not only from my hometown; she had the same family structure as I did, very strict parents who didn't let you do anything, because we come from a Muslim household. So it was really nice and comforting to have someone by you through this whole new experience. We were each other's like teddy bears. We grew apart.

I really found my freedom and my home and my space in Santa Cruz. I think that's why I like it so much. I was able to do what I wanted. I didn't have any restrictions or rules. I feel like I didn't have a personality before I moved out. And then once you're there,

you're like, I don't know anybody, I don't know myself—and you have to figure that all out.

So I think that's why I love Santa Cruz, because I was able to understand who I was and figure that out, and get people that I felt had the same values as me, and develop friendships and connection to those people. It was a learning curve. But then once you kind of get into it, I felt like I belonged in my little circle.

Crespin: Yeah, that's nice. Yeah, freshman year's a lot of finding yourself and all that. It's a crazy year.

Nazir: Yeah.

Crespin: I was going to ask, what communities were you part of in Santa Cruz, and are you still a part of them now, due to distance and all that?

Nazir: So I tried to get involved in the Muslim community in Santa Cruz. But I wouldn't really classify myself as religious, like very religious. But I did know people who were in the Muslim community in Santa Cruz who were very religious. That was a defining characteristic of themselves.

I did try to get in. I made a couple of friends that were really cool people. But I kind of realized I don't think I fit in in that space. So I started meeting people and getting introduced to different people. I didn't really form a community within a certain club or anything, but I did have a close group of friends. We had the same values. We thought pretty much the same way.

Yeah, what was the other part of the question?

Crespin: If you're still part of whatever it is now.

Nazir: Yeah. Half of the group kind of split off because we have

differences. But the people who I retained during that are now very close to me. It like two other people. And it's hard because one of them is in San Francisco and another one is in Long Beach. So it's difficult because we don't ever get to see each other. We're hoping that we can get reunited someday. (laughs)

Crespin: What communities are you part of back home? Or were, at least?

Nazir: My family's very religious-oriented, so just by default, I would be classified in the Muslim, I guess first or second-generation communities. Most of the people that I'm close with are a part of that Muslim community. Their parents either immigrated here, or they were children of people who freshly immigrated here. So it's definitely immigrant first generation. Where I live it's kind of like an East Asian bubble. There's a lot of East and South Asian people who live around me.

It's funny, because I've never had a culture shock. I've always grown up with—like there's only been two or three white kids in my classes. It's never been only me. I've always seen people who look like me in my classes. I kind of expected a culture shock when I went to Santa Cruz. And to a degree, I felt it. But I'm affiliated with College 9 and 10, so that's a computer science kind of area. But I really like the social justice theme. So the college and the people that I was living with, they were all mostly Asian and Indian, too. So my whole life I've been surrounded by people like that.

Crespin: That's interesting. My life has been full of culture shock, so I find it wild. Especially because you went all the way to college, and it's just the same. It's crazy.

Nazir: Yeah.

Crespin: I know that we're supposed to talk about big picture stuff, but let's just get into it. So, what do you call—like what do you call the pandemic? Do you call it corona? Or COVID? I feel like people

have different reasons for calling it—

Quarantine: “The Purgatory”

Nazir: Yeah. I call it COVID. I call it “the purgatory” we’re in right now, quarantine.

Crespin: That’s a pretty accurate name for it. When did you first hear of corona, or COVID?

Nazir: I remember hearing about it in January. I just assumed it was going to be the swine flu situation, because that’s the only pandemic-related thing that was in my mind, that I had experienced. I think the SARS epidemic was when I was like one or two, so I don’t remember that.

Crespin: Yeah, it was like in the ‘90s, I think, or like the year 2000.²

Nazir: Yeah. So I think the only like pandemic close thing we experienced was swine flu. And from what I remember, that only lasted like a week. I didn’t even have a full week of classes that were canceled.

So I heard about it in January. And then, I think February, the middle of February, me and my whole family, we took some time off; I took some time off school because my cousin was getting married in New Jersey. This was while it was slowly spreading. And it was like, oh my God. I remember my mom was talking about it and I was like oh, it’s no big deal. It’s going to go away. This is just scare tactics. It’s going to be solved.

Crespin: Like Ebola. Everyone was freaked out about it.

Nazir: Yeah, that was what I was comparing it to. It’s going to be one of those scare tactics that doesn’t leave China.

So we were traveling. I think the first time it was kind of like scary was going to the airport. We went to SFO to fly to New Jersey and it was empty. I was like, this is weird. Because I'd never been to an airport—even when it's like not vacation season, it's always very full, especially SFO—but it was pretty empty. Especially going back, it was crazy empty, too.

So that stayed in my head. But I just literally did not want to believe it was true until we got the email saying that you guys should probably go and take an extra week off.

UC Santa Cruz's Response to COVID-19

Crespin: That was a pretty surreal time. How did you feel about the UC's response to everything? Did you feel like they were giving good info, or they were too late with stuff?

Nazir: I mean, I think we all did not like that weird time of not knowing what was going to happen. I specifically remember getting an email and they were like, "Just wash your hands regularly. We don't have any plans of shutting anything down. But we're going to follow the news, and current events are rapidly evolving." I was like, oh, this is fine. It's just going to be like a weird flu thing.

And like the day after, or maybe even like that same day, I have friends who were like, "I'm leaving right now." And I was like, "Are you kidding?" I didn't want to believe it because I was like no, I'm staying here until the very last moment. I'm not going home. And then we got the email that was like—it wasn't even an email saying you guys have to go home. It was like, "You guys should probably leave, and then we will tell you when you're going to come back."

But I feel like it's hard—as much as we want to blame the UC system—they didn't have any extra information that we didn't. They knew exactly as much as we did. I don't agree with the way that they conducted fall or summer, because I think a lot of people lost money. But in terms of the spring situation, I just feel like they

there was not really any other option. They were trying to keep us involved and up-to-date, but obviously, there was not a lot of information to do that.

Crespin: There still is a lot of uncertainty about what is going on. Compared to when this first started, how do you feel about living in such an uncertain time, or whatever. People say, “unprecedented time,” but that annoys me now. (laughs)

Nazir: Well, I’m just trying to look in the future. I’m trying to see when things will get back to some kind of normal. I don’t like using the word “normal,” because I don’t think there is a normal to be going back to. But until there is a vaccine, we will be living in this constant, perpetual state of flattening the curve and then getting relaxed and saying, “Oh, the curve is flattened, so we’re going to stop doing the things that flatten the curve.” And the curve gets back up and then the cycle goes over and over and over. So it seems unprecedented. We’re living in a constant pattern of that—of waves and then going back out in other waves.

Crespin: How did you feel about the first month or two of the pandemic?

Nazir: It sucked. It was horrible. I hated it. I wanted to die. It was not fun because I was just getting into the groove of things at Santa Cruz. And I was like, I’m going to take summer classes. I’m going to live in Santa Cruz over the summer. I don’t have to go home. And then being put back into your home. And not only being put back here, but being put back here like perpetually, not even being told what’s going to happen. It was really difficult for me because I’m a planner and I need to know what’s happening. I need to be in control of things.

Yeah, I didn’t really like it. It was one thing to be home, but it was another thing to be home and not being able to see friends. And not being able to escape home life when it becomes really suffocating. I think that was a really difficult adjustment to deal with.

Crespin: And how would you say the area around you reacted at that time?

“You go ten minutes away to Danville, which is the rich white part of our town and you see ... people walking around with no masks like they don’t care.”

Nazir: The bubble that I live in is very Democratic. A lot of the people are from China and India and I think these countries are very—I think the problem with the United States is that we live in an individualistic society where it’s one man for himself. That’s all fine and good until you have something like this happen where you need people to be looking out for each other. If that’s not a fundamental principle, then you’re going to have bubbles like Orange County and places like that where they just don’t feel the need to look out for other people, and they’re just looking after their own rights and individuals and whatever. But I think growing up in a Muslim—and Desi is what I kind of refer myself as. It’s Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and that kind of sub-region. Asian countries are very collectivist, and they’re very community-oriented. I have a mailbox that’s maybe like a hundred feet from my house. I’ll go check the mail and people will be complaining that, “Hey, when you go check the mail, you need to be wearing your mask. Even if you’re walking, the minute you’re outside your door, wear a mask.” And I’m just like, “Thank you. Thank you for saying that, because sometimes I forget.” But it’s kind of crazy because we have people who are sticking to these guidelines. Then you go ten minutes away to Danville, which is the rich white part of our town and you see the complete opposite. People walking around with no masks like they don’t care. So it’s just crazy to see how, I guess, naturalization and how socialization plays a role in how people are responding to the pandemic.

Crespin: Yeah. That’s all I have to say to that. Rich people play by different rules. How do you feel about like the income disparity at the moment? What do you think about the recent social issues we have had, or even in the world, because everything’s so connected

nowadays. What do you think are the more important ones that have happened recently during the pandemic?

Nazir: I think it's really interesting. I've always been extremely interested in social justice. In high school, I used to write articles about climate change, the Paris Accords, foreign issues and stuff. I remember the first time I heard about Black Lives Matter as a movement was in seventh grade and immediately it was a movement that I was completely onboard with. And I was twelve, so the fact that I could understand the need for it at that point.

And just going from 2012 to 2016, Black Lives Matter was not an issue—it was a very divisive issue, but I feel like now the difference with the protests is like, I mean at least from my point of view, there's not really anyone who's like "All Lives Matter" in my circle. Versus a couple of years ago, like in 2016, there were people and friends I knew that were posting, "All Lives Matter, All Lives Matter." So I think it's kind of interesting.

Then we also talk about with the protests, the accountability of using racial slurs. In high school, I was like almost ostracized, like me and my friend group, because I was the one who was calling people out for that, and being called "sensitive bitch" and whatever, "social justice warrior."³ And just being like, "I don't really care what you say, I'm going to continue doing this." And then now, fast forward and you have people who called me that now using Black Lives Matter and all of that as, I don't know what it's like, a tokenship kind of thing to get—I don't know what it is, performative activism?

Crespin: Performative activism, yeah.

Nazir: I think it's really funny the way that it's evolved. I'm not even trying to bash on the people, because I do believe in change. But I think it's really funny, the landscape and environment in 2016 versus now. I feel like there's much more support and much more awareness on the issue than there was a couple of years ago, which is crazy.

Crespin: Yeah, I feel like things change a lot. Like, I don't know, but being our generation, would you consider yourself a Gen Z or Millennial? I say Gen Z, but—

Nazir: Yeah, I would say Gen Z.

"It's Like, Girl, We're in a Pandemic."

Crespin: Okay. Clearly the Boomers do their own thing and the Millennials do their own thing. How do you feel about how Gen Z people are dealing with corona, and how that's probably shaped by like how we grew up? Messed-up stuff happened when we were kids. School shootings, that was like normal.

Nazir: Yeah. I think there's definitely a lot of pros to our generation. But I also feel like the fact that we're so young is— We are very reckless in our generation. I think it's definitely Gen Z who is going out and partying and bringing all of the—we're not necessarily contributing to COVID, necessarily. But we are the cause of spreading it. I think a lot of people don't understand that. I'll just be scrolling through social media or TikTok or whatever, and there are people who are like, "You're 17 and you're not going out right now. You're wasting your life." And all the people are like, "Oh, I don't have friends! I don't have friends!"

It's like, Girl, we're in a pandemic. I don't know what you're talking about. I just think that that's like a secondary thought. People are very ignorant. They just think, "This is the time of our lives. We need to be utilizing it, we need to be going out, we need to be making memories." Obviously, the individualistic culture is showing out more, too, I think in Gen Z as well. I just feel like people, especially people I went to high school with—it's really frustrating to see people in San Diego one week, San Luis Obispo another week. And it's like, I get you're masked, but you don't need to be going out, so don't go out.

My philosophy is if you don't have a need to go out, don't go out.

You don't need to be traveling. Even if it's safe, I don't care. You're getting in contact with people. You're getting food. You're getting services. You're using services that essential workers have to come into contact with, and I don't think it's fair for you to have some fun. It's like, can people just not stay home? I just don't understand how hard that is.

Crespin: Clearly, it's very divisive right now.

Nazir: Yeah.

Crespin: I feel it's kind of clear what your stance is. But how do you feel like it's going to affect us real soon? How do you think that's going to play out in our future, not only in the US, but that's clearly happening all over the world, where people either take it seriously or don't take it seriously? So what do you think are steps that could be done to stop those non-serious people, and how do you feel like those things are going to play?

Nazir: I think there's a lot of factors. You can talk about education; you can talk about our administration. You can talk about a lot of things. Philosophy is my major and we talk about collectivist versus individualistic cultures. I think it just boils down to that. If you look at cultures like Japan, the minute they go outside they put a mask on. There's no questions; there's no talk about freedoms or individual rights. They have managed to flatten the curve. And they've managed to go back to living the way they want to live.

The United States was founded on the principle of doing whatever you want, like leaving the Union, starting your own country. I think it's difficult to change that. I honestly don't think there's ever going to be a situation where United States is going to come out in the forefront of amazing health practices. We are all looking out for ourselves. If you want to be in a place where they value science and they value collectivist measures, you don't need to be in the United States. We're not going to be doing that.

Crespin: Let's take a detour. What have you been doing? What has been bringing you joy right now? Or what is some self-care stuff you do right now?

Nazir: (pause) I think it's difficult. I used to do to self-care by leaving and going to hang out with friends and stuff. But it's difficult now because, obviously, you take that away so what else can you do? I used to be an avid gym-goer. I loved to go and work out. I did track in high school—against my will. I did not want to do it. But I kind of fell in love with it. It forced me to use physical activity as a means of de-stressing. I would automatically go to practice after school, after a hard day of school. So I think that wired my brain to using that.

So I took that to college. Last fall, I got to school and I was like, I want to work out every single day of fall quarter. It's a beautiful day. I want to get cute little side abs. And I did it. I literally worked out every single day and I got little side abs and I was so proud of myself. (laughs) And then this happened and it was really annoying. I tried to work out at home. But it doesn't work. It just makes me feel disgusting. I don't like working where I sleep. I don't like doing that. It needs to remain separate for me. So that got taken out of the equation as well.

I have started getting into art. I used to be really into art in high school. I wanted to minor in art when I was going to college. But I realized I don't like to mix academics with hobbies. I didn't want to do that. And so now I've been getting into just doing art as a hobby, which is nice, because I haven't done that for a while.

And then, I guess something else is—I got into a relationship right before we left for quarantine. So it was a struggle. We had to basically kind of develop the foundations of a relationship apart, virtually. I think we succeeded. So I turn to my partner and then we get each other through difficult times, turning to each other to just rely and just keep in check like what's important, even if things are stressful. So that's something that I've learned to rely on.

"I think everyone's kind of learned to rely on technology more."

Crespin: So, with the last point, how do you feel about technology? Because it plays a significant role in our lives.

Nazir: I don't want to say I'm addicted to my phone, but I think I'm addicted to my phone. Especially staying connected with partners and friends and stuff, you have to be on your phone and on social media all the time. It's really not ideal. For me, ideal is putting my phone away and just spending time with people. I think quality time is much more meaningful and purposeful than Facetimes and whatever. But obviously in a time like this, you have to do that.

So I think everyone's kind of learned to rely on technology more. I think it's going to be really interesting coming out of it when we're able to see people. I'm really interested to see how our relationship with social media and technology is going to change or stay the same. Because if it stays the same, I think it's going to become really toxic. Obviously right now it's staying the same just because it has to, and it's staying at this high level because we're forced to.

But once you take the mandates away and the vaccine comes out, I think that that kind of addiction that people have gotten with their technology, I don't think it's going to go away. So I feel like that's going to be a future issue.

Crespin: Yeah, I can see that. I saw that I was on my phone for like eight hours. It's not good. How do you feel about school, because it's also online, unfortunately.

Nazir: I'm okay because my professors have been very, very accommodating and very nice. I haven't had any bad experiences with professors, thank God. So it's made my experience, much, much easier than it would have been, if they would have been a little difficult. I'm condensing my fourth year into my third year, so I'm graduating in June. I'm basically at the point where I'm going

to be doing my last year online. I don't think it's a big deal. It hasn't really registered to me that I'm not going to be having a real senior year.

But honestly, it's okay, because I think the fact that I'm forced to be at home and it's kind of cutting out a lot of extra time, I'm putting that towards taking more classes and doing more things to get done quicker. And so it sucks, but I think there wouldn't have been a situation where I would have been able to do it like this unless quarantine was like this. So I guess for that I'm thankful. I'm able to speed up the process.

Crespin: A lot of people are graduating this year.

Nazir: Yeah.

"I think [the fires were a] really dark reminder that climate change is not stopping, whether we're inside or outside."

Crespin: Congrats. That's not easy. Oh, I forgot to ask about this, but were you affected by the fires in NorCal at all?

Nazir: Yeah. It was really scary. There were a lot of fires in San Jose, which is the city that my partner lives in. And they were all on the brink of going to the city, which is really scary. And obviously, Santa Cruz, it got hit, and that was really scary. Because I have a connection toward that little city, and so I was very scared.

Where I live, there were a little bit of fires. But I live in the valley, so it's very dry already. I think they already did all of the measures that you need to do to prevent fires. Back in 2013, they burnt all of the dry hills behind our houses and stuff. So that was never an issue; it's never been an issue since then. But the only issue was air quality. The air quality got—I think the AQI was like a 400 at one point.⁴ That was insane to me because that's what you see in Third World countries where they don't have any infrastructure. Yeah, that was

kind of scary. At some points the air was like getting into my room and stuff. I have a humidifier that's always running in my room. And we have three different air purifiers that just go on throughout our home.

Yeah, it was really scary. I think it was a really dark reminder that climate change is not stopping, whether we're inside or outside. It was really intense.

"We're forced to see everything that's happening."

Crespin: Yeah, and how does it feel to have all of these major things happen at once? You have the pandemic; you have the wildfires; you have social issues that are now being brought to light. The election. We haven't even touched on that yet, but the election.

Nazir: Yeah, I think it's really insane. Canceling out COVID—I think if we compare the amount of issues and events that have happened in our world, there are not necessarily more now than there have been anytime else. I think the fact is we're just at home and we're seeing it all. Because there's no distractions. There's no going out. We're forced to see everything that's happening. I think that really affects our perception of it, because it seems like things are so overwhelming. It's like, if it's not one thing, it's another thing. And so I think it's really important to be mindful that if you're on your phone 24/7, and you're on social media and news sites 24/7, you're going to be seeing these all the time. So just not to get like overwhelmed or fatigued by everything that's going around.

Crespin: Yeah. Since I just mentioned it, how do you feel about the upcoming election? Have you voted?

Nazir: Yeah. I voted two weeks ago. So it's just sitting in a pile with all my family's. Me, my mom, my dad and my sister, we're all eligible voters this year. So that's just sitting in a little pile. I'm a little more optimistic. I think in 2016 I was like 100 percent sure that Hillary was going to win. I was like, there's no possible realm where Trump

could win. And then it happened and I was like, Jesus Christ. Now it's a big disappointment to see the Democratic candidate being the one that is kind of centrist. He's really not Democratic at all. It's basically just an election between two Republican candidates, in my opinion. I feel like I'm more optimistic just because of that fact. The fact that Biden is a white male and he's running a more centrist platform, I have a little more hope that he's going to be the one that's winning. Not mention like the failures that Trump has had this whole thing. I'm a little more optimistic than I was in 2016.

"I think the biggest takeaway is maintaining composure and self-care when things are completely chaos."

Crespin: There's way too many failures to list in this hour's time.

So where do you feel like you're going to be going from this? What things have you not necessarily learned, but have had to deal with in the pandemic that you think you're going to carry with you when this is one day, hopefully, over.

Nazir: I think the biggest takeaway is maintaining composure and self-care when things are completely chaos. I think that's what I've learned. I'm thinking of it more big picture as maybe a test of, can you survive this and then you can get to adulthood; you can get to freedom; you can get to the things you want. I'm trying to less focus on the details and the chaos and the horrible things that are happening, and more in a positive way try to take lessons out of it. I think that's what I always do with painful periods. It's painful—you can sit with it, but you can also try to learn something from it. That's the attitude that I'm trying to take right now.

Crespin: Mm-hmm. And what benefits do you think you've gotten from isolation, or negatives? But hopefully it's positive.

Nazir: Yeah. There's a lot of negatives. But I can focus on the positives. Some positives are I have been very good at maintaining my grades. That's really important because I want to go to law

school. So I think being at home and not having distractions of like oh, should I go out, whatever—even though I want those distractions, they allow me to focus on school. And then studying for my LSATs, I have more time to be doing that and focusing on that. Studying for long-term tests has always been a really big weakness of mine. During the pandemic, I've been way more structured and rigid than I've ever been in studying times and making sure that I do it every single day for two hours. So I'm hoping that I can see all of the benefits of that when I take the test, when I graduate.

I think another positive is the fact that my partner's also working from home, in his home. That has allowed us to have a lot more time to connect and get to know each other than most people would have. Like Facetiming all day, and just talking and spending time all day. I think that's something that we wouldn't have had if it hadn't happened. I think we've gotten to a much deeper level than we would have if it would have been just free rein, going out and living our normal lives. So I guess that is a good positive.

Crespin: What are the things you absolutely hated about this period of time?

Nazir: I think it's difficult being in a family where you don't really agree with a lot of the things that are implemented. And then being in a strict household, also, it's difficult because you establish your own autonomy and freedom when you go to college. And to have that ripped away is really debilitating.

But I think for me, it's more about just coping. If I can stand seven, eight, nine, ten months, however long, in a place where I don't want to be, inevitably not being told when I'm going to leave; if I can handle this, I can literally handle anything. Nothing can be put in my way that I can't handle, if I can go through this.

But I think it's really difficult for people with families that are harder to live with, especially bigger families. You feel like you're suffocated. You don't have your own space and stuff. Yeah, that's

been a big thing to adapt to and deal with for sure.

"I miss having my own routine, having free rein of the day."

Crespin: What is the thing you miss the most pre-pandemic? Like getting ice cream, or hanging out with friends and like watching Netflix or something.

Nazir: I miss having my own routine, having free rein of the day, waking up and being like, I'm going to do my homework, and then I'm going to go thrift shopping, and then I'm going to go grocery shopping, and then I'm going to go to the beach, just being like, I can do whatever I want today. That is such a joy that I took for granted when I was there. Now you have to go through two people to do anything. I miss autonomy, just being your own person.

Crespin: Mm hmm. If we unfortunately find ourselves in another pandemic somehow, what would be your tips and tricks for the future people, how to survive this hard time?

Nazir: Lean on people. Lean on friends; lean on people that you're close to. Maybe refuel the relationships that you feel like have gotten a little distant. Focus on yourself. I think a lot of self-care. Meditation is really helpful.

Crespin: I do think those are some good tips for now. What is your absolute hope for the future?

Nazir: I hope this ends by the summer. And we can go back to some less rigid restrictions for the summer. I just want to move on and graduate, get a job, get my own place. It just feels being home and stuff, I feel like I'm back in high school. I feel like nothing's changed. I want to feel like things have evolved. Like, yeah, that's my hope. I want to have that sense of evolution and have that sense of change.

Crespin: Have I missed anything? Was there any topic that I haven't covered? Or some crazy thing that happened to you during the pandemic that you would like to share?

Nazir: I don't know. It's been pretty uneventful for me. (laughs)

Crespin: You have a partner. You're doing fine. You have an internship. There's got to be something.

Nazir: Yeah. I think something really good that I'm looking forward to is I have a potential internship in January with the public defender's office in Santa Cruz. I'm just praying that goes through and I can go back to Santa Cruz and get a place. I'm really excited about that. I'm hoping to leverage that internship to a job, hopefully, when I graduate. Because that's definitely the kind of field that I want to go into, public defending, helping people that don't have the resources. So that's something that's really interesting and fun.

I was working with this Science & Justice Research Center this spring, summer, and now I'm doing it this year, too, which is really cool because I've been able to research about bioethics and a lot of the philosophy that's concerned with COVID-19. We were able to create a podcast which is airing on a radio station, which is really cool. So that was really fun because we put a lot of work into the interviews for that, and curating the podcasts and the scripts and stuff. And then they are also helping me with my graduation time. I need seventeen units for two quarters to graduate, so they're letting me manage a lot of their social media accounts and stuff for two units a quarter. So I don't have to be taking extra classes, I can just be working with them. So that's a really, really helpful thing that has happened.

Crespin: That's awesome. I didn't ask, but what do you miss about Santa Cruz? It's a very specific place. It's very special, in a way.

Nazir: Yeah. I definitely miss the people and the vibes there. I think the people were like super nice and chill. It was completely opposite

from my hometown and my high school, which is cutthroat and competitive and stuff. I really appreciated the fact that no one was asking you—like in high school, I would walk in and people were like, “How many APs are you taking? What grades do you have? What did you get on your SATs?”

Crespin: Yeah. (laughs)

Nazir: It was ridiculous. It was this constant cycle of comparing yourself to others. I really appreciated the fact that Santa Cruz was self-paced, almost. It was your path. You focus on enriching your path, and your path only. I really appreciated that. I liked how, especially in my major, the classes are really small and the professors are really nice. And I’m able to reach out and look for opportunities. So that was something that I do miss about Santa Cruz.

Crespin: Yeah. It’s a special place. I guess we’re done. Thank you.



An Empty McHenry Library Cafe
Photo by Shmuel Thaler

Endnotes

¹ A prominent example is The Innocence Project itself, a nonprofit to exonerate the wrongfully convicted. -Editor

² The SARS outbreak occurred primarily in 2002-2003. -Editor

³ In recent years, "Social Justice Warrior" or "SJW" has become a pejorative and dismissive term used by right-wingers against progressives for their perceived over-zealousness on basic human rights and other justice issues. Some progressives have reclaimed the term for themselves, but it remains mostly used as a slur. -Editor

⁴ Air Quality Index.



Black Lives Matter Protest, Capitola.
Photo by Shmuel Thaler

Aitanna Parker

Interviewed by Kathia Damian



Aitanna Parker recently graduated from UCSC with a double major in Technology and Information Management, and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies. During the pandemic she was living in a house in Santa Cruz with seven housemates. In her letter of application to this project Aitanna wrote, "I want to center the oral history not as an investigation on the legacy of imperialism but as an afro-futurist project that makes space from cultural knowledge to be valued. Oral history is a non-linear timeline of our ancestors' wisdom... a practice of communication with our ancestors."

Kathia Damian: Hi, welcome. So can you introduce yourself, like your name?

Aitanna Parker: My name is Aitanna Parker, she/hers. I am awesome; I'm a Libra. Graduated, doing things, making moves, thank you. That's my introduction.

Damian: I love that. Will you invite me to your TED Talk?

Parker: (laughs) I'd love to invite you to my TED Talk.

Damian: So you recently graduated. What was your major?

Parker: My major was Technology and Information Management (TIM). It's just a long, three-worded phrase for IT stuff. And then I double-majored in Critical Race and Ethnic Studies (CRES).

Damian: No way! I actually haven't heard of the information management major. What kind of stuff did you learn? Was it like computer stuff?

Parker: Yeah. It's affiliated with Baskin. It's a mix of computer science and business. So I can code, but I'm not going to build you an app. I can code enough to give you a business plan, and talk about markets and stuff like that, and then put it on paper and then do stuff like that.

*"There is a Black Engineers group on campus.
But we're few and far in between."*

Damian: How was it being a bachelor of science? How is that major? What's like the breakdown?

Parker: The major? Well, this major like compared to CRES?

Damian: Yeah. How did those classes feel?

Parker: Oh yeah, it was terrible! It was so bad. I started off in computer science. And then not only was the material hard, but it was also hard finding your group and finding your community in these places. There is a Black Engineers group on campus. But we're few and far in between. So it was difficult. So then I switched to TIM, because like my roommate had switched to TIM. And I was like, we can do this together! And it's the same thing; it's still at Baskin.

And then I was still struggling junior year because I was super into social activism. I was a part of BSU. I was just doing so much that didn't align with my major. And I was like, so what's out there calling me?

Then I went to a discussion with Nick Mitchell. And he was talking about diversity and labor and things like that, and being all

theoretical—and I could follow along. And I was like, wow, you're an icon.

And then in 2017 he lowkey convinced me to take CRES then. I found my group immediately, and then graduated and flourished and was really happy that I could do both.

Damian: That's really cool. That seems difficult to balance both. But you found community.

Parker: Yeah.

Damian: Were you involved with any clubs on campus or anything like that?

Parker: Yeah. I was involved with the National Society of Black Engineers. I was involved with Black Students Union, and I was involved with African Students Union on campus. I also interned at the African American Resource Cultural Center. I think those are all the organizations.

Damian: Do you have any memories associated with those? Because I remember there was the sit-in at Kerr Hall, and there's been a lot of activism.

"The next year, I was like, be the change you want to see, like Angela Davis said."

Parker: Yeah, so memories with those organizations as to how it changed me or something like that, or was it really awesome? Okay.

Yeah, so BSU Kerr Hall was great. I was—it wasn't great. BSU before that had been really, really problematic, as in it was alienating a lot of folks. It was very divisive. My first year here, we had a year-long debate on whether or not there's privilege, light-skin privilege—it was year-long, people got into a fight. It was a mess. It was a mess.

The next year, I was like, be the change you want to see, like Angela Davis said. So I joined the BSU board. And I tell you, it was so unorganized. I was just not ready for the amount of petty arguments; I just was not ready for it. I was also going through things at home. Then we were planning for Kerr Hall and things like that, so that was also important. Kerr Hall was also a mess, but it was also really transformative. I got more into activism there.

But I would say with other things, like with ASU, the African Student Union, just being a part of that space—because I'm like, how do you call this, Black and born here, and so are my roots and stuff like that. But being able to come in and, I don't know, I call them continental Africans, whatever, "We're just going to keep it over there." But they just have more roots over there, whether or not they were born here. So I thought that was really interesting and also transformative in how I understood Blackness and connections and pan-Africanism and things like that that I later learned about.

And with the National Society of Black Engineers, it's most focused on professionalism and this idea of, "Think of success as wealth and the American dream." So that in its way is also a little problematic, of course, but also was really transformative in the way I saw myself, and the way I found community, and the way I also organized. Because the professionalism aspect is helpful in being a leader in activism. You know what I'm saying?

Damian: I do. What do you hope to do with your major? It sounds like you have an idea of success? Do you know what that means, or what do you want to do with that?

Parker: Yeah. So based on Safiya Noble's book, *Algorithms of Oppression*, what an icon, let's talk about—she's a Capricorn. (laughs) So after reading her book, I found that there was a space to do both and be both. Because I really want to go to grad school for data science and also unpack Blackness at the same time, but do it in the engineering space. That's going to be difficult because there's a bunch of white men in STEM. (sighs) It's a headache. But

for the foreseeable future, I'm going to do tech business stuff to pay off these student loans, get out of debt and things like that, because of labor capitalism. And then at least go back to grad school, if not as an engineer, as a Black Studies researcher or something. Travel the world is really my next goal in life. And also, "get paid to tell people that they're racist" is the overarching theme of my compass.

Damian: I love that so much. That's like financial dominatrix, and like, hello?

Parker: It is. Like you see me, like you see me. And thank you for validating me. (laughter)

Damian: Oh, I love it. But yeah, I like that you bring up Safiya Noble. Are there any other writers of the same data injustice genre that you like?

Parker: There is Cathy O'Neil who wrote *Weapons of Math Destruction*. She's good. I think the book was good. I'm still working with SJRC, the Science Justice Research Center. I'm working with them to prepare for an interview with Alexis Madrigal, who is the *Atlantic's* head person for COVID-tracking data. And so right now we're preparing for that. He's also a person I look to because he's a person of color and he's focusing on the racial data of COVID, and that's really cool. Other than that, there is Simone Brown, who I have not read yet, but she wrote the surveillance one that is in my drive that Nick Mitchell sent me that I still have not read from two years ago. And that's fine—you know, sometimes you're just not mentally prepared. You know, the ancestors will guide you.

Other writers? I haven't been able to find engineers who write about this stuff, but I'm still looking out there. I know there's organizations like Data for Black Lives at MIT. I know that there's a few other people that Dorothy Santos, to be honest, connected me to. She was like, "There's a whole world out here. You've just got to get connected. It's fine." So there's people I can't name, but they are

doing work like this, especially more recently.

Damian: I guess I'll pivot. This is one question I had prepared: I'm kind of curious about where you grew up and about your family.

Parker: I grew up in Sacramento, California. (laughs) I was actually born there and then raised in the Bay Area, Contra Costa County, in a really small district called El Sobrante. Just for the people who like to come for me, I have to say that. And then I moved back for high school to go to Sacramento.

I grew up in West Sacramento. I was raised by a single mom most of my life. And the funny thing is, the year I went to college is the year that she had another baby. So now I have a little brother and little sister who are four and three. So you know, she's real interesting—she as in me, as in Aitanna. (laughs) Life is really interesting and dynamic.

My family has influenced me. I have a racially diverse background. My mother is half Irish and half Black. And the Irish is only important because she had a lot of identity issues. But she always reminded herself that she was Black. She was always trying to make sure I grew up knowing who I was and knowing my heritage and things like that. So that influenced me even in middle school and high school. I was always like—well, I was forced to be—but I was always like the most educated around Black racial issues before the whole Black Lives Matter, and then after that getting political education. So I was really interested in that type of stuff.

Damian: That's cool. What are your siblings' names? How is it to have such a big difference in age?

Parker: It's so weird. One of them is named Ana, and the younger one is named Alastair, a girl and a boy. And it's weird. I lowkey feel like an aunt. (laughs) I babysit a lot, but I try to avoid it as much as possible. Yeah, it's weird. But I've seen people do it before.

And I'm just thankful—honestly, I had an aunt who was pregnant at the same time as her daughter. And my mom is really young. So I'm just thankful that that didn't happen in our family. There's a kid that gets born every ten years, around, (laughs) because usually people have babies young in my family. I'm just glad it wasn't me. So then the timeline can be on somebody else. So like in ten years I'll probably pop one out or something, (laughs) you know?

Damian: How is your extended family? How big is your family?

Parker: I'm not close with a lot of blood relatives, just because of family drama and trauma. But I have a lot of non-blood relatives that I call family and that I'm really close to. And they've been with me all my life. They're like really cool, I guess; they're great; they're nice. I don't think they've been that influential as far as education or career or things like that because I haven't seen, or I haven't talked to them that much since before high school. I only talk to them now because again all of us are like ten years apart, so we all went through different phases in our life. So when they were watching me, I was a kid, right, because they were babysitting me and stuff. They were in high school and I was just bugging them. I was always the baby of the family and the only kid. So I'm just going in, I'm talking a lot and rambling. But yeah, that's it: the extended family's cool and nice.

Damian: Yeah. It sounds like it takes a village, like they did babysitting for you, and now—

Parker: Oh yeah, that was a requirement. And it's required for me, too. It's so rude, you know? (laughs)

Damian: And what about your mom? What does your mom do?

Parker: My mom is a nurse for dialysis, for DaVita. So dialysis is for people who have kidney and liver failure and can't clean their own blood, they have to hook them up to machines to do that for them sometimes, at least once a week for people. So that's what

she does. I absolutely knew I did not want to go into the medical field. (laughs) My mom has been doing that since before I was born. I grew up around hospitals and things like that. I was just not interested in blood and people dying and CPR. I was traumatized and did not like it. And the scrubs aren't cute. No, not for me. I knew that at a young age. It's like, thank you, you know, I don't have to figure that out. (laughs)

Damian: That sounds kind of gnarly to grow up around. I know when I was a kid, I had weird career choices. Did you have a different career choice than what you are now?

Parker: Yeah. I mean, so I've been talking about this a lot. Well, as you can see, I'm extroverted (laughs) and I have a stage presence. I really like acting. I think it's really cool. And if everything in the world was okay, I would do that if I could. Or, that was also when I was really young—but now the industry is a mess. People are dangerous. I don't like that. And it's too uncertain.

But I also really admire Neil deGrasse Tyson. He's a Libra. He has a thick mustache. You know, a little salt and pepper up there. And I really love the stars, because I have an astigmatism. So when people used to talk about astronomy, it would always be blurry images. And I think that's why I used to like it, because people could see what I see. I have thick glasses. And this has always fascinated me; I love learning about that stuff. If there was no financial hardships or racism or sexism or ableism, that's where I would be. But you know what? I'm here. I'm glad I'm alive. I'm ready.

Damian: I'm going to pretend we're in this dream world, instead of this pandemic world. What would you want to act in? Theater? Movies?

Parker: So I've never acted in a movie, but I've done theater plays before, just because it was accessible. And I thought those were really fun. I did Rainbow Theater my first year here. I did a play with that. And then I also did *For Colored Girls* that same year, which is

a really big play that Ntozake Shange wrote. It's really good. Don't watch the movie, watch the play, because the movie's terrible, of course. I loved it so much. I think I would like to do that if it was a fantasy world—I think so. But I haven't done it in like four years, so I don't know.

Damian: What kept you from going back to Rainbow Theater, or being less heavily involved?

Parker: It took a lot of hard work. We had 11:00 pm practices, and it was just a whole other job on top of schoolwork. And I could not, I could not manage it. It affected my schoolwork. And I was just like no, I have to get out of here.

Damian: *That's a bummer.*

Parker: Yeah.

"Another science teacher forced me to apply to college, lowkey. It was only me doing this. I didn't have help from my mom or anybody around me."

Damian: Moving on to your time in college, what college did you choose?

Parker: I chose Stevenson College. And that was because my math teacher in high school, I told him I was applying to UC Santa Cruz. And he was like, "Oh, banana slugs! I went there." He's a younger teacher, whatever. And he told me to apply there because it would fit my personality. (laughs) So that's the only reason I applied there.

I didn't know anything about college or whatever. Another science teacher forced me to apply to college, lowkey. And then I just never followed up. I never wrote emails. It was only me doing this. I didn't have help from my mom or anybody around me. I just applied. And then they put me in the Rosa Parks African American theme

housing, which honestly turned out for the best, so I was happy.

Damian: Yeah, Stevenson is wild.

Parker: It's a roller coaster. But I also am glad I was not put in Merrill or Crown or Kresge.

Damian: Are you a first-gen student?

Parker: Yeah.

Damian: Oh, nice. So how was the getting to college? Why did you want to go, and how did that happen?

Parker: Yeah, so my mom, although she's a wonderful Scorpio, she always told me throughout my life I had to go to college. So even when I was young, I was good in school, right? I was good in school all my life, whatever. But she was just like, "You need to go to college. You need to go to college. That's your goal. That's your goal." So it was always in the back of my mind as a possibility. But as it kept approaching throughout high school, it was so confusing to do it on my own. You have counselors and stuff at high school, but it really wasn't helpful.

I got close with one teacher, my biology teacher, I took her for three years, for APs and stuff, and chemistry and biology. And she lowkey forced me to apply. I was staying after school for three hours every day that I didn't have practice and apply for school. (laughs) And she told me about all the free programs that you could get free applications and stuff, because my mom didn't have much money at the time. She wrote me a letter of rec; she asked other teachers to write me a letter of rec, just so that I'd have it in on time and I just sent it off. And then I got a thing saying, "You got in." And it was cool.

I think navigating that part of it was difficult. But if I didn't have

her, I probably wouldn't, I definitely wouldn't have gone to UCSC. I probably just like—you know, imposter syndrome, it's really difficult. So being a first-gen student, having to navigate it all on your own was so difficult; coming to college, doing stuff on your own, it was just a mess. And if I didn't have the Black student housing, I wouldn't have been able to meet a lot of people who would have held my hand through different processes. And I probably still wouldn't be here today, to be honest. Because even having to engage with financial aid, and how they play with you—as a freshman, I could not, I could not handle that.

"I would say it's different from Sacramento in the way that it's more of a laidback, chill, like yes, armpit hair; yes, don't shave; yes, we love queer trans folks."

No, it was a mess. It was a mess. It was a mess. But I'm here and I'm glad I had that mentorship. I'm glad I could be that mentor for other people.

Damian: Yeah, pass it on. I like this theme of reciprocity about family and just, I don't know.

Parker: Thank you. I'm a Libra; we like to keep things in balance.

Damian: So there was a culture shock when you got into college from coming from Sacramento?

Parker: It was more like I felt like everybody else had so much preparation, or just came in, knew what they wanted to do, knew how to navigate. And I was like, "Do I have class in the morning or at night? Like, I don't understand." (laughs) I just didn't understand it. I think that was more of the culture shock. I just wasn't ready or prepared.

The only thing I knew about college was through movies. (laughs) And I just thought of *Van Wilder* right now and how terrible—I

should not have been watching him as a child. But also, that's what I thought I was going to experience. And I was lowkey nervous. I was like, I don't want people knocking on my door at 2:00 am; I don't want these little Greek robes coming down. I don't need that. It was just a mess. (laughs) So that's what I thought about. And I also thought about *Legally Blonde* and stuff like—it was a mess. I thought it was all going to be fraternities and sororities and like—it is, but it's also just not the vibe of Santa Cruz. Every college and university is different. And also this setup of how colleges and dorms are the same thing here at Santa Cruz, and they're all spread out. There's Greeks here, but it's not a heavy Greek life here. And there's no football team, so there's not a lot of parties and things like that. The vibe is just very, very different.

I would say it's different from Sacramento in the way that it's more of a laidback, chill, like yes, armpit hair; yes, don't shave; yes, we love queer trans folks. Which is also very different. It's a very queer campus, which is very, very different.

I think other people were prepared in the college administration sense, and then also the whole vibe of Santa Cruz was new. And I was like—I wasn't ready. I just wasn't ready.

Damian: Yeah. I was not ready for crunchy granola folks that are trying to practice their Spanish, you know?

Parker: Wait, what?!

Damian: At the farmers market, they see like a Latino vendor, and then they're like, "Cuanto zanahoria?" And I'm just like—

Parker: Did you just call them crunchy granola? I'm writing that down. Crunchy granola? Is that a thing?

Damian: Yeah, like granola people; people that wear Birkenstocks and—

Parker: No, bebé. See, this is why I took French in high school, so that I could not be those folks, period. I'm done, you can all keep coming for me. I don't care.

Damian: I'm curious. What do you do for fun?

Parker: (laughs) I really like to dance. I was an only child, which I think is important—so I've been told. I like my space a lot. I like to go off for walks or hike alone. I like to color and draw. I've been getting into painting since COVID, and I think I've gotten decent.

Black Lives Matter

Some of the projects I've worked on were the Santa Cruz altar downtown. I tried to organize an event over there, which was successful. But then white supremacists took it down, which is fine.

Damian: *What?*

Parker: Yeah, it was annoying and really hurtful. But you know what? There are other people who have taken the reins right now, because I'm a little stressed out. I'm exhausted from that. So that was a project over summer as well.

Some other things I like to do—I don't know, I like to keep busy. I've been busy all my life. So taking a slow down since COVID has also been weird. So I've lowkey been picking up a lot of projects and putting pressure on myself, just because I'm used to that type of pressure to get stuff done—which has also been picking up. And I'm just like, ew, I'm not in school.

So it's been weird. But I'm still here. I would say for the most part, that's what I like to do.

Damian: That's really cool. I'm curious more to hear about this altar, if you want to talk about it.

Parker: Yeah. So on June 4, 2020, there was an altar put up by the Santa Cruz clock tower. You know where the clock tower is, right? (laughter)

Damian: Yeah.

Parker: For the acting and stage things. I also like to host things. You know where the clock tower is, right?

Damian: Yeah, yeah.

Parker: Okay. So there was a Black Lives Matter theme honoring people who have died—not just George Floyd, but other people as well. And they put it up there. It was only very small at that time.

But then there was the Fuck the Fourth event. Like the Fourth of July, but it was like the anti-Fourth of July. So there was a lot more food; there were vendors. People put a lot more artwork up there, and that's when I started getting involved. And then people kept tearing it down, like the Trump supporters in Scotts Valley.

Anyhoo, so that's happened. So ever since that, people kind of got burnt out a little bit. And so then, I'm not really involved with those people. But I have friends in those groups who organize that. But it wasn't really for me. I just kind of showed up. And then I started getting more involved with restoration and adding to the altar. It got frustrating after a while, because people kept tearing it down, or we couldn't put permanent things up there. So if we glued stuff down, Parks & Rec would take it. Or some people put like—instead of using the fountain, because it was broken, people put dirt in it to have a community garden. But the Parks & Rec took that down. And then one time Parks & Rec stripped all of the artwork and things like that and then put it at the Civic Center, saying that they did it on accident. (laughs) And so that was the breaking point. I was like, oh no.

At first I wanted to make the altar an art project, just because art commissions are protected against the city. That was my initial idea. But that was back in August, and that was pre-evacuation, pre fires. And so then afterwards, I was tired, people were burnt out. I was like all right, whatever.

And then there was a group who sparked up here called Abolitious. They were an abolition reading group. (laughs) And they had decided, after their reading and their learning for the six weeks of that—which I thought was so amazing—they wanted to put together an “abolition fair” to get people introduced to abolition and collab with a bunch of different orgs, like Defund the Police and NAACP, which is interesting. (laughs) I thought that was a perfect way to get people to notice the altar more and take care of it.

So September 29th, the day before my birthday—I did this on purpose so I wouldn’t have to work on my birthday—I organized an event. I think a hundred people showed up, and we were able to raise almost six hundred dollars. The altar was beautiful. There were flowers; there was artwork. We spray painted some posters. It was beautiful. There was food and everything.

And two days later, somebody literally stripped it down. I will have to send you pictures. It was just a mess. I’d just worked so hard to organize all these logistics. I’d put in so much money, so much time, so much effort. So did everybody. And then it just got stripped.

So now I’ve decided to take the rest of October off because I’m tired, and I’m tired of working for free. And so somebody else who is more equipped to handle the white people and the city council is working on a grant proposal for their vision of the altar and the artwork. So that’s what I’m more supporting now, stepping back but also helping where they need it, because it’s an important space.

But that is the synopsis. The event was called Protect the Altar. It was really cute. But that was also a project that I overworked for free. Free labor, let’s talk about it.

Damian: That's such a bummer, though—like, legit. Like I'm a Cancer, so—

Parker: Oh! Cry a little.

Damian: That's so sad. But yeah, free labor.

Parker: Free labor is a mess. It's terrible and I'm tired of it. I'm tired of it. It's racist.

Damian: Yeah, I feel like it's such a fine line between self-care and then also caring about your community. I feel like nowadays self-care has been appropriated by wellness industries, instead of actually being a practice.

Parker: Yeah.

Self-Care

Damian: So it's hard during these times. But how *do* you practice self-care during moments like that, when things you've worked hard for fall apart?

Parker: Yeah, I would say for self-care I've really been practicing boundaries, right? Communicating boundaries I think has been so helpful, and being able to say no to things. Like especially when I was in school, I would just overwork because I had to meet a deadline—like a fake deadline. Abolish everything. It was just like so stressful and so overworking.

And now I have to set clear guidelines and deadlines for things. And if they don't meet them, I know my capacity and I know what at least I can do and contribute. Being fine and okay with that and not getting mad at myself has been super important.

Also taking walks is really great. I was just talking about this with a friend: I have to have a pair of headphones so that I can go in my own little space and survive without engaging with others. Because sometimes, you know? Although I am extroverted and I do like to talk to people, I also hate people on the inside. And so I need my own space. (laughs) I can be physically here, but like spiritually, mentally, and emotionally, I'm somewhere else. I'm killing it. Like Beyoncé's saying [something] and I'm like onstage with her. You follow me? I go somewhere else in my mind. So that's my biggest self-care: (laughs) boundaries and headphones, because I cannot deal with it.

Damian: What kind of music do you listen to?

Parker: So yeah, I know it's very, very like cliché to be like, "I listen to everything." But I've been trying to listen to more different stuff. I mostly listen to R&B and stuff, newer R&B. But my friend, she's Dominican from Washington Heights (laughs) and she sent me a whole playlist, so that's also something I've been getting into. So just that.

I'm trying to think of what else. I'm really into, I don't know if you can call this a genre, but Cali music is also something that keeps me grounded. So like Mac Dre, Too Short, Kamaiyah. Some of the SoCal stuff—but you know, they always bite from the Bay Area. I'm thinking about my Spotify playlist. But that's the top three, at least. And then a lot of female rap, yeah. So that's just on my Spotify most played or whatever, it's a bunch of like Megan Thee Stallion, like Jungle—I don't know if I should cuss.

Damian: Junglepussy!

Parker: Junglepussy, (laughs) BbyMutha, it's literally all of them. And I'm just like, I can listen to this all day.

Damian: I love BbyMutha so much.

Parker: I literally, because I'm mad that she's not getting the same hype as these other female rappers are getting. Which is annoying, and we all know why it is. But I still love her. She's giving up all the advice. It's just great, it's fantastic, thank you.

Damian: I feel that. I feel like whenever I want to get made up, I listen to that type of music. And I'm like, I am a bad bitch, thank you.

Parker: Yes, Yes! And we're not going anywhere, but we still put our eyelashes on. And we're here; we're onstage, mentally awake. Yes, I feel you.

"Dancing has definitely changed. Because also I can't go to parties anymore. And I really, really need to. I have a quota of how much butt I like to shake per week and everything, and I can't do that anymore."

Damian: And you said you like to dance. Has your dance practice changed since COVID?

Parker: Dance practice? I used to dance a lot with the African Student Union. We would do African dances. And so that was also something. My other dance practices, it has changed because I've had to move since COVID because of evacuations and timing and space. And now I share a room, which as an only child, a former only child, is really interesting. But it's okay, because they're an only child too, so they get it. So it definitely has changed. I don't get as much alone time as I used to. It's affected—weird, although I do it still kind of sort of not really, like when I go on my walks I have my headphones, I'm like getting, and I'll sometimes do this (dancing) as I'm walking. I also get stares. So like it's changed (laughs) as well. So that's also different and interesting.

But dancing has definitely changed. Because also I can't go to parties anymore. And I really, really need to. I have a quota of how much butt I like to shake per week and everything, and I can't do

that anymore. And I'm really, really upset! And my body is also upset. I feel like I'm getting old, you know what I'm saying? I can't use it in the way I wanted to. So it kind of creaks now, you know what I'm saying? (laughs) Like I don't stretch because I don't dance anymore. So my body is just like—it's weird. It's weird. It needs to be moved. So just being moved in a different way, it's just like, this is new, this is weird, I need more. My dancing has changed. (laughs) Five-minute answer.

Damian: I just need to get sweaty, dance up on someone, you know.

Parker: I don't even need to dance on someone. I just need a loud speaker with a lot of bass. I can dance on the wall if I need to. I can dance by myself. I'm an only child. I can entertain myself. But in that setting, that's what I need. You know what I'm saying? Like with a friend, from a distance, looking each other the eye, and we're just like [breathes rhythmically]. The height of emotions—it's just a different feeling, and I miss it. And Zoom isn't the same.

Damian: Sad. What's your housing situation now? Where do you live?

Parker: I still live in Santa Cruz. I just had to move in with seven new people, which is interesting. They're all very like COVID-safe and stuff like that. But I've never met any of them before. We never even had a rapport. So that was interesting.

And that's my current housing situation. But I'm also going to move soon to a single. So it was only a month long of these new things, and then more new things.

Damian: Where are you going to move next?

Parker: To Seabright, which is a five-minute drive. I'm taking over a friend's sub-lease, because they're going to be gone until January.

They want to be with family, and they're from the East Coast.

Raining Ash: The CZU Lightning Complex Fires

Damian: Oh, nice. How was the evacuation? Were you in Santa Cruz during the fires?

Parker: I was in Santa Cruz during the fires. The fires were wild. I did not have a plan. I did not think it was going to get this bad. I just was not ready. It was a mess.

The evacuation was literally just like, it's raining ash. My friends are leaving. They call me, they're like, "Atianna, we're about to evacuate. Are you safe? Are you okay? Do you need anything?" I was like, "Take me with you." They were like, "No problem." I packed a bag literally four hours before I left, a little go bag. I don't even know what I had in there. Then we stayed at a friend's house in Oakland for four days. Which was also like, okay, it was a lot of people and kind of gross. But also, it was really nice. It was a spacious place in Oakland. We were all just vibing out because we were all like lowkey scared.

But at some point Oakland and San Leandro or something like that was like the only little pocket of decent air that wasn't considered unhealthy, so being able to sit in the backyard with blue skies, or just reading, or just vibing out with other people. They also could cook. There were seasonings in the food. I was grateful. And it was all communal, and just like, "Yeah, come on back whenever you need. Do you want anything? Do you need anything?" We were eating up all them groceries. But you know what? It was okay. They were really nice people. (laughs)

And then after that, I went to go stay with family. And then when Santa Cruz was just a little bit more clear, there were like actual blue skies, I came back. And then I moved to this new place. So there was a lot of bouncing around. I couldn't work during that time. I couldn't finish any applications. There was just no productivity. Not

that like I didn't want to, but I was stressed out, and/or didn't have internet access, and/or didn't have a quiet place to even like think. So that was just weird. It was weird. It was good; it was weird, but it was like a nonconsensual new experience. Which is fine— (laughs)

Damian: I like the role that community seems to play, just like nice people in your life. That just sounds like something that you have, which, I don't know, makes sense: like attracts like. So that's nice.

Parker: Yeah, they're really nice. Yeah, they're cool. People are cool; I think people are nice, I think. I don't know.

Damian: (laughs) You just said five minutes ago, you're like, "I secretly hate people inside."

Parker: (laughs) But you know?

Damian: Yeah, I get that. I wonder, I'm curious what motivates you. Because you seem so go-getter, I don't know, despite a lot of things that have happened recently, like evacuation and COVID. But what motivates you to keep getting it?

Parker: Oh, I'm trying to figure out how I want to answer this. Okay, I feel like I don't really have a choice being able to go out and get new opportunities and things. Like being first-gen, I don't have a lot to fall back on. So it's just like you've-got-to-keep-going type of thing. You've got to keep hustling and grinding and like, I don't know, I think it's not just as I was brought up, always keeping busy, but it's also that there's nowhere else for me to go. So I've got to go forward.

Damian: I think I get that, the scarcity mindset; that you're like, no opportunity's going to come again. Like, I need this right now.

Parker: Yeah, yeah. And so that's also something I've been trying to do, work on. But also for certain things I don't need—for certain

things, it's good. For certain things, it's bad. And that also plays into the impostor syndrome, and the overworking, and being exhausted, and working for free because it's another new opportunity. So it's all connected. So I'm trying to find another self-help book to unpack it with me. (laughter)

Damian: Just the book. Why talk to another person? (laughs)

Parker: Because I don't want to—like, what am I going to do, take a class on it?

Damian: There's therapy. My family's an immigrant family, so they're like, "What is that?" But also some of my friends are like, "That seems like a good idea." And I'm like—

Parker: Therapy is fantastic. I personally, I haven't had great experiences with in-person before COVID here. And Zoom therapy is also interesting. I'm going to try it again when I get a single, though; when I have my own space and I'm going to be able to breathe a little bit more comfortably, I'm going to try again. But like— (sighs) like they really want you to cry. Like, why? Like, hello? They don't want you to laugh in therapy. They'll just sit there and stare at you. I'm like, just laugh so I can let go, shed a tear, something. Rude, you know? (laughs)

Damian: Humor is a defense mechanism.

Parker: I literally deflect all the time. Also I know so many Libras who deflect, which like, I see game and you can't play me. But also they don't like it when you do that in therapy. And I'm just like, I'm trying to work on it. That's why I'm here. You know?

Damian: You have a sense of humor. You need a better audience. Maybe a stage, you know.

Parker: Maybe for therapy—and actually get paid for it, instead of

paying them.

Damian: Yeah, I mean so many comedians are fucked up. But damn, that's like therapy, but you're getting paid.

Parker: Yeah. Thirty percent of comedians are clinically depressed. It's really bad. (laughs) But also, get your coin, you know?

Damian: That makes sense. I like coin, I think—maybe.

Parker: I also want to get time on here, because I feel like I might have been talking a lot.

Damian: Yeah. I'll ask one wrap-up question, and then we'll keep it going. You did make me cry with that altar story. Did you see that? I was so bummed.

Parker: I'm sorry.

Hopes and Fears for the Future

Damian: No, that's okay. But I just want to ask about do you have any hopes or fears for the future? Which is a big question, because I know there's coronavirus still wilding out there, and then what happens with the election.

Parker: Oh yeah, hopes or fears. (laughs) Let's start with fears and end on a good note. My friends—well, a friend who is a little bit older than I has been talking about making a post-election plan. As in if things pop off, which either way it goes—although there's like six people on the ballot. I just dropped off my thing today. But whatever, like either way it goes, there's going to be something. I'm really scared, because every time I drive past Scotts Valley, there's like a bunch of Trump stuff. And those people are out in the boonies, and what if they come here? It's really scary—I'm scared about like my future. I had a bunch of plans this summer. I had an

internship that got canceled. And they've been like iffy on hiring, and everything's been paused.

So life plans have been like, not on pause, but I'm not hitting the milestones I wanted to. And I also have to calm down and stop being me, so that's scary. COVID's scary. Jobs are scary. And safety is really weird in these times.

But I hope for better. (laughs) I really want to go to grad school in the UK.

Damian: Hey—

Parker: Or not the UK, in Europe I'm thinking about, because UK charges American prices and I don't like that. Like why would I go there just to pay the same tuition? Like are you bonkers? Are you bollocks? Like, hello?

But I'm thinking about Germany. But I'd have to learn German. And like (groans). Or like Switzerland is cute. Sweden is cute. Non-European Union people, you've got to pay like a thousand dollars for tuition per semester. (groans) I'm like, that's like community college. Anyhoo, they're like, it's a little much. Okay, So I hope for that. I want to manifest that in the world. (laughs)

I have a really good support system with friends. I've been able to see them because they've been safe, which is awesome. I just saw some friends over the weekend. I'm going to go on a trip with some other friends, drive up to Tahoe. That's really nice. I really am grateful that I have a good support system of different kinds of people who are really awesome, and actually really nice, and like I don't hate them, you know?

Damian: That sounds nice, though. It sounds like—I don't know, Tahoe sounds nice, Europe sounds nice.

Parker: Yeah, yeah.

Damian: When things get funky here, just like—

Parker: Absolutely, absolutely. I can't wait to get out of this country. I was thinking about Australia, but they have really big spiders. And I was like, you know what? It's not even worth it. Like it's not even—

Damian: Yeah, so you're like done with America in the future?

Parker: In the future, as in in the next few years, let me get out. You know what I'm saying? Also, there's been a joke going around, or that's just been coming to me at least, because I've been saying this: that like America is like the Florida of the world. And I'm like, that is so embarrassing.

So I've been practicing my British accent, getting real good. I don't speak French all the way, but I do a really good French accent. Like watch, watch, watch. (with accent) "UK"—okay, so I do it really good. I feel like when I practice on my English friends that it's so close, I could basically be from London. So "Pardon, jog on, man." I get really good.

So, let me transition back. (laughs) I'm really trying to do better, so people don't know where I'm from. So that's been my life. I'm tired of the United States.

Damian: Yeah. Honestly, it's nice to hear that. Because I feel like in the community I'm in right now, people are just like, "I want to move to South Orange County" or something. I'm like, "No, the world is big!" (Parker laughs) I like talking with people who have big imaginations and a radical enough imagination to imagine a different future.



Protestors at the Town Clock, Santa Cruz, May 31, 2020.
Photo by Jason Schaul

Irene Reti

Interviewed by David Duncan

Photo by Elizabeth Van Dyke



Irene Reti is the director of the Regional History Project at the UCSC Library's Special Collections & Archives Department, where she has worked for thirty-two years. She attended UCSC as an undergraduate, earning a BA in environmental studies in 1982, and as a graduate student earning an MA in history in 2004. Reti is also a

photographer, a writer, and a small press book publisher. During the pandemic she was living in Capitola, California.

Duncan: This is David Duncan interviewing Irene Reti. It is October 16, 2020. This is with the Regional History Project oral history project on COVID-19 with UCSC. Just a few quick things I want to go over with you, Irene: it's best if your voice is heard more than mine. I'm just here to listen and ask a few questions. If you need to pause or take a break, please let me know, there's no issue at all. You'll see me taking some notes. It's being recorded on Zoom. The goal is to capture your experience as you want it to be told and shared.

The COVID-19 project seeks to capture memory from this unique period so that it can be a source of learning and healing in the future. Don't worry about feeling something you have to say isn't worthwhile; it always is. I don't want you to feel rushed, but keep in mind that we're going to be keeping to a strict one-hour mark. I will keep track of time and try to end us as least abruptly as possible.

So the first question I want to ask is how you came to be a part of

UCSC and what your affiliation is there today.

"I fell in love with the landscape and the culture and the experiment of UC Santa Cruz."

Reti: I came to UC Santa Cruz as an undergraduate student in 1978. I was born in Los Angeles and raised in Los Angeles. And I fell in love with the landscape and the culture and the experiment of UC Santa Cruz at the time. After I graduated, I stayed on and became a staff person and eventually, thirty-one years ago, landed at the Regional History Project at the library.¹

Duncan: Great. It must be nice to go to school and then come back to work in the same place. And just to capture your perspective, what first comes to mind when you think about UCSC? Like what does it mean to you?

Reti: UCSC for me is a place of natural beauty and tremendous openness and experimentation, and affirmation of people's, of students' creativity; of interdisciplinary, synthetic thought; of commitment to social change. I was an environmental studies and women's studies major, and I've found a home at UCSC as a person who's a progressive Jewish lesbian feminist.

The Impending Pandemic

Duncan: So things were normal up until about nine months ago, I guess. I'm curious about the first time you heard about COVID-19 and the initial concerns or no concerns that you had when you first heard about it.

Reti: Well, that's an interesting question. I think I first heard about it through the media, it being in China. It felt kind of faraway. I wasn't anticipating that we were going to end up in anything like what we are in now. However, as the pandemic got closer and we started to have cases close by in the Bay Area, it became very pressing for

me very quickly, because my life partner, spouse, is the director of spiritual care at a major Bay Area hospital. So I'm married to a healthcare worker and I was immediately aware, probably earlier than some people, of what was going on and the risk, and was quite concerned about infection myself, working in the library. So I got up to speed really quickly.

Duncan: Would you say that your spouse's perspective and concern began to influence you more than other things for people that didn't have that same connection?

Reti: Yeah, because when you're a healthcare worker, especially in a major trauma center, any kind of major event, whether it was, say, an earthquake with a lot of deaths, or a plane crash, or anything major, you know that that person's going to be on the frontlines. So I immediately felt connected to it in a medical sense that I think I wouldn't have been, otherwise. I was worried about her personally being exposed, too.

Duncan: Sure. And is there a time that you can pinpoint when the pandemic became real at UCSC or in Santa Cruz, when it really kind of hit home that it was here and finally affecting us?

Reti: Well, there was so much going on this year, and we will get to that a little bit later. But I remember there was this point where they sent out this email on the library's staff network saying, "We're going to be getting these sanitizing stations and they'll be put around the library, and that will be really helpful in terms of infection."

Actually, I did not find comforting at all. I work in public service because we have a desk at Special Collections that's open to the public. I was immediately thinking, gosh, all these people come in. The library is a giant vector site anyway, especially around finals week, and the transition between winter and spring was about to happen.

So the library's packed. And they're talking about putting in these

sanitizing stations. But the problem was that the stations were put up, but there was actually no sanitizing fluid put in them for a pretty long time—I would say at least a week. I couldn't be scientific about that. But it was a very long time in pandemic terms when they were talking about how they were going to have this fluid, and it wasn't there.

I got really upset because I felt like the campus wasn't taking care of us. They were saying we needed this fluid, but at the same time they weren't providing it. I did not feel like I was taken seriously.

We were all hearing about the cruise ships where people had COVID. I felt like the library was a cruise ship and we were about to pack it full of students. And the campus wanted us to stay open till two in the morning. And you know, you've got people who are super stressed out, and the bathrooms are crazy at that time. I was just like god, this *is* a disaster waiting to happen. I did not feel like the campus was taking my concerns seriously. I was told that the sanitizer was back ordered and they couldn't get it. We know now, sanitizer *is* really hard to get.

Shortly after that point, I talked to my supervisor. She was very supportive and said that it was fine for me to work at home. A few days later the library actually closed down. So I was just a few days ahead of changing campus policy. I'm a little older than a lot of my colleagues—I'm almost sixty. I am in a higher risk group.

But I remember there was a point where several of us were huddled around the printer in the hallway. One of my colleagues was kind of doing this weird dance with the other one. I walked by and asked, "What are you doing?"

She goes, "Oh, we're practicing social distancing." I laughed. I thought, well that's sort of silly. How is that going to keep us safe? That certainly was a foreshadowing of what we're all doing now.

Duncan: Hmm. I was also going to ask if you could speak a little

bit more to your specific position at the library, and maybe a little bit about your day-to-day, and then how that transition of how that changed throughout the pandemic entering UCSC.

Publishing During a Pandemic

Reti: Sure, David. I am the director of the Regional History Project.² I work in Special Collections. We have a suite of offices and a large area where we keep archival material. At the time that the pandemic hit, I was just about to publish *Seeds of Something Different*, which is a history of the campus.³ The books were supposed to be arriving right then. In fact, they did arrive, although we had some difficulty due to the graduate student strike that closed the campus to UPS deliveries for a while. But in any case, the books arrived.

We had been working on this project for five years. I was aware that we had a limited amount of time before things were going to close down. I had this sense: do it now. I needed to mail out copies of the book to all the people who had kindly given us photographs to use, and send out review copies, while I still had a mailroom, while I still had access to all of the supplies that I needed. I was working like crazy to try to get that taken care of. We did get everything out before we closed down, but just barely.

My life before the pandemic was basically being in the office and doing oral history kinds of work. I'm lucky, in that most of my position is transferable. It's born-digital material. We're recording on Zoom. The oral history profession has done a lot of things to adapt to this time. Unlike for some of my colleagues, who process paper that's in boxes, or do a lot of in-person public service, my job, in some ways, was much easier to do remotely.

Duncan: What was that like? It's interesting to hear what sounds like this feeling of—maybe impending doom is too much—but you describe this feeling of, "I'm going to lose this ability to take care

of things in a certain way." What was that like, to be in that time?

"I have two parents who were refugees from the Holocaust. The sense that your whole world could completely change and you have to be resilient and nimble is something I was raised with."

Reti: Well, there are a couple of things about my background that probably are relevant. One of them is that I've been in Santa Cruz long enough to go through the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake. I had just started working at the library when that earthquake hit on October 17, 1989. We were closed down for a little while. Then all the staff came in and helped pick books off the floor and deal with some of the other damage that had happened. I'm very aware, from having gone through that experience, that disasters interrupt your work. I could just see it coming, that that was going to happen.

I'd also been through some other disasters in Santa Cruz because I came in the late '70s, and we had a giant flood in 1982.⁴ We had a power outage that was a week long when I was a student. Santa Cruz has a history with disasters.

But then the other thing that's relevant is that I have two parents who were refugees from the Holocaust. So the sense that your whole world could just completely change and you have to be resilient and nimble is something I was raised with. It feels like it's in my blood. I'm just like, okay, here comes a disaster, you better start taking this seriously really quickly. I may be a little hypervigilant, but I am also responsive.

Duncan: I think having that sense is something that I think a lot of people don't have, at least, or haven't experienced. And that goes into, I think, retracing your perspective of the past year at UCSC with various events—the power shutoffs, the grad student strike, and then COVID, and then the fires. I'm curious how all these events tie into your own experience.

Reti: Yeah. So the power shutoffs were, I guess for me they were

mostly just annoying.⁵ I felt bad for the students because there was just this constant disruption of their work. But again, because my work is easily transferable, I didn't feel like that was a majorly hard thing. That was last fall.

The grad student strike was hard. What can I say about this? It was this complete standoff between the administration and the students, and the response of the administration, I felt like, was militarized and extreme. That it was troubling. But also, some of the platform of the grad student strikers did not feel practical to me, such as the size of the raise they were asking for, which was an additional \$1400 a month.⁶ As an underpaid staff person, I have firsthand experience with how unrealistic their expectations were, and I understand the limitations of the UCSC budget, which would never be able to accommodate a raise like that, as much as I get how difficult it is to pay for high cost housing in Santa Cruz as a graduate student. So I had some disagreements with some of their demands. They were extreme and I think that's one of the reasons it went on forever. It felt like another case of polarization in our society, which is growing increasingly polarized. I felt despairing about that, like this is just never going to end. The only thing that ended it—and it didn't even really end it—was the pandemic. And that's horrible, that the pandemic was the only way we could kind of end it. It felt like both sides needed to save face; we were stuck.

Then that strike impacted *Seeds*. Each box of *Seeds* weighs 42 pounds.⁷ We had a large number of boxes of freight coming, several pallets. UPS decided not to cross the picket line so the freight got stuck at their center in Salinas. We eventually negotiated with UPS to meet the library operations staff on sort of an undisclosed corner down in Santa Cruz (laughs) and they transferred these giant pallets between a UPS truck and the library's truck. The library operations staff were wonderful and we got our books. But that was just the first in what proved to be a constant litany of amazing hurdles that we faced with producing *Seeds* this year.

And so moving ahead, I already talked about how the pandemic

affected *Seeds*. But we had planned to have a book launch, which was going to be Alumni Weekend. And because of the pandemic, there was no Alumni Weekend. Therefore, no book launch. So we moved nimbly to being on Zoom. We had a book launch that Bookshop Santa Cruz and some other local organizations sponsored. It went wonderfully. We probably had a lot more people than we would have had had it just been at Alumni Weekend. Then we moved to doing a summer reading series, and we got hundreds of people. We had a six-session series for *Seeds* and alumni from all over the country and other people came. So that worked out really well.

But then the fires came. Right as the fires hit, we were supposed to be getting our reprint of *Seeds*. We had this incredible donor who paid for another thousand copies to be printed, because the first 300 sold out really quickly. So that was great news that we got in the middle of this pandemic. This alum just showed up and said, "I'd love to help fund this," and gave us a bunch of money. But the problem was, we were supposed to be getting—wait, I should back up. We had freight issues all along with *Seeds*, because we had no library to receive freight in. So Bookshop Santa Cruz was really wonderful. They were allowing us to ship all of the books there. Then we'd pick up some of them and move them to my house. It's taken a lot of creativity to figure it all out.

Right as the fires hit, our last remaining shipment of freight—because we got the *Seeds* in batches from the printer, because that was easier—a last remaining batch was in Salinas. And they were calling us, UPS was calling saying, "Hey, we need to deliver this to the campus."

And I was like, "You can't deliver it, because we're literally being evacuated. The campus might be burning. Please do not bring any books up here. Please, please, can you keep them at your warehouse?" They said sure. They were really nice about it.

Then I looked at the map of where the fires were in Salinas. And

the River Fire was right next to the warehouse where *Seeds* was. So it's just like, oh my God, what next? (laughs) You know? And meanwhile, of course, we're all dealing with the fires, again, this feeling of things being so out of control. The orange sky. The apocalyptic feeling in the air. It was very disturbing.

Duncan: It's been a long series of events, for sure. I'm curious, too, with the timing of *Seeds* coming out and the book launch, if you were aware at all of the position you were in within the Santa Cruz community to kind of set the tone for how to adapt, you know, in that kind of scenario, where you're going to have to move things online really quickly? Did you feel that you were blazing a trail, so to speak, with how events are now going to have to transition in the time of COVID?

Reti: You mean in terms of oral history work?

Duncan: I guess more in terms of having an event that was planned—it was probably one of the first events that were planned to be in person, and then very quickly had to go online.

Reti: Oh, yeah.

Duncan: Because I remember the date of the in-person event and kind of shelter in place happening very quickly. You were kind of a trendsetter, I guess, in that way. Of making a new event virtual instead of in person.

Reti: Yeah. Well, there was this weird point when University Relations was kind of polling us, those of us who had big events planned for Alumni Weekend, saying, "Do you still want to have this event in person, or would you rather cancel it?" This was during that week before we all went to shelter in place. I was dead-set against having it in person because I felt like it was irresponsible to think about encouraging people to fly here and spread the pandemic. Cameron Vanderscoff, who's one of my co-editors, lives in New York. He was very bravely saying, "I'll still come out. I'll get on a

plane.” I was thinking on my God, I’m exposing him to COVID-19—or actually at that time, I guess, we were calling it the coronavirus. I didn’t want him to do that.

I didn’t feel like it was actually fair to be asking me that question, too. “Do you want to have—” (laughs) Who am I? It didn’t really matter what I said anyway, because they pretty much were planning for a little while to just go ahead. I thought, well, this is going to be a terrible event because no one’s going to come. And if anyone does come, I don’t know if we can keep them safe. At that point we didn’t have protocols yet about what was safe and what wasn’t. Masks, indoor event—I mean, it was just bad. So I was very relieved when the University decided we weren’t going to have Alumni Weekend.

But then there was this feeling of well, okay, so what are we going to do? How are we going to publicize this book? I have to credit Jory Post, who has done a lot of events for Bookshop and who was the one who approached us about doing it. We were really grateful. We initiated the summer event. That first event was just a simple reading. You were there, right, David?

Duncan: Mm-hmm.

Reti: That was a reading on Zoom. We divided up the script that we would have used in person and we switched back and forth reading it. But very quickly, by the time that the summer event happened, people’s expectations of Zoom had changed. In that first event, people seemed super excited just to have a reading. By the time we did the summer series, people were giving us this feedback that we were basically just these talking heads. They wanted slides, and they wanted slides coordinated with quotes, and they wanted videos. (laughs) It was very interesting to see how quickly the online format culture switched, just to see that happen, literally before our eyes from one week to the next.

Duncan: That’s very interesting. And I think interesting, too; it

sounds like you're sort of describing this gray area right around the launch of the *Seeds* event where no one really knew how to handle it. And I'm curious what your take on, if you're comfortable talking about it, the UCSC leadership in communicating what their expectations were, along with hearing everything from state and federal government. How was UCSC handling things in that transition period from normalcy to shelter in place?

Reti: Like I said before, I think that there was a chaotic period where communication was not particularly great, like around the hand sanitizer stations and just policies. I thought it didn't make any sense to be encouraging students to congregate. I mean, I'm sure you've been in the library during finals week. Every table is full and the students are all smooshed together. So I was really alarmed. I felt like policies to protect us should have happened more quickly. But at the same time, I do have to recognize that we were all learning about this, and the campus had never been through a pandemic before.

I do think that since that time, there's been a lot of support. I think, from what I've heard, that the UCSC campus has been more protective of our employees and students than some of the other campuses that have pushed to open quickly, or to have more in-person instruction. I don't know if it was because we were close to Santa Clara County or—because it is up to the individual leadership of each chancellor how things are going to be handled. I do feel that our administration has been more protective and reasonable and very generous in allowing people to use COVID-19 leave if they're taking care of a family member who has COVID, or they have a lot of stress around COVID, as long as it's a COVID-related situation that you talk about with your supervisor. I think, in many ways, the campus actually has handled things pretty well since that time. It's just the beginning point that was pretty muddled.

Married to a Hospital Chaplain

Duncan: Mm-hmm. The next thing I wanted to cover is a little bit

about how your own household has changed in this time, and what the transitions have been, especially having your spouse be a frontline worker, too.

Reti: Yeah. So very early, my spouse and I devised our own protocols. When she comes home she leaves her shoes outside. She immediately goes to take a shower. She changes her clothes. She puts her clothes in a bag so they can be washed. I felt kind of badly because she's tired and she just wants to come home and have dinner. But she was really amenable and sensitive about that this was a good idea. We have figured out some ways to keep safer.

Also, a friend of mine told me about a lot of different supplements, like Vitamin D and other kinds of things that you could take that would help build your immunity to COVID. I got those. I took over the shopping. I always have been the person that cooks, but she used to shop. But just because she's already getting a lot of exposure—I mean, her hospital, I feel like, is very careful. I do want to be clear that I think their protocols are good to protect her. And they've gotten better and better as they've learned more. So I'm not super, super concerned. And she does not go in and visit COVID-19 patients in person. Most of that is done through telemedicine now, through having a phone in the hospital that's secured so no HIPAA is violated or anything. But anyway, I took over all the shopping.

Our lives are really different, because she's still going to work. A lot of people are sheltering in place with their spouse. She goes to work most days. Sometimes she works at home, but rarely. So she's not experiencing shelter in place in the same way, although a lot of their employees are working remotely and there's all kinds of protocols around protecting people. It's not like life is just the same at the hospital as it was before the pandemic. But she's not as isolated as I am. So there's definitely a difference in how we're experiencing the pandemic.

Duncan: That's very interesting. Would you say that the different

experiences of isolation are something that you've both been able to talk about and work through? Or is it something that hasn't really come up yet, as we're still in the middle of the pandemic, too?

Reti: We definitely have talked about it. We both see a certain number of people in a very socially distanced way. I have several friends that I walk with. We have an outside area in front of our house and we occasionally have one person over and visit. She understands that that's really important for me to be able to do that. We do a lot of talking about how we're both affected by this. The early weeks of the pandemic were very stressful for her because there needed to be new policies put into place. Because she's the director of the department, there's a lot of things that she had to figure out. So I felt like at that time, part of my job was to support her. Like, you know, massages, (laughs) download, crying, everything that was going on for her.

So I definitely absorbed some of her stress. But we talk about everything. We have a really good, clear relationship. She's a chaplain, too, so it's really easy for her to talk about stuff. She knows how important self-care is, and not bottling stuff up.

"It seems like our world has gotten smaller and bigger at the same time."

Duncan: Mm-hmm. And you mentioned very limited social events. I was going to ask, what has been the change in things like recreational activities? I know you do some photography. I came across some of that online, which is very nice. I wonder how that's changed for you, too, in this time.

Reti: Yes, I still continue to do photography. But my favorite place to go is the High Sierra. I have not been able to get there because it's too far. I was supposed to go camping, actually, with a couple of friends on the east side of the Sierras. And that's when the fires happened. So that wasn't because of the pandemic. We were going to take—it's kind of crazy—we were going to take three cars.

We were going to drive three hundred miles—it was totally horrible from an environmental point of view (laughs)—and get two different campsites and use three tents and three stoves and separate food and everything. But we didn't end up doing it because of the fire because there was no way we were leaving town right then. So most of my photography has been very, very local, like going to the Arboretum at UCSC, or Elkhorn Slough. Last week I went to Monterey and that was like going to the moon.⁸

It seems like our world has gotten smaller and bigger at the same time. I would say smaller, in that going to Monterey is like going to the moon. I'm tired of walking around my kind of boring neighborhood, although I have taken a lot of photos with my cell phone of beautiful leaves and flowers and even a snail, different details—really opening my eyes to what I see here. I do appreciate being able to walk around the neighborhood. When the fire was happening, and we couldn't even leave the house, I missed it. So I don't want to be too negative. (laughs)

But I'm a landscape photographer. My partner and I were supposed to go to Montana, and we were going to go all these beautiful places in that area this summer, and we had to cancel that. I realize that's a first world problem for sure, not being able to go do these things. But they are part of what gives me joy. So it has been a loss to not be able to do those things.

"I think this experience has highlighted how precious it is to be together in person and not just on a screen."

I love seeing people in person. It feels like such an incredible treat. My partner's sixtieth birthday was a few months ago and we did this little driveway dessert get-together with our neighbors. It felt like this amazing thing to actually sit with another couple and eat. (laughs) It was just like, wow, this is so incredible. We've done a couple other little things like that. It's so precious. I think this experience has highlighted how precious it is to be together in person and not just on a screen. I don't think I'll ever take that for

granted again after this is over, how special that is.

I think another thing is if you're having any issues with a friend and you want to work things out, like emotionally, and you're both sitting there with masks on—which you should be—it's a lot harder, because you can't see someone's facial expressions. And you can't hug them and hold their hand. I would say the number one emotional way that this has affected me, and I would say this is definitely true for my partner as well, is being aware of when people have a major loss—and we've had a number of friends who have lost parents this year. For a long time, people were not allowed in the hospital, even if somebody was dying. I think our experience of grief has been greatly impacted. Because you can't do the basic things that you would do, like hold someone's hand. In Judaism we have a shiva minyan where people get together after someone's died and bring food and sit with somebody and pray in person. A lot of those have gone virtual.

So again: resilience. We're still having them, but it's not the same as being able to just go sit with somebody. Yeah, it's a drag: I can't go to the Sierras. But seeing someone's mother or father die and you can't come over and hug them and sit with them, that's just horrible.

Duncan: Absolutely. Does it feel more like a delay in grieving? Or is it just a different kind, would you say?

Reti: (sighs) That's an interesting question. I think we won't really know for years—I think there's going to be a lot of PTSD of all kinds that come out of this experience. Certainly, people still are grieving. I have seen my friends grieve the loss of their fathers and mothers. But I think there's also, when you're grieving during the pandemic, I think one loss brings up all the other losses. Like, "Here I am and my father just died, and my mother is in her nineties, and I don't know how long she'll be around. And I'm all by myself in this pandemic because I don't have a partner"—I mean, I'm thinking about a friend of mine now. This feeling of loneliness and

vulnerability is heightened by the pandemic.

Weighing Risks During the Pandemic

Duncan: Absolutely. And thinking about vulnerability, too, I think social events are really important for a lot of people. I totally agree being able to see someone is really much more meaningful now. But what is your understanding of risk, going grocery shopping, versus seeing someone across the driveway. How do you make sense of that risk in this time in Santa Cruz?

Reti: Yeah, I feel like it's really tricky. We're always making these choices. At the very beginning, I tried Instacart. I wasn't happy because we're vegetarians and they mixed up my order and I got this entire sack of meat delivered to me. (laughs) I gave it to my neighbors, and they were thrilled. It was really great organic meat; it was perfectly fresh and everything.

But I was just like, okay, I think I'm going to need to just go to the store. I had a good mask. I go every two weeks and I buy a massive amount of food. I also shop for two friends of mine who are seniors. So I shop for two households. I go to two different stores. It's a three-hour trip. They give me their list. I go in; I drive their groceries across town, because they live on the west side of Santa Cruz. Then they wipe everything down.

I decided that I don't think that transmission is really happening like that, that way very much. So I don't wipe everything down. I just put everything away and it's been fine. So that's a choice I've made, to not spend my energy wiping every nook and cranny of every package like they do. But I understand that their health risks are higher and they need to be even more careful.

I get together with one person at a time outside. And it's interesting, because some people always wear a mask when you see them. I wear a mask, unless I'm sitting twenty feet apart from someone outside. Then I don't wear a mask unless they want me to. But if

we're walking—I feel like it's impossible to really stay six feet apart when you're walking. So I always wear a mask.

I've never gotten together with anybody inside. I wouldn't do that. I think that's way too risky. And I've not been back to my office. I have colleagues who are working under very well-thought-out guidelines for how to work in their office by themselves, with a schedule so they don't see anyone else. So it's not like I think they're doing anything stupid, or the university's putting them at risk or anything like that. And it's totally voluntary. I have felt like I don't need to do that. I'm lucky. Why take the risk of going into a building when I can do my work here?

Unmasking Masculinity

Duncan: I wanted to follow up with something you mentioned on Wednesday when we were in a meeting together. You mentioned something about walking and someone not wearing a mask; I was wondering if you wanted to share that story.

Reti: Oh, I was down in Monterey. I was sitting with a friend of mine and we were wearing masks. We were sitting kind of near her car, but far enough apart ourselves, watching these pelicans and making photographs. And this guy pulls up and he parks next to where I'm sitting. He gets out and he has this big camera. He's all happy; he's going to take pictures of the pelicans. But he's standing pretty close to me— maybe eight feet away. He's clearly not just going to jump out, take a picture, and jump back in. He was setting up, you know.

So I just turned to him and really politely said, "Hey, would you mind wearing a mask?" Like that, you know.

He just stared at me. And he goes, "Actually, I *would* mind."

I just said, "Okay." (laughs) Like that. I know if you engage with

these people, then the next thing they're spewing words in your face and putting you more at risk. And plus, masks have become so politicized in this time, it's crazy. They're not just a mask; they're a whole symbol of your political affiliation.

So I just let it go. And my friend who was with me said—I didn't see this—but she was looking at the guy. She could see the guy's wife or whoever, you know, the woman he was with. And she's waving this mask around in the car saying, "Put it on! Put it on!" He was just ignoring her.

I've noticed that a lot of times when you see a man and a woman together, the woman is wearing a mask and the man has a mask around his neck, or he doesn't have a mask at all. I think because of the way that the Trump Administration has characterized mask wearing, it's become sissy, un-masculine to wear a mask. If you're really tough, you don't need a mask. So I was playing around for a title for an essay that I probably won't feel like writing, but it was called "Unmasking Masculinity." I think that's what I mentioned when we were in class together.

Duncan: That's a great title.

Reti: It is a great title. Somebody can write it. (laughter) I have written a lot of essays in my life, but I'm kind of tired of writing those kind of essays. I just want to take beautiful photographs. It's exhausting to think about writing that.

Evolving Information

Duncan: You mentioned something really interesting that I'll have to think about more, but there is definitely maybe an unprecedented factor of COVID-19 where people are making their own decisions about what makes sense, whether it's as political as not wearing a mask, or, like you mentioned, your friend wipes down their groceries and you don't. I wonder what goes into that kind of decision making, whether it's where we choose to get our information? And

it's an evolving thing, too, I think, with our behaviors. I'm curious if you've got anything to share about that. I know it's not really a question.

Reti: Like how do we make the calculus about risk?

Duncan: Yeah, I guess. Like what goes into your decision making to choose what you're willing to risk and what you're not?

Reti: Right. Well, some of it is because I am partners with a healthcare worker and she gets a lot of good information. So over and over again, surfaces—this is just information she's coming home with; I mean, you could get it other places, too—but surfaces are just not a major factor. High-touch surfaces, yes—like if I go get gasoline, I'm super, super careful to sanitize my hands afterwards and my credit card. I dread getting gas because everybody's handling that pump. So it's not like I'm totally cavalier about it. I'm also really careful when I go to the grocery store to do the same thing. Sanitize everything after I'm done that I've touched, like my credit card and my hands and everything. But I think that we all make these decisions based, first of all, on our own health.

I think in the beginning, people didn't realize how serious COVID was. You asked me when I first became aware of COVID, and it actually was when my father had knee surgery in mid-February. I was in Arizona at the hospital with him. We were in the waiting room, my partner and I, and the radio was playing and they were talking all about COVID, COVID, or coronavirus, corona. And at that time, we thought like, what is the big deal? It's just like a bad flu. I really did believe that back then. Little did I know that my father had surgery at the last possible moment he could have, that we were incredibly lucky that we were able to go there and be with him. Very soon our world would be totally different.

But as far as how I make all these decisions, I mean, some of it is just sanity. Like there's no way, once I realized this was going to go on for months, that I was going to just not see anybody for months,

you know?

I have a ninety year-old father who just got knee surgery. And he's in pretty good health. But he had a heart scare a few weeks ago. They took him by ambulance and checked him out. I called the hospital and they were on lockdown. There was no way I was going to be able to get in to see him. So I wrestle with these kinds of questions about, well, would I get on an airplane to go see him? What if I had to quarantine for two weeks before I could see him? You know, all these questions. I just keep praying that he makes it through this time. I haven't seen him, so I worry about him. A lot of people's parents are really lonely. He's actually very technologically oriented, so he's on Zoom all the time. He takes all these lifelong learning classes, and he has friends he talks to on Zoom. But even so, he's still lonely, and I don't have a sense of really how well he's doing. So those kinds of decisions become really difficult.

I guess one more I'll throw in is that a friend of mine had surgery recently. It was really hard to not be able to go and visit her. I brought her soup and things like that. But you know, all the things that you would like to do for someone who's just recovering, you can't do any of that either.

The Future of UC Santa Cruz

Duncan: Right, that's true. We have about ten minutes. And I do, I'm curious—once again it's difficult, because we're still in it. But how do you foresee the future of UCSC, from a community standpoint all the way to an institutional standpoint? What are your thoughts when you look to the future beyond COVID?

Reti: Well, I have a lot of concerns. The UC campuses and all of higher education and all educational institutions have taken a huge hit because of the pandemic. There's far fewer students. Just in spring quarter, there were all these students who were supposed to live on campus and the campus had to give all the housing money back. I don't do budgets so much, but I know there're a lot of costs

associated with the pandemic. I know right now the campus is waiting to hear how many in-state students we will get. And a lot of students, rightly so, are questioning, what is the value of paying full tuition for remote learning? UCSC has a higher portion of in-state students than other UC campuses. We have fewer international students, fewer graduate students, for that matter. In some ways, that's good because international students really are dropping off during COVID, and also out-of-state students within the United States are dropping off.

But we're in a very vulnerable position because UCSC's never had a lot of money. We've always run close to the bone, compared to a lot of the other campuses, so we're vulnerable to budget cuts. So I think we won't know until probably the end of this month; we'll start knowing what our budget's going to be like for this year. But it's really not until next fiscal year that it will really hit. Because that will be a full tax year under COVID, and all of the contraction of the economy. We still had part of the normal tax year this last year. So I have a lot of concerns about the campus' financial future.

I also have a lot of concerns about what Cameron Vanderscoff was calling "the remote turn." The turn towards remote education is just massive. In 2019, I interviewed George Blumenthal, who was our chancellor until very recently. Maybe two pages of the transcript are about online learning. (laughs) And it was pretty much of a cursory look at these kinds of classes, and very dismissive.

Talk about having to eat your words—I mean, it's completely different now. So what is this going to mean for a campus which has prided itself on a residential college system, but which has also been experiencing a massive housing crisis? And we were talking about putting housing in the East Meadow, and that's been very controversial. Maybe we don't need that housing, because maybe we won't have so many students living in Santa Cruz. But then at the same time, I don't think we're out of the housing crisis yet. I think that the fire has only made that worse, because so many people

lost their houses and there's even more pressure on downtown.

I feel like the future is really, really murky as far as the campus is concerned. I don't know what's going to happen, how many professors are going to want to be teaching remotely forever because they don't want to live here, and they could live somewhere cheaper. I think we don't even know all the implications of this yet. This is a time of great uncertainty. I think we have to come to peace with that, because we just don't know the future. That's how it is. There's possibility in that, but there's also great vulnerability.

Duncan: Absolutely. I had a question, too, that I thought of a little bit ago. I notice you have *Seeds* behind you.

Reti: Oh. (laughs)

Duncan: For me personally, my dad being an alumnus from UCSC, and *Seeds* coming out during the grad student strikes, I feel like the book contextualized a lot for me in terms of history leading up to the strike, things I'd heard my dad talk about. I wondered, if you had a chance to maybe release *Seeds* a year from now, how you would have included COVID-19 in it, or what role it would have played in the book?

Reti: I had one person say to me "There should be a volume three." We have two volumes. We thought about writing a postscript, because we reprinted the book. Should we have mentioned that we had published this during a pandemic, and what happened? What we realized is that anything that we wrote, which would have just been a few paragraphs, was probably going to be out of date a month later. So we just decided to leave the past as its own entity there, as its own complete creature (laughs) and not try to tack on something—"And now we live in a totally different world. Guess what?" You know.

I think that this series of interviews that we're doing as part of this team that you and I are on are going to be a really important

source of material for the future, just as we did interviews after the Loma Prieta Earthquake and those are part of *Seeds*. So that's a great example of how valuable this could be. I don't even think I could begin to guess what that history might look like to some oral historian in the future who has my job. I hope that they find this set of interviews valuable, and part of the story that will need to be told.

Duncan: Definitely. And then the last question I have is, do you feel like there was anything that I should have asked you?

Reti: What we didn't talk about at all is the political situation in this uncertainty. We're doing this interview on the eve of the election of 2020 [Trump vs. Biden]. The great uncertainty and anxiety that many of us are feeling is connected to the election as well as the pandemic. And Trump just had coronavirus last week.

I have great fears about the future of democracy in this country. Coming from a background of being a daughter of a German Jewish Holocaust refugee, I'm very aware of how the Nazis came to power. I'm not saying we have Nazis in power now, but I think we're in danger of a fascist kind of regime. I hope that we're able to preserve the democracy that we have.

Endnotes

¹The Regional History Project is housed in Special Collections at the McHenry Library on campus.

²Irene Reti is the third director of the Regional History Project, which has been documenting UCSC and Santa Cruz history through oral history since 1963.
- Editor

³*Seeds of Something Different: An Oral History of the University of California, Santa Cruz* was slated to have an in-person launch on April 4, 2020. The books arrived in the weeks prior. It covers the scope of UCSC history from its founding to the late 2010s. - Editor

⁴On January 5, 1982, exceptionally high rainfall precipitated a flood in Santa Cruz, leading to widespread destruction, damage (including a bridge collapse), and power outages. Twenty-two people died in the disaster, including ten killed in a mudslide in the Ben Lomond area of the Santa Cruz Mountains. It was the first major flood in the area since 1955. - Editor

⁵The campus and parts of Santa Cruz County experienced planned power outages in late 2019, taken as a precautionary step to prevent more wildfires.

⁶See <https://payusmoreucsc.com>

⁷ *Seeds of Something Different* is two volumes and a total of 925 pages.

⁸See ireneretiphotography.smugmug.com for examples of Irene Reti's photography.

Cameron Vanderscoff

Interviewed by David Duncan

Photo by Benji de la Piedra



Cameron Vanderscoff was the lead trainer for this project. Vanderscoff is a broadly experienced oral history educator and practitioner with deep roots at UCSC. He is a UCSC alum (2011) in literature and history. He has worked with the Regional History Project as an interviewer since 2011, and is the coeditor (along with Irene Reti and Sarah Rabkin) of the (2020) Regional History

Project anthology Seeds of Something Different: An Oral History of the University of California, Santa Cruz. Vanderscoff has been training and mentoring teams of UCSC students in conducting oral histories with UC Santa Cruz's Okinawa Memories Initiative since 2017, a project he co-founded, and continues to serve on its board of directors. He is also nationally and internationally active in the network of emerging COVID-19 oral history projects around the world, including serving as an interviewer with Columbia University's project, a consultant with the Queens COVID-19 Project, and co-initiating a new community COVID response project in collaboration with global colleagues in the field. Vanderscoff earned an MA in oral history from Columbia University. He lives in New York City.

The Oral History of Cameron Vanderscoff is inscribed to many treasured community members, leaders, friends, and mentors in the Harlem area who either passed directly from COVID-19 or who died in the past year of another cause but had their passing, memorial, and remembrance changed by the many effects of COVID. It is also inscribed to many beloved people who have been lost further afield from my home of Uptown Manhattan. My year of COVID-19, and that of my loved ones, has been shaped in ways large and small by their presence, their absence, and their legacies. A partial list of their names is below. This oral history is dedicated to their souls and their stories, including:

Minister Gary Samuels
Mr. Edward Polanco
Miss Barbara
Sergeant Leroy "Stump" Davis
Miss Linda Carr
Mr. Samuel Hargress Jr.
Mr. Al Howard
Mr. Walter Guillermo Plúa Villacreses
Mr. Pastor Francisco Plúa Villacreses
Mr. Norman G.
Mr. Douglas G.
Mayor John Daly

To Others Not Named Here
And to those who hold their memories and carry that light forward

"My story with UCSC is a multigenerational one."

David Duncan: All right, so this is David Duncan interviewing Cameron Vanderscoff. It is November 11, 2020. The interview is with the Regional History Project at UCSC's COVID-19 Project. I'm in Mount Hermon, California. And Cameron, you are in—

Cameron Vanderscoff: I'm in Uptown Manhattan, New York City.¹

Duncan: All right, perfect. So just to kick us off, would you mind telling me a little bit about how you came to be a part of UCSC, and what your relationship is with the campus now?

Vanderscoff: Yeah. My story with UCSC is a multigenerational one. So the campus was opened in '65. And then or very soon after, my mom's elder cousin, the late Sharon Lowry, née Henjum, became a staffer. Her husband Al [Lowry] was one of the early photographers of the campus.

And then my mother and my aunt both went here. They were both here in roughly the early '70s.² They were there back in the day. So I grew up with stories of Santa Cruz, certainly, as a result of that. As it turns out, they were there in a very, very different era of the campus' history, a far more experimental and open-ended time. The campus was also much smaller at that time.

But I didn't really realize all those changes until I came to the university myself. I graduated high school in the North Bay area. I was raised in a town called Novato. And when it came time to go to college, UCSC was on my radar. I don't know that I had the grades, but I did have the test scores. Out of the various options, I had a sense of history at UCSC. I had the stories. I had memories of visiting Santa Cruz as a little kid. Years later, I was sitting in The Crepe Place over on the East Side and I had this sudden flashback that I had been here as a little kid. It was very weird, (laughs) because I would go to The Crepe Place to see my buddies' shows, you know what I mean? They have live music there. And all of a sudden, I had this

flashback that I was here when I was six or something. Mom had gone back to visit Santa Cruz, maybe for a reunion or something.

So in that way, the Santa Cruz thing is pretty deep. And a lot of the iconic names of Santa Cruz, like Ken Norris in environmental studies, for example, were my parents,' or my mom and my aunt's teachers.³

So I came here with a certain sense of history—and came here in fall of 2007, just as the recession came down. So it was a hell of a time to go to school in that way. And it's good because a part of my decision for UCSC was also financial. Looking at private colleges, it would have meant even more debt. In retrospect, that was a good decision because right as I was making that decision and going to school, the recession came down. So that could have been truly ugly.

I was at UCSC for four years. I was at Cowell College. I majored in history, and then literature with a focus in creative writing. It took me years to get into the creative writing focus, but I did, and honed a major interest in all of those subjects there—after initially struggling to find my footing at UCSC. I considered transferring out. But then I found a community in my program. I took a great class on Egyptian hieroglyphics. And I also found my footing through taking some wonderful classes on memory, on the subject of memory, specifically around World War II with professors Alan Christy and Alice Yang. So that was another major moment for me.

I was an RA, for financial reasons, for three years, two of them at Cowell, and one down in The Village, which is functionally a bunch of portables that they dumped off the edge of the cliff into what is literally a former limestone quarry. But life was good. Everyone else thought we were troglodytes, but we actually had a great time down there.

So that was my life in Santa Cruz. I play guitar. In Santa Cruz there's an acoustic guitar at every party. So I was one of those guys. (laughs)

And then I stayed in Santa Cruz for two years after graduating. I gave the college commencement address and really was very involved in life at Cowell. So I unexpectedly, by the end of my time, managed to find my way into this close-knit college community that had actually characterized early UCSC, but has become harder and harder to find. You really have to work to find it now, compared to what UCSC used to be.

That was part of my alienation from the campus. At first I was like, the place that was described to me by my mother and my aunt, I'm not finding it here, or it's very well hidden. And it just turns out that what I was looking for, yeah, it did take some digging—but it was there. And I had this brilliant, close college experience that felt very connected to the history.

So I was an RA. I was also the library lead at the Page Smith Library at Cowell College. I went around and cataloged books, mostly classics, like Greco-Roman classics, according to the Library of Congress classification system. I had a lot of friends, then and now. My friend community has been really important to me. I have a lot of loved ones who I met there, and who I then lived with for the two years that I stayed in Santa Cruz after college—which is also the years when I discovered oral history. So maybe that's a good place to start.

Duncan: Yeah. And I'm curious, too, if you could talk a little bit about how you found your way back to being affiliated with UCSC after graduating from an undergrad.

Vanderscoff: I finished undergrad June of '11. And then in those two years where I lived in Santa Cruz, after six months of just sort of drifting a bit, I found my way into oral history. And in this interesting way, oral history was kind of like—I took it out of Santa Cruz, but it was also a return to it. (laughs)

So I left Santa Cruz to move to New York City in August of 2013 to enroll in the Columbia University master's program in oral

history. Because by this time, I had gotten picked up—all of my first interviewing had been with the Regional History Project, interviewing elders from the UCSC community and deepening my sense of the relationship to the place. I mean, that's the thing: doing the oral history work gave me such a strong sense of connection to the place.

And the ironic thing is that when I visit now, it's totally changed. Because of course, when I was a student there, I was just kicking it with young people, you know what I mean? We went to class. We wandered the woods. We experienced parties. (laughs) We were out and about. We were shaping ourselves, I guess. And so my world was all young people. Now when I go back, a lot of what I'm doing is I'm actually seeing some of my old narrators. So now I know more people in the eighty-plus set, I would say, if we exclude the Okinawa Memories Initiative students, than I do in the twenty-five and younger set, let's say, the group that I was hanging out with when I was a student there.⁴

So I had that sense deepened. I left Santa Cruz, but I maintained a close relationship with my mentor, Irene Reti. It's not an exaggeration to say that Irene changed my life. She was my first mentor, and my most important mentor in oral history. Now I'm proud to call her a colleague and a friend as well. But Irene definitely changed my life and was very encouraging.⁵ So when I left Santa Cruz, I had a sense of roots there.

In New York, I finished the master's program and I started my own practice as an oral historian, which I had been doing in Santa Cruz in a way, freelance work. That's what I've been doing fulltime ever since then. It's what I'm doing now. It's what I'm doing today, in fact, prior to our call.

But I kept these ties back with Santa Cruz, and so I looped back to Santa Cruz in several ways. One is that I continued doing freelance work for Irene Reti and the Regional History Project throughout. I've done all sorts of interviews. So even when I was away from Santa

Cruz, every six months or every year I was doing some interview for the Regional History Project. This was all pre-pandemic, so these were in-person interviews. They were mostly in Santa Cruz. One was down in the Pasadena area, in La Cañada-Flintridge. And another one was actually in Bath, in England.⁶

And then from 2015, Irene and I and our dear colleague Sarah Rabkin—Irene brought the two of us on to work on *Seeds of Something Different: An Oral History of UC Santa Cruz*. So that has been an immersion in the history of Santa Cruz. So even though I haven't lived in Santa Cruz now for seven years and change, my understanding of the place has deepened, because it's been such a focus of my work.

Then on a parallel track, I was involved in starting up a new chapter in the Okinawa Memories Initiative. I was living in International House here in New York, which was like this little mini-UN of twenty and thirty-somethings who were graduate students. So the whole world was in International House. And International House, through this organization, offered these grants for "Projects for Peace." It made me think back to my undergraduate studies with Alan Christy on Okinawa and how impressed I'd been by the Cornerstone for Peace, which is a peace memorial in Okinawa in memory of the lost in World War II, in the Battle of Okinawa. And just in general how fascinated I'd been by the place, because it was also a place that I'd heard about in stories growing up. My grandfather, who's now ninety-nine, served in the Battle of Okinawa in the navy, and was involved in dropping troops.⁷ He was there for the first week of the battle.

So when I heard about this peace grant, I thought, "Well, the most powerful and compelling place I've heard of as far as peace studies is Okinawa." So I called up Alan. And Alan had continued to work on Okinawa. I wound up getting the grant. That snowballed into this beautiful project, which is building on the momentum that Alan had with the Gail Project for several years. Now we call it the Okinawa Memories Initiative. And that is a UC Santa Cruz-based

project. We work with UCSC's undergrad students, staffers, faculty, grad students, both in Okinawa on trips and in Santa Cruz.

When I go back to Santa Cruz now, I often stay in the [Cowell] provost's house with Alan. Or I go stay with my buddy Colin who lives up on Highway 1, up by Bean Hollow Beach in Pescadero, the outskirts of Pescadero. So it remains a home, you know? Again, I haven't lived there in all this time, but you carry places in your heart, you know? I would say it's safe to say that every single workday, I need to think about something related to Santa Cruz, or answer an email that's related to Santa Cruz, or do some task that's related to Santa Cruz, whether it's the Regional History Project or the Okinawa Memories Initiative.

I'm also going to move over and let my cat out, because otherwise it will mewl through this whole thing—

Duncan: No problem.

Vanderscoff: —which might disrupt the integrity. (laughter) It can be on the record that there was a cat named Papo who was my housemate.

So yeah, so that's the short thing of Santa Cruz—and that's deepening this generational thing that already exists. So for me, Santa Cruz is this place that's layered across time and from a lot of different perspectives. It's not a single identity or a single thing.

Duncan: Yeah, and I was going to mention that, too. You have this family connection, a connection of you as a student, and then this professional relationship now. And I wondered, what is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of UC Santa Cruz, with all these relationships you have?

Vanderscoff: Hmm. [pause] It's interesting, I need to think about that, because there are all of these—and I think about it in different

ways across all those things. I think the first thing that comes to mind is that— (apartment buzzer rings) For the record, I live in the fourth story of an apartment building in New York and the buzzer rings randomly. It's not for me.

So, I think of it as a home that even though I don't live there, I will always carry with me in some way. Like there's certain places in this world that when you go to them, you never fully leave them, or they never fully leave you—I don't know which it is. Santa Cruz is one of those places for me. It was the right place at the right time, ultimately, when I was a student, and then also in terms of my career. It was the same way for my mother. I mean, if you think about it, she's going to college just several years after the campus was founded. So I think it's a place—it's a place of necessity or something like that.

I obviously have a ton of thoughts about Santa Cruz history and the ways in which it's different, and the ways in which frankly it's not different, or not as different as it used to be, right? But I think it's this place—and I really notice this here in New York—that does give you some kind of a different way of thinking, just with Santa Cruz and how it's a space where folks are really exploring their identity. That could be sexual identity. That could be gender identity. That could be a political identity. It could be all sorts of things. Santa Cruz is not a utopia by any means. I don't mean to idealize it. And Santa Cruz has a lot of problems, including the history of whiteness, that there is a lot of work that still needs to be done to shake. And there's a lot of reasons why that's there historically. The place is changing and it has more changing to do. So it's not to idealize or romanticize what this place is.

I will say that when I speak to people who have been to other colleges, often it's a different vibe. Santa Cruz is a place that at its best gives you permission. It certainly gave me permission to do a lot of things, including to become a freelance oral historian, which is a highly unusual career. (laughs) You know? There's not that many of us—not that many oral historians, period, let alone sort of the

subset of that, which I do.

And I think also Santa Cruz gives you, at its best, a real curiosity for weirdness. I mean that in a deep way, not like in the shallow way of, "Oh, Santa Cruz is a funky place," you know what I mean, like, "It's all hippied out, that's what it is." That's not what I mean. It's something very different. I think politically, it's certainly changed me—and just an approach to change which is well suited for oral history.

I don't know if that starts to answer that question. It's something I think I could stand to think about a lot more. But sometimes I'm just having conversations with people out here and they're like, "Man"—I'm doing my California voice— So they're in New York and they're like, "You know, boss, you're very Californian."⁸ You know? (laughs) I take that as a compliment. I think Santa Cruz does embody some of the best things of California. Also some of the negative things of California are there, particularly as it's become extremely expensive with the tech boom. The place has changed in that regard even since I was there. But to me, coming from Santa Cruz, the idea that there are different lenses to see things, that's not a strange idea. It's a familiar idea. I think that's certainly served me well during this presidency. Yeah, I'll leave that there for now.

"You could see cases start to tick up": A Rising Pandemic

Duncan: Sure. And that's how I wanted to transition into talking about COVID and how that's affected [you]; even though you're remotely in a way experiencing UC Santa Cruz, I still wanted to capture your experience in that way. Can you talk about the first time you heard about COVID-19 and any initial thoughts you remember?

Vanderscoff: Yeah. I couldn't tell you the very first time. But one of the first times, a friend of mine in Ecuador was thinking of coming to visit New York.⁹ She and I were talking, and she said "Well, yeah," but she said, "We're hesitating"—because her family was going to

come as well—she said, “We’re hesitating because of this virus.” I was already aware of the virus, and I remember thinking, “Oh, that’s”—like my initial reaction to coronavirus was this is going to be like Ebola was here, *not* how Ebola was in places like Liberia and Sierra Leone. I grew up with this media culture which is deeply alarmist, in the age of 24-hour news, this age of sensationalism, and an age when the news is often ready to stoke especially viruses that are perceived as foreign, that are coming from abroad, and really milking that for material.

So my initial reaction was, “Oh, you’ll be fine. I’ve seen iterations of this before.” Of course, that wasn’t true. I was wrong.

So that’s when I first heard about it. When I first started taking it seriously, you could see cases start to tick up. And early, early on—there’s going to have to be a lot of periodizing of COVID because there’s so many little micro-eras within it. Really early on, it was starting to peak in Seattle. As I recall, that might have been a bunch of nursing home cases. I remember seeing that and I remember a friend of mine made the decision to leave New York and go to Seattle. And at the time I was thinking “Oh, that seems a little risky,” because Seattle at that point was a headline location for COVID in the United States.¹⁰

I had a plan to go to Arkansas.¹¹ I was supposed to go to Arkansas, give some talks in a class and meet with my colleague, Benji de la Piedra, whom you know. I remember before I left I asked my housemate Mario, “Is this a bad idea for me to be going to Arkansas? Should I not be traveling at this point?” I left for, I don’t know what it was, maybe March 10th or something.¹² So it was right when—and things were heating up at this time in Lombardy, in Italy, in Spain. And the thing is, because of International House, I have friends in all of these places. So I was calling people up and they were like, “This is bad. It’s getting rough.” So I was getting these dispatches from across the world. But it was still at this wobbly moment.

So I went to Arkansas. Then when I was in Arkansas for about a week, maybe a week and change, that's when the shit hit the fan as far as New York City was concerned. Stuff was getting worse and worse in New York City, so I had to make a choice whether I'd return to New York or go back to California to stay with my folks. But I was concerned about infecting my folks because by then, there was already this info out there about asymptomatic carriers.

And I take all this public health stuff really seriously. I used to have a job where I worked for epidemiologists. It wasn't a huge job and I didn't have it that long, but I spent enough time around epidemiologists to really start respecting what they did, and also to really understand there's large degrees of uncertainty. It's kind of like a "best possible" practice. Not to claim that I have any sort of clinical knowledge or expert knowledge of that stuff, but enough to, like, if an epidemiologist is sounding the alarm, as opposed to someone who's tripping out on CNN, or someone who's trying to race bait talking about Ebola and furthering a racist political agenda, or a nativist political agenda—whatever it is, all the above—I take it seriously when an epidemiologist says something. It turns out that I'm very much in the minority (laughs) in this country, it would seem. I don't know.

"I made the decision to come back to New York."

I was being interviewed about my experience with COVID a few weeks ago for the Columbia COVID project that I'm on.¹³ The way I explained it in that interview was, I made the decision to come back to New York. It felt like the right place to be, kind of like a solidarity to it. Like this is my home now; this is where I live.

Also, I was really, really concerned about the asymptomatic carrier thing. These were the early days. There was no testing, or if there was testing, it wasn't clear it would last, or when testing would come. It was just the early days of the scramble for protective equipment and the N95 masks. I was just like, "If this disease is that dangerous"—and I remember looking at a statistic saying

if this is left unchecked, this is the percentage of infection you'll have in the state of California. I then did the next step of math, and I said, "Even if you're talking about a .5 % mortality rate here, you're talking about"—I'd have to find this article now—but the calculation that I came to, you're talking about like 500,000 to 800,000 deaths. I was like, "This is really serious."

So I went back to New York. And it felt to me like I'd left New York through one door and I came back through a different one. LaGuardia was desolate. The guy who picked me up—I got an Uber back to my place because there were no—Public transit was running, but I was concerned about that. And there weren't even cabs on the street. I mean, there weren't even as many cars as there should be. It was eerie. And this guy said, "This is going to be my last day." He said, "I'm just not making enough for it to be worth it. Who knows what's going down with this virus?" So I talked with him and he just said, "Yeah," he said, "New York's changed." He said, "I've heard some young people are still having secret parties." But he just went, "You know, brother, this has really changed."

"You were faced with something whose momentum you didn't understand and couldn't stop."

So that's the world that I came back into. I've been here ever since. The furthest away I've been from home is biking distance. I've been in a few cabs. I don't own a car here. Don't need one—I thought. (laughs) Right now, it might be kind of nice. But under normal circumstances, I don't. So yeah, here I am.

Duncan: Can you describe the feeling of what the city was as it—When you got home, I assume things got much worse, and New York became the headline city like you described Seattle. What was that feeling?

Vanderscoff: [pause] Like watching the wave go up over your head. You were faced with something whose momentum you didn't understand and couldn't stop.

It's different for different folks. I have the privilege of being able to do most of my work from home, so I didn't have to keep commuting. But seeing those rates go up. When they talked about they were going to convert the Javits Center, which is a major, major facility, into a hospital, I was like, "Shit, they're making field hospitals." That is bad—in New York City, a place which has a lot of hospitals. I mean, the American healthcare system is a disaster, but if in New York City you're putting up field hospitals, (sighs) that's bad.

So that's the thing: do you believe these signs when you see them? So many people didn't. They didn't even believe it once the wave hit us in New York and it crashed over us. They still didn't believe it would go somewhere else. But for me, seeing those signs, I was like, "This is bad. I don't know how bad it's going to get, and maybe it's not going to get as bad as I think it is. But it's going to be bad somehow, one way or another."

Very quickly, International House, where I used to live, made the choice to clear out the building of residents. It gave one week's notice.¹⁴ You're talking about international students, some of whom could not go home. Wealthier countries would have mandatory testing on arrival and then mandatory quarantine and tracking, you know, not just contact tracing, but ankle bracelet-type stuff. Some countries that had less means, they closed their borders. They just shut down because they knew that if it came, it would be a disaster.

And so when I heard about that, we as the alumni community of I House started setting up a fundraising effort to make sure that we didn't have any homeless residents, to make sure that residents also, wherever they were at, was in a place that was COVID-safe. And this was in this time when the signals were changing fast on masks, changing fast on the droplets that move through the air. It was very difficult to understand.

Here in New York, the particular challenge was A, the president spreading mis- and disinformation, and demonstrating a criminal disregard for human life. One of the things that's come out of

this crisis for me is—we know there's inequities in our society. We know they've been amplified by COVID. We know there's a racial health and wealth gap. We see those figures. But what has been so disturbing about seeing this is the extent to which some Americans consider other Americans expendable, their very lives—their livelihoods *and* their lives.

I'm not easily shocked in that sense because I know American history—not everything, but I do read a lot of American history, and through oral history, you learn a ton of experiences. The degree of the incompetence was shocking to me, because the incompetence was based on dehumanization. It wasn't just incompetence. It was also apathy. And then realizing, (pause) "Oh shit, we're in New York. This is going to hit us hard, first," Right? "Hopefully, later on in other places, it will be more figured out."

Another part of the heartbreak has been that that hasn't been the case; that all of these places that had a chance to do something about it—Florida, all these other places where there have been outbreaks since—many of them didn't. Because they too considered us here in New York apparently: A, I guess not their countrymen, you know, countrypeople or whatever; but B, more importantly to me, it's just a basic recognition of human beings and the prevention of suffering.

"I think we should be suspicious when we hear about people calling for what are functionally blood sacrifices to fuel the economy."

One of my first interviews that I ever did was with Hayden White, historiographer Hayden White. He talked about how pain is just a part of life, but that a good ethical goal is to reduce gratuitous pain, unnecessary pain, just harmful pain, you know? So to me, when all these people were saying, "Oh, you know, old people, they're expendable. Aren't they willing to die for the economy?" Every time I heard that, I was like, "Well, you first." The lieutenant governor of Texas said something along those lines. And I was

like, “Yeah, you want to go first?” I think we should be suspicious when we hear about people calling for what are functionally blood sacrifices to fuel the economy. They’re calling for someone else to go first. It’s just self-serving, venal, and cruel.

And here in New York we saw the results of that. De Blasio gave a ton of mixed signals here in New York, so people in New York felt like they couldn’t trust him. And de Blasio is also at this point pretty unpopular as a mayor. He’s disliked by conservatives; he’s disliked by liberals; he’s disliked by progressives. It’s actually kind of an extraordinary feat in the history of New York mayoralty—and we have Mike Bloomberg and Rudy Giuliani in that pantheon. They at least knew not to piss off their base. (laughs)

But here it was really Cuomo. Cuomo was the source of information. That’s where we got information from, his daily briefings. But we saw it, and I saw the differential map almost immediately. Here in New York, Harlem started suffering right away. Densely packed, working class immigrant communities in Queens—Jackson Heights, Elmhurst—got hit hard right away. Wealthy neighborhoods like the Upper East Side did all right. Lots of New Yorkers, wealthy New Yorkers who had second houses, fled to their second houses. Some New Yorkers had golden parachutes. So race came into stark, stark display. Immigration status came into really sharp, sharp display. Class—huge, huge. All the people who could pull the golden parachute did. Maybe not all, but many.

My experience of this pandemic has felt like a story of delayed exposure. Or how when thunder just cracks far away and you can see the lightning burst and it takes the sound longer to reach you. To me that’s what this has felt like. I walk out my door and I see a makeshift shrine where they’ve just taped someone’s picture to the wall in a spot where they used to hang out or used to work, and people are burning candles there. That kind of thing. So there’s that kind of closeness. And then the closeness of losing people in Harlem—losing beautiful people who died unnecessarily in Harlem.¹⁵

Shockwaves from Around the World

Then at the same time, I'm also raising money through crowd-funding to make sure that all these international students are taken care of, and they're safe, and not getting infected. Some of those people were still here. Other people had made it home. I called these people up and we interviewed them, because we had to figure out who were the people who most needed this money. We did this on an ad hoc, volunteer basis, because we knew how bad this was for international students.

I don't know what happened out there at Santa Cruz with all of that, but it's rough. We had people saying, "I cannot go home right now." We spoke with someone who said, "My family's from near Wuhan. You think it's an option for me to go home?" Or for someone to go home to Italy at that point, when Lombardy was just burning with all of this.

So I also then heard, at a longer remove, these shockwaves from all these places around the world. So for me, COVID from the beginning has been a global story. And it continues to be that way. I call up my friends in different places and I hear how it's going in Japan.

What was so disturbing about that early on is I heard about places that got their shit together. That was inspiring and so saddening to see, places that made the choice to not treat their own as expendable. I heard about people going back, like the way Taiwan handled this thing. Hong Kong had some impressive steps. And some of it—it's this tricky line between safety and authoritarianism sometimes. Sometimes that line I think was blurred in some of the countries' responses. But they didn't let their citizens, their *people*, die in massive numbers—which is *something*. I don't mean that as a cover for authoritarianism, but as a call for humanitarianism, and a humane response to this crisis, and that that should be first and foremost.

So I would hear about these countries—now granted, a different situation, right? Hong Kong, much easier to control. The United States is huge. Different set of circumstances. But there still were learnable and teachable things that other people were doing that we were just ignoring. So for me, it went like that. And so in my house here, it's always been that kind of ripple effect.

Then through all that, I'm hearing stories from California. I'm hearing stories about not only the pandemic, but California burning, and my folks saying that it's hard to breathe and the air quality. All that's happened since I've left California. So then I hear about my original home, my home state, and all these disasters and the Santa Cruz campus itself being threatened—and me feeling that deep sense of connection.

One of my narrators in Santa Cruz, John Daly, died during this time.¹⁶ His funeral was remote. Under different circumstances, it would have been nice to go to it, and just be there. That's not the only online funeral I've attended. I can't say it's my favorite way of doing it. I mean, not like funerals are anyone's idea of a great time, but there are more healing ways to mourn and less healing ways to mourn. And the online funeral is not my thing. It's the inability to be with one another, to bear witness.

Even though I've been in New York, my parents keep saying, "Well, come out to California." I'm just trying to figure out, is there a way to do that that's safe for all concerned, safe in terms of quarantine, safe in terms of reliable and consistent testing, and also safe in terms of me getting back to New York because this is where I live?

Yeah, anyway, I forgot your question. So feel free to re-rail me.

Duncan: (laughs) That's totally fine. I did want to ask, you have your connection with New York City and to UC Santa Cruz, obviously very different COVID-19 experiences—

Vanderscoff: Yes.

Duncan: —even just geographically, looking at how the virus has affected these two different places. What has been difficult in either explaining to people at UC Santa Cruz your situation, or you understanding the situation of UC Santa Cruz based on what you're going through in New York?

"What kind of government puts itself behind locked doors and leaves the people outside to be taken by the plague and their land burned by the fires?"

Vanderscoff: That's a great question. [pause] I was talking with a friend of mine from Santa Cruz. I was talking to him about the loss out here and everything. And he said, "Oh man, you shouldn't come back to California right now." This was before the fires. He said, "You shouldn't come back to California right now. You're going to punch someone in a Ralph's [supermarket] or something." And while that isn't literally something I would do, what he's saying is that I would get frustrated.

I have felt a gap because for me, from the beginning, this has been about life and death. My housemate lost someone early on who we thought was getting better and then was on the ventilator and took a turn and died. He was young. Then a few weeks later, our household was just getting on its feet a little bit and then that's when my friend Gary Samuels, Minister Gary Samuels, died after having been hospitalized in St. Luke's Hospital, released, then Harlem Hospital, released, and then was home in Harlem, where he died.¹⁷ He was fifty-nine, which is young. It's just young.

And so for me, I've seen it because of this global exposure that I've had, and also because as an oral historian, I'm a part of a lot of different communities in New York, an unusually broad range, just because of all the different projects I've been on. The downtown artistic community; I've interviewed people in the corporate real estate community; I play guitar in the Harlem jazz, blues, and Gospel community. I live up here in Inwood, which is a Dominican immigrant community. And there's many more examples of that.

And I saw very clearly, very personally, who was suffering, who was dying, and who was not. So I get frustrated with people who talk about this in terms besides life and death, and poverty. It has felt like a gap.

And then the fires happened in California. I'm sure that there are things that I didn't understand about that, although it added to my sense of having a government that sees its people as expendable. To me, it confirmed that sense in a bigger way. What kind of a nation— And we know this, by the way, because Mark Meadows made that remark a few weeks ago, right? Basically admitting, "We aren't trying to contain this thing." He was like, "We've got to let it run its course."

What kind of government puts itself behind locked doors and leaves the people outside to be taken by the plague and their land burned by the fires? It's a biblically bad government. (laughs) You know, that scale. The story that keeps popping up in my mind at this time is *The Masque of the Red Death*, Edgar Allen Poe, that you have Prince Prospero and all the elites who think that they can wall themselves off and have masquerades. But the Red Death, the plague, will come nonetheless.¹⁸

That's the thing. There's all this knowledge out there about this. There's an old blues song, Mississippi Fred McDowell did it for one, called "You Gotta Move." It's like, "Look, you may be rich/ You may be poor/But when the lord gets ready/You gotta move." There's these certain "natural facts." Some people explain those religiously. Other people have secular explanations, such as: "Fire is hot," "Plague is bad." (laughs) That's what frustrates me about this because it can be explained in the simplest possible terms. And in spite of that simplicity, there's been such a failure of witnessing.

"These were all African American elders": Black Lives Matter

That's what I understand the Black Lives Matter movement as being about. Like I remember I was thinking, when my friend Gary died,

it was like—it was wildly gaslighting, the whole situation. Because everyone was saying, “Oh, people who died of COVID, they had preexisting conditions.” Which to me is the sub rosa version of—it’s like the version of this [thing] that it’s working people’s fault that they’re poor. It’s this blaming thing.

And then seeing a complete lack of recognition at the national level, as if that life didn’t matter, as if Gary’s life didn’t matter. And it did. I mean, he was, for my money, one of the best Gospel and blues singers of all time—period. And I mean anyone, recorded or not. But beyond that, he was a beautiful soul who worked for public housing. He lived in public housing and he worked for a housing authority, a senior center.¹⁹⁵ He took care of elders in Harlem.

One of the last things he posted before he died was a picture of eight different elders and he said, “These are all people just from my center who we’ve lost.” These were all African American elders. Gary was African American. And when he died, and when other people who I knew on the scene died, the national response seemed to be that their lives didn’t matter. Right? To me, Black Lives Matter is a resistance against that, in saying that these lives do matter, and they’re not expendable.

But just that sense of gaslighting. I’ve been reflecting on this as something that for me, as a white person in America, that was a newer thing. But I really wonder, as having reflected on communities of color, that that’s more common, more widespread; that someone dies and the first question is not, “I’m sorry.” The first question is, “Oh, well, what were they doing?” To me the version of that in COVID is, “Oh, but did they have a preexisting condition?” And you’re like, “So they deserved it? What are you saying?” And also, what does it mean to have a preexisting condition in a society that has, again, this health and wealth gap, this racial disparity? What’s the preexisting condition there? It’s this racist society.

So for me, all this stuff feels very connected, and very emotional, and very personal. When the election was called for Biden on

Saturday, I went down into Harlem. One of the last things that Gary said to me was, "We have a lot of walls to sing down. We have a lot of walls to sing down when this is over, Cam." I was calling him every day, or texting him every day, one or the other, so we were in communication most days. He was getting better. And then he took a turn, and that was that. But we thought he was getting better.²⁰

So for me, that's added a real sense of when's the other shoe going to fall on this whole thing? Because for my housemate, the person he lost, we thought he was getting better. With Gary, we definitely thought he was getting better. He was sounding better.

"Singing Down Walls"

So on Election Day, I felt like what I needed to was A, to go into Harlem, to ride my bike down into Harlem, which is a beautiful ride down the Harlem River from here. Then the other thing I thought I needed to do was to go to his old house, which I hadn't done. He lived on the ground floor of the Harlem River Houses at 152nd and Adam Clayton Powell, which is very uptown Harlem, top of Harlem, right before you hit the river and then there's the Bronx and Yankee Stadium. That's where Gary lived for the last few years of his life.

So I went there. So I went there and I laid flowers and I poured out a little scotch. He used to do the blues standard, "One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer," which John Lee Hooker did originally, and then George Thorogood and other people did. And I sat there for a bit. It felt right, because I was just like look, there's a lot of walls still to sing down, but we sang down one of them with the president losing this election, whether or not he'll admit it. And whatever else happens next—it could get ugly. We don't know. I mean, it could get really ugly. But this was a wall that has been sung down by a lot of voices, more than seventy million of them. And that's powerful.

So it felt like it was finally the time to go to Gary's place. Because that's the thing, for everyone who's lost someone in this time,

there's not a [typical] funeral, and information is unclear.

A Global Moment

And so, for me, that's the purpose that comes out of this time: singing down walls—and to see all COVID stories as both profoundly local and deeply global.

So when I think about the Santa Cruz COVID story, right, which is the focus of this project, how do we see it? What are the borders of that story? Where does it go? And in a way, I'm the least qualified person to be interviewed about this on the team because I haven't lived in Santa Cruz for seven years, even though I've continued to visit it and so on. But maybe the perspective that I can bring is to say that the Santa Cruz COVID experience shouldn't have borders. I understand that there's a value to thinking about things locally, and I don't mean to erase that. For example, what Harlem has gone through in this time, that's Harlem's experience and that's not to be co-opted. And so when it comes to Santa Cruz's experiences of this time or the experiences of the fire, that is uniquely and powerfully Santa Cruz's, and that integrity needs to be recognized.

But as far as where does that story stop, it shouldn't. Because I was really struck that back in April, when everything was boiling over here, I was feeling commonality with folks in Harlem, but not with folks on the Upper East Side in the same way. I was feeling commonality with some family members in California, but certainly not the folks who were out there protesting in Huntington Beach, or wherever else they were protesting. I didn't feel community with the folks who were chilling out in Florida, going down to the water. But I did feel commonality with people I was talking with on the phone in China or in Italy, all kinds of different places.

And so, to me what that suggests is that this is a global moment. And the way that it's gone down in Santa Cruz actually makes that in some ways even clearer than it is here in New York. Because in Santa Cruz it's been accompanied by ecological disaster brought

on by climate change. So to me there's a big question about, what kind of an ecosystem do we want to live in? To me, climate change is a part of that, key part of it; racism is a part of that, a key part of that; all of these different social justice movements.

Because there is this spatial thing: you can see where there are fires because the climate is a certain way. And you can see where there are deaths from COVID because the weight of historical and systemic racism in this country lands in a certain way. I would say that these things are connected. Not to say they're all the same, but that they're linked. So to me, the Santa Cruz COVID story should be a story without borders and without easy endings.

The vaccine should not be the end of the COVID story. Once the vaccine is made and let's say it works out fine and it's widely distributed. To me, that's not the end of this story. The end of this story needs to be something open-ended, written in community and in real solidarity and in seeking those connections. Because maybe Santa Cruz's experience—I mean, I'll be honest, I was following all the fires on the West Coast because I'm fearful for my friends and family, my loved ones there, that their homes could be in danger or that they could physically be in danger. So I was focusing on that. I don't know if there were other fires in the world at that time, or other kind of climate change-propelled disasters. Maybe those commonalities exist. That could be a powerful network that could draw a connection across things that's much more powerful than, say, tracing a line around Santa Cruz County or something like that.

So for me, the powerful flipside of this time is that you never know where you'll find a witness, or who you could be a witness for. It could be someone who you might think of as being quite different from you, or a setting that's quite different from you. There's something powerful in that that I hope endures beyond this time.

Duncan: Perfect. Well, I think that's as good a place to end as ever. We're just a hair over, so that's perfect. It was a pleasure, and I'll stop the recording.

Endnotes

¹Specifically Inwood, the northernmost neighborhood of Manhattan.

²My mother, Clare Henjum, was a student at UCSC from '73-'74 (Class of '74), and my Aunt Peggy Henjum was there from '74-'77 (Class of '79) - Narrator

³The Regional History Project has done an oral history with Professor Ken Norris. See "[Kenneth S. Norris: Naturalist, Cetologist & Conservationist, 1924-1998: An Oral History Biography,](#)" interviewed by Randall Jarrell and Irene Reti, edited by Randall Jarrell

⁴More on OMI later in this oral history. - Narrator

⁵I first met Irene in the fall of 2011, when I was working on an oral history of the late Professor John Dizikes, which had been initiated by then-Cowell Provost Faye Crosby. Irene, the Director of the Regional History Project, has mentored me since then. - Narrator

⁷Stanley Clifford Henjum, my grandfather, was a radar and electronics officer from '43 to '46.

⁸I correct myself here because I used the more Californian "man" when "boss" is a more typical New York word—I had the wrong hat on for the impression. - Narrator

⁹ This potential visit was to be late February/early March 2020.

¹⁰See Piper Milton's oral history in this collection for more about the impact of COVID early on in the Seattle area.

¹¹ Before COVID-19, I traveled a lot, mostly for freelance oral history work assignments, usually at least a quarter of the year and sometimes almost half. From April to August, I had planned to be in Germany (conference), Singapore (conference), Okinawa (work), and potentially Panamá and England. That proved to be hubristic, to say the least. - Narrator

¹²On review, I left for Little Rock on March 9th.

¹³ Columbia's NYC COVID-19 Oral History, Narrative and Memory Archive

¹⁴This occurred in late March, not long after my return to the City.

¹⁵Rest in peace to Minister Gary Samuels, Sergeant Leroy "Stump" Davis, Miss Linda J. Carr, Mr. Samuel Hargress Jr., Mr. Al Howard, and to many other treasured community members in Harlem who have died in 2020, either directly due to COVID-19 or who had their passing impacted by COVID's ancillary effects, such as quarantine, isolation, over-taxed medical resources, disruption of traditions around illness and death, and more. Prayers and care go up for many other individuals, who I will leave here anonymous, who are currently hospitalized or facing illness at home in this time.

¹⁶John died in June 2020. For his oral history, see [John C. Daly: A Life of Public Service in a Changing Santa Cruz, 1953-2013](#)

¹⁷Gary passed in April.

¹⁸In the story the elites basically wall themselves off from the poor people and their suffering, but an embodiment of the Red Death—the Plague ravaging the countryside—comes to their party anyway.

¹⁹Specifically, for New York City Housing Authority. Gary was deeply involved with his community.

²⁰As many Americans people worldwide have experienced with loved one, I was unable to visit Gary in his recovery due to quarantine and contagion concerns. He died in April 2020. His funeral was held on Zoom.



Black Lives Matter Mural Decorating UCSC Water Tank.
Photo by Irene Reti

The Narrators



Tree Memorial, 2020
Photo by Irene Reti.

Nicole Afolabi

Interviewed by Maryam Nazir

I had the pleasure of meeting Nicole Afolabi online through Instagram messaging. She was looking for stories and experiences people had with racism, discrimination, and otherwise prejudiced behavior exhibited by members of Greek organizations and the organizations themselves. Nicole was a rallying figure in both opening the door for difficult conversations, and pushing for Greek life accountability here at UCSC. Unwittingly, she lifted the veil off of the glamorized, rose-colored depictions of Greek life, and boosted the stories of those who felt marginalized, ostracized, and holistically excluded from this facet of college life.

I met with Nicole on the 27th of November 2020, during the worst wave of COVID-19 we had seen. Nicole was living in Brentwood, California during the pandemic. Prior to this interview, I observed her on local news stations speaking frankly about instances of hatred and racism within her community. Though we never had the pleasure of meeting in person during our time at UC Santa Cruz, through mutual friends I was able to connect with her on social media, and follow what she was doing.

This interview took place less than two weeks after the confirmation of Joe Biden as our president-elect and around the time frame that two major pharmaceutical companies released the results of seemingly effective vaccines. The mood seemed to be one of cautious optimism underscored by a brutal awakening the past few months in this pandemic had caused.

—Maryam Nazir

Nazir: Let me start this interview off. This is Maryam Nazir with Nicole Afolabi for the UCSC COVID-19 Project. It's Friday, November 27, 2020. So I'm going to just start out with your beginnings and stuff. Where were you born?

Afolabi: I was born here in America. I was actually born in Wisconsin.

My parents moved to California when I was two years old. And then I basically lived in the East Bay area. I lived in a small town called Brentwood pretty much all my life.

Nazir: Do you remember any of that experience back in Wisconsin?

Afolabi: No, not at all. I went back three years ago, or something like that, and I did not remember anything.

Nazir: Do you have family over there?

Afolabi: My mom actually came from Nigeria. When she came, she was in Chicago for a couple of months. And then my dad was at the UK at the time. So then they got married and they decided to go to Wisconsin because where she was living before was in the city and they wanted something more for a family. Then my dad got a job out here. So then they had to move out here. They stayed in Fremont for three months while the house I'm living in now was getting built. And then once this was built, we've lived here the whole time.

Nazir: That's cool. Yeah, I'm in San Ramon. I'm really close to Brentwood.

Afolabi: Oh, my mom works there.

Nazir: Oh, that's so cool. So you stayed in California your whole life. This is the state that you would call home, pretty much?

Afolabi: Yeah.

Nazir: What does your family life look for you?

Afolabi: I'm back at home now with my little brother. He's ten. And then my mom and my dad.

Nazir: So it's a pretty tight family? How much younger is he?

Afolabi: We have a twelve-year age gap.

Nazir: Wow.

Afolabi: Yeah, but ever since I came home for quarantine, we've become soclose. He's pretty much always with me. I had to kick him out. I was like, "I have something to do for an hour, leave me alone."

Nazir: That's so cute. (laughs) So you have one younger brother and then your mom and your dad.

Afolabi: Mm-hmm.

Nazir: So you guys have probably gotten really close during this time of staying home.

Afolabi: Yeah.

Nazir: I have younger siblings, too. And you're a fourth-year now? Or third-year.

Afolabi: Yeah, fourth-year.

Nazir: Fourth-year. I know it's hard because being in college, you feel like you're separated from them.

Afolabi: Mm-hmm.

Coming to UC Santa Cruz

Nazir: So going into your time at UC Santa Cruz, what drew you to the campus specifically?

Afolabi: Honestly, it was such a last-minute decision for me selecting to go to UC Santa Cruz. I came and I toured real quick. My parents just drove through, and I was like, okay, I can see myself here. It was a UC. And when I first was coming in my first year, I was doing biomedical engineering, and UCSC's engineering department was really good. So I was like, if I go here, I should excel well in my major—even though I ended up switching. But I think that was the main reason, because of the major.

Nazir: So you came in because of the major, but obviously you switched. So what do you feel like now is drawing you to the campus?

Afolabi: Honestly, the friends I've met. I actually left for a quarter UC Santa Cruz, because at first I felt like it wasn't for me. It was because I didn't really know what I wanted to do. So I left, took some time, and then I came back. I felt like it was one of the only schools, after talking to different people, where the people are really nice, and it's not too competitive academically, and people like to help you and stuff like that. I like the whole vibe and the energy of the people that go there.

Nazir: So you came in with biomedical engineering. And then what did you end up switching into?

Afolabi: I really have tried everything. After biomedical engineering, I went to econ; and then after econ, I went to pure math; and now I'm doing politics and statistics.

Nazir: Wow, so it's a big shift from when you first came to now.

Afolabi: Yeah.

Nazir: What helped you navigate that switch? Because obviously, I came in with a different major as well, but it's like you take certain classes or whatever. What, for you, was the kind of like, okay, this is

where I'm fitting in academically?

Afolabi: With the biomedical engineering, general chem weeded me out. I was like, no. I'm not doing this. But I really liked all the math classes I had to take. So I was like: okay, you know what? I don't want those classes to go to waste. Let me try doing econ. And then I got to Econ100A and 100B and I was like, oh, no, this is not for me, either. But I still liked the math. So I was like, let me do pure math. And then I was like, I don't know, I like math, but is this really what I want to do forever? And then growing up my whole life, people have always told me, "Oh, you'd be such a good lawyer. You'd be such a good lawyer." So I was like: let me see what politics is about. And I've honestly really liked it. I have one more class to take next quarter and I'll be done with it. It was really fun. And then I was like, I've taken all these math classes, I don't want it to go to waste. I only had to take three extra classes for the statistics major. So I was like: okay, let's just do that.

Nazir: That's really interesting because law and math are two completely different ends of the spectrum.

Afolabi: Yeah, I was wondering, too, how's that going to work? But there's jobs like political statistician, especially after the election and everything, and counting the polls. And I was like: wow, this is where I could be, or something like that.

Nazir: You must experience two different types of demographics, in your politics classes versus your math class.

Afolabi: Yeah, oh, for sure. In STEM I feel like the teachers don't really care that much. It's like you have to do no matter what's going on. But in politics, they're a lot more understanding. It's a lot more laidback. But overall, I can't complain. It's a good mix.

Nazir: It's appealing to both sides. Are there specific communities that you felt connected to during your time at UCSC before the pandemic hit, in terms of clubs or organizations or anything?

Afolabi: I was a part of a sorority, but I'm not in that anymore. So, other than that, I don't really think there was anything else. Well, I am now a program coordinator for the Office of Diversity and Inclusion for the Student Union Assembly [SUA]. I just started that this quarter. That's about it.

Nazir: What was your overall third-year experience like before the pandemic hit, would you say?

"Then corona happened."

Afolabi: The first quarter, I wasn't at Santa Cruz. That's when I'd taken some time off. Then I came back that winter quarter. Three weeks into it, the strike started.¹ Then corona happened. So that was basically it: I was only there in person for maybe three weeks.

Nazir: Wow, that's crazy.

Afolabi: Yeah.

Nazir: Wow. Going to the end of winter quarter, when did you first become aware of the pandemic?

Afolabi: I actually remember because I was having situations with my housing and I was freaking out. I was subleasing for winter quarter, and the girl was like, "Oh, I'm actually coming back and I want my spot" or whatever. So I was freaking out about, I need to find housing; I need to find housing. And then I remember it was finals week, and I wasn't leaving until that Friday because I had to move all my stuff out. And then all of my housemates were just like, "Oh, no, we're going to go home," because some of them were from SoCal [Southern California], and they were like, "There's going to be a lockdown. I might not be able to make it back." I was scared. But I was like, I have to move all my stuff out. And then I was freaking out: about where am I going to move to? Because I still hadn't found housing. And then I remember getting the email

that the first week of spring break was going to be online. So I was like, okay, that gives me two, three weeks to find a place for housing and I'll be fine.

Then I went home and I got the email that the whole quarter—and I was just like oh, wow, this is actually a lot bigger than what I thought it would be. I think when I got the email that the whole quarter would be [remote], and when they had canceled the class that just graduated, its graduation, I was like, oh, this is big.

“But then school started and I was like, oh, how are we going to do school online?”

Nazir: Yeah. So that early couple of months of the pandemic, what was your experience with shelter-in-place?

Afolabi: It was kind of different, hard to get used to being back at your parents' house, when I'd been living on my own or whatever. It was also spring break, too. I had plans to go on a trip and everything like that. So I was so upset and kind of like, what in the world is going on? Because nothing like this had ever happened before. But then school started and I was like, oh, how are we going to do school online? I was kind of nervous about that. But that quarter went better than I could have expected it to go. It wasn't really too bad, if I'm being honest.

Nazir: So do you feel like you had an easier transition to remote learning?

Afolabi: I think so. Compared to others, I cannot complain at all.

Nazir: How do you feel your professors handled it? Do you have any criticisms, or do you feel like they were just doing what we were all doing, which was just kind of adapting?

Afolabi: Yeah, you know how I was saying the STEM professors

and my politics professors are two different people? My politics professors have been really understanding, lenient on due dates. Even when we have papers due, they're like, "Just email me for an extension. No questions asked." But one of the STEM classes I'm taking, the professor literally was like, "I don't care that it's online. You guys are still expected to do everything at full capacity as if it was in person." And that's how they designed the class. They're so insane. Like even with everything with the election and then the pandemic. I know there are some people in the class that are having housing problems and stuff like that, or Wi-Fi problems, and they're not understanding at all.

Nazir: That's really upsetting. What do you feel like was UCSC's response to the pandemic? Do you feel like they handled it in the correct way? Or do you feel like there are steps that they could have taken to make it a little easier for students, especially students who are maybe majority STEM, or only STEM? Do you feel like they were kind of neglecting that part? Or was it just: "What can we do?"

Afolabi: Yeah, I feel like it's hard. I know some professors who are STEM and really nice. It's just those few professors, and I don't really know if the school can enforce it, or something like that. But I feel like what they should have done, since it was online, is lowered tuition and all of that. That's something that I really feel passionate about.

But I really don't feel like there's that much they can do. I know my little brother, their school provided all the students with laptops to loan. Maybe the school could have done that, because I know not everybody can maybe afford a computer, or something like that. Or work with the internet companies to make sure people can afford fast internet and stuff like that. Or tell the professors not to make the cameras mandatory, or making the Zoom lectures mandatory—you can watch it on your own time or something.

Nazir: Yeah, totally. Before the pandemic hit, did you have a work

life? Or were you just focusing on school?

"I was working, too."

Afolabi: No, I was working, too. I worked at this tax office in Santa Cruz before the pandemic had started. I remember texting them, like, "Oh, I'm just going to be back for one week when I go home for spring break." And literally my last shift there before I came back for spring break, my manager was like, "Oh, we just got the stay at home in place." We weren't sure because it was around tax season—but then they extended it, because of coronavirus—if we were considered an essential worker or not. She was like, "You know, we might be doing it remote when you come back in two weeks." I was like, "Okay, just keep me updated." And then I ended up never even going back to that job. They ended up opening up, but I was still back in the East Bay and I was like, I don't think I'm going to move back to Santa Cruz just for a job. I can find one out here.

Nazir: Did you get a job once the pandemic hit, or were you kind of laying low?

Afolabi: I laid low for the first two months, and then my job that I usually work when I come back home, I started working there. But then I ended up getting my internship with the school. So I've just been doing that one because it's remote and then I don't have to leave my house or anything.

Nazir: So it was kind of an easier transition, meaning you weren't really working at a restaurant or something, where it was completely shut down, it was a little easier to find remote work. Do you have any friends or people in your life that were in that position, where their job required them to be in person, and all of that source of revenue and income was completely cut off because of the pandemic?

Afolabi: Yeah, a lot of my housemates—I live with seven other girls and a lot of them are in that position. So they were like, "I'm not

going to be able to afford to pay this month's rent." And thankfully our landlord is the nicest person ever. He was like, "Just let me know. I can cut it down. You guys can pay me back later." He was so understanding. So just seeing those people, that they were affected.

Nazir: Your housemates, were they able to move back, or did they have to kind of make do and stay in Santa Cruz during all of this?

Afolabi: It was a mix between some of them. I know one of them ended up having to sublease the place because she was like, "I can't afford to pay the rent"—stuff like that. Two of them were graduating that year, so they just decided to stay. And then the third one, she was a year younger than me and she wanted to keep the house. So her and the rest of the girls are still in there.

"I literally want to go out so bad."

Nazir: So there was this really major shift in interacting with people during the first couple of months of the pandemic. Do you feel like this shift negatively impacted your own social life? Or do you feel like it was easy to transition because it was a time of emergency?

Afolabi: No, it definitely—I literally want to go out so bad. I cannot wait for the world to open. I've had so many trips I've had to cancel. My birthday's in December, literally a month, December 27th, a month from today. I was laughing at my friends in the beginning, like, "Oh, you're quarantined, but on my birthday I'll be fine." But now it's a month away and we're going to most likely be locked up. So I'm so upset.

Nazir: You moved at the very beginning of everything and you've seen your community deal with the pandemic, from March-ish to now. How has it affected anyone in your life, whether it be people in Santa Cruz, or people in your surrounding community right now? How have they dealt with it?

Afolabi: My town's kind of weird. It's a really white town, so they've been marching and having protests because our schools are closed. Then a couple of weeks ago, my mom got an email: they're trying to reopen in person and stuff. I feel like my town does not take it serious at all.

But in Santa Cruz, I guess they do. One of my issues is I left all my personal stuff the first couple of months, in Santa Cruz because I thought I was only going to be home for two weeks. And so I was like, "I'll go this weekend and go get my stuff." And the people who would be in Santa Cruz would be like, "Oh, um, do you just want to wait to make sure after it dies down because of corona and stuff like that?" I was like, "Yeah, I'll respect that, whatever." I feel like it affected my friends in Santa Cruz a lot more than where I'm from.

Nazir: Yeah. The way that this pandemic affected your community, you're saying that a lot of people were resistant to the mandates and stuff. Do you feel like because of that it affected everyone the same? Or do you feel like you saw really big disparities in how it was affecting, say, white, privileged people in your area, versus people who were immunocompromised, or low-income and essential workers? Do you feel there was a big disparity gap? Or do you feel like, for the most part it was the same demographic being affected the same way?

Afolabi: I think it was honestly the same demographic. Because I had some of my friends who I was, in the beginning, looking at crazy. They were still going out, too, and thinking it's a hoax and just like whatever. A lot of my high school friends actually went to school out-of-state on the East Coast. Even my friends in LA, they're always sending me videos and it's packed. And I'm like, oh my gosh, are we living in the same world? So I think it affected them differently—and they're all races, too.

Nazir: How has the impact of the pandemic been on you and your family, either health-wise, or even just mentally? How do you feel

it's affected you as a family?

Afolabi: I think it's brought us closer because now we're stuck with each other. My dad used to work from home, but it was only him so he got the house to himself. But now him having to adjust to all of us is annoying on his part. But we get it now. We'll get on each other's nerves someday. But it is what it is.

"I'm just like, dang, we can't do anything."

Nazir: That's really good. So you feel like you've been able to retain at least some sort of sanity while you've been—?

Afolabi: Yeah.

Nazir: What do you feel is the biggest difference in your days right now versus your days prior to the pandemic?

Afolabi: Just how much I'm at home. I'm such a homebody. I have my little Snuggie on and I'll be in my bed watching a movie right now. I used to be someone who used to go out a lot, always doing stuff, always with my friends. So now I'm really like bored.

Nazir: Yeah, it's a big transition. What has been the most challenging thing for you in this transition?

Afolabi: A lot of my friends turned twenty-one this year. There were so many trips and stuff that we had planned. I'm just like dang, we can't do anything. So, like that.

Nazir: Yeah. What do you miss the most about pre-pandemic life?

Afolabi: Literally being able to go out at night and literally to do whatever— (laughter)

Nazir: Yeah. Are there any things that were surprisingly positive during this time that you feel like you discovered?

Afolabi: Yeah. I did nails before the pandemic. But since the pandemic, since I've been home a lot, I've improved so much because I have been practicing and stuff lately. So that was a really good positive.

And before, I had really bad test anxiety, too. Being able to take my test inside my own house is a lot better, so my grades have definitely improved.

Nazir: Yeah. Did you do those yourself?

Afolabi: Which ones? Oh, my nails right now? Yeah.

Nazir: They're so cute. (laughs)

Afolabi: Thank you.

The Grad Student Strikes

Nazir: You said that you came back winter quarter and that was the height of the wildcat strike. How involved were you in those grad strikes that were happening?

Afolabi: Oh, yeah. I went to two or three protests. And my friend was in the SUA at that time, so I attended their meetings on it. I would say I tried to be as active as I could—because I was working then as well, too—to show my solidarity and stuff like that.

Nazir: When did you first hear about the grad strikes?

Afolabi: I think I was on Twitter or something like that. I think somebody retweeted their Twitter account. And I was like oh, that's

my school. Then I started reading about it, and then I saw it on Instagram and everything.

Nazir: Yeah. Do you feel like the issues of the grad strike—because it was really kind of just fizzling down because of COVID—do you feel like they were solved? Or do you think that it was more just overshadowed by bigger issues.

Afolabi: I think it was overshadowed by bigger issues, for sure.

Black Lives Matter

Nazir: Yeah. So going from March, transitioning to the events that happened in May, and the out support for Black Lives Matter and everything—do you feel like you were always very outspoken about things like that? Or do you feel like that kind of just happened in this instance?

Afolabi: Now the type of person I am—I really want to say I don't know how to mind my business, but I do—but if I feel like there's something that I have to say and I feel like people need to hear it, then I'm just going to say it. If something's bothering me, I'm going to say it.

Nazir: Yeah. I feel like a lot of people see May as a singular kind of event where it was like, "Oh, this happened and now there are so many protests."² But I feel like people who were following the movement for a while knew that this was happening since 2012, 2008—

Afolabi: Yeah.

Nazir: —and a long time before that, too. So did you have that need to use your voice? Since then you felt like you had that, you know, well before—

Afolabi: Mm-hmm, I felt like I was older now and I understood it a lot more now. I had a different perspective of how serious this actually is. So that's why I felt like I was able to do more, and go out and protest, and do stuff like that. But I remember, even in high school, we would have the little walkouts and I would participate in those and stuff like that.

Nazir: So you were able to attend protests before COVID happened, in regard to Black Lives Matter.

Afolabi: Yeah.

Nazir: And so, were you able to attend them after as well, during May?

Afolabi: Yeah.

"I feel like Santa Cruz is one of those towns that pretend to be liberal— even UCSC, in particular. But they're not. When real issues come, they're silent."

Nazir: What was the biggest difference in the protests before COVID and after? Or was there?

Afolabi: I just went to one a couple of weeks ago. Now there's masks and stuff like that, and some people try to social distance or something like that. But I don't really think there's anything that different.

Nazir: The reason why I called you for this interview is because I remember you were very outspoken on social media about calling out a lot of the abuses that UCSC and the organizations and the people were overlooking and not addressing.

Afolabi: Mm-hmm.

Nazir: Can you speak on, if you're comfortable, the things that you think that UC Santa Cruz was lacking in terms of Black Lives Matter, in terms of accountability, and a lot of the stuff that led you to go on social media in the first place? What triggered it?

Afolabi: Mm-hmm. I feel like Santa Cruz is one of those towns that pretend to be liberal— even UCSC, in particular. But they're not. When real issues come, they're silent. And it was annoying to see, because people who interact with me and I think were friends, or thought we were friends, were just silent on issues that could affect me, could affect my family, too. It was weird to see. So I was just like, enough is enough, you know? I literally was just was like, I'm done with the fake activism and all of that stuff. And so that's why I felt compelled to say stuff. You were asking what the school can do better. I feel like accountability, like you said, take the report seriously and have a faster turnaround time. Because I redid my thing. And people are still getting interviewed. There are still investigations. The time is just so long.³

Nazir: Yeah. And, so from my point of view, did you feel like you got more support than you did backlash?

Afolabi: Oh yeah, 100 percent. There was way more support. I always talk about it, like even till this day, people will still DM me and say, "Wow that's so crazy." I literally was just talking to whoever followed me at the time, and you know, like Twitter and stuff, I don't even feel like people are reading my stuff. I just feel like it's a diary and hope the world just sees it. So yeah, it was just so crazy. Like my DMs just started—I turned them off at one point because I was like okay, this is so much. But it was also sad to see, in terms of the abuses, how many stories there were, too, because that's a lot of people whose lives are affected.

Nazir: Yeah.

Afolabi: Yeah.

Nazir: Yeah. I think it was really good because I feel like you did open that door for conversations to happen.⁴ Otherwise, I really don't think any of that kind of stuff would have been addressed, if you hadn't opened that door. But at the same time, it is kind of a big responsibility. And it's a big, I guess weight, to know that the people you are calling out are not necessarily in a position to apologize or even recognize what they were doing wrong. Did it ever take a toll on you mentally?

Afolabi: Not really. I know I have my social media and all that stuff, but I have a different world outside of that. I have more issues and stuff to deal with that. So I logged on; I would see that; and then in my day-to-day life, I had other stuff to do. So I don't think it took that much of a toll. When people were trying to give me money, I just felt like it was something that I was going to do regardless. I don't see me doing something brave or stuff like that. I was just doing what I do usually, so that's why. But it really showed me how a lot of people when they did tell this woman stuff, they didn't have anybody even caring and listen to them.⁵ So just being able to be that for someone was nice. I kind of felt nervous because sometimes I don't know how to comfort people, especially with a text. It's kind of weird. I was like, I don't want them to get the wrong tone or anything. I think that was the only part.

"And this girl and all those other girls started crying; they were just like, "The guys, the frats, are not going to want to party with us, because we've got too many ugly minorities."

Nazir: Yeah, yeah, that's crazy. You said that you were involved in a sorority. When was that?

Afolabi: I rushed my second year, and then I was in it up until this quarter.

Nazir: Hmm, interesting. Are you in one right now currently?

Afolabi: No, nothing.

Nazir: No. I know they're kind of weird about speaking about it, but were there any reasons related to this as to why you decided not to continue your involvement?

Afolabi: Yeah. There was this one girl, and there were about five other girls with her. This was my first red flag. There were a lot of red flags I ignored, but one of the biggest ones was at my pledge night when I was rushing, they had a whole little separate celebration that weekend. It was where the active people got to meet all the new girls. My pledge class had a lot of diverse people in it. And this girl and all those other girls started crying; they were just like, "The guys, the frats, are not going to want to party with us, because we've got too many ugly minorities." They wanted more white girls and everything like that. I kind of let that slide. But there was one girl who did drop because of that.

And then as I was in it, I kind of, I don't know—I'm a social person but antisocial. I was just like, "Okay, this is not really my vibe," you know. I made two friends. And I was like, "I like you guys." And they kind of also had, "This is not our vibe, but we're too scared to drop, so we're just going to suck it up." But we wouldn't go to anything. And they would always text the other two girls, like, "Hey, where you up?" But with me, they would never text me or anything like that. That just kept going on. Then I kind of was just like, okay, I'm going to distance myself, too. I would only go to the socials or the formals and stuff like that.

And then there was this one girl, she would constantly confuse the other—there was like five Black girls. It's not that hard to remember five people's names. She would constantly call us the wrong names, even after we corrected her. There was a quarter when I wasn't even at UC Santa Cruz, she would constantly call the other Black girls Nicole. She would post videos of her singing songs with the N-words on her stories and stuff, and it wouldn't be a problem.

*"You have Black sisters.
Why would you not stand in solidarity?"*

And then the height of the Black Lives Matter George Floyd thing happened and my organization, my ex-organization, put out a really insensitive message. It was really disturbing that they were pretending that they cared but couldn't even say George Floyd's name, or Black Lives Matter.⁶

So I called them out on it. I made my first tweet. Then they said, "Oh, we can't mention anything because of the rules" of the higher-up organization. I was like, okay. But then I went on other pages of the same sorority, but at different schools and they had actually said more thoughtful posts in other organizations—even at UCSC they did. So I was just like, that's suspicious.

And then, of course, it started gaining attention. And then all of a sudden, miraculously, that night they were able to put out a better statement. I was like, so you could have done one from the start. Why didn't you? You have Black sisters. Why would you not stand in solidarity?

And then I guess they caught a lot of heat from that and other people started saying their experiences that they had. Like there was this social where we were paid for decorations. And they decided getting a Trump sign decoration was okay in an organization that has some undocumented sisters in it, has minorities in it. I don't know why they thought that was okay. Just a lot of stuff.

Nazir: Wow. And then did you have other friends who weren't necessarily in that same sorority you were, but who were participating in Greek life as well?

Afolabi: Yeah. And after my things had—I guess a lot of people realized—they also dropped because they were like, "This is not something I want to be associated with." I didn't drop right away. They had meetings trying to say they were going to fix it. So I

wanted to see those meetings, give them the benefit of the doubt to see. And they didn't care. They had one meeting and then were like, "Okay, let's start planning recruitment again." So I was just like, okay.

And my last straw was when I knew I wasn't going to participate in recruitment. I didn't feel comfortable telling other girls to join when I there were so many issues that they tried to sweep under the rug. But they texted all my other friends who were like, "No, we're not going to do it either," but they hadn't dropped yet. They were like, "Hey, are you going to come? Are you going to come?" And with me, no text. So I was like okay, this is my last straw. And I just dropped.

Nazir: Do you feel like this is an issue that is being faced by a lot of your friends, too, in different organizations? Like it's not just this specific one—

Afolabi: I don't really have that many other minority friends in other organizations, so I'm not really sure. But I know none of them are perfect.

Nazir: Yeah. You talked about their responses to everything that was happening [with Black Lives Matter] in May and June. I think it's really interesting because what you're explaining to me is that they on their own did not feel like it was important enough to address. But once they start getting heat for it, it's then something that is like, "Oh, now we should talk about it because we're losing members and we're losing supporters."

Afolabi: Yeah.

Nazir: Do you feel like there's a way to address this? Or do you genuinely feel like this is a really systematic theme in Greek life that is just really difficult for one single person to fix?

Afolabi: I think it's way too difficult. It's something that's rooted in their nature. When I was getting heat from other people, too, they're like, "Why would you even think about joining those type of sororities or whatever, instead of the D Nines?"⁷ But I don't think it's a crime for somebody to want to join a sorority. And every Black girl who joins white sororities, they're like, "Oh, I'll be able to change it, I'll be able to change them." But in reality, you cannot.

Nazir: Yeah. Do you feel like there wasn't really space for you to be comfortable in those organizations?

Afolabi: Yeah, because one of my other minority sisters called them out in a meeting in front of everybody when they called the N-word. And instead of just holding each other accountable if they saw somebody, they would feel the need to be like, "Oh my gosh, did you see blah blah blah said the N-word to another minority person." Why do you have to tell me? Why don't you go there and correct them? You know, so it's just weird.

Nazir: Yeah. Did you get responses back? You said that you did call them out on social media. Did you get any backlash or responses, or did any of the girls reach out to you following what happened?

Afolabi: I think two of them apologized in that Zoom meeting because me and some other girls had called them out in front of everybody, and two of them did the little tearful apology, whatever. I don't know if it's sincere or not, but it's not my place to judge. I guess I give them props that they were, you know, saying an apology. It's not easy to apologize. I hate apologizing, so I feel it. And then there's one girl who is just being difficult. She's tried to get me to stop talking about her so many times. But I reported her because even her housemates confirmed my claims; it was a known thing that she was, in my opinion, racist. She demonstrated those racist tendencies. She gave me two cease-and-desist letters. But I don't care, not going to stop me. And one other girl tried to reach out and apologize, too. So I guess some of them did.

Nazir: Yeah.

Afolabi: But the problem with that was that they would just apologize to me, when it wasn't just me; you need to apologize to all the minority sisters that you offended, not just me because I called you out.

Nazir: Mm-hmm. I feel like they're looking at it on more of an individual basis, rather than a history and pattern of not being inclusive, and not giving space to people, and not listening. That's really overwhelming.

Self-care

During all this time, how did you practice self-care to keep you sane? Because you have COVID going on; you have lockdowns; you have, obviously in your community people not even recognizing it; and the Black Lives Matter; and then all of this stuff with the sororities. How do you feel like you've just kept sane?

Afolabi: Yeah. Obviously my friends, and I love Twitter and TikTok., I would just Facetime them and stuff like that.

Nazir: Did you start up any hobbies or anything that gave you little instances of joy during this pandemic?

Afolabi: I just started focusing honestly on my nails a lot more. I just love it. I put a show on and just do my nails. So that is another thing for self-care. But I definitely improved a lot; since the quarantine, I've practiced a lot more.

Nazir: Wow. Is it a business? Do you do it on other people?

Afolabi: I finally started again taking people. But I had to stop again, because the cases are rising. But that little break that we had in between, kind of, I was able to take people again.

"...if you think you've hit rock bottom, like no, it just can keep getting lower and lower."

Nazir: Yeah, that's really cool. If you could just imagine yourself back in May or March, like early pandemic, what were your biggest fears or anxieties about the future?

Afolabi: I was so nervous about where I was honestly going to live in two weeks. I was so nervous about that. I had taken a lot of classes this past summer that we just finished. In May, I was freaking out I'd be able to get into every single one. And then I was wondering how I was going to have to do summer up there and find a place for summer, too, because I thought it would be in person. So, yeah, but everything worked out, I guess.

Nazir: So fast forward now, what are the biggest fears or anxieties you have now about the future?

Afolabi: If I'm going to be able to get a job in a pandemic.

Nazir: Yeah, that's a lot. If someone was reading this and looking back in twenty years or thirty years, what would you want them to know about this crazy time that we're living in right now?

Afolabi: I don't even think you'd be able to imagine, honestly, the whole world just shut down and you couldn't go anywhere, basically. And you had to wear masks. And like school—you stopped going to school, it had to be online. I don't know, I was telling my parents, I feel like technology's going to really start having to change now, especially if it continues getting worse. People are going to have to do virtual everything. But I don't know what I would tell them. I'm trying to think. You know when you're trying to imagine what it was like during the Great Depression? I honestly don't know. But our government needs to step it up.

Nazir: Right. For sure.

Afolabi: And honestly, this year just showed that it could keep getting—if you think you’ve hit rock bottom, like no, it just can keep getting lower and lower.

Nazir: Yeah, I totally agree with that. Is there anything that you feel like we didn’t really talk about that you would like to include in this interview?

Afolabi: I don’t think so. I can’t come up with anything. But if you come up with any other questions, you can let me know. I’ll send a voice memo over or anything.

“They were having little Trump parades on the water.”

Nazir: (laughs) I think I forgot to go over this, but I remember clips of you on the news with that instance of really horrible racism that was happening in your neighborhood. What was that experience like? Can you just give a little information about what that was like?⁸

Afolabi: Yeah, it shows how comfortable people are showing their racism, especially with Trump in office. It was really scary, but it was also really good to see my community come together and show that, “No, we do not tolerate this at all.” It was really impressive to see multiple nights people out there, people coming from twenty-five, thirty minutes away, just to drive there to this house and show that they don’t support this.

Nazir: So was it a really tense time in the weeks leading up to the election in your community?

Afolabi: Yeah, because there’s a good amount of Trump supporters. I live five minutes away from the Delta. And there’s a lot of houses on the [Sacramento] Delta, so they were having little Trump parades on the water there. And there was a Trump parade; my neighbor has that “Honk for Trump” sign, so people would be honking like

nonstop. So I was really nervous. Because I would see the polls and be like, "Oh, I hope so." But then seeing so many people I know who are voting for Trump, it's like, you can never know.

Nazir: Did you already know where people were politically leaning before 2016? Or did you kind of just assume that like, oh, everyone's pretty smart here and there's common sense?

Afolabi: Oh, yeah, I've always known there's a lot of Republicans in my town. But I feel like the issue's not even being a Republican; the issue's if you just support Trump. I knew a lot of Republicans who were like, "Oh, I'm Republican, but I cannot support Trump." So I thought it would be more level-headed than that. Like you can do your Republicans for the other parties and stuff like that, but I was shocked how many people after the 2016 election were *still* going to vote for him for president in my town.

Nazir: Yeah. And so that kind of election result was really shocking to you back in 2016, right?

Afolabi: Yeah, because that was the first time I'd really seen it with my eyes, and a lot of my friends' parents, a lot of my friends themselves, too. And I was just like, well.

Nazir: Yeah. Did you do any work with the election in the days and weeks leading up? Or was it mostly just sitting here and observing the primaries and hoping for the best?

Afolabi: I didn't volunteer or anything like that. I was at home, fingers crossed, talking about it with my friends nonstop. I'm taking two politics classes this quarter. We were talking about it in class pretty much the whole time.

Nazir: Honestly, 2016 was a big election, but I feel like the stakes of 2020 were the biggest they had ever been in all of history. Was that really cool to witness?

Afolabi: Yeah. And like that election—I had a class until 6:55. So we were talking about it and watching it and everything and it was cool just to hear somebody who’s more advanced in that field and knows a lot more than I would, like their perspective and everything.

Nazir: Yeah, that’s really cool. We’re ending a little bit early. But if you have anything else you would like to add, you can do that now, or else we can just end it right now.

Afolabi: I honestly can’t think of anything. But like I said before, if you have anything that you come up with, just let me know.

Nazir: Okay, perfect. Thank you so much.

Afolabi: Yeah, of course. Thank you for thinking of me and everything, too.

Nazir: So yeah, I’ll email you probably in a couple of weeks. We’re going to be submitting everything before the end of the year. So after that, we’ll probably be submitting to you transcripts and things to look over. I know it’s really hard to go over through all of the events that happened this year, so thank you for joining me and thank you for speaking about it because it is kind of tough to bring a lot of that stuff back up. But yeah, thank you, and I hope you have a great rest of your day.

Afolabi: You, too. Bye.

Nazir: Bye.

Endnotes

¹ The COLA [Cost of Living Adjustment] graduate strikes.

² The murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25, 2020 set off an extraordinary wave of protests.

³ This was in regards to the corresponding sorority story, where UCSC was investigating several instances of racism in many of the Greek organizations at UCSC, including Nicole's organization that she had been a part of at the time.

⁴ This was in reference to both the Kappa Kappa Gamma incident and several instances of racism committed by members of various UCSC sororities and fraternities and reported by students to Nicole's Instagram feed. Nicole was able to compile these stories and post them on her own Instagram account, garnering a lot of attention to this issue that had been overlooked and ignored for so long—Maryam Nazir

⁵ When individuals who had experienced racism attempted to complain/share their story to Greek life board members, they were overlooked, ignored, and mostly shrugged off—Maryam Nazir

⁶ See Kora Fortun, "Student Draws Attention to Racism within Kappa Kappa Gamma," in June 12, 2020, City on a Hill Press: <https://www.cityonahillpress.com/2020/06/12/student-draws-attention-to-racism-within-kappa-kappa-gamma/>

⁷ "The Divine Nine," a group of nine historically Black Greek organizations officially known as the "National Pan-Hellenic Council."

⁸ <https://abc7news.com/brentwood-police-mannequin-sleepy-joe-biden-department/7683116/>



Police Line at UCSC Strike. Photo by Jaden Schaul.



Protest, Santa Cruz
Photo by Jaden Schaul

Brenda Arjona

Interviewed by Maryam Nazir

I was referred to Brenda Arjona by one of my closest friends and roommate back at UC Santa Cruz. This friend is an anthropology major and mentioned that Brenda was a TA for one of her classes. She spoke highly of Brenda's passion and verve for the graduate student strikes, and the care she exhibits towards her students. This was perhaps one of my most moving interviews for this project. I resonated with Brenda's experiences of struggle, perseverance, and loss through this tumultuous year, and how she shifted from reliance on institutions that were supposedly meant to have the interests of their staff in mind, to relying on community strength and love. Brenda and I talked via Zoom on a chilly December night about a month after the 2020 election results, amidst record-breaking COVID-19 cases, and feelings of cautious optimism during the first vaccine rollouts in the UK and the US. —Maryam Nazir

"We kind of bounced around."

Nazir: This is Maryam Nazir with Brenda Arjona for the UCSC COVID-19 project. It's Friday, December 11, 2020. So I'm just going to start off with your path and early history, and then we can start going forward. So to start off, tell me a little bit about you and where you're from.

Arjona: Where I'm from? Okay, (laughs) that's always kind of a loaded question to me. I'm originally from the L.A. area, but I grew up in Mexico. And I am a single parent. I've been out here in Northern California since 2014. I came up to Berkeley to get my bachelor's and then I came straight here to Santa Cruz. So I'm away from home, but it's been like that for a while.

Nazir: So you grew up in the L.A. area?

Arjona: Yes.

Nazir: What region specifically, or what city?

Arjona: We kind of bounced around. We were in South Central when I was younger, but after hearing gunshots every night, my mom tried to move us out. Then we moved to Long Beach, which is also kind of a ghetto in some areas. (laughter) So yeah, we kind of bounced around different little cities—Downey, and ended up in Norwalk. But I also did second grade in Mexico because my parents—you know, when people are immigrants, sometimes they miss back home so much that they can't acclimate. So there was a year in Mexico.

Nazir: Wow. So when did you move to the States?

Arjona: I was born in El Paso. So I was born in the States. But right after I was born, they went back to Mexico and then came back. They went back and forth a few times before I was five. Then they finally decided, okay, we're staying in the US.

Nazir: So you mentioned that you attended Berkeley as an undergrad, correct?

Arjona: Yes.

Nazir: What major were you?

Arjona: Anthro.

Nazir: Anthro. What drew you to Berkeley, Northern California, after living in SoCal for your whole life?

Arjona: Anthropology itself, the discipline. I'm an archeologist specifically, because there's subdisciplines. But archeology, and

anthro in general, is huge at Berkeley, especially archeology. I mean, it's really problematic. I have a lot of problems with archeology now. But they were some of the founding people there, like [A.L.] Kroeber, people that started research on the shell mounds. I connected with some pretty great archeologists there. So that's what drew me to Berkeley, the people and the archeological work.

"I've had a harder time, as far as actual culture shock, coming here to Santa Cruz."

Nazir: Wow, interesting. Was it a kind of culture shock coming from SoCal to NorCal, or do you feel like it was easy for you to transition?

Arjona: Oh no, it was not easy. (laughs) It was hard. It's a lot different than I would have thought. California is one big state, but the culture's different. At first I didn't really know anyone. But I've had a harder time, as far as actual culture shock, coming here to Santa Cruz. Berkeley at least, it was more like homesick-type stuff, but then I was able to find support and like-minded people, people who shared my struggles and I could relate to. Here it's been so hard, way harder.

Nazir: So after you graduated Berkeley, what was your path post-grad?

Arjona: I wasn't planning on going to grad school right away because like I said, I am a single parent. My son is eleven. The plan was to move back to L.A. and get a job, or maybe take time off to just be a mom, because it's hard to balance everything. But there was an archeologist here that was doing what I wanted to do. Unfortunately, she's not here anymore, so it didn't really work out the way it was supposed to. But it was basically something that fell in my lap at the last minute as far as a possible opportunity. I didn't think I could accept it, and I did. It was last minute. I was graduating Berkeley May, and then boom, by the time summer hit, I was here.

Nazir: So there wasn't really a gap for work experience. It was just kind of jumping from one academic plane to another?

Arjona: Yeah, absolutely. (laughter)

Nazir: So what drew you to Santa Cruz, specifically?

"Initially, I came [to UCSC] because she was the only archaeologist that does queer theory and feminist archeology."

Arjona: It was an archeologist. Her name's Chelsea Blackmore. Like I said, unfortunately she's no longer with the institution. I'm a fourth-year PhD student at this point. So it's been a rude awakening to see how the institution treats its students. Those are my own personal views, obviously. But yeah, unfortunately she's not here. and I think that's part of it. It's harder for women, and she's a white woman, but a white queer woman. And she had a hard time getting tenure and I feel like it was kind of unfair towards her. Initially, I came here because she was the only archaeologist that does queer theory and feminist archeology. And you know, it's 2020, so you would think it wouldn't be that hard to find that, but it kind of is. Some archeologists completely disregard that gender can be seen in the archeological record, you know, stuff that is outdated. But yeah, when I saw that she does that and she was really unapologetic about it, I was like, cool, I can totally see myself doing a career under this person's guidance. So I came here specifically for her.

Nazir: And was she able to act as a mentor for you while you were in grad school?

Arjona: She was. She didn't leave till last year. I got to go to Belize with her three times. I was doing some pirate site archeology, which was really cool. My project has shifted now because she left. But I did get some really great experience, and also some really great support, emotional and in general, because she was an advisor who was also very candid and very open about mental health and stuff like that. And so for me that's a huge plus, that I got to see this

nurturing relationship with my advisor versus just—these are the due dates, and stuff like that.

Nazir: Yeah, you were able to form that relationship.

Arjona: Yeah.

“I don’t meet a lot of single parents in grad school.”

Nazir: So during your time at UC Santa Cruz, are there any organizations or clubs or communities that you felt particularly connected to? Or do you feel like it was more creating connections as you went, like through your mentorship?

Arjona: Yeah, for me it’s been more discovering those connections. I don’t know if it’s just because grad school is isolating already, but I also live in Family Student Housing and it could be that my experience stands out. I don’t meet a lot of single parents in grad school. But I’ve had a pretty isolating experience, so I haven’t really felt like I’ve jumped at the chance, or even been exposed to the chance to join a lot of official orgs. So it has kind of been through my advisor I met other grad students that she would tell me about.

I finally actually started meeting people this year, being part of the COLA strike and getting fired. That kind of bonds you to people. Yeah, so it was not until this year, and this is my fourth year, that I started to get plugged in with people. And now, as a result of this year and the strike and all that, now I’ve been able to link up with The People’s Coalition;¹ talk to folks from Undocu Collective;² meet people in GSA [Graduate Students Association] or people in the union, stuff like that.

Nazir: How hard was it to balance that single parent life and academic rigor? You had to do that in your undergrad, as well as your grad school, right?

Arjona: I did. I did—again, I don't want to sound like I'm just this pessimistic person, but my experience hasn't been great. I'm just being honest. I actually felt a lot more support in that aspect of being a student at Berkeley. They have a student parent grant. It's not just funds, but they have a space for student parents; they have a student parent center. So it just felt like there was a lot more that was geared specifically to someone in my position, versus here it's been hard to balance that, and to find resources or help that would alleviate some of that stress. It is really hard and my academics definitely suffer because of it, and my parenting suffers as well.

Nazir: Yeah, it's a big burden to be placed on a student. So when did you first become involved with the grad student strikes and COLA?

"... My power had gotten shut off by PG&E. I couldn't afford to buy groceries for me and my son, so my colleagues brought groceries to my door."

Arjona: It was last year right around this time, actually almost to the day. I spoke at a press conference. Because I was so isolated, I didn't have any friends. But somebody in my department who was really involved in the strike, she was basically like, "Brenda's a student parent. Brenda lives in Family Student Housing. Brenda has a really high rent burden." And it was really a really vulnerable time last fall for me because my power had gotten shut off by PG&E. I couldn't afford to buy groceries for me and my son, so my colleagues brought groceries to my door. It was one of those moments in life where you need community support. And that was right when people were like, "Hey, we're thinking about doing this strike." So it's like, I'm already down in the dumps and struggling financially, so I might as well. So it was right around this time last year.

Nazir: So shifting more towards the pandemic, that was around March. When did you first become aware of it?

Arjona: I started being aware of it in February. I think I remember starting to see memes on Instagram and Facebook that were making jokes about the beer Corona. It feels really dumb to say this now—but I was still so kind of naïve to it and in my own little like, we're still in the strike. And then when March came and I noticed there was more news about it, I was like oh, this is serious.

But at first everybody was just kind of joking about it, so it didn't feel like a serious thing. But I definitely knew it was there. I was like, okay, there's this thing going around that everybody's saying it's just the flu. And it's crazy how that shifted in just a month from being aware of it to—boom, everything's on lockdown.

The COLA Strike

Nazir: So prior to the pandemic, what was your degree of involvement with the grad strikes?

Arjona: I was extremely involved. If you Google my name, you'll find tons of articles and reports.³ I was super, super involved. Definitely not in the organizing as much, but I believed in what we were doing. I was all in. I withheld grades. Up until a week before lockdown, or something like that, that we were still doing stuff. I remember that it came to a complete halt.

Nazir: Yeah. You mentioned that you withheld grades. So you were teaching during the grad student strikes.

Arjona: I was teaching. I've been teaching this whole time, except for when they fired me, which was in the spring. They didn't give me my job in the spring.

Nazir: What classes were you teaching?

Arjona: Last fall it was *Biological Anthropology*. And then last winter it was *Intro to Archeology*.

Nazir: And do you feel like your students were receptive about what was going on during this whole time?

Arjona: My students were. I don't know if I just got lucky. But I also had a lot of POC [people of color] in my classes, so I think that makes a difference. I didn't get any pushback. But then I also never was like, "Hey, I'm going to do this, and screw what you guys think." I don't really believe in these hierarchies where it's like, "I'm your TA and I'm a grad student and I have seniority" or whatever. So I was very much having these conversations throughout the quarter about like, "Hey, I'm not here to screw you over. This is what's going on." But there was always this option of, "If you feel uncomfortable in any way, let's just not do it, right? We won't withhold the grades, or whatever." Maybe I just got a couple of batches of students that were awesome, but they were really, really supportive, really receptive. And even the ones that I couldn't tell if they were supportive or not, I just knew that they knew that I wouldn't screw them over. You know? (laughs)

Nazir: Yeah. Was there kind of a mutual understanding within all of the TAs in the anthropology department, to your knowledge, that this was a movement that all of us needed to get behind? Was it all mutually understood? Or do you feel like some of them were on the same page as you were?

Arjona: Oh, no, there were definitely tensions. (laughs) Yeah, not everybody was onboard. And actually, I've changed my mind completely about some stuff with COLA, as a woman of color being involved in that. Sometimes I think with these movements, too, hindsight is a big thing. I remember things changing daily sometimes. So yeah, there were definitely a lot of tensions, and not everybody was onboard. But I think it seemed like the majority of people were in support, including my faculty. So it did make it easier to go with it.

Nazir: And then was that the same with the professors that you're working with as well?

Arjona: Yeah, they were supportive. The professor from the winter scabbed on me. I was really upset, and I still want to talk to him about it because he had told me the whole quarter that it was okay to withhold, so I had made agreements with my students.

And then my best friend got murdered. I know it sounds horrible the way I'm saying it, but it's been a really traumatic thing for me this year. But as I was literally in Santa Rosa helping her mom plan the funeral, I had my students' papers with me in the car. And I'm over here literally experiencing the worst thing ever, that my best friend was stabbed to death, and this freaking professor didn't even have the decency to contact me and say, "Hey, I'm going to submit grades." He did cite COVID as his reason, I heard from another grad student who was TAing with me. But I felt like that was a really rude thing, to not even let me know. Like, you know, "Hey, I changed my mind. I feel like COVID is really affecting the undergrads, so I'm just going to submit grades." I just feel it's a matter of respect, right? I'm working for this professor. And then my students probably were like, what's going on?" Because we had talked about—I had students emailing me like, "I support you" right before the submission deadline. So I felt stupid. I was like, "Damn." But I was also going through a lot. So in the moment I was just like, "All right." You know, what can I do?

Nazir: I hear a lot of different experiences from TAs who were in the grad strikes and it is really dependent on the department that they're working in. I feel like with a lot of the humanities, arts, and some of the social sciences, most of the professors were more on the TAs' sides. Do you feel like the professors in your department sided, for the most part, with the cause? Or do you think there was more pushback, in comparison to other arts and humanities and like CRES majors, departments like that?

Arjona: I think that for the most part I would say, in comparison to others, that we did have support. Because I do remember chatting with other folks at the picket and stuff, from other departments and I was like, "Oh, that's how your department's acting toward you?"

Wow, I'm so sorry." I was running into faculty from my department every day at the picket, so there was definitely a level of support that I think was felt. It was the majority.

*"I'm in a PhD program and I'm over here begging for food stamps, getting my freaking power shut off.
I felt like it robbed me of my dignity."*

Nazir: And when you first got into this whole movement, what was a particular cause? I know all of the causes are extremely important. But what was one really important cause that you felt like affected you, something that you desperately felt needed to change, and that there was no waiting—it needed to be addressed. What was one cause specifically that struck you the most?

Arjona: For me, it was my financial problems that were affecting my parenting, basically, my personal life. You know, when you're raising a kid it's like yeah, you have to keep them alive. But it's also things like my son already knowing, "Hey, can we afford that?" Saying stuff like that to me.

I did this for us. I was pissed. I'm like, I'm in a PhD program and I'm over here begging for food stamps, getting my freaking power shut off. I felt like it robbed me of my dignity. So it very much was this survival thing, like hey, we need to eat. But I also feel really undervalued as a POC, as a woman of color in this PhD program. And I'm saying, "Hey, I also have to raise a kid." Maybe my situation isn't this cookie cutter grad student thing. And there are other grad students that also don't fit the mold, right? But I felt really unheard in these struggles. I had to go cry at Slug Support. I literally had to be in tears for them to be like, "Here's a thousand dollars to pay your rent."

Nazir: Wow.

Arjona: And this is all when I'm supposed to be grading and getting ahead in my career. You just feel almost less than human when you

continue to struggle and not feel seen or helped by the institution. They're the ones that were like, "Come here. Come to Visit Day. We got you."

"I was in this alternate universe where there was this beautiful supportive community, and mutual aid, and teach-ins at the picket line."

Nazir: Yeah, that sounds really overwhelming. And so, in the time of in-person striking, which was like January to middle of March, what do you feel was the height, or the climax of the entire event, in your opinion?

Arjona: Shutting down campus (laughs) for me, I think, was the climax. Because that's when I saw the most support; I saw the most people, I mean, hundreds and hundreds of undergrads. It almost felt like a dream. (laughs) There was one of the days when the campus was shut down. And for the record, I will not confirm that I was there in the street blocking stuff, but I was just looking around. It was like this—not just this like activist direct action, we shut down campus energy—but this very loving community like—I don't want to say a festival, but it was the feeling of just like, my son and I, we would get produce at the picket every day. We would get fed every day. My son would just walk from Westlake, which is right next to where the picket is. He would walk there and be hanging out with people from my department, hanging out with other kids. So it felt like I was in this alternate universe where there was this beautiful supportive community, and mutual aid, and teach-ins at the picket and stuff like that. And it all, I think, climaxed around when we were shutting down campus. (laughs)

Nazir: Yeah, I've only been here since 2018, but in my time at Santa Cruz, I've never seen a protest, I've never seen a movement of this kind of caliber, and interviewing other people, they really haven't either. Do you feel like this was a movement that was always brewing, something that was always under the waters, and that the administration was just kind of putting off, and it just spiraled

and volcanoed into this massive event? Or do you feel like there was a single catalyst that happened around December that caused everyone to examine and be like, "This is an issue we need to address?"

"I did not think they would fire eighty-something grad students."

Arjona: The timeline stuff was led by the UAW, the union. I'm a little salty at the union. They didn't really support us when we needed them. But I think the timeline was more on their schedule. Because there was that thing that happened, I think was it 2019 or '18, where basically what they wanted got denied, right?⁴ So it all kind of led from that. So I think the timeline was more of them. But I do think that, at the same time, there are all of us that are having these experiences that are just getting worse and worse.

And this does lead back to—even during my time at Berkeley, even grad students there— I remember, as an archeologist, you spend a lot of time in the field in the summers around grad students and professors. I remember them struggling. I remember talking to my field director. She was a married grad student in her early thirties and her and her husband were barely making it. They still had to work other jobs on top of getting their education. So I think this is a problem already across the board. And not just grad students; I mean, undergrads struggle. Hello, like there's fricking fees for everything. Parking. If you just think about how much money the university makes off of everything they charge us for. Fricking late fees. Like everything. Even this quarter, I was like, why am I paying—

Nazir: Campus fees.

Arjona: —I think like, was it eight hundred dollars? I added it up. It was some kind of ridiculous amount for all these campus fees and stuff. And I was like, I'm not even using the services!

Nazir: Really.

Arjona: Yeah, so I think, in a sense, that has been always brewing. People are like, "Okay, every year things get more expensive," and finally, you have these people in the union who are proposing this crazy wildcat strike. And it's like, "All right. Maybe this is the time."

Nazir: Yeah. You mentioned that you got fired in the spring. Can you explain a little more and the events that led up to that happening?

Arjona: Yeah, it wasn't a shock. I knew it was coming because when you're on strike, you know what you signed up for, right? You get the threats and the warnings. I think it was Valentine's Day when we got the email. And I think [February] 21st [2020] was when it was an official, on letterhead: you will not have your position in the spring. Which then they were really shady about and also tried to take away our position right now, even though that wasn't even part of the original letter. All shady. All shady. (laughs) But yeah, it was right around February, mid-February. I did know leading up to it. Like I said, there were those warning emails; there were the threats. So it was very much every time we'd have these meetings of, "Are we still going to withhold grades? Are we still going to go through with this?" You know, those of us who participated, we knew what we were up for. So I was basically like, yeah, I'm going to get fired.

Did I think the school would go through with it? No. (laughs) I did not think they would fire eighty-something students, grad students. (laughs) So that was kind of like, oof! That was another thing where I was like, wow, we really don't matter to you guys at all.

Nazir: No. No. And this happened around, you said, February last year?

Arjona: Mm-hmm. Yeah, like mid-February.

Nazir: Around the height of everything that was happening.

Arjona: Exactly. Now that I look back on it, I think we were like on

one. Because I remember that Friday night, I think it was Friday, Valentine's Day. We were just so excited after another week. Or, I think that was the first week, actually. So we were on one, and then we get these emails and it's like, "You're fired." And we didn't even really pay attention to it. I think I remember getting really drunk that night and having a blast, you know? (laughs) But then a week later when the official letterhead one came, it was like, oh. But even then, that was, like I said, I think around the 21st of February. So even then, there was still that momentum. We were still shutting down campus. We were still getting lots of people to come out. So yeah, it was unreal at first.

"People were starting to feel like, okay, people are getting sick. This is spreading."

Nazir: Yeah. And when the rumors about COVID coming to California and lockdowns and stuff—do you feel like it was COVID that shut down the momentum? Or do you feel like that momentum was already slowing down?

Arjona: I mean, with movements, you know, the momentum kind of ebbs and flows, right? I think we would have kept going, honestly. I think the way the university used COVID as an excuse to shut us down did affect things. But I did start noticing, maybe I don't know, a week leading up to COVID, that even at certain events, I did start noticing people who were like, "Ooh, COVID, I'm going to stay away." So it did start becoming a reality, but only for some people. Only some people were worried. Only some people were leaving their masks on. But definitely people were starting to feel like, okay, people are getting sick. This is spreading.

And then, yeah once COVID hit, like I said, it went from seeing everybody every day to nothing. And immediately the school jumped on it. Not just that, but I think, what was it, the ten people gathered rule that came out.⁵ So then we were immediately like, "Well, we can't have these massive protests, obviously." And then again, seeing all those emails from the school where it was just like,

“Because of COVID, you can’t do this and because of COVID, you can’t do this.” So it made a huge difference, kind of cut our legs off in a way, you know?

Nazir: Yeah, I talk a lot about how in the university’s eyes, COVID came at the perfect time because they were allowed to use that as a means to not address the big movements that were going on. Do you feel like the way the university handled the shutdowns and everything that was going down, do you feel like they did capitalize on that part to kind of overshadow and overlook conversations about COLA and the grad strikes because of COVID? But they didn’t really care about COVID, it was just kind of suppressing the movement.

“And not to mention that they fired a bunch of students right before a pandemic, and they left us without health insurance.”

Arjona: Yeah, absolutely. I have all the emails still. I remember every single email, the wording was very—I mean, all the emails that come from [Chancellor] Cindy [Larive] are complete bullshit, or any of them. But yeah, I just remember being like okay, this is so clear that you all are doing, you know, X, Y and Z just to shut us down.

And not to mention that they fired a bunch of students right before a pandemic, and they left us without health insurance. We got that back by fighting for it and circulating petitions and stuff. Because people were like, “What?! You don’t have health insurance?” They did leave us without health insurance right before a pandemic. (laughs) So I really truly think like they gave no fucks, you know.

Nazir: Yeah. And you know, following everything that’s happened with the pandemic and how they handled everything, has that kind of changed the perception of those who did get fired and who were reinstated? Obviously, there’s not really much of an option, because there’s not really a plethora of teaching assistant jobs going around that you could just change. Has it changed the way that you’re now

operating within this institution, knowing that if they could, they would just fire you, instead of listening to demands? How has that changed your perception of the school?

Arjona: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, like I said, in general, my views are—some would say extremist. I'm for abolition and stuff like that. I don't really buy into neo-liberal stuff. But, that said, like I said, I did want to believe that we can be in this labor struggle and that there would be some kind of like—like they kept saying "good faith" all the time. "Good faith response."

"The worst thing would have been I get COVID and die. And I don't think they would care. I really don't."

It has been an extra, extra letdown. I was already feeling unsupported by the university, but it's like, oh, you're out to crush me. Because like I said, my best friend was murdered. They don't even know. Sometimes people are going through stuff in their own lives. And it's like, they're already making us miserable. Like for all they know, I could have seriously killed myself this year because of everything I've been through. My son got depressed. Little ten year-olds aren't supposed to be depressed. Or, eleven. Sorry, he's eleven now.

You know, it's like hella sad, but I see the impacts of what the university did. And it really did; it caused depression. I didn't think I cared as much as I did. Once I lost my job and it was spring and all my other friends that didn't lose their jobs were talking about their TAs and their students and their classes they were taking, I felt completely useless.

I kept trying to say, just dedicate yourself to being a mom. But then COVID hit. So then it was like oh, now you have to adjust to home schooling. So it's been all these changes that COVID made way worse, and has made my mental health dip, and on top of that feeling like this university literally, like you said, they would have literally kicked me out. They would have left me without insurance.

The worst thing would have been I get COVID and die. And I don't think they would care. I really don't.

Nazir: Wow. No, it's horrible. We're not talking about this movement anymore; this movement really doesn't have the vigor that it did in February. Has it shut down completely, these conversations about how an institution needs to be treating their TAs? What are the bare minimums? How does it shut down these conversations, or how have these conversations transformed, a year after everything's happened?

Arjona: I can't speak for some of the COLA actual leaders and organizers. I haven't been in conversations with them too much anymore, and I think that's part of how my perspective has shifted. I know for a fact some of the other BIPOC⁶ who were involved in COLA—without putting anyone on the spot or anything—I know for a fact that we do have problems with COLA as POC. There is a lot of whiteness, and there have been issues with people just not wanting to even acknowledge that racism. (laughs) And these kind of systemic things do permeate into these activist spaces. That was really disappointing to see, especially when I felt like I could be like a face of COLA on one day, but then if I'm saying I don't agree with X, Y and Z, I didn't necessarily feel like my experiences would be validated.

I don't know if that's the case now. I think that they're still having conversations about COLA. I'm just simply not really interested in it because, although I do totally believe—I think I should be getting paid more. I do. I think labor struggles are hella important. I would still support that, right? But seeing how we've been treated; my very close friend, Carlos Cruz, he's like a brother to me, he's been part of the reason that I'm coming out of depression. He's such a freaking amazing person. And I don't know if you've heard, Carlos is still getting punished. Right before Thanksgiving, fricking Sue Matthews went against the board. The board was like, "Fine, let's change it to a warning." And she was like, "Nope. I'm white." It's not okay.⁷

So I can't focus on COLA anymore, because for me, it's this entire system that's like, oh, you all are racist. Like you all straight up really don't care about us. Not just that, you're going out of your way to persecute Carlos. I'm raising a little brown boy. He's going to be a man one day. I want to be able to tell him that I believe in an institution that truly is doing what it says, which is diversifying, helping to change the community, helping to change the world. And so I have to think beyond COLA now. There's so many other issues, the way that I saw people being treated by cops, the way I've been treated by cops, even here at Family Student Housing.

COLA scratches the surface, but there's so many things that are bigger, so we're choosing to focus on that, because at the end of the day, that's where the root is. A cost of living adjustment is one branch of this big problem. Really, all of us should have some kind of adjustment to something, to be able to survive living here. Even undergrads, you know? And same for workers, right? So there're so many other struggles that lead to a bigger issue. And it's not just getting a cost of living adjustment, in my opinion.

"I really like connecting with my students. To me, that's a really special part of teaching."

Nazir: Yeah. And then when were you reinstated?

Arjona: Somewhere in August, I think it was late August. I found out really late in the game and had to add classes super—I hadn't even planned. I thought I was just going to be gone.

Nazir: Yeah, how was that transition from being an in-person TA to a remote learning TA for you?

Arjona: That's been really hard for me because, like I said earlier, I really like connecting with my students. To me, that's a really special part of teaching. I know not everybody feels that way. And it feels super—like just a lot of distance. I feel like they don't reach out as much. It's just kind of awkward. I know people have social anxiety,

and I don't think that helps. Yeah, it's been different and I'm sure the students feel it, too. There's a lack of a real connection, where I feel like I'm actually supporting them. I'm doing the best I can, but it's definitely affecting me, how I enjoy teaching and all that.

Nazir: Do you feel like UC Santa Cruz afforded you resources to be able to make that transition effective and smooth? Or do you feel you and other TAs—a lot of those resources weren't really given to you guys and it was just like, figure it out.

Arjona: No, I have not felt supported with resources. (laughs) So I don't know if you've heard; probably you haven't. At Family Student Housing, the internet is really bad. I'm not just talking shitty, like on campus. I'm talking, there are days where it would cut out around noon and doesn't come back on till four. There's days where it cuts out every thirty minutes. And so, my son and I having to both do school at home; actually he's failing three classes. He's had to do math classes on his phone with data service. The school knows this. Ten of us were complaining because we have to teach from here. Family Student Housing has a bunch of grad students. And they finally two weeks ago, gave us this other option to go study at Rachel Carson College. Basically, they gave us a study room. But the internet, for sure, has really affected not just how I can teach, but how I can learn because now I'm in classes and I'm cutting out. That's embarrassing, you know? It's also disruptive to the class. So that's been really hard. I did borrow a laptop from Slug Support, which helped. But again, if the network itself sucks, it's super stressful.

Nazir: Yeah. How was that transition when lockdown happened? That was around March. How was that for you, you know, being in a situation where you feel like your own job kind of has abandoned you—how was that experience, the lockdown for two weeks in March and April.

Arjona: Sylvia was my best friend's name. She was murdered on March 20th. So I kind of checked out after that. Other than checking

in on my students the week after, I think, to try to turn in grades, I'll be completely honest. I wasn't following any protocols. I drove up to Santa Rosa a few times. And we had a funeral for her. (laughs) There were a lot of people there. I'm not going to lie; I could have caught COVID. And I'm so glad, knock on wood, that I didn't. But at that moment all I cared about was my best friend.

"When you're grieving and stuff, you need support. You want hugs, or you want to be around people."

So those intense weeks where everybody went into lockdown, I was in my little world of personal issues and traveling back and forth to Santa Rosa. I know I put myself at risk. I'm so lucky nothing happened. But yeah, for me it was that chunk of time specifically where I was dealing with all that. So I guess I didn't really lockdown (laughs) because I was in my own thing.

Nazir: And then once you kind of got out of that, I guess I'd call it that grief bubble, and you were able to kind of move forward a little bit, how did you deal with this new reality of—you can't leave your house. Especially being in Family Student Housing, I bet the measures that need to be taken by the school to ensure safety and all of that, they're probably very neglected. How were you able to stay sane during those months?

Arjona: I haven't. I've been really depressed. Like severely depressed. Anxiety has been really bad. Like I said, my son got depressed. That all happened after those initial weeks of lockdown because we *couldn't* adjust. And then adding a layer of grief. Like I said, anyone else who's going through *anything* extra, right, it's just like, whoa. Because when you're grieving and stuff, you need support. You want hugs, or you want to be around people. And it was such a rude awakening to come out of that bubble, come back from Santa Rosa, and then be like oh now you're stuck inside FSH, which you already hate. (laughs) It's not the apartments here. I'm grateful for the space, it's roomy. But the windows rattle when it's windy. I had a rat in here for like six months last year, a big

rat. So it's not the place where you want to be locked in forever. And on campus we are a little more removed from town. That has made it really hard, too, even just to get a trip to the grocery store. Nothing's close by, you know?

Nazir: Yeah. So how did that adjust your social circles and your social life, the early months of the pandemic. How were you able to maintain connections with people that were really important, and transition from seeing them in person? How was that transition for you?

Arjona: I'll have to give a shout out to all my friends, even the ones who I'm not that close to, from the strike, just people I met on the strike. Because they knew I was having a really hard time, people went out of their way to come to my door and social distance, but check in on me, or leave snacks for my son. It was just the sweetest stuff that I would never imagine that people would do. People went out of their way to bring the connection to me while I was down in the dumps. And that really helped because I'm a really social and outgoing person. I chat with people, like the bus driver. I'm that person. (laughs) So it's hard for me to be isolated. And just to be isolated with my son, I love him to death, but you know, he's eleven, he has his own social circle. And we've both had to make each other our social circle. So I'm grateful that people went out of their way to visit us.

"At Family Student Housing, it's really sad because you don't see any kids playing outside anymore, at all, ever."

But it's been hard. At Family Student Housing, it's really sad because you don't see any kids playing outside anymore, at all, ever. It's so depressing. It's so sad.

Nazir: Wow. So you kind of touched on this, but how has this pandemic affected your family, how you guys interact and what you guys do for fun? How has it changed the dynamic between you guys?

Arjona: The silver lining—and I'm sure a lot of people have experienced this—is we've been forced to do more outdoors stuff, kind of shift the activities, right? So that's been a push, a good, positive push, in a way. But even that was kind of hard because I know one of the families, in the first weeks of the pandemic, or of the shutdown, they were told they couldn't go hiking right out here. So, at first I was scared to even do that. But we've changed the activities we do.

But it has strained our relationship, mother and son, I mean, just any humans being around each other 24/7 gets really frustrating. So it's caused issues. Like I said, he misses his friends. I have to let him play Xbox a lot more now because literally, Xbox Live is his only communication with friends. I hear him laughing, and then I'm like (sighs) I miss that because I don't hear that anymore, right? So then I'm like cool, Xbox Live. So he's kind of loving it, in that sense. We had to completely change everything that we do to adjust to being here 24/7.

Nazir: What is one positive thing that has come out of this isolation period?

"And I'm like, oh my God, all my shit's going to burn."

Arjona: I would say the outdoor thing. That helps a lot with my mental health. I sometimes make the excuse that oh, because I am a grad student, I don't have time. But once somebody tells you you can't leave your house, all you want to do is leave your house. (laughter) So it's made me appreciate a lot more the time I get to be outdoors.

Nazir: Yeah, that's good. So moving into August, you're so close to the Santa Cruz wildfires. How did that time affect you?

Arjona: Yeah, my 2020 has sucked ass. The fire started on my birthday.

Nazir: Oh my gosh. (laughs) What?!

Arjona: Yeah, I know. I think the universe is trying to send me a message. My birthday was August 16th and that's the day the lighting happened, the lighting storm, and that's what caused the fire. I was actually already heading out of town for my birthday with my partner at the time, another 2020 loss. (laughs) And then the next thing I know, it's a couple days after my birthday and I'm getting this notice that I'm supposed to evacuate. I wasn't even here.

So I was freaking out. It was so stressful. I don't think I've ever been that stressed in my life. I was on my phone checking the fire every single day for hours, because it was a mile, especially where Family Student Housing is, in relation to the campus and where the fire was, like where I am right now, the fire was coming from that side, over here. I think it was about a mile out.

Nazir: Wow.

Arjona: I was in LA, because I'd already been heading out, and then we got evacuated. I'm looking every day at this little perimeter online. And I'm like, oh my God, all my shit's going to burn. You know? (laughs) It was so stressful. Oh my God. Yeah, I was like, oh, that's going to be the cherry on top of this year. It was one of the scariest things I've gone through. I have friends that actually did lose all their stuff, grad students that had to move up into the mountains, just because it's cheaper. So I also count myself very lucky. But oh, the amount of stress, I was like, any day now, I could just lose everything I own, like everything. Mostly you start thinking about stuff that you can't replace. Like pictures and family heirlooms. And I'm an archeologist, so artifacts. But it was really scary.

Nazir: Yeah, that was a really hectic time. I know people who lost houses, too. And they were really close to the campus. You wouldn't think that they were going to lose them.

Arjona: Yeah.

Nazir: So what forms of self-care do you practice? During those stressful times, during the times where it feels like everything is falling apart, what kind of forms of self-care do you feel like are most effective for you?

"I cannot normalize COVID in my life."

Arjona: Well, I always want to throw in a plug for therapy, even though I have not been going. (laughs) But I do truly believe in it. Like in the times that I've been here and I have gone to CAPS [Counseling and Psychological Services], it really has been a life saver at times. I do feel like we have that support. They've printed out like places I can go. I think it's a ten-dollar copay. In that sense like I feel supported. I live on campus, I could take the little blue bus right there if I had an emergency meltdown or something.

But aside from the official channels of help, like I said, Carlos, some of my friends that are really—they're not just friends—these are people that I do activism with and that are in the struggle with me, people from town that I know. A friend of mine said this to me last weekend because I told him, "I feel so depressed. I don't know why I can't pull myself out of it this time." He reminded me sometimes it's not just self-care but community care. Because I have a child and stuff, I think the community care has made all the difference.

I do practice my own stuff, like for example, things that I know are going to cause me anxiety that are heightened during COVID, feeling that I always have to be available for people. I don't know if you've felt this way, but I feel like people are more likely to schedule Zoom meetings on a Sunday. And I'm like, when would we have done this in person, you know? I feel like a lot of those lines are blurred. So for me it's been noticing that the world is telling me to normalize COVID in my life and also, noticing that that cannot really apply to me. It's about keeping my boundaries and saying, you know what? I don't have that privilege. No, I cannot normalize

COVID in my life. No, I cannot do this for you. And like I said, community care. And therapy.

Nazir: Yeah. So, wrapping up, do you have any hopes for the future, any hopes for the new year and what's coming forward?

Arjona: This year has been the worst year of my life. It really has. I feel like I already hit rock bottom. I'm just hoping anything better than this year, but I'm not too optimistic. As the year's coming to an end, I've talked to a lot of people. Even in just like jokes online, on Instagram or whatever, memes, I see that there isn't a lot of hope for the new year. It's like the new year's canceled, in a way. I feel like nobody's really looking forward to that shift, I think because we kind of know COVID's still going to be around. But I am at least hopeful for getting this moron out of office. That is something I'm looking forward to. If that's the only thing, then it's that. (laughs) That's a plus.

Nazir: (laughs) Totally. Yeah, I guess that's all the questions I have. Are there any things that we haven't covered that you would like to be included in this?

Arjona: No, I think we've covered pretty much everything I could think of.

Nazir: Okay. Great. I want to thank you for participating. I know it's really hard to unpack a lot of the things that have happened this year, so I would really like to thank you for participating. I will email you the transcript once we get that out, which is probably going to be around January. And then I'll probably ask for your address March-ish, because we'll be mailing out the actual hard cover book copies to you as well.

Arjona: Well, cool. That's awesome. And I'll get that paper to you that I have to sign.

Nazir: Yeah. Perfect. Anytime. Great.

Arjona: Well, thank you. I'm really glad you're doing this, too. Because this is not just a historical time, but I like the idea of a time capsule of like, hey, this is what people were actually going through and not sugarcoated like you're going to read in a history book: "From this year to this year was Covid-19."

Nazir: Yeah, real experiences, not statistics.

Arjona: Right, so it's important.

Nazir: Yeah. Okay. Great. I hope you have a great rest of your weekend.



Police Arresting COLA Striker. Photo by Jaden Schaul.



Police at COLA Strike. Photo by Jaden Schaul.



Students at COLA Strike. Photo by Jaden Schaul.



COLA Strike
Photos by Jaden Schaul.





Black Lives Matter Protest, Capitol. Photo by Shmuel Thaler.

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2020/03/04/18831296.php>

² <https://www.cityonahillpress.com/2020/08/08/undocu-collective-words-of-support-ring-hollow/>

³ See, for example, CBS News: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/parents-international-students-struggle-after-uc-santa-cruz-firing/>

⁴ In August 2018, the University of California (UC) system signed a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2865 representing over 19,000 academic student employees, including graduate student teaching assistants, across the UC system. While the contract was originally ratified by a majority of members that participated in voting, 83% of graduate workers from UCSC voted against ratification. With the high cost of living in the Santa Cruz area because of nearby Silicon Valley, many UCSC graduate workers expressed dissatisfaction with the contract since it did not include a cost of living adjustment (COLA).” See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_Santa_Cruz_graduate_students%27_strike

⁵ In the early days of the pandemic the State of California prohibited gatherings of more than ten people. This has continued off and on throughout the pandemic, depending on the number of cases in a specific county or the number of available ICU beds in local hospitals—Editor.

⁶ BIPOC is a recent acronym which means Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. See, for example: “We use the term BIPOC to highlight the unique relationship to whiteness that Indigenous and Black (African Americans) people have, which shapes the experiences of and relationship to white supremacy for all people of color within a U.S. context. We unapologetically focus on and center relationships among BIPOC folks.” <https://www.thebipocproject.org/about-us>

⁷ See the December 6, 2020 letter to Chancellor Larive from the Council of UC Faculty Associations protesting Academic Vice Chancellor Sue Matthews’ decision to reverse a Student Conduct Association’s ruling on the case of Carlos Cruz: <https://cucfa.org/2020/12/to-larive-re-carlos-cruz-suspension/>



Sign in the Window of Kayak Connection, 2020
Photo by Irene Reti.

Jazmin Benton

Interviewed by Aitanna Parker

On December 1 2020, I interviewed Jazmin Benton. She is a queer, black, woman PhD student. I met Jazmin at the picket line during the wildcat strikes here at UCSC. I have been organizing with her throughout this year. I was interested in learning more about her journey and how her organizing has changed throughout this year. What does accommodating look like? This conversation brought insight into how her life prepared her for this year during COVID.—Aitanna Parker

Parker: This is Aitanna Parker here for the UCSC COVID-19 oral history project with Jazmin Benton on December 1, 2020. Welcome, Jazmin.

Benton: Thank you.

Parker: Jazmin, do you want to introduce yourself? However you feel comfortable.

Benton: Okay. I'm Jazmin. I live in Santa Cruz. I'm a graduate student at UC Santa Cruz. I'm Black. I am thirty-one years old, which makes me a nontraditional student; I don't know if that matters in graduate school.

Parker: Okay. I want to ground us and to ask how you're doing this day, or how has this day been for you? What have you done today? How do you feel about it?

Benton: Today's been pretty good. I got some sun. I had a seminar class that I'm like kind of sad is over. I really liked this class. I didn't think I was going to. But it was a good group. Next week we have presentations, which is always boring. But maybe it will be okay.

"I am the fourth black graduate student in this program and it's been around for ten years."

Parker: Okay. And I just want to iterate for the transcript, what department are you in?

Benton: I am in History of Art and Visual Culture.¹ I tried to transfer to the feminist studies department.

Parker: Got it. Can I ask why you want to transfer?

Benton: I'm an art historian. I'm cool with that. [But] HAVC is just full of a lot of racists. I'm unhappy. I don't feel safe there. I don't feel cared for. And the work that the faculty are doing, it's not the same work as I thought they would be doing. So there's no one that I really want to work with anymore. I feel like I'm giving way more to HAVC than HAVC is giving to me.

Parker: Labor—what a theme of this encounter. And this is your second year in the program, right?

Benton: Yeah.

Parker: You just entered your second, and you're already over it.

Benton: Yeah, I mean technically, I guess I've been trying to leave since the end of my first year. Yeah, spring quarter first year was when I found out that was something I could do: transfer.

Parker: Wow. That is, that is— (pause)

Benton: Oh, I got to keep talking. (laughter)

Parker: You don't have to, if you don't want to. We could also go to a different subject, if you're not comfortable.

Benton: No, a big part of my year has been my troubles in my department. It's not really something that was exacerbated by coronavirus, which is really weird to say. But it definitely—I don't know if it got worse or I decided that I was going to start talking about it more, just be very open about how I've been treated by the department after I guess, George Floyd was murdered.² They came up with a diversity statement to put on the website about how they care about Black Lives and stuff. And I think that I am the fourth Black graduate student in this program and it's been around for ten years. And I'm the second Black student who's not an international student. It's a terrible place to be Black, to the point where, I had a meeting a few weeks ago with the chair of the department and I told her that I found the "We Care About Black Lives" statement to be insulting, and pointed out that there's literally nothing that the department has ever done to show that they care about Black lives. They don't care about my Black life at all. I put her into contact with the Office of Diversity and Equity and Inclusion [ODEI]. I suggested that every faculty member take their two-year course on not sucking. And she was like, "Oh, I can't like make my faculty do anything," blah, blah, blah.

And a few weeks later, she emailed, because some of my white colleagues in my department have started to try to help me get out and get what I need from the department to leave. And she, in response to them, mentioned that she's working with ODEI on making this department a safer place, but with no mention of the fact that I did that. I went out of my way and did something that was very scary and probably a bad idea in the long run for me personally to be like, "This department is racist, and here's the person who can teach you how to not be racist, and I think you need to talk to her." But I'm just totally erased from that.

Parker: When did that happen that you talked to her? You had that initial conversation.

Benton: I had that conversation with her and my advisor three weeks ago. And then one week ago, the Monday before Thanksgiving, is

when the group of mostly white students in my department were like, "Hey, Jaz is being treated terribly and we think that she's doing too much work to try to get out of here. So we're doing this work on behalf of Jazmin." Because I have this outstanding incomplete because I had a professor who I told he was racist and then he gave me an incomplete on my final paper. So that's when that conversation started. And that's when she was like, "Oh, yeah, you know, I'm working with ODEI." Period. Really? And she told me that I should take a summer class or something because I have to make up the credits so that I can get be finished with my coursework. So she was like, "Oh, you should take a summer independent study," blah, blah. I don't want to do more things. I already did this class.

Parker: Yeah, Jazmin, I know you're saying that that happened—but like, that happened and like, like what?! And just in context, I think there are two, for sure, Black people in fem studies right now. (laughs) Let me stop—I was going to include the halves, or like we don't know yet. There's four Black women in the astrophysics department.

Benton: Wow. (laughs)

Parker: I didn't know there had only been four in the last ten years of this program. So they're like, "Do more free labor?"

Benton: Yup.

Parker: And like, what?! There's so many things, Jazmin, running through my brain. What is going on with this UC?

Benton: I really don't know. I don't understand it.

Parker: Okay. So what happened with the professor that you called racist and gave you an incomplete and will not fix it? What's going on with that?

Benton: So he thinks that I did not write— We had to write a seminar paper. And the syllabus was very vague. It was just like, “Write five pages engaging with the material from the second half of the class,” right? And one, most of the material in the second half of the class was eugenics shit. It was really bad. And during class he would get really upset when students would be like, “Hey, this is—we hate this.” (laughs) He would sometimes ignore students who would say things. He would just not respond, shut down a lot of conversation. One day we all talked about how hard the class was to be in because we were talking about really heavy, terrible things. And usually if you have a class like this, there’s space to feel human, and feel like you matter as a person. But because I think a lot of what we were reading were things that were written by people he personally knew, he took it really personally. Not having that space made people feel silenced and upset.

And then the next week he was like, “We have new classroom guidelines. If you talk too much in class, stop talking,” and things like that. Basically just told everybody to shut up. And then at the end he—I wrote my paper and I shared it with my whole class. My paper was a testimony of my time in the class and suggestions for building an anti-racist classroom.

And he was like, “You need to write a new paper that fits what was outlined in the syllabus.” And I was like, “Okay, well the syllabus was just like engage with the material, and I did.” And then I found out that one of my friends in the class had co-written a paper with another student. And he wrote to them like, “Oh, I really wish that you two would have told me that you were going to co-write or asked me, because I want everybody to write their own paper. But given the time”—because it was when the strike was first popping up—“given the time, I’ll let it pass.”

So that’s when I was like, oh, okay, I’m not writing another paper at all because that’s absurd. And then I also found out that—so I was the only Black student in class. And there were two other students of color who also got incompletes, not that they asked for them.

They wrote papers. And he was like, "I'm just going to give you an incomplete and you need to rewrite your paper."

Parker: That's—(sighs) Let's take a breath.

Benton: My advisor was like, "Oh, Jazmin, it's only ten weeks." I was like, "I hate this class and I don't want to be in this class anymore." And she was like, "It's only ten weeks; only ten weeks." I was like, "It has been over a year that I've been dealing with this." And now that professor is my department's director of graduate studies, which means I can't do anything without interacting with him. And I refuse to interact with him. But I'm not the only current graduate student who refuses to interact with him.

Parker: This year's been a lot. And so you said that this class is happening around, at the pop off of the strikes, which I remember specifically was like February 10th.³

Benton: No, this class was fall 2019. So that's the aftermath.

Parker: That was your first class here, in your PhD program.

Benton: Yeah.

Parker: Okay, okay. And so he didn't decide to give you an incomplete until February? Can we just do the whole timeline of when you got here? Okay, so, we're here. It's September 2019; we are doing orientation; we are like new, fancy, future Dr. Jazmin.

Benton: All of this is bad. I was on fellowship. My fellowship payment came in almost a month late because they wouldn't do direct deposit into my credit union. And every time that they would try and it would bounce back, I would have to wait seven days before they would try again. And then eventually I just had to use—so I am married. I am separated. So I eventually just had to use my partner's bank account, because he banks with Bank of America.

So I have to have Bank of America in order to get paid. I can't use the credit union.

Parker: Wait, what fellowship are you on?

Benton: Cota-Robles.⁴

Parker: You came in with a fellowship?

Benton: Yeah.

Parker: Hmm, Jazmin, award winner. Stop, you're just saying this so subtly. These are accomplishments; these are things going on. Okay, you're on fellowship. They paid you a month late because they're haters.

Benton: Mm-hmm, and they refused to write me a check. I was like, "Just cut me a fucking check. It's not that big a deal." Can I cuss on here?

Parker: Yeah (laughter)

Benton: So eventually they did write me a check and mail it to my house. Because I also couldn't just go get it; they were like, "No, we have to mail it to you." Okay, okay. So. But yeah, now I use Bank of America, which sucks. I hate using Bank of America.

The COLA Strike

Parker: Okay, so we enter, we pick our classes for fall quarter. We have some good classes, some bad classes. But I know also at that time, that's when COLA was starting to pop off, and then COLA for All was starting to pop off, which was more towards November/December—well, at least when the actions started happening.

Benton: Yeah. I wasn't involved in the very beginning. I think, the library stuff was the first stuff that I remember seeing on social media. And then I guess, I don't know how, probably I was just like, let me follow those Black people at a certain point, you know? Because I do remember doing things before we went away for winter break, but I can't tell you what or how I started or anything like that.

Parker: Yeah. But I just wanted to pinpoint and highlight that you had classes going on while at least grad students were striking, like, "We're not going to give free labor to this university anymore, because we're tired."

Okay, winter break happens. Now we're in winter quarter 2020; this is such a hard year. (laughs) Oh, this is a hard year! This is a hard year. But we're in 2020; new quarter, dining hall, library stuff is there. We don't know where we're going with COLA. We have new classes. This is our second quarter of our first year, after dealing with some BS. Go ahead.

Benton: Yeah. At the beginning, [classes] were still meeting on campus, and then eventually we just weren't. I was taking this really great class with Bettina Aptheker, who will always—

Parker: Wow! (laughs)

Benton: That was one of the greatest classes. It was really good. Pretty much everybody in that class would be on the picket line every day. So I'd be like—I think it was like Wednesday at two, "Everybody get your shit, we're going to Bettina's class. (laughter) We have to do this." She was really happy to be there and she loved being around us and we were all having a good time. And then my other class, because I was taking two classes, I can't really say anything that happened in that class. But I did write a paper for that that I reworked and submitted it to a conference. So maybe I'll get to read it in front of people on the internet.

Parker: I remember walking into that class on accident while you all were at Louden Nelson.⁵

Benton: Yeah.

Parker: That was super awkward. I remember it vividly.

Benton: You could have stayed.

Parker: No, no, that would have been so awkward.

Benton: I was always trying to get people to join. "Why don't you come to class with us?" (laughs)

Parker: But that looked like a fun class. If I could go back, I would stay and just sit and talk about pedagogies.

Okay. So now okay, so the strike has been happening. We're in Bettina's class. We're having our lives. We're getting it; we're getting it together. And then when did you know that coronavirus was serious? Like what moment or what memory do you have being like, "Oh, wait, this is an actual thing, and dangerous."

Benton: I was talking to my grandpa on the phone. I was on my way to the Louden Nelson Community Center for class. My grandpa was talking about it. Everybody had been kind of talking about it, you know? But he lives in a retirement community, and he usually drives people places. When he first came to the retirement community he was one of the younger people. He would drive people to the grocery store and stuff. They had a little bus that would take them, but it was only once a week or whatever and they would only go to a specific store. So he was driving people around. And he was like, "I can't do that anymore because I don't want to get anybody sick." I was like, my grandpa knows literally everything, so I think we all got to go inside. (laughs) I think we've all got to not be doing this.

"You can't come back on campus."

And then it was maybe a couple days later that [the campus was] like, "You can't come back on campus. Just abandon whatever you have on campus." I do have a travel mug that I miss every day. It's next to my stack of library books [in the graduate student office]. This one is orange. I miss it.

Parker: And you can't get it now?

Benton: I mean, I probably could sneak in. It's probably fine now to sneak in, because nobody else is going there, you know. My cohort is four people, and two out of four of them are international students. They, around the same time, left the country. I was like, oh, shit. They were like, "We have to get out because we're afraid we might not be able to go home if we don't go home *right now*." Which was a good move for them.

But, yeah, I remember walking down the street, talking to my grandpa on the phone and being like oh, probably we shouldn't be doing this. Maybe this community center shouldn't even be open. And then a few days later, we're closed.

Parker: A few days later. Absolutely, that was a wild time. So how has life been since that initial—"oh, I'm taking this seriously"—till now? How do you feel? What's your situation looking like?

Benton: I guess that happened in March. I spent March through August in Santa Cruz. And then at the end of August, when the big lightning fire happened, I left. But before then, I was still doing my own grocery shopping and stuff like that and had a few friends who I was still seeing in person. When I went out I was wearing a mask and sanitizing everything before I touched it. And then I'd sanitize myself afterwards and the outdoor clothes.

Then I went to my mom's house. I just got back from there. I went

to my mom's house for three months and that was very different.

Parker: And that was in Maryland?

Benton: Yeah, in Maryland. So my mom, from March till like July, was furloughed by her job. She works in special education. So the school closed, obviously, so they furloughed everybody, and it was fine. But then in July, her job's like, "Oh, you have to start coming back in, but not to work with students. We need you to come in to clean," because some kids were starting to come back to get physical therapy and things like that. So not like a full school day, but just coming in for medical care that they couldn't get via telehealth. So my mom and her coworkers, they were being told that they needed to come in and disinfect rooms after they were being used for these appointments. My mom was like, "No." They asked her first and she said no. So they asked another coworker. Then they went back to her later because they were like, "Oh, we need somebody else." And she was like, "Definitely not." So they went to another coworker. So all of her coworkers had gone in before her. My mom doesn't drive, so she takes the train to work. And the trains were operating only like six people per car and things like that. She was like, "It's not safe. Bus drivers are getting COVID, and I'm just not going to do it."

So eventually she was just taking vacation time because they were like, "You literally have to come back in or you have to resign." She's worked there for like seventeen years. She's few years out from retirement. The day that I flew in was I think her second day back at work. So she only had to take the train a couple of days and then I was able to drive her for that time. And she eventually—right now she is not working again because she is on short-term disability because her doctor's like, "You don't have to go back. I'll write you a note. What do you need?"

She had to go back for a few weeks before it would count because apparently you have to work enough hours within the calendar year before you can apply for things like short-term disability. But

because she was furloughed in March, she didn't work very much in the calendar year, because there were these several months of the year that nobody was working. Yeah, so right now she's not working and at home and not getting coronavirus.

But while I was there, that was my life: I would get up, drive her to work. This was at seven a.m. over there. But then I was in class here, class on California time. So I was not going to sleep until like midnight. So just having these extremely long days. It was exhausting. I was messing up a lot of time zone stuff, where you miss meetings or be three hours early, be like—I don't understand why nobody's here. (laughter) and then realize oh, because it's like six in the morning. Nobody would be here.

But yeah, she was not doing her own groceries. It was a much harder quarantine. She was just going to work and coming back home. And then after she stopped working, we went to my sister's house. My sister had a baby a couple of weeks ago.

Parker: Yeah. Auntie Jazmin!

Benton: This is my fourth niece. (laughs)

Parker: Okay, okay, there's four of them. What have been some of the highlights of this year?

Benton: I made a lot of really good friends. Because I had moved to a new place, I was very scared about not being able to make any friends, especially being in this white town and stuff. But being involved in COLA for All and the community care kind of stuff that we were doing, and especially at the very beginning of lockdown, just making sure people had groceries and stuff—I feel like I got close with people in a very quick way.

Parker: That's precious. New friends, let me hold you. That's exciting.

Lightning Storms and Fires

I want to go back to the lightning storms this year. On top of everything else, that was a lot. That was freaky. That was too much—way too much. You said you left right after that, right? Did you leave because of the lightning storms and the fires? (laughs)

Benton: I left—I evacuated just to a friend’s house in Mountain View for a couple of days. I was always planning to go visit my mom in August. I was going to wait till September. But during that time I was like, I’m just going to change my plane ticket to earlier and leave as soon as possible. Because I couldn’t breathe. And I was like, I can’t live on my friend’s couch forever. I’d rather go live on my mom’s couch, I guess. And that’s what I did.

Parker: Yeah. And then after visiting family for three months—

Benton: Yeah.

Parker: —you came back. How do you feel? Was there a push to be back? Or were you like, I’m tired of family?

Benton: I wasn’t supposed to come back until January. I don’t know why I felt like I could stay four months away, but you know, it’s a thing that I tried. I made it three months. I missed being alone.

So I guess the other big thing that happened to me this year is I got my cat, Prudence. And you know, cats don’t really like traveling. She was being harassed by little kids. So I was like, “All right, let’s go back to our house with all the stuff that is ours and a door that I could close and not hear anybody.”

Looking Backwards

Parker: Absolutely. So I want to talk more about you as a person and how you got to be you and how awesome you are. Okay, are

you ready?

Benton: No. I don't know how to answer that question.

Parker: No, it wasn't a question. It was just like, "We're going to go there." Are you ready for the ride?

Benton: Yeah.

Parker: Okay. So talking to Jazmin, like your twenty-one-year-old self, what would you say? What would you prepare her for? We're in 2010. "Single Ladies" just came out.

Benton: (pauses) Okay, okay, okay. So I am an undergrad. Wow, okay, it would be like, "A lot of things are going to happen that are going to make choices for you, so think about what you want—or be prepared to have the choice made for you."

Parker: Okay, you just drop that hidden gem on her and then like disappear. (laughs)

Benton: Yeah. I wouldn't want to tell her, *don't do something, or do something*, because, I don't know, all this stuff mattered at the time.

Parker: Okay. And how was undergrad for you?

Benton: So the school that I graduated from, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, was very small. I honestly have fear in my heart that it will turn into what UC Santa Cruz is now. Because it's a really special state school, but not the good state school, you know? There's the one that everybody wants to go to, and then there's like, "Oh, UMBC"—people forget about it. It's great. Nobody's ever heard of it—wonderful. But most of the people who do come specifically to go to that school are in a computer science thing and then they go off to work for the government and to work for

the NSA or something. They are clearly just making weapons. But it has a very small, but really cool arts program where I was in art history and museum studies. There were two faculty members, so I knew them. I still talk to one of them regularly. And it was exactly the kind of environment, educational environment that I needed. Because the program was so small, we didn't have enough classes; you'd take classes in different departments and pretty much sort of make it up as I went along. It was more project-based than paper or test-based. And there were opportunities for funding, even if you were undergrad and things like that. It was mostly a commuter school. Most people there had transferred from community colleges. So I was there a couple of years. I think I entered UBC in 2010. When I graduated high school, I went to Tulane University in New Orleans. That did not go well. Then I left school forever. Very white school: the only time it ever shutdown was for the Civil War. I mean, I guess it's probably shut down now, so I guess they can't say that anymore. (laughter)

Parker: So you didn't like that university. You're like, "I'm fucking over it."

Benton: Also I was studying architecture, which I was not good at it. I just want to put that out there. (laughs)

Parker: That's why you have that ruler, and those cool little like—(laughter)

Benton: I love, love building things. I love making things. Oh, but also—okay, so I graduated. I graduated high school in 2007. And then this enormous recession hit.⁶ So I entered school thinking I'm going to be an architect, which is a lucrative career, right? Then I got my first internship at an architecture firm that had just laid off 75 percent of its staff. It was a big warehouse space, so most of the staff who didn't have their own office—only like three people, whose names were on the name of the firm, had offices. It was like a hundred desks just empty. I interned there and then I went back to school. I made it like a month or two before I was like,

I've just got to leave. I'm bad at this, and there's nothing on the other side. Most of my student loans are from this experiment. It was just like, I have to get out. I was getting C's. It was hard. Then when the people I entered school with graduated, a lot of them just spent the first couple years out of school—because it was a five-year program and I would have left with a master's also—a lot of people spent those first couple years like waiting tables because there weren't any jobs because nobody was building anything. We're still not really building a lot in the United States. Or left the country; I know some people who left the country in order to get a job in architecture.

Parker: And then you left school and you were like, "I'm never going back." Until you went back and found a program you liked. What did those three years look like?

Benton: I was like babysitting. I was sad all the time. I didn't know what I wanted to do. But I also had these really damaging ideas about college, right? Like, if I wasn't going to a very expensive school, then what was even the point? Those kinds of things. So eventually, I don't know what it was, probably my mom's subliminal messaging or something that was like, "You should apply to schools." I was also like, "on a break." (laughs) I had told Tulane that I was going to come back at some point, which was funny. (Parker laughs) I talked to one of my friends and he was carrying something really heavy. I was just walking past him on campus. He was like, "I can't really talk, like hey, let's check in later." I was like, "Actually, I'm leaving. I'm just going to take the year off." And he put down his thing and hugged me. He was like, "I will never see you again." (laughter)

Parker: He knew!

Benton: He knew.

Parker: Wow.

Benton: Yep. I don't know. It was a very strange time. I don't remember a lot of it. Like if you were to ask me what was happening in 2009, I'd be like, "I really don't know."

Parker: You know what? To be honest, I don't either. Well, I do and I don't, you know what I'm saying?

So what happened between the University of Maryland, Baltimore and UCSC? Like how did you even find this program? How did they swindle you into coming here?

Benton: My undergrad advisor as I was leaving, was like, "Okay, let's start looking at graduate programs." And I was like, "I'll never go back to school. What are you talking about?" (laughs) Like, "You're funny." And then she was like, "Okay, well, I already wrote your letter of recommendation, so I'll just file it away." It was like, "Oh, thank you."

[A little while later], I was working at these museums [in Los Angeles]. Los Angeles is a very hard city to move to. I'd made a bunch of friends who were grad students at UCLA.

Parker: How did you meet them?

Benton: I met some of them on, do you remember a website called The Toast?

Parker: The Toast?

Benton: Yeah. Toast, like the food, like the bread product.

Parker: Was that a show?

Benton: It was, no, it was a website that would write about pop culture and literature and stuff like that. I [had] met people through

there, just online friends. And then when I moved to LA, I was like, I don't know anybody out here. So I joined one of those people who I met through there who had a reading group, a Marxist reading group, a Marxist feminist reading group called hell books. Like bell hooks, but switched around.⁷ I kind of infiltrated that friend group. I had several friends who were dating PhD students, UCLA PhD students. I would look at their boyfriends and be like, they're not doing shit. I could do this. (laughter)

Parker: What an inspiration.

Benton: And I was like, I'm going to apply to graduate school. I didn't for an entire year. I was just talking about it. I don't remember how I heard of UC Santa Cruz. But I remember looking at probably, it was probably Jennifer González's work, something she wrote. Because you know you read stuff and you see like, "Oh, this person is a professor at so and so." Then I started to notice what schools I was reading things from. So I started looking to UCSC. And they had the visual studies program, which was kind of weird. I didn't want to do art history PhD because I didn't want to have to learn French. I still don't know why anyone would want to do that. (laughs) Because they were all like, "Okay, in your core class, remember, we've got to talk about Picasso," or whatever. And I was like, I'm not going to do that again. You can't make me. I did my time.

So I was looking at more weird programs. And UC Santa Cruz was in-state. I'd have to move, but I figured it wouldn't be too traumatic of a move. I know that I looked more attractive to this department because I was already a California resident. And then I visited and saw the big trees and stuff, and I was like, oh, yeah, I want to move here. I love big trees. Also, I saw this Black lady the first time I ever visited. She was just out on the street. She had a huge dog, and she was smoking weed, and she told me that I was beautiful. And I was like, wow, this is freedom. She lives next to the beach. (laughter) I was like, I'm going to live here.

So when I got into school, I came to visit— It was really between

two schools, and the other school that I visited didn't have food that I could eat when I came for visiting day. They didn't have anything vegetarian; they had vegetarian stuff but it all had cheese on it. I was like, "I can't eat this. I can't eat this!" (laughs) I was so mad. (laughs) I was hungry, you know? So it was like, everything else that's happening here is probably fine, but I hate it. I hate it here.

Parker: Food is important.

Benton: Yeah. And I was like, "Thank you for flying me out here, but I never want to speak to you people again." Then I wound up at Santa Cruz.

Parker: Okay, we're going to go deeper. We're going to go deeper. Are you ready?

Benton: Okay.

Parker: We're in the year 2000.

Benton: Yeah. Oh my God, what?

Parker: We're going back—

Benton: 2000?

Parker: Absolutely. We're in the year 2000: Ed Hardy, okay? We're giving you low-rise jeans. Baby Phat, okay? We're giving you all of that, all of that. Jazmin as an eleven-year-old: from eleven to twenty-one, who is she?

Benton: Um, she's very quiet. Reads a lot. Owes the public library a lot of money.

Parker: (laughs) What!

Benton: What was I doing? A little boy crazy. And watched a lot of TV. That's still me. Library fines are real. (laughs) They are destructive too, you know—like you're eleven, you don't got a job, how are you supposed to pay the fine? And just the fact that I would lose books. On more than one occasion, I chose not to give a book back because I liked it. My grandparents lived like a block away from the public library. So I would like spend all my weekends with them and then I would go to the library and get a huge stack of books. In transition, going from their house to my house, things would get mixed up.

Parker: No, absolutely, that must have been difficult for you—like the logistics of it, the supply chain. You couldn't handle it. Okay, so, Jazmin, we're now in Jazmin's high school.

Benton: Uh, yeah, okay.

Parker: What was the most memorable moment of your high school? Give me the scandal, and then the moment about you, you know what I'm saying?

Benton: A scandalous moment? I don't know who I was telling this to recently, but my English teacher had a baby who is now in high school. (laughs) I just found this out. It was very upsetting. So my English teacher had a baby. So she was out and they didn't give us a long-term sub, even though she was out for months. So we just had this random sub that would switch out every day. And this dude, he fell asleep when we had a test on *Macbeth*. My real English teacher had written the test, so it was like a real fucking test. But nobody in that class had read the book. So he fell asleep during the test. And then everyone in the class, we just started working on this collaboratively, you know? It was across social group bounds. Like I would never work with some of these kids, you know? But we were just like, "Lady Macbeth, what was she all about? Which witches, what are we talking about?" We were just working things out. "What do we think this question means?"

Parker: That sounds like a real team-building exercise, and I love it.

Benton: Yeah. It apparently counts as cheating. Somebody snitched on us and we all had to retake the test. (laughs)

Parker: That's racist.

Benton: Right? And I think the person who snitched on us was just mad because she had actually read the book and was mad that other people were getting an okay grade. Because none of us was getting good grades, because we didn't know what the fuck we were talking about, you know? So then I had to fucking read *Macbeth*. And then we got a real substitute after that, like a long-term sub. They were like—(laughs)

Parker: Right.

Benton: —“these gifted, talented students, they're too clever. (laughs) We've got to get somebody in there. Somebody needs to watch them.” So yeah, what did I do in high school? I hung out with a lot of boys in high school. It was weird—a lot of Jewish boys, not boys that I was interested in dating. They were just there.

Parker: And so how has that high school Jazmin—we got college Jazmin, we got you now—how do you think those lessons you've learned over the years have prepared you for this moment right now, December 1, 2020?

Benton: I mean, I'm terrible at planning—always have been. And usually it's just like, even when I try to plan something, there'd be a Great Recession or some shit. So it doesn't work out anyway. I guess that ability to, sometimes, to refocus on what it is that I can do next, that's something that keeps coming up that I've been thinking about lately. In 2000—that was like fifth or sixth grade—a lot of what it meant to be in the United States changed. When I entered elementary school there wasn't a fear that I could be killed

by a person with a gun just randomly wandering through. And we didn't have the internet in our home. I'm sure some people did, but we didn't have that kind of money. So even what future jobs, or what families looked like was so—was just unthinkable when I was a kid. The life that I planned for myself doesn't exist. The life I could have planned for myself doesn't exist. Because things just changed—very rapidly.

I'm thinking about this, being trapped in the house—I'm rambling now—being trapped in the house and fearing going outside. I can't tell you what year it was, but I was in middle school and there was a—this sounds ridiculous, like it sounds ridiculous to say—but there was a serial killer who was just going around shooting people in Maryland, Virginia, DC area. So we weren't allowed to go outside. Yeah, they made a movie about it with that dude from *Gray's Anatomy*, and he was like brainwashed, like his girlfriend's son or something—I don't really remember.

But we couldn't go outside for gym class. We couldn't wait outside for the bus, for the school bus. It was all of these things. This didn't happen at my school, but other schools everybody had to wear like ID so that you were immediately recognized. And because of all of this restriction and lockdowns, that also kind of changed how we students hung out together. Because it wouldn't be like, "Oh, everybody's just going to go to a mall and hang," like somebody's mom could drop us off at the mall on the weekends. Nobody's mom would do that because they feel like you'll die. (laughter) So, no. And so it became like you just had your three friends, and that's it. And you would only hang out with each other. And I was thinking that reminds me of having the bubble, our little social pod nowadays, where it's like, "No we can't be going outside. You might die."

Parker: Oh, got it, Jazmin, that's really chipper of you. So great, okay: This is the last and final question before we wrap up. I wanted to ask what do you want people to remember about you?

Benton: About me right now at age thirty-one. (pause) That's a big question.

Parker: It is.

Benton: Hard. I don't know. Something nice—like that I cared about them, probably; I care about other people. I don't want anybody to be hurt, even if I don't really like them. I just want to make everything a little bit better when I leave. I'm very soft. I just pretend to be mean.

Parker: Well, I want to thank you so much for your time.



Black Lives Matter Protest, Santa Cruz
Photo by Jaden Schau



Masked Bus Rider
Photo by Shmuel Thaler

Endnotes

¹Often rendered, as it below, as “HAVC,” and pronounced “Havoc.”

²George Floyd was murdered on May 25, 2020.

³The COLA [Cost of Living Adjustment] graduate student strikes

⁴Eugene Cota-Robles Fellowship. As the UCSC graduate division web site puts it, “These state-funded, merit-based fellowships are awarded on a competitive basis to first-year graduate students who have overcome significant social or educational obstacles to achieve a college education, and whose backgrounds equip them to contribute to intellectual diversity among the graduate student population.”

⁵Referring to the Louden Nelson Community Center in Santa Cruz, where some classes were held during the graduate student strike.

⁶The Great Recession in the United States officially begin in December 2007. It technically continued until June 2009, but its effects have lingered.

⁷bell hooks also was a UCSC affiliate, having gotten her doctorate there.



Black Lives Matter Protest, Santa Cruz Town Clock.
Photo by Shmuel Thaler



Fallen Mask, Capitola
Photo by Irene Reti.

Benjamin Breen

Interviewed by David Duncan

Professor Benjamin Breen is a recently tenured professor at UC Santa Cruz in Early Modern World History. I chose Professor Breen for this project because he was my instructor for my last in-person course at UC Santa Cruz. For our Winter Quarter 2020 Master's Writing class, Professor Breen chose to hold our course at Abbott Square, the epicenter of Pacific Avenue in downtown Santa Cruz, due to the graduate student strike that was regularly blocking access to campus. We often met in the courtyard adjacent to the Museum of Art and History, with gourmet food and drinks filling our table. Most of our seminar's discussions centered on our anxieties about crafting our Master's, the strike and the looming coronavirus that was rampant in Washington State. Our last class meeting occurred days before UC Santa Cruz shut down. The handshake we exchanged at the end of class would be the last one we had before the pandemic took hold.

When Professor Breen entered our interview Zoom meeting via his cellphone, he explained that he had been on his computer all day and wanted to conduct our interview while he took a walk near campus. At first I was concerned about not having video for our interview, but Professor Breen's comments on his surroundings and how they related to his memory before and during the pandemic added a unique component to this interview. Hopefully the reader will picture themselves back on UCSC's campus, as I did when I interviewed Professor Breen.—David Duncan

David Duncan: This is David Duncan interviewing Professor Ben Breen. It is October 30, 2020. It's about 4:17 PM. Thanks again for virtually coming to be interviewed. The first thing I want to ask you, if you could tell me a little bit about how you came to be a part of UCSC and what your role is there today.

Ben Breen: I joined UC Santa Cruz in 2015. I was coming out of my PhD program in the history department of UT [University of Texas]

Austin. I started here as an assistant professor. I'm now an associate professor, as of 2020.

Duncan: Great. What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about UCSC? How do you define it in your head?

Breen: Redwood trees. And then beyond that, the culture around redwood trees— ecologists and people who are interested in the interface between humans and nature. I think of it as a very distinctive ecological place. It attracts people who are interested in either studying that or living in it. The "ecotone"—that's a word I learned from Jim Clifford—the interface between two different habitats.

Duncan: Interesting. You live in faculty housing, correct?

Breen: Yes. My wife, Roya, and I live in faculty housing called Hagar Court.¹

"I always devote a class to the great plague of London in the 17th century."

Duncan: Okay. And to focus in on COVID-19, the pandemic, do you remember your first thoughts about it when you heard about it?

Breen: Yeah. Actually, it's quite distinctive memory in my mind, the first day that I heard about it. In winter of 2019 I had taught my early modern Europe class, which is a large lecture class about Europe between the years 1500 and 1800. I always devote a class to the great plague of London in the 17th century. I always tell my students that plague is part of life, part of human history, and that we're lucky to not be living through an era of plague. And so I think I even mentioned the influenza pandemic of 1918 in that lecture as an example of the last time there'd been a pandemic. I basically just left it at that. I didn't really think about the fact that we might

be living through something similar a year later.

But because my mind was kind of primed by having covered that material, when I first heard about the coronavirus, the novel coronavirus, back in January [2020], I started following it along with some interest. But, of course, I didn't take it as seriously as I later would. But I remember really vividly, the day of my vote for my tenure by my department, I met outside the door—and this was in January, so this was quite early—I ran into Gail Hershatter, who's a historian of modern China, so she was also following the news with great interest, presumably because she studies China. I told her I had been sick and I had a cough early in January. She said something about, "Oh, did you hear about that virus in Wuhan? It seems really like it could get worse." I was like, oh, yeah. And then I just didn't think anything more of it. Months later I was like, did I have coronavirus then? I think very likely not. But it was a weird moment, because at the time I was thinking, this is something far away. And then a month later, it kind of came back to me.

"I had this little feeling of like oh, is this an apocalyptic movie plot that's beginning?"

I was going for a run about a week later. I'm not sure about the timeline, but it was the first time that it had left China and been detected somewhere else. I believe it was Spain or France, maybe, or Italy? Somewhere in Europe. I was listening to NPR while on my run and I had this little flash, when I was looking out over the campus and the Monterey Bay, thinking that I kind of feel like a character in the first scene of a disaster movie, when everything's normal, but there's a little TV on in the background that says, "Alien spacecraft detected hovering over the White House," or that kind of disaster movie beginning. I had this little feeling of like oh, is this an apocalyptic movie plot that's beginning? Then I brushed it off and didn't think about it. A week later, it started to actually be like that in real life, to a certain extent.

Duncan: (laughs) That's really interesting. What were the initial

concerns as it became more and more real for you?

Breen: Well, one of them was teaching. It didn't become a concern initially. I guess—actually, no, I take that back. It's a funny thing about how your memory of something gets compressed like an accordion, and you kind of see what happened later. If I'm really trying to think back to my initial reaction, I was not really concerned about it being in Santa Cruz until March, when I got concerned. But in that time that I'm thinking back to now, in February, I was just feeling bad for the people of Wuhan. I think that was mainly what I was thinking about, thinking how scary it must be to be in that place, and then feeling that distant concern that you feel. Like as we're talking today, there was an earthquake in Turkey. So it's on my mind that there're people suffering in Turkey. But I didn't, at that point, think of it as a global problem, I suppose. I just felt this distant feeling of concern for a distant place.

Duncan: And then, as it entered California and Santa Cruz County, was your interpretation of how the UCSC community was handling things and issuing information, was that chaotic to you or positive? Do you remember thoughts on that?

Breen: Hmm. I feel like there's a distinctive quality for how it went down at UCSC because it was such a busy year. It was basically overshadowed by the strike.² I remember seeing two good friends of mine who were faculty, who were sort of like the faculty watchdogs for the students on strike. They were the faculty observers, I think they were called, who observed the strike to make sure that they could intervene if there was police violence or some other kind of thing. So they were very dedicated to the graduate student strike. And they had been out there; I saw them quite frequently.

"The strike was coming to a head at the exact time when coronavirus became a pressing concern."

It first started to get somewhat scary when there was the first report of coronavirus, of novel coronavirus in the United States.³

I pretty quickly became very concerned, because I'm a historian of medicine and I had a certain paranoia, almost, about pandemic diseases, even before this happened. It's just something that's on my mind as a possibility. I ran into them and I was like, "What's going to happen to the strike?" Because they were talking about doing a sleep-in. They were going to sleep in tents on the street. They seemed concerned and didn't know. That was to me, a very distinctive UCSC-specific memory of this. Because it was happening at exactly the same time. The strike was coming to a head at the exact time when coronavirus became a pressing concern. The same week. So for me, that was the main local aspect of it and most of my feelings about UCSC's response were drowned out by those larger events of that time.

Duncan: Yeah. That makes sense. And could you speak a little bit about how that last quarter of in-person classes, that transition from, I believe it was toward the end of the quarter, into things going virtual—what that was like?

Breen: It was sad. I feel sad about how that ended. It was a very challenging quarter. But I was also feeling good about the work that my students were doing that quarter because it was so challenging. I was quite proud of them. Seeing them flourish against the odds was a great feeling—an then having it end so anticlimactically. It was a very surprising and disappointing ending to the quarter for me, because I was really enjoying having some normalcy of meeting with the students in my classes.

I had planned to celebrate the Iranian new year in the backyard of my house. My wife is Iranian and there's roughly a month of celebrations for the Iranian new year, which usually happens around March. The initial holiday that kicks it off happened to be the same day as our final class of the graduate seminar I was teaching, so I was going to hold the seminar in my backyard as a picnic for the final class and do this ceremony that is done on Iranian new year, where you symbolically bid goodbye to the year that's passed and then welcome the year that's coming. One way of doing that is that

you burn papers that are no longer needed from the old year. It's sort of like a religious fire, a fire that is part of the holiday. It's called Chaharshanbe Suri. It's a Zoroastrian holiday.

I was thinking it would be fun if we could burn the rough drafts of our essays in the fire as a kind of redemptive thing of moving on from a pretty rough year for, I think, a lot of people involved. The fact that we didn't get a chance to do that was quite disappointing to me. It was something I was looking forward to. I had even—this is the sad part—I had even bought little presents for everyone in the class, a book that I thought they would like. (laughs) This is actually quite a melancholy memory. I accidentally left those books outside and they all got soaked by water. Because I was thinking oh, when this coronavirus thing is over in a few months, I can still give them. (laughs) And then they were all ruined.

Then, as months passed, they became a kind of totem where I was like oh, this is a symbol of, you know, like rain literally fell on my parade, you know what I mean? (laughter) Like this thing that was supposed to be this picnic and then it became cancelled, and then the little gifts I was going to give away were basically ruined. I still have a few of them that weren't ruined. Maybe someday I'll give them. But the time still is not right, I think, to give a physical gift to someone. So, I'm still waiting.

Duncan: We definitely all still talk about how we wish we could have done that. That would have been a great end to that class.

Breen: Yeah. I'm glad that I canceled it, though. I remember that class was like a week before UCSC officially canceled classes, I believe. Somewhere around that time. My memory is that classes were not yet officially canceled, but a lot of people were starting to think that they would be. I erred on the side of caution. Now I'm glad I did, but it still is kind of sad. You shook my hand at the end of our second to the last class. I don't think I shook another person's hand for months after that. (laughs) I remember I had friends over that weekend and that was the first time I did the pandemic elbow

bump.⁴ Do we have a word for that, the elbow greeting thing that people have started doing? It felt really weird for everyone involved. In fact, I felt extremely rude for doing it. But I haven't shaken another hand (laughs) from that moment on.

Duncan: It's amazing how quickly that stuff changed.

Breen: Yeah. It is.

"It wouldn't even surprise me if this current pandemic is not the worst that I, or we, end up living through."

Duncan: Did you have an idea then that things were going to actually come to Santa Cruz shutting down and classes going virtual?

Breen: Honestly, I did, because I'm an optimist in the long-term, but a pessimist in the short-term, about a lot of different things. So I've always kind of expected to live through a severe earthquake, and [other kinds] of natural disasters, just living in California. And then as I said, because I teach the Black Death, 1348, 1349, and the great plague of London and other pandemics in history, I do kind of have the same feeling about these. It wouldn't even surprise me if this current pandemic is not the worst that I, or we, end up living through. That said, I actually find a lot of solace in that history, because I am fully aware that the plague of London, for instance, happened in the era of Descartes and Thomas Hobbes and Isaac Newton. We think of it as a time of great creativity and innovation. We kind of forget that it also— Maybe you heard during this time there was a lot of talk about how Isaac Newton was home from Cambridge University during the pandemic when he developed, I believe, his theory of optics. That's often a thing that people said to kind of make you feel better about having things canceled. (laughs) It felt kind of facile and sort of weak at the time. You know, we're not all Isaac Newton, and also, I'm sure he was not happy about that. It's not something we should welcome. But at the same time, I have always felt a feeling of kinship with those stories of human suffering

and then moving past it and overcoming it. So that's what I mean about being a short-term pessimist and a long-term optimist.

But yeah, I would say I took it more, much more seriously than people close to me. I remember my wife flew to Barcelona at the end of February. I packed a bunch of masks in her suitcase and told her to wear a mask in the airport. She sort of laughed it off and said I was being too anxious. And in retrospect, we were like, that was probably a good idea to have a mask with you in Barcelona in late February.

Duncan: Right, definitely. And I was going to ask, too, whatever you're willing to share about how the pandemic has affected your household and how that's changed your day-to-day life.

Breen: Yeah, it really has. I actually didn't change it as much as other people because I spend a lot of time at home anyway. I'm not a big traveler for fun. So in that sense, it was easier to adapt to than other people I know who have many different activities that took them out of the house. I basically, even before the pandemic, was pretty much working from home or from my office. My outdoor time was just going for walks and stuff. It wasn't like I was regularly going to sporting events, or the kind of things that were impacted. I'm struggling here because I don't want to put too light of a tone to this, because it was really devastating for many people I know. But frankly, for my personal life, from the perspective of just my day-to-day, it hasn't been that difficult. It's been different, but not difficult. Part of that is that I'm lucky to be happily in a relationship where I feel good about spending all day with someone. (laughs) I think my answer would be very different if it wasn't like that for me. But no, it actually has been fine.

"I had trouble sleeping because I was reading news too much and sort of doom scrolling . . ."

My cat started to annoy me a lot more. (laughs) I was home with my cat all day and I realized how needy she can be. (laughs) She

was very happy about both of us being home, but it became kind of annoying.

I started to get backaches because I'd spend all my day sitting on my couch, as opposed to walking around. I had trouble sleeping because I was reading news too much and sort of doom scrolling, is that the term people use? Just kind of reading through the news and not being able to sleep. Honestly, the first couple of months were pretty rough. But I was lucky, in that my life was pretty adaptable. It wasn't a huge adjustment.

And also I feel somewhat aware now, as I say this, that I didn't have anyone close to me who died. That would have been completely different if someone I knew had died in those first few months. And still, knock on wood, I'm lucky. I've known people who got sick, and my wife had family who are hospitalized. But no one has died that we are close to. That really is the defining difference for people this year. My answer would be radically different if one of my loved ones had been sick or dying at that point.

"Honestly, my main feeling of regret this year is that I feel as if my students are sort of being failed."

Duncan: Sure. And what about professionally? As a professor, obviously, you've transitioned to virtual. I would imagine there's some unexpected loss there in how you see your job that maybe people aren't that aware of.

Breen: Yeah, that's true. It's kind of hard to talk about it because it's still happening. I don't want to demoralize myself by rehearsing all the problems I have with teaching online because I'm doing it right now, this week. But it's true. There is something significant that's lost. Honestly, my main feeling of regret this year is that I feel as if my students are sort of being failed. I feel like they're not getting the full experience that I hoped they would get this year. Like I just talked to a student who was supposed to do a study abroad program in Italy, in Rome. And then it got pushed back, and then it

got pushed back again, and then it got canceled. She just decided to graduate and move on instead of doing that. That's one of those things. You can't really have back that time, that year of your life that would have been one thing and then it went another way. For me, I'm thirty-five and I've had times—I've been to Rome, you know what I mean? I've had a chance to do that stuff. In fact, I went to Rome when I was twenty-one, the same age as the student I was talking to. And the fact is that you can't get back those years, those years of being eighteen into your early twenties. Now losing a year of those experiences is sort of okay with me. But if I was twenty, or twenty-one, or twenty-two, it would actually be pretty disruptive and disappointing.

So I think a big part of teaching online for me during this time is being aware of my students, the problems they're having in their lives. And of course that's very much a first world problem, not getting a chance to study in Rome. But I've also had students who were fired from their jobs, or had their parents laid off, or had parents get sick, or family members die. That happens every year when you're teaching, but this year was much more, for obvious reasons. So that's been the biggest struggle: how do you still not shortchange your students and have high standards for them and try to teach all the material you wanted to teach, but also balance that by recognizing that in some cases they're having the worst years of their life? In many cases, they're having the worst year of their life. And the way of navigating that emotionally and as a teacher, I think everyone's just kind of figuring out as they go. That's been really challenging.

Duncan: Sure. I've interviewed other people that have expressed that even though online school isn't ideal that it's still somewhat an escape for them, as a student? Is that something that you detect as a professor, too, that students are maybe potentially more engaged than in person because it's nice to have a distraction in the day?

Breen: I detected that in the spring, yes. Now cases are higher than they've ever been in the US. But in the spring, like in April in

particular, April, May, there was a real feeling of uncertainty and their projection was horrific death tolls. Remember, people were talking about two million dead in the US at that time. Then I think the students really appreciated having something to take their mind off it. In fact, I was actually initially thinking I would revamp my class to make it more about the history of medicine and pandemics. And then very quickly I was like, I shouldn't do that. I should just make it completely nothing to do with pandemics and teach what I wanted to teach originally. Because it is, as you say, a distraction and a relief to think about something else.

This quarter, I can't really tell. I sense a little bit of exhaustion this quarter. I think people are just worn out of Zoom. They're sort of worn out about the whole process of spending all their time at home. Yeah. I would like to think that it's a welcome bit of normalcy for them, but I also think that it's not easy to be a student right now, now that they're looking forward to winter and spring and wondering what those will bring. If I put myself in their shoes, I have a lot of sympathy and I don't necessarily want to put too cheery of a light on their experience, because I think it's objectively a pretty rough time to be a student, this year.

"Tenured professors are in one of the luckiest positions of any job right now..."

Duncan: Yeah, and I did want to touch on— before corona entered the scene, we had the first round of the power safety shutoffs last winter.⁵ And then the strike, and then the pandemic, and I guess you could throw the election in here now.

Breen: Yes.

Duncan: How do you contextualize the experience at UCSC the past year? As a professor, too, which I think is a perspective that isn't really getting talked about that much.

Breen: Well, it's for good reason. Tenured professors are in one

of the luckiest positions of any job right now, I think, in the sense that there's job security. And what they do is readily transplantable to an online format. It has major drawbacks, like I alluded to. But I have a friend—her job was booking music venues in New York City. And like you can imagine, (laughs) that job did not last. Some jobs are completely dependent on public gatherings. So I feel like I really can't complain too much about my working conditions or my job because it's not dependent on that.

Two things I'll say. One is, being a historian—as you know, archives are closed. And historians basically need archives to generate new material. We can get by with other things. I've been doing these interviews with people, living people I'm interested in talking to for my research. But within a few months I ran up against the problem of not being able to visit an archive, which is frustrating. But it was also kind of interesting because it forces you to be a bit more creative.

So I started writing more in a narrative nonfiction style where you can get by without having to have documents to footnote. It made me be a little bit more imaginative in reconstructing moments in history without that material to fall back on, which is a different style of writing than I'm used to. You know what I mean? Like you're kind of, for instance, working from a photograph that you found online. You can look at the photograph and say, oh, okay, they owned a 1937 Corona portable typewriter. How much did that cost in 1937? Oh, that was really expensive. Okay, so they were doing well in 1936 to be able to afford it. This kind of reasoning is not something I'm used to, because I never have been forced to rely on a things like a photograph I found online.

Usually the problem for a historian is they have an overabundance of material, thousands and thousands of documents, and you have to sort through it. So in a weird way, speaking as a historian, I actually have kind of enjoyed the challenge of having to do research with such strict limitations, because it's forced me to think about how

research works in a different way.

“If I had really been hoping to get archival research done this summer, for instance, it would have been very disappointing and stressful.”

But I say that realizing that I’m very lucky, because I managed to do a lot of research in 2019, so I also had a bunch of photographs and documents that I hadn’t gone through. So I’m kind of just relying on those. If I had really been hoping to get archival research done this summer, for instance, it would have been very disappointing and stressful. I think that’s true of a lot of my colleagues, that there’s putting your research on hold. I’m thinking about people I know who are in the sciences, where when the campus was closed, perhaps they didn’t have access to their lab. Or my friends in the arts division, where their work might involve doing a public performance and that was canceled. That would be really difficult. So I guess, in a certain sense, historians by virtue of the fact that we’re kind of hoarders of data—like every historian has thousands of archival documents on their hard drive that they haven’t looked at—it was a bit easier because we have a reservoir to draw on.

Duncan: Right. That makes sense. That’s interesting. And you mentioned before in the recording that you live in faculty housing. And I wonder, is that—I have no idea on the community dynamic there, if there is one. And changes or connections that have been made during this period?

Breen: Yeah, actually that’s been the real bright spot for me. I’ve really, really been appreciative that we live next to people we get along with. We live in a condo that shares walls with other units, and so it’s pretty close quarters. For instance, our neighbor’s kid, Arthur, he’s five years old. He refers to the little block of houses that we all live in that are connected, five, six connected houses, he calls it the wall. So he says he lives in the wall. (laughter) He thinks we all live in the wall with him, like we’re a little burrow of mice or rabbits or something. (laughs) I really like that. So that

kind of thing, like having conversations with this five-year-old boy who's my neighbor, who I knew before the coronavirus, but now I'm actually helping babysit and getting to know really well. Spending time with our other neighbor, who's Bettina Aptheker, who's a really wonderful person that I know has been interviewed before in the oral history program. She's a retired professor at UC Santa Cruz. She and her partner, Kate [Miller], have been really wonderful to talk to. We actually share a yard with them. They're probably the people we talk to the most. They've been extraordinarily kind and sympathetic and just really nice, and also, importantly, very calm presences in our lives. They never get stressed about anything, as far as I can tell. I get stressed about all kinds of things, so I'm really, really grateful about that.

Duncan: Yeah, I'm sure. That's nice to have. And to be in a community of people with similar mindsets or interests, probably, too.

Breen: Yeah. Although it does get a little—it gets a little weird sometimes. Because since we're all teaching online, it's kind of like we're all working from home doing the same thing. So it's a little bit of a monoculture. We're all on the same schedules and so forth. But on the whole, it's been very lucky. I would feel much more isolated and probably much sadder if we lived outside of this little—because we live actually on campus. We're on the edge of campus. That's the other thing; just being able to walk around campus is so nice. As we're talking right now, I'm looking out at a quarry that looks out over the ocean and there's birds flying around. Trees are turning colors. When we moved here, we moved from New York City. Being confined to your apartment in New York City must be a completely different experience than here.

Duncan: Right. I imagine. That's interesting you mention that. Have you noticed any physical differences to the campus besides people not being there? Just a different vibe or something like that?

Breen: Absolutely. That's been one of the biggest differences. I mean, the campus was literally like, have you seen the movie 28

Days Later?

Duncan: Yeah. (laughter)

Breen: You know the beginning where they're just showing London and there's nothing there?

Duncan: Right.

*"Every day I saw coyotes.
They started to reclaim the old land."*

Breen: Like everything's just empty. It literally felt like that for the first month. Because once people started taking it seriously on campus, we took it really seriously. No one I knew left their house for a week when it was really bad. I did start going on runs because it was socially distanced enough that there was literally no one around. I would just run around, not even on the foot paths, but in the kind of deer paths, or on the Great Meadow of campus. I saw so many animals. It was just crazy. I mean, not just your typical deer and turkeys, but every day I saw coyotes. They started to reclaim the old land. They would be on a running path and act like I was invading their territory. And historically, that path would have tons of people on it. This time was like, kind of spooky, actually. (laughs) Somewhat intimidating to run into two coyotes at dawn staring you down, you know. But actually, on the whole, I really liked that. In fact, our neighbors saw a mountain lion in our backyard. So the campus has really been reclaimed by animal life.

Duncan: Would you say it's something that happened fairly quickly, too? That you noticed?

Breen: Yeah, within a week. It was kind of crazy. That was one of the most distinctive things about it, was seeing how quickly animals reclaimed— I mean, we live on the edge of Pogonip, so they already lived in Pogonip and they expanded their territory

to the parking lot in front of our house quite quickly. Yeah. I just went for a walk a few days ago and there were—I know turkeys are always on campus. But there were about fifty turkeys and I could just walk through them. Because they were not at all used to humans, I guess. I mean, if you think about a turkey's lifespan; some of the turkeys were born during the quarantine. (laughs) Enough time has passed that there are six-month-old juvenile turkeys that are like this is all they know, I guess. I hadn't really thought about it, but that will be interesting to see how the animals, whether they change in a somewhat permanent way because there's animals being born and living out their lives during this time. They don't know that they live on a university campus. To them, it's like they live in a nature reserve.

Duncan: (laughs) Right. Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. I wonder what it will be like when people go back, if there's going to be a lot of animal-human interface in the beginning, for better or for worse.

"It was a very stressful night...when it looked like [the fire] might just literally consume the campus."

Breen: Well, the thing that is maybe even weirder is the wildfires were right to the edge of the north part of campus. So I also think that pushed a lot of animal life south into the middle part of campus. I hadn't thought about that, but that's probably part of what's going on. They're refugees from the wildfires.

Duncan: Yeah, that's right. The fires were relatively close to campus. Was that just another thing on top of the pandemic? What was that experience for you?

Breen: Honestly, I don't mean to put such an optimistic light on things, but I was just talking to my wife about how we did get evacuated. For a week we couldn't return to our house. But it was actually the only excuse we had to go somewhere else during this whole summer. So even though it was obviously very stressful, once

we were evacuated and safe and had our cat with us and were out of Santa Cruz, it was actually kind of nice. I wouldn't really have been able to justify staying at a hotel or traveling without having to, literally being kicked out of my home and needing to travel. But once we had that spur that made us leave, it was actually good just to have some experience of being somewhere else. Because obviously, everyone feels very cooped up right now. It was a very stressful night—the night, you remember—when it looked like it might just literally consume the campus. But once that danger passed, it was actually not bad.

Duncan: How much of the pandemic was in the back of your mind when you had to evacuate, too? I'm sure there's added concerns there, too, leaving your home finally, right?

Breen: Yeah. I was concerned about traveling safely and wearing a mask and washing my hands and stuff. It wasn't really that difficult, though, just because we were in our car. (laughs) Our poor cat was extremely confused because the sky turned orange and darkened at noon. And then we put her in a little box and drove her for hours and then she had to live in a hotel for a week. That was probably pretty weird for her. (laughs) Frankly, because this whole summer's been so strange, this whole season and year, I think it was less weird than it normally would have been to be evacuated.

Duncan: Mm-hmm. True. And talking about leaving Santa Cruz being kind of a nice thing, I'm curious too—have you attempted any new fun activity replacements? I know you used to go to one of the local bars every now and then, which is a little hard to do now.

Breen: Yeah, that's a good question. Not really. (laughs) Oh, okay, honestly. If I'm going to give you an entirely honest answer, my wife and I started playing a lovely and heartfelt and beautiful video

game called Star Dew Valley. You know Star Dew Valley?

Duncan: I've heard of it, yeah.

Breen: Yeah, it's really great. The plot is a person is working at a giant tech company. Then they quit their job and move to their Grandpa's farm. And they start meeting the townsfolk of this little village called Star Dew Valley. Then they build a little life for themselves. It's a farming game. You get cows and milk your cows and grow plants and stuff. But for some reason, both my wife and I during the quarantine got kind of obsessed with it, I think because it simulates normal life. You go to town and you see the townsfolk. There're little festivals and stuff. So it became a life simulator, to some extent. And it was a thing we could do together. It was a fun thing.

"I started writing a really bad novel, just because I wanted to have an imagination world that I could live in that wasn't the world of Donald Trump in 2020."

Beyond that, I don't know. I started writing a really bad novel, just because I wanted to have an imagination world that I could live in that wasn't the world of Donald Trump in 2020. But honestly, that has as much to do with the presidential campaign and this feeling of fatigue I have about how screwed up American political life has gotten. I definitely have noticed that I have a bit of more of a flight to imaginative worlds this year. I started reading novels again, lots of novels. I guess that's the biggest change. Yeah, that's true.

Duncan: Interesting. And as you start thinking to the future outlook for UCSC and education and higher education, what are some of the thoughts that come to mind? I know, like you said, it's hard to think about when we're not out of it yet.

Breen: Yeah, exactly. I don't want to say something that's going to sound stupid in a year, because I'm really not sure if I'm in a position where I can predict. Like for instance, some people I know

are speculating that online education is going to permanently stick. It will stay like this. Now that we've gotten used to it, perhaps it will just become the norm. I think that's a possibility. But I don't think anyone's in a position to be able to say for sure because it depends on so many variables.

I think that people are going to be really happy once there's a vaccine. I'm very hopeful that 2021 will be a very joyous, happy year. Because that is another thing you learn from studying the history of pandemics is that people move on pretty quickly, and people are adaptable. So if we are able to get this under control by 2021, I think it will actually be remembered as a redemptive and joyous year for the university and for everyone else. And that will include fixing our budget problems, right? (laughs) Because once the university starts functioning like normal again, it will probably solve a lot of the things that are giving me anxiety. If it doesn't start functioning normally, I foresee pretty major changes to how universities work. But what those are, who knows? It's never happened before. It's truly unprecedented so I really don't know.

I hope we don't move online, though. That's all I'll say.

Duncan: Yeah, same.

Breen: So I'm distracted because there's an incredibly beautiful, tiny little bird hopping around in front of me. (laughs) This is what I mean about enjoying living on campus. This little yellow bird that has no idea that there's a quarantine happening right now, or a pandemic. It's just jumping around. It's probably six months old and it's just loving life. (laughs) I love seeing that kind of stuff.

I guess one thing I'll say is I think for my students who are graduating right now, I feel much worse for them than the students who have another couple of years. I think the people hardest hit by this are going to be the people who got their degree right now, like this spring, and are currently looking for work. That is going to be really damaging. Because there's all these add-on effects. I say this as

someone who graduated in 2007 and was looking for work in 2008. So I'm sympathetic to being born in an unlucky year. That might have effects all through the rest of their careers and lives because they weren't able to find work. It has all these results down the road.

I do feel good about the fact that universities are almost like a reservoir of talent for people who are just riding it out. You know what I mean? Like you must be thinking that. One good thing about being in a PhD program is that you can kind of decide when you graduate. You don't get necessarily told that it has to take a certain number of years.

Duncan: Right.

Breen: I bet a lot of people are probably going to wait a year to go on the market, or apply for jobs, and stay at universities until this blows over. Yeah, I hadn't really thought about that. But in a way, that's good to have that shelter. In another sense, I'm worried that it will create all kinds of job market issues later on. This is kind of inside baseball, though. Sorry. I'm just thinking about it from the point of view of a history PhD student, I guess.

Duncan: No. I want to touch on, too—and I know it can be difficult to think about, too, because it's just the way the year's been—but I wonder if you can talk a little bit about if your perception of the virus and your level of fear has changed. Not everyone has known someone that's had it. You mentioned that you knew people that have had it. And how that's evolved over the past year.

Breen: Yeah. It's a funny thing about human life. How to put it? The times in my life when I've lived through a historical event are very few—I haven't really had a very interesting life in that sense—or a traumatic event, or any kind of event that I later look back on as an important event—I don't notice at that point in my life that it is important. It's only later that I realize it. So that's been how it's gone this year. A close friend of mine did get coronavirus and was quite

ill from it. But it didn't occur to me or my friend that they actually had it until after the fact. Because you don't really think that you would get it, right? I don't know. Early on, it felt like this thing that was sort of far away. My friend got it fairly early. So it was weird, because I couldn't actually process that at the time. It was only in retrospect that I was like oh, they actually were quite sick. For months, they were sick. I'm still working through that because it didn't have a strong feeling of urgency at the time.

And the same with the risk to the world. It was a slow-moving feeling. I was much, much more stressed out in April. I was just a wreck in April. Honestly, I was not doing well at all. I think that's true of a lot of people. A lot of people weren't sleeping well. Then I learned how to adapt to it, I suppose. April was when everything was getting canceled. Like summer conference plans—you know, just stuff like that. Nothing important, but having it all pile up in the same week or two felt kind of apocalyptic, to see how things accelerated and changed so quickly.

"I'm walking right now in Santa Cruz, which is land that was once inhabited by people who in large part died out due to pandemics..."

Now I'm like yeah, we're living through a plague time. And it's actually not unprecedented. It's unprecedented in my life and my parents' lives. But in most human lives, historically, at least throughout the last ten thousand years, on average you could probably say that they would live through some kind of plague event or pandemic event. I mean, it's just part of history. And in some cases, much worse than today. I'm thinking about the black plague, bubonic plague.

I'm walking right now in Santa Cruz, which is land that was once inhabited by people who in large part died out due to pandemics, you know? A huge percentage of the population that five hundred years ago was living on the land I'm standing on right now died in a pandemic. So, when you remember that that's part of our history—I

don't know. This is again the weird, kind of uncanny pessimism and optimism that you get from studying the past. It's both extremely frightening and creepy to realize that, in a very real sense, I am living in a post-apocalyptic world from the perspective of an indigenous person from California from five hundred years ago, right? I'm living in their apocalypse, effectively. But also to feel that kinship that people in the past have lived through things like this, and suffered through them and that it's not unique—it makes me feel better in some ways.

Like if you think about all your ancestors, going back ten thousand years—if you tried to explain to them, “Oh, there was a year when a plague came and no one could really live their normal life and people got sick,” they would know what you were talking about. If you told them this is the year when the iPhone 12 came out, they would have no idea what you were talking about. (laughs) So it's one of the few things that you could talk to your great-great-grandfather's great-great-grandfather or grandmother about and they would actually have some kind of sympathy and understanding. That's something that I didn't expect to take away from this, but it's connected me more to those people who've gone before us.

Duncan: Yeah, I don't know why that makes me feel better, but that is kind of a nice way to look at it.

Breen: I get the feeling of continuation, like humans are not just one generation. You live in one generation and think that it's all distinctive and unique. But then you realize that you're the thousandth generation in an unbroken chain. And if you talk to each of those generations, they would also feel distinctive and unique. Then you realize that you're all kind of in it together. I like that feeling of communion with other people.

Duncan: That's perfect. I have one final question: do you feel that there's something that I should have asked you?

Breen: Hmm. Oh, give me a second. That's a good question. I

wasn't expecting that question.

Duncan: Sure. Take your time.

Breen: Well, you didn't really ask me about lessons learned, but I guess that's kind of a facile question because no one knows yet. You're not going to learn the lesson until years later, perhaps. I keep thinking about what I would have told myself a year ago to explain this. But I can't really think of how to phrase that as a question. But do you know what I mean? Do you have little flashes where you think about how disarming and weird your life would look if you could just have glimpsed it a year ago? Everything is just topsy-turvy. Maybe you could start asking people: On this day that I'm interviewing you, what did you think 2020 would be like? Because everyone always thinks about the new year, the year to come, and I'm pretty sure no one expected this to happen. It might be interesting to hear what people's expectations were, versus the reality.

Duncan: Absolutely. That's a very good one. That's perfect.



Curious turkeys wander through the empty campus.
Photo by Elizabeth Van Dyke.

Endnotes

¹Hagar Court is faculty and staff housing on campus.

²The Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) strike was a major movement by and for graduate students on the UCSC campus in early 2020.

³The first case was confirmed on January 21, 2020.

⁴ Somewhere around March and April people started bumping elbows as a new greeting, allowing more distance between the two people and not involving direct hand contact. It soon became a strange new tradition. - Editor

⁵There were power shutoffs on campus that continued for unusually long periods of time in the months leading up to the pandemic.



Coyote wanders through the empty campus.
Photo by Irene Reti

Dennis Browe

Interviewed by Maryam Nazir

Dennis Browe and I initially began working on a Pandemicene project with the Science & Justice Research Center here at UCSC back in the spring of 2020, and at the time of the interview were in the process of creating a podcast with our research team regarding the differing social justice related perspectives of this pandemic. This interview was conducted less than a week after the election results, amidst one of the greatest upticks in the pandemic we had seen since late March. Despite working together for over eight months, most of what I know about Dennis was learnt through this interview, and it was actually he who had connected me with the folks at the Library's Regional History Project. Dennis has been working to get his doctorate degree here at UCSC, and has been involved with the Science & Justice Research center for a while. I have conducted numerous interviews with other esteemed faculty and important figures, with Dennis acting as my helpful guide and peer, so it was interesting to see our roles flip in the process of this interview. —Maryam Nazir

Nazir: This is Maryam Nazir with Dennis Browe for the UCSC COVID-19 project. It's Wednesday, November 11, 2020. I'm going to start out with a topical history and your path to UC Santa Cruz. Where did you grow up and what is the place that you would call home?

Browe: I grew up for the first twenty-one years of life or so on Long Island, New York, so it was the suburbs. I was maybe forty-five minutes to the east of New York City, of Manhattan. So my home is New York suburbs, but going to the city a lot. Things like that.

Nazir: What was your earlier education experience, going back to high school, undergrad?

Browe: To high school? I went to our Long Island town's public schools all throughout—elementary school, middle school, high school. And then I went to SUNY-Binghamton, which is a New York State school. It's a little bit upstate New York. It's where a lot of people from the Long Island and New York area go, because it's a state school. The tuition is much lower than any type of out-of-state school, or private school, or anything like that. So I had a not-super challenging, but a decent enough, I guess, public school education. All through grade school and then even through college, I attended state school.

Nazir: What was your major?

Browe: I majored in philosophy, kind of like you, Maryam. I also minored in cultural anthropology in college. I didn't have a specific focus, in terms of my areas of interest, in college. I ended up having a few different areas that I really liked studying. But in general, I really liked my philosophy courses and professors. They really challenged me. And one amazing feminist anthropology professor, too, who introduced me to a lot of things.

Coming to UC Santa Cruz

Nazir: Interesting. So what led you to pursuing a graduate education here at UC Santa Cruz?

Browe: It's a good question. Let's see. There's a few different steps. I'm now thirty-five, so I didn't go back to start my PhD until I was thirty-one, thirty-two. I took a lot of time in between. After college, in upstate New York, I moved to San Francisco. I'm from New York, but I have a little bit of family out here on the peninsula.

I didn't really know what I wanted to do with my life. Like I said, I enjoyed certain topics in college, but I didn't have a career trajectory or anything like that. So I was just living and working in San Francisco. This is around 2007, before the recession of 2008-2009, and also before housing prices in the Bay Area—before the

tech boom, part two—exploded. So I was living in San Francisco pretty cheaply around 2007, 2008. I had a job; my first job was in social work. I liked it, but it wasn't my lifelong passion. And I was unemployed for a while in San Francisco, kind of depressed, not too happy with things.

Then I found this master's program in San Francisco at San Francisco State University, in sexuality studies. It's an MA in sexuality studies. That looked really cool because I took a few courses in undergrad around gender/sexuality stuff. So I applied and I got in and I ended up doing this two-year MA program here from 2009 to 2011. I loved it. I met good professors, inspiring, really good friends. Some of them became my lifelong friends that I still talk to all the time now. That was ten years ago.

So after my master's, I continued working at SF State, first at what's called the Health Equity Institute on campus. It's a public health research and practice institute. That was for about five years. I worked on a big HIV/AIDS project. So the field was public health. That was—and this is kind of relevant to the story of my journey—a lot of public health work is soft money. So we would get grants; the grants would last maybe a year or two to fund our project and some of our salaries. Then they would end and my boss would have to reapply to new grants constantly. I was kind of tired of not having steady, full-time work. I wasn't making enough. Even if San Francisco was cheaper back then, I wasn't making enough to live comfortably and save anything at all, as an adult living by myself.

So I took a job in the administrative part of the philosophy department at SF State. My job was to administratively run the master's program. We had a really cool, famous within academia philosophy MA program. We didn't have a PhD program there, because SF State doesn't really have PhDs, except for one or two specialty ones. I was in academia still, but in different roles: public health research, public health practice, administration.

I realized, if I'm going to be in academia for a long time, I might as

well go back to get my PhD. So fast forward—I did that for another three or four years. And then finally I decided I was ready to get my PhD. Some people go straight through from undergrad; some take a year or two off in between undergrad and master's. I ended up taking a lot of time off in between finishing undergrad in 2007 and starting my PhD in 2017. So that's ten years.

Nazir: That's really interesting.

Browe: I don't know if you're going to ask about this, but my fields here in Santa Cruz that I focus on studying are medical sociology and public health. So I wanted to take my public health experience—I really enjoy being in the field—but work on it in an academic light.

Nazir: So during your time here at UC Santa Cruz, are there any specific organizations or clubs or communities that you felt particularly connected to prior to the pandemic?

Browe: Prior to the pandemic. I guess the main thing I came here to work with was the Science & Justice Research Center, which is how I met you. That's a lot of the work that I'm doing. It's a lot of the employment that I have here besides TAing. I guess that's the main one. Was there anything else?

As a grad student here the past few years, I don't think there was any type of clubs or organized activities. I went to all sorts of different events the past few years just for social stuff—meet people, make friends, make friends with other grad students; meet some undergrads, professors. But there wasn't anything that I was regularly attending, besides the Science & Justice.

I guess there's stuff within that. Like, I met another grad student here, Paloma, also. It's through Science & Justice. There're different research clusters which have been funded at different points. We're not funded anymore for this cluster, but it's the Queer Ecologies Research Cluster. While that's through Science & Justice, we kind of spun off and did our own thing after a few years. We haven't

done too much academic research, which is fine, but we hosted a movie night series last winter, a year ago. I think we screened five movies once a month over winter and spring quarter. That was in the Grad Student Commons. We had a nice gathering of fifteen to twenty people for each movie night. We provided snacks.

*“A lot of people have been pent up and feeling frustrated”:
The COLA Strike*

Nazir: That’s cool. So can you tell me a little about when you first became involved with the grad student strikes in COLA.

Browe: Yeah. What are we in? We’re in November of 2020 now. I guess it was around a year ago, December of 2019. This is kind of the folklore of the COLA stuff, which drastically changed a lot of my outlooks and opinions on things and I think a lot of grad students that you or others will talk to. Are there other—now I’m asking *you* a question—are there other people on your team interviewing people about the COLA strikes? Or is this your topic area that you chose?

Nazir: I’m kind of focusing on it. I know one other girl is focused on COLA, too. She’s trying to find more people as well. But yeah, it’s just me and her.

Browe: Cool. Okay, so it’s not one of the main themes that everybody’s focusing on. Awesome. So the question was how did COLA start, or what made me get into it?

Nazir: What got you involved in it?

Browe: I had been friendly, in different seminars over the past three years, with a bunch of grad students who became the initial leadership of COLA. I want to be careful, too, like [with the word] “leadership”. COLA wasn’t an official thing. The whole point of the strike; it was an unauthorized wildcat strike, the cost of living

adjustment, COLA, strike. And anyone was invited to participate as much as they wanted in the strike as grad students, to put in as much effort. So when I say "leadership," this is all self-volunteer and self-appointed. Obviously, in any type of social world, things can become cliquy in some ways, but the effort was always made open to invite other people.

I'm also in the sociology PhD program. Sociology was very heavily involved as graduate students. which makes sense, just thinking about the sociology department here at Santa Cruz, which focuses a lot, not entirely, but a lot on labor questions; Marxist perspectives of political economy and science studies, you know, Science & Justice Center stuff.

So now I'm kind of going roundabout, but last December 2019, there was this email chain. I don't remember exactly what happened. But as the undergrads know, and the grads know, it's really, really, really expensive to live in Santa Cruz. Housing is so incredibly limited. We're all very rent burdened. A lot of grad students pay about 40 to 60 percent of their monthly income toward their rent, which is considered "obscene" rent burden, if not more so.

So a lot of people have been pent up and feeling frustrated. Some of the grad students here who are part of our grad student union, had been kind of meeting behind the scenes for months, thinking about this COLA campaign, but their idea was that it wouldn't happen for like another year. They were starting to meet behind the scenes in private—but open meetings, anyone was invited—to plan this COLA campaign, cost of living adjustment, for a year or longer from now. The idea was to get grad students riled up and start talking to them, and get students interested in the possible idea of a sanctioned strike, meaning it's through the union: we're doing everything by the books and we're supported by our union and the university can't fire us in any way.

But what happened was, I don't know, sometime in December last year, there was this email chain. The chancellor [Chancellor Cynthia

Larive] had said something. This is our new chancellor, too. She had just taken over last year. I forget what the original email was, but there ended up being this reply-all email chain of all the grad students replying to the chancellor, and all the admin offices that were already copied on the email, and then all the rest of the grad students. There's a grad student list-serv. And somebody signed off at the end of their email, "with hostility." "Dear Chancellor, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," expressing a lot of anger. And they ended the email with, "with hostility," comma, their name. Then some other grad students joined in and started saying these things.

It got pretty wild, this email chain. I mean, there were a few grad students who actually started cursing out the chancellor publicly on this email chain. Maybe I could find that stuff for you at some point if you don't have it already, for the archives. So people are pissed. A lot of decorum, what we consider polite manners or professional manners, kind of went out the window. And there's a lot of different perspectives on that. Oh, is that appropriate or not? Is that right or wrong, or not? But the fact is that it happened, and a lot of the grad students got really excited because we realized a lot of us were suffering together to pay for housing.

"People decided to go on an unofficial wildcat strike..."

So that was the very initial start. And from there, it kind of blossomed. I think in the middle of December, right before finals week last winter, 2019—of course this was way before the pandemic—we had an in-person auditorium meeting. Maybe about 250 grad students were there in the auditorium. It was about a two-hour meeting. By the end of that meeting, people decided to go on an unofficial wildcat strike, which is not unheard of, but it's so rare that it happens because they're dangerous. People can get fired that way. The West Virginia teachers' strike did a wildcat strike a few years ago, a successful one.¹ They're our models for this, but it's dangerous.

This came from being viscerally pissed, not just at the chancellor, but she's the leader of the campus, so she has decision-making power, someone to take our anger out on, and frustration out on, too. So this was the start of it, that email chain that started with, "with hostility," the grad student's name. And then this initial 250 grad student meeting that said, "Let's do this! We're all in it together" That's the start. I can say a lot more, but I'll let you keep going.

Nazir: So these kind of issues that you were talking about, do you feel like they were ever addressed prior? Because you were here at UC Santa Cruz for a minute before the strike started. Do you feel like they were ever addressed in a way? Or was it more of just an individual kind of, we're not being paid, and it was never organized, and this was the culmination of those worries?

Browe: Yeah, this was definitely the culmination into a form of organizing, labor organizing. But unofficially, not through the official channels of our labor union. These questions had been addressed for years beforehand by our union, by our grad students here. And there's actually a whole history of even the administrators here knowing that it's tough and always admitting that it's tough for grad students and undergrads and everybody. They would know this. We have documented history of four to five, six years of admin conducting research studies about our living conditions and working conditions here, these formal surveys that the campus puts out to understand housing conditions, to understand grad student needs and struggles—whether that's pay; whether that's food security or insecurity; whether that's mental health struggles. So one of the main points and talking points of our COLA movement became: the administration has been aware of this for four to five years now. They just never do anything about it. There's study after study conducted by admin themselves knowing that grad students here are not really okay.

There're differences within grad students, obviously. Some come from more upper-class backgrounds; some lower-class

backgrounds. Some have to work additional jobs while they're here; some don't have to work other jobs at all because they're so well-funded, or their advisor professors have really well-paying research grants. So that's part of it.

"Admin is impotent"

But as a whole, grad students realized how pissed we were that admin has known about this for years and years and just never does anything. So part of our COLA narrative became: "Admin is impotent. They're useless. They say they care. They have all this knowledge. They don't act on it. They don't do anything. They just keep always saying, 'Well, this is how the world works. This is how bureaucracy works. We don't have enough money in our UC campus budget, to change anything at all.'"

And this collective refusal of the grad students all at once starting this COLA campaign was like, "Well, goddamnit, we want to make you do something. We're going to collectively refuse to do our work as a whole. And if you want to fire all of us, that's going to be a battle." So that was the start of everything.

And one of my roles—I started asking around. All the grad students had a Signal² chat, for anyone that wanted to be on it, part of the COLA. So maybe, I don't know, two to three hundred people at any time on the Signal chat. I don't know if you use Signal, but it causes it to break down all the time with that many people on it, so there's a constant buzzing signal. But I was asking around one day on a Signal chat. I was like, "Do we have documentation of admin's knowledge of all of our struggles?"

So I ended up spending about a day, day and a half, putting together this, I don't know, twenty-page document collecting all past surveys and emails from admin, showing that they do have knowledge of all of our struggles. The point was, they have the knowledge. They just never do anything or make any substantial changes.

Nazir: I remember following the COLA strike in December. At that time, to my knowledge, none of the other UCs were doing something like that organizing. I'm sure there were presences in other campuses that were talking about it. But for me, it looked like UC Santa Cruz was the catalyst, and it kind of blossomed off to Davis and Berkeley and Santa Barbara and all these other campuses. At what point in the COLA strike did you realize: we have a lot more impact than what we were initially going off of. And the next thing you know, Bernie Sanders is talking about it on the news.³ When did that hit you?

Browe: Yeah, that's great. Gosh, I don't know. There's so much. In my timeline and in my story in my head, when I'm narrating it to you, I'm still at like five percent into the story. And what you're asking about is seventy percent into the story, sixty percent. There's so much and I'm going to have to figure out what to say and what not to say.

I think I mentioned to you in the context of you asking me to do this interview, it was very emotional. I guess I'll get into that. Also, back to your very first question, you had asked me how I got involved. I've been telling you about how all the grad students in general got involved.

So this was all last December. The Bernie Sanders stuff was in March or so. So the COLA strike itself was last winter quarter, which is the beginning of January through the end of March. It was about those three months. The first COLA strike was just a grading strike last December, so it was a while ago. I wasn't a TA at that point, so I didn't have any leverage over the university to go on strike. It was only for the TAs that could withhold their students' grades. So that was the start of it. That was the first phase.

In the second phase, in winter quarter, so after the Christmas and New Year break, at another one of the big meetings in the lecture hall of the auditorium we decided to go on a picket line strike. I think that was pretty much all of February. We sustained a picket

line every single, five days a week at the base of campus. It was about halfway through February through halfway through March. We sustained that for about four weeks, an entire month.

On the Picket Line

And one of the ways I got really involved was my very good friend, who's also a grad student here who I met here, she had volunteered to help supply food for the picket line, lunch every day. It takes a lot of work to supply free meals for the people at the picket line, you know, for one hundred to three hundred people a day, every day, for lunch. And again, this is all unsanctioned. So there was massive COLA fundraising. I think by the end of it, we raised about \$300,000 toward our strike. It was just a GoFundMe, a Kickstarter or a GoFundMe thing from worldwide donations, which is pretty cool. A lot of that money went to helping support the grad students who did end up becoming fired through COLA. But a significant chunk also went to sustaining this picket line—the medical supplies, the water, the food, and the massive lunches every day.

So my good friend had volunteered. And she basically voluntold me. I could have said no, but she said, "Do you want to help me with the picket line lunches?" So that's how I got really involved. I was only somewhat involved, even though my friends were doing stuff beforehand. It was really through our personal friendship that I ended up being at the picket line every single day for a month, basically, helping out with all the food, calling all the local restaurants in town and trying to get discounts on our massive orders, things like that.

We would order taquerias a few times, maybe once a week. We had a grad student who had a friend who had a breakfast taco, breakfast burrito truck. So he came. We ordered from him. Homemade pozole that his grandma helped him cook for two hundred people. We ordered Mediterranean food—Falafel, pita, hummus, things like that. Lots of pizza from Costco. I'm going over these details because sustaining the picket line was the heart and

soul of the COLA movements, even while the actual grading strike, the withholding of grades was ongoing. And that's really where we bonded the most as grad students, and with many undergrads too. Again, this is before the pandemic.

But between fifty and a hundred grad students, and many, many, many undergrads randomly, a few hundred even, would come out throughout the week, every single, all day, every single week. And almost none of us who were really involved got any schoolwork done at all the entire month during that picket line. It was just the gritty details of running a picket line all day, every day. UC Berkeley, their grad student association helped us with the Porta-potties. I don't know. There's so much to tell, if you want to ask anything more specific.

Now I realized you just got back into the questions about Bernie Sanders and stuff. I guess that was toward the end of the picket line, so that must have been around early March. We also had a media team. We had five or six people volunteer on the media team for COLA, so they were getting the word out. Lots of the main organizers of this movement were doing interviews with anyone that asked us to do an interview. We tried to get it into the big journal outlets. Eventually Bernie Sanders, when he was on his campaign trail for the primaries, had heard about it, he had tweeted. We tried to get him so hard to come to the base of campus. He didn't come, though. But that was mid-March. By this point we had been featured in, I don't know—I can't remember anymore—but big outlets, like *Vox* or *The Atlantic*. Things like that.

Nazir: Yeah, that was crazy. And I feel like it started getting a lot of support towards the beginning of COVID. When did you first become aware that, oh my God, this is a pandemic and it's probably going to hit us soon?

Browe: Yeah, it was really interesting timing. The picket line went for that month in between mid-February to mid-March. Like I said, we were providing lunch; we were sharing food; we were sharing

everything. Everybody, hundreds of people, for the whole month there.

"It hit so quickly": A Building Pandemic

At this point, I guess, people were talking about COVID-19 a bit. It mostly seemed localized to Wuhan, China. It wasn't really a factor. We didn't feel like it was affecting us here in the US at all, and certainly not a local thing. It only became really apparent as the end of the picket line was getting ready to start winding down anyway. We just felt like we didn't have enough momentum and people to keep it going every day. People were exhausted, having been doing this every day for a month now.

The end of the picket line was close to the end of winter quarter ten months ago, or seven months ago, even. And it just kind of happened that we finished the picket line in mid-March. We had just one week after that.

Right after that, it all happened so soon. They actually announced, I think, some of start to the quarantine of California, like businesses are going to be shutting down. Public health advisory stuff was saying, "Everybody please stay inside. Don't go out into public. Don't go out to bars anymore." So it was really weird timing. The picket line part of the COLA movement—we tried to keep COLA alive besides it, but it was hard once everything went virtual and that first week of quarantine, I think, was our spring break here.

Nazir: Yeah.

Browe: Yeah. So that was March 22nd or 23rd, 2020. So we finished the picket line part of hundreds of people sharing lunch and fluid and all sorts of germs every single day. We had a week transition. End of the quarter. And then the pandemic, the quarantine for the COVID-19 started pretty instantly. I don't even know what the moral of this story is, but it hit so quickly. We didn't have too much time to think about it. It just all of a sudden it became a really, really

serious threat in the US consciousness, in the US mind, and we all just started following.

And then, starting in April, there was all sorts of struggles with the COLA movement, and grad students and the organizers trying to figure out, how are we going to keep this thing alive when we can't meet? Because, like you said, right before that happens, Bernie Sanders tweeted us out, was interested.

The other UC campuses, which we really needed for their labor power, for their TAs to withhold grades, also, because there's more TAs at some of the bigger campuses, and they're more quote "powerful and important" than UC Santa Cruz, like Berkeley and UCLA—their grad students had joined the COLA movement, too, and they were starting to organize in consultation and conversation with us here at Santa Cruz. We kind of think of Santa Cruz, the grad students, as a small town with a big heart. We accomplished a lot. We did a lot as a small campus, just a small amount of grad students.

So with the pandemic, like I said, UCLA and Berkeley grad students had just started organizing. But they lost their momentum, too, from the pandemic. No one could meet in person. It was a big news story. One person, a grad student who was part of the Berkeley COLA movement, they had tested positive for COVID. And then everybody was scared and freaking out because they had been in a big COLA meeting, with like a hundred people in one of their auditoriums.

"COVID killed our strike momentum."

So the pandemic shifted, and for the most part killed the COLA momentum. And then we started hearing from other people, even allies in other ways and some professors, that we can't focus on COLA. It's not important anymore. We need to focus on adapting and surviving and getting through this new pandemic. We don't even know what's going on still.

Nazir: Do you feel like COVID shut down these really important conversations? Or do you feel like these conversations were still sustained, but postponed?

Browe: We had tried to sustain these really important conversations. We tried to sustain the strike. We tried not to postpone it, as in literally stop it and then start it up again later. We were worried about losing the momentum. But my take is that overall, COVID did shut down; it killed our strike momentum; it shut down these conversations, because for better or for worse, suddenly there's bigger things to worry about.

There were some grad student COLA organizers who were arguing that this is the best time to keep up the momentum for COLA because things like having enough pay, having enough income to live, especially during a new pandemic when we're forced to be home 100 percent of the time--can't go to work, because they shut our campus offices down and stuff—is just as important, even more important now, rather than before. But even if a lot of people—including me—agreed with that, there just wasn't a lot of tangible things that we could do.

Nazir: Yeah. Do you feel like there's a future for COLA to come back with more momentum than before, with more change than before? Or do you feel like it was kind of a one-hit stop?

Browe: A one-hit wonder, huh? I'm so hesitant to answer that. I don't think it's impossible. I think the conditions were ripe in that moment that COLA exploded, explosively blossomed into a wildcat strike labor movement that started getting international attention and raising three hundred thousand dollars. I think it would be very, very, very hard to start anything like that up again, at least in the very near future. First, we're almost in 2021 now. The pandemic is still raging in the US. A hundred thousand new cases a day. We used to think fifty thousand new cases a day was a lot.

I think it could start up again, maybe years from now. I know we

have some amazing labor organizers here. I don't really count myself as one of them, even if I was very involved, and I would be involved again. But we have some amazing actual organizers here, movement organizers, who might be thinking of other things, which I'm not aware of. But in terms of a COLA movement, at the moment, in November 2020, there's not really anything happening so far.

Again, COLA was all unsanctioned. We still have our union that's fighting for our grad student worker rights and things like that. That's been ongoing; it will always on go. But COLA itself, there's not much happening. During the wildcat strike, there used to be, I don't know, fifty, a hundred messages a day on Signal chat. Just everything, anything. Now there's like one or two a week. That gives you an idea.

"Something we all needed to take seriously."

Nazir: So I'm going to shift towards your personal experience with the pandemic. You told me when you first became aware of it. I guess this is an obvious question, but when did you realize it was going to have such an impact on the way we work, the way we live, the way we do things?

Browe: I think it was in that very quick moment toward the end of the picket line, that week, the very last week of school. I guess it was finals week in winter quarter here where it started becoming a thing in the US. I think it was all within that week where it suddenly became a reality, a public health reality in the US, a scary thing in the US, something that we all needed to take seriously and we couldn't just blow off.

My good friend, who's a grad student here, it was her birthday at, I guess, mid-March, the end of March. She had a birthday party in her house. that was right before they announced full-on quarantine. Like, "Don't go socializing in your friends' houses. Don't go outside," essentially. So she came and they greeted

everyone with hand sanitizer and stuff. And we're like, "Okay, we need to be careful, but we're going to celebrate indoors anyway." Because at that point, the science of it, we didn't really know that it was aerosol-based, that it could be spread mostly through germs in the air. We were like, "Okay, as long as we clean the surfaces or hands or plates, it will be better." The public health wisdom is still, "Wash your hands," of course.

But this was right before they fully announced quarantine. We were just in this birthday party eating pizza, having some tequila. Now when we look back, we are like, "Oh, gosh, we gathered together indoors and thought hand-washing would be enough." But that's just how quickly the science has changed over the past few months and what they've learned about the virus.

Yeah, so I guess for me personally, it was just really the same as everybody else. It was oh, God, we've been sharing food at the picket line for the past month with hundreds of other people. I hope we all don't come down with it. If one person had had it, we're all going to come down with it within the next week, and a lot of us are going to get really sick, which luckily did not happen. Thankfully. Really thankfully.

"We were going a little stir crazy": Sheltering in Place

Nazir: So the early months of the pandemic, March, April, May-ish—what was your experience with that shelter in place order? Not being able to see people, not being able to freely move around. How did it affect you?

Browe: I'm now living in San Francisco, but the whole summer, I was still living in Santa Cruz with three other housemates. Two of them were grad students also in the sociology department and one was a partner of one of them. We were all pretty good friends, so we had a really good house of four people. We got along. Of course, we had some arguments and tensions, but we had a house of four people who were pretty good friends.

So the socializing aspect was pretty good for me. I did not, luckily, suffer the loneliness aspects that hit a lot of people, and the isolation aspects that hit a lot of people really, really hard the first few months of the pandemic. I feel pretty lucky on that. Yeah, just hung out with the housemates a lot. We were going a little stir crazy. But I would still take bike rides by myself around Santa Cruz, try and go where there's less people and things like that. Just for the outdoors, fresh air, and stay sane, as they say, with exercise. But I didn't really feel isolated in a large way.

I mean, the question of being able to sit down and focus on my schoolwork and my studies—we were still fresh coming off the COLA strike, which was really, really really intense and emotionally intense. And then with the pandemic, I didn't get a lot of work done with the spring. That was when I met you, Maryam, and we started working on what became this podcast project that we were doing separately.⁴

Nazir: Yeah.

Browe: So we were doing that. Our professor, Jenny Reardon, started her undergrad Sociology of Health course called Living and Learning in a Pandemic, or in a Pandemicine So I was helping work on that, and think about that. But at that time, I was still pretty overwhelmed. None of us knew what to think about, what to focus on. It was all so new.

Nazir: Yeah. What was that shift for you like, from in-person to remote learning?

Browe: I did it and I accepted that we had to do it. But it wasn't easy. It wasn't good. It wasn't comfortable. I still dislike remote learning. Some people love teaching and learning remote and there are some amazing professors I know who have good pedagogy around online learning and feel like they're effective at online teaching.

I've never liked being in an online course or taking an online course.

I guess a lot of people nowadays—we're in November—are tired of Zooming their friends all the time. People have Zoom fatigue, of course. But even from the beginning, I felt grouchy. Even with my good friends I wanted to see, I was like, "I'd rather see you in person for a few minutes with a mask on, rather than spend an hour on Zoom." So I didn't like any of the transition. I accept it. Certainly now I accept it, of course. But it's still not great for me, or comfortable for me.

Shifting to Online Teaching

Nazir: Did you like the way that UC Santa Cruz transitioned and handled this whole shift? Or do you have any critiques about how they handled things?

Browe: I feel like admin did the best they could in such a short timeframe of shifting, but I'm so influenced by having been a huge part of the COLA movement. We constantly are finding stuff to point out, things that they were doing [such as] asking grad students to spend a lot more of their working hours learning how to teach online, but that they were trying not to compensate us for. This is, again, a labor issue. They're asking us to do extra work without compensating us for it. And from an institution that already pays such low, low level wages to grad students here. We could get into that, if you want. That's one of the main critiques, is them asking both students and professors to do a ton of extra work for last spring quarter, shifting to online, which obviously we had to, but without willing to be compensating anyone for it. I guess so much of it comes down to money. Because they were still charging last spring, or even this fall right now, which is almost over, we're halfway through it— they're still charging student fees for all sorts of campus services. I don't know how much it is for undergrads; for grads it's like 350, 400 bucks a quarter. We're all paying these fees but we're not getting any of the services.

Nazir: Yeah. Did COVID-19 change anything about your academic path or academic trajectory?

Browe: (laughs) Well, I guess my cheeky answer would be that it has made it hard to focus on my academics. I'm still struggling with that a little bit, just straight-up getting my work done. I'm doing the week-to-week things and leading the things I need to lead. But I'm not making a ton of progress in terms of my own work and research. I'm definitely behind on things. I feel guilt and shame about it, but I also know it's a reality and I'm trying to just do it day-to-day anyway.

But I guess a specific thing that would be a change is I'm at the start of year four now in my PhD program, at the start of designing and starting to do field research for my work. My dissertation research is going to be on anti-aging medicine, the science of staying younger on a biological level. There's chronological age, which is like I'm thirty-five calendar years. That's my chronological age. But there's this new stuff that different scientists and biologists and genomicists are developing called biological age, which is using biomarkers in your genome to determine how old you are biologically compared to your chronological age.

I'm at the start of this research and my plan was to go to a few different anti-aging meetings in the Bay Area. Professors from Berkeley and Stanford and Santa Cruz and a few others would meet once or twice a year at the Bay Area Aging Meeting, BAAM. That was all canceled in the spring due to quarantine and lockdown. So none of these in-person meetings are taking place right now. I can't go to the Buck Institute, which is the biggest and the first institute specifically devoted to the biological study of aging in the world. That's in Marin County. So my research is stalled. I'm not exactly sure what I'm going to do yet and how long the lockdown is going to last here in the country and in California. So at the moment, I can't even get my research started, at least not in person. It's a struggle. I'll find ways to overcome it. But all of my ways to connect with these scientists doing this work, they were cut off due to quarantine.

Nazir: Yeah. Were you working besides your role as a PhD student?

Were you working any jobs before COVID hit?

Browe: No, not any outside jobs from the university. Some PhD students will have weekend jobs, but the majority work as either TAs, or GSRs, grad student researchers. Working like that pays for our tuition and for our healthcare and gives us the living stipend and stuff. So I was working a few different things like that. And I worked a few different jobs, mostly through Science & Justice Research Center, over the summer. That's separate funding.

Isolation

Nazir: What were some of the more difficult adjustments in terms of your social circle and social engagements? I know you've kind of touched on that but adjusting from like March to summer to fall. What are some of the difficulties that you faced regarding your social life? What are some difficulties that you keep facing with trying to make connections and retain connections with the people in your social circles?

Browe: It's not so hard to maintain connections, but hangouts are fewer and further between now. Like I said, I just recently moved back up to San Francisco, where I was living before Santa Cruz, so I have a good amount of friends in San Francisco and Oakland and the Bay Area, and also now in Santa Cruz. But some people, a few of them are immunocompromised for different reasons, and so we have to be really careful if we're seeing each other in person. We actually hung out in Golden Gate Park the other day, like eight or nine people. Everyone agreed to get tested beforehand, which is a good way. It's not a foolproof way. Tests could be a false negative, or a false positive and stuff like that. But we still felt pretty safe. So nine of us hung out in Golden Gate Park without masks on and gave each other hugs, for the first time in six months, about two weeks ago. That was Halloween day, the thirty-first.

But yeah, it's things like that. It's the lack of seeing good friends in an intimate way. I have a housemate here who's a good friend.

But that's about it. I'm really not seeing that many people, and not going to other people's houses. It's an ongoing struggle. It could be a lot worse in a lot of ways. But it's still not that easy, the lack of physical touch, and friendship-wise, unless people are living with their partners. a lot of people are struggling.

Nazir: Yeah, completely. How do you feel your connections and relationships with friends and family and partners have changed over the course of the pandemic? Or have they changed?

Browe: (laughs) Yeah, I guess honestly for me, in my life, these connections haven't changed with close friends or family members. My family's still all in New York, or in New Jersey. I've been living cross-country from my family for thirteen, fourteen years now. I still talk to them on the phone or Skype or Zoom occasionally, things like that. I guess the only difference is that I can't easily go home and see them for the holidays. Yes, I can fly. Then there's the question of my parents who are now sixty-five, seventy. I don't want to be around them right after a plane flight, things like that, so thinking about the quarantine even there.

My brother and his wife just had twins two months ago, little baby twins. They're really cute. They're in New York, Brooklyn, but I don't know when I'm going to—I could see them, but it would be a lot of work to fly there, then quarantine for a week or two somewhere and then see them, and not have my own space. So I'm not easily able to see my family for a while now.

Nazir: Yeah, that must be really hard.

Browe: Yeah.

Nazir: If you're comfortable sharing—has the pandemic affected you, or any of your loved ones or your friends, in a health aspect or economic aspect? Anything that you're willing to share about that?

Browe: Yeah, I guess a few things. My mom is a court stenographer, so she goes to the courtrooms and on her special machine that she's trained on, she takes down every word said for official court records. She's been doing that for, I don't know, thirty-five years or something, her whole adult life. She's pretty independently employed. But because all the courtrooms were shutdown with quarantine nationwide—there was no cases happening—she's had a really, really hard time getting almost any work, which means severe lack of income for the past six months. And she had some problem with unemployment because they had the most cases filed for unemployment ever a few months ago. It took her like two months to get the problem sorted out. She was on unemployment and that helps. But I think it's running out now, or it ran out. Her boyfriend is a great carpenter, but he's on long-term disability, because he hurt his back on the job. So he's not really at work. So they're struggling in New York in terms of money stuff. My dad just retired from a job, so he's mostly fine.

"This is the first death in my immediate circle that I'm dealing with from COVID."

And then, this is recent. My best friend that I grew up with in New York—we were basically born together, have known each other our whole lives, are family friends—his sister just died from COVID five days ago. I've known her my whole life, too. She's five years younger than me, so I was young, but I was basically around when she was born and stuff like that. That was five days ago she died. She was in New York. That's been kind of devastating. Just four days ago I had to call my family one-by-one and let them know that she passed away, awful conversations each time. So that's a little bit different than economic. This is the first death in my immediate circle that I'm dealing with from COVID.

Nazir: That's really difficult.

Browe: Yeah, it's terrible. It's like my best friend is not—I just talked to him for like a minute or two. He's so overwhelmed and he's

dealing with all the logistical aspects of what you have to do when your family member dies across the country.

Nazir: Yeah. And he's based in the East Coast, you said.

Browe: He grew up there, but he's actually in Ventura, or somewhere near Ventura, California.

Nazir: Were they able to make any funeral arrangements? Or is it still kind of up in the air?

Browe: I think that they decided to not do an in-person funeral, because she just died from COVID. Why risk more people having to fly? I would fly if there was a funeral. But why make a bunch of people fly? So they're going to do a Zoom funeral or something.

Nazir: Yeah, I guess that's the toughest part of it, too—

Browe: Yeah.

Nazir: —to be able to be consoled and be with loved ones during really difficult times.

Browe: Yeah, a lot of people are struggling or affected by this, too. My Grandma Dorothy died maybe like four months ago, not from COVID, but just from other ninety-year-old complications. She was in New York, too. So we had, again, a family Zoom funeral. Not ideal. I would have loved to fly home and see my family and be there in person. My dad's mom. But it was the same type of thing. We did our best.

"Hope is our daily living"

Nazir: What has given you sources of hope or optimism for the future? Tough question.

Browe: [pause] Yeah. This is my take. I know I ask people this in other interviews related to the pandemic. It's great that the US elections just happened and Donald Trump was chosen by the people not to be our president for the next four years. So that's one quick progressive, leftist, liberal source of hope for me at the moment. Joe Biden's already planning a twelve-person national COVID pandemic leadership team to help try and get this country in order, not that that means an automatic quarantine for everyone for months, but we'll see what they're going to recommend. I definitely, for the most part, trust in the science and the leadership and the public health leadership, so that we can go back to, not a normal life, but a life that's living with the virus and in much, much more safe circumstances be able to see people again. So that's one thing, is actually forming a national leadership team to help deal with this and guide the country through this. And it might be state-by-state.

Nazir: Yeah.

"I would take a really long bike ride with my two friends..."

Browe: What else, hope for the future? I think just continuing to talk to friends, be close, talk on the phone to friends and family and stuff like that. People are just continuing to live their lives and go about things, even amidst tragedy, whether it's personal tragedy or national tragedy. There's so many things that I can say that are not hopeful about the future.

But hope is our daily living; we're still going about things. People are generally treating each other well and trying their best to be nice to others and kind to others and things like that. It's hard to think of answers that aren't really cliché. Now I understand when we ask in our own interviews, we get funny [answers]—now I'm on the other side of it. "Anything else hopeful for the future?"

I think that's it, just really going about daily life, still having dreams about doing things, being able to travel again, being able to see

my family in New York again. Things like that. Being able to be with friends again in a bar or restaurant, or even our houses.

Nazir: So hypothetical: tomorrow COVID is solved. What is the first thing you would do post-pandemic life?

Browe: Like solved, in the sense of everyone has been vaccinated and it's safe and effective and things like that? Like there's no more pandemic?

Nazir: Mm-hmm.

Browe: Okay. What would I do? I'd probably either host or go to a house party with friends and beer and stuff, just to celebrate together. Yeah, that sounds like the most easy, nice thing. I would take a really long bike ride. I like biking over the Golden Gate Bridge. I live kind of close to it here. We bike to Fairfax. There's a little coffee shop for bike riders in Fairfax, in Marin. So get coffee there, go inside again, sit and relax. Saturday, Sunny Saturday type of day. Come back. So yeah, take a nice bike ride, which I love doing with my two friends here who live across the street. They're bikers, also. Do a bike ride. Come back, relax, just go to a party, drink beer with friends and celebrate. Celebrate being able to celebrate, you know?

Nazir: Yeah. (laughs) Exactly.

Browe: And I'd probably figure out where and how I want to travel in the upcoming months. I don't have that much money. I'm a relatively poor grad student, but at least see my family in New York and stuff like that. Maybe plan a week trip somewhere.

Nazir: Yeah. Well, thank you so much for joining this interview. It was really, really interesting to get to know you more.

Browe: Sure. Thanks, Maryam. It was fun to answer, to have you

ask these questions. Good questions. I haven't really talked about COLA, except to friends during it, in a while. This is the most reflection I've done on it, actually.

Nazir: Yeah, I'm glad. It was really interesting to hear the development and how it started, and to know a lot about it.

Browe: Yeah. And there was so much more, but I had to limit myself on what I did say.

Nazir: Yeah. Okay. Cool. Let me stop recording.



Lone student at Rachel Carson College
Photo by Shmuel Thaler

Endnotes

¹“The West Virginia teachers’ strike began on February 22, 2018 with a call from the West Virginia branches of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association for teachers across West Virginia to strike. The strike was called in response to the comparatively low pay of West Virginia teachers, a pay raise passed by the legislature and signed by governor Jim Justice that provided only a 4% raise over the next three years, and cuts to benefits.” See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018_West_Virginia_teachers%27_strike

²Signal is an encrypted, secure communication platform.

³On February 19, 2020, Sanders, who was a presidential candidate, tweeted “UCSC grad students are fighting to have their labor rights acknowledged. I strongly urge the president of the UC system to stop threatening them, especially immigrant students, for organizing. I stand with @payusmoreucsc “

⁴Before beginning this oral history project, the director of the Regional History Project consulted with Jenny Riordan and other faculty and staff involved with the Science & Justice Center [SJRC] to share resources and ideas. Some of the team members for this oral history, including Maryam Nazir, were recommended by the Science & Justice Center as interviewers partially because of their previous experience with The Pandemicene Podcast and as members of the spring 2020 undergraduate seminar course Riordan taught SOCY 194: Living and Learning in a Pandemic: The Sociology of COVID-19. The Pandemicene Podcast describes itself as a “podcast series based on interviews with SJRC’s robust network of local and international public health experts, scholars, and practitioners. Our goal has been to capture everyone’s unique quarantine experiences, interests in understanding local responses to the pandemic, and the world-building projects they have been undertaking!” See: <https://pandemicene.ucsc.edu>

Jacqueline Brown-Gaines

Interviewed by David Duncan

This was my final interview for our project and the one that I was most curious about. Jacqueline was a new graduate student starting her first quarter at UCSC remotely after finishing her time at Spelman earlier in the year. I reached out to Jacqueline in the early weeks of the quarter about being interviewed, with the stipulation that we wait until the end of fall so that she could experience more of what school was like here. I was curious about how Jacqueline's personal timeline of events differed from others, especially with moving across the country and starting graduate school at an institution she had not yet been able to attend physically. I hope that Jacqueline's story resonates with others who have started new things during this pandemic and how she managed the challenges that crossed her path.—David Duncan

Duncan: This is David Duncan interviewing Jacqueline Brown-Gaines. It is November 17, 2020, a little after noon. This is an oral history interview for the Regional History Project talking about COVID-19. Jacqueline, thank you again for being here, and sharing some time with me here. Just to get us started, could you talk a little bit about how you came to be a graduate student at UCSC?

Brown-Gaines: Okay. So growing up, I always knew that I wanted to be really smart. Didn't really know what that would look like until I got to Spelman [College] and I was exposed to amazing Black women professors who brought their lives and their experiences into the classroom and were charismatic, extremely intelligent, stunningly gorgeous. I was just like oh, I have to do this.

So one of my professors, Dr. Akiba Sullivan Harper, she suggested to me that I apply for the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship. She was an ambassador for it. I remember her comments on my final essay. My first semester freshman year, she was like, "I think that you would make a really good contribution to the academy." And I

was like, “What is the academy? What are you talking about?” But I believed her and went to the information session, even though I couldn’t apply until the next year. But I was constantly thinking about what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to study Black girls’ history because it was under-studied and underestimated as well.

So the next year, I applied and got into the UNCF [United Negro College Fund] Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship program. And from there, it was kind of a streamline into a PhD program. I didn’t know much about UC Santa Cruz prior to going to Spelman. My dad did a lot of the research for me. And he was like, “Santa Cruz looks great.” He would send me all these emails all the time. And I was like oh, I really want to go home to Los Angeles. What is in Santa Cruz?

“I could not believe my eyes—forests and this gorgeous campus.”

But then my junior year, after the end of the school year, we took a road trip up to Santa Cruz. And I just was like, wow, who made a school like this? (laughs) I think we went in July 2020. I could not believe my eyes—forests and this gorgeous campus. And then all the things that he sent me, I would read them. I was like wow, this is a pretty amazing school, just as far as the radical upbringings. Even the concept of a banana slug is amazing to me. I fell in love with it.

I was a little concerned at first because I knew that the funding situation was a little wonky. So I didn’t really have my heart set on it. I was like wow, like in a dream, maybe. But then after I applied—it was the last school I applied to—I got accepted and they offered me a wonderful Eugene Cota-Robles Fellowship.¹ And I was able to dream.

I definitely thought I was still going to go to UCLA, but they ended up rejecting me, which, whatever (laughs) doesn’t even matter, because Santa Cruz is where I needed to be and it’s been an amazing experience so far.

Duncan: Great. And I know this is sort of a weird question as a first-year student that has only experienced being a grad student online at UCSC. But if you could, what, if anything, what are some of the first things that come to your mind when you think about UCSC? What does it mean to you?

Brown-Gaines: It means community, legacy, histories—bringing ourselves into a space and being appreciated for all of our parts. It was really natural to me. Of course, I'm online and these are all ideas in my head. But I think Santa Cruz's focus on teaching and community really disrupts this idea of education being a socializing tool. So just like having conversations that are decent and respectful of other people. That is what comes to mind.

Graduating from Spelman College During a Pandemic

And like I said, community is a big one. I also witnessed that with the ways that they dealt with the fires. And coming from Spelman, that was really big on community, it seems like an extension, or just the right path in general for me, because you're nowhere without community.

Duncan: Absolutely. And—I'm not sure if Spelman's on a quarter or semester—but your last time period at Spelman was also online because of COVID?

Brown-Gaines: Yeah. That really tore us up. We left right before spring break, regular as usual. I was planning to go on a research trip over spring break with my oral history class. It got canceled two days before we were supposed to leave. And we were just like, "Okay, well, see you after spring break. Sorry we couldn't go on this trip." And over the spring break, they were like, "Oh, no. This is serious. We're going to have to evacuate everybody. You get an extra week of spring break, but all your classes have to continue online."

Spelman has a lot of older professors, so a lot of people barely use

Moodle.² (laughs) So they had to get up to speed and we also had to deal with losing our community and stuff. So, yeah, it was online.

But I think we all did a really good job of trying to keep ourselves together. The Spelman sisterhood is so much stronger. Our alumni donated all this money for emergency relief for the students to help them get laptops and internet for their home. They had a lot of programs which I went to, which is why I'm kind of burnt out on Zoom programs now. (laughs) We had a Founder's Day celebration virtually, and we had different wellness programs, meditation. We had our virtual sendoff, instead of a graduation. So they're still kind of planning for a graduation, which I appreciate. And church services—all kinds of things.

But it was, yeah, online and— I mean, I think now that I have some time away from it, I can appreciate it more. But it was horrendous going through it. It was like, "This is the worst experience of my life." (laughs)

Duncan: Could you talk a little bit, too, about if you recall the first time you heard about COVID? Or maybe the first time it was really on your radar, what your initial thoughts were?

Brown-Gaines: Yeah, I would say I heard about it maybe in February because I read one article that was saying that Wuhan had been in lockdown for seventy-something days. And I was like, what the heck is going on?! Like, what is this?! You know what I mean? So we're in the middle of that assassination of the [nuclear scientist in Iran] Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. Then also the [first] impeachment [of Donald Trump], right? So we've got a lot of stuff going on here. And so I'm just like, okay, other people are on lockdown, but they seem okay. Because the article that I was reading was about the social media culture that had spurred out of this lockdown. I was like, oh, that's kind of cute! Like, what is a lockdown? So that was my first exposure.

My first direct contact with COVID was this research trip that we

had been planning for months getting canceled. I was like, oh, so this is real. But again, it didn't really hit that close to home, I would easily say, until I got the email that all my sisters at Spelman had to go back home. That was just real fricking hard, and still has been, to this day.

And that's the weird part about it, too, is still continuing to live, and then also move back across the country—that transpired when I still kind of—I want to say I'm mentally still in Spelman. You don't have that cutoff that you get when you get a graduation, so it's a weird place to be in.

Duncan: Sure. I was going to ask what that process was like, finishing your time at Spelman and then moving across the country in the middle of a pandemic to California. We'll start with that. What was that like?

Brown-Gaines: Yeah, so graduating online, or being sent off—I mean, we really made the best of it. I lived in an apartment, an off-campus apartment, so fortunately I didn't have to move in the middle of the semester. I think I spent a week praying. I was like, thank you, God, that I did not have to move to California in the middle of my senior year. I know another friend from Los Angeles, he had eight AM [classes]. So him having to wake up at five o'clock in Los Angeles [because of the time difference] (laughs) was a joke.

Me and my friend Chris—well, her name is India, but we call her Chris—we lived in the same apartment complex. So we would go up to her place and we would have brunch every day, and mimosas, and do our work together to try and keep us motivated. It was kind of sad. It was a student housing complex, but she was kind of the only person I really talked to. We would spend a lot of time together and go to the store. But going to the store was so traumatic every time.

Spelman had weekly town halls to keep us informed about what they were doing. I would listen to those. I found a lot of solace in

my classmates, because we would talk about what was going on in class and—our classes are really intimate in person. So we drew on that community to keep us going throughout the other part.

I was writing my senior thesis at the same time, or finishing it up. But my classes were my refuge from all that, in a weird way, even though they were on Zoom, I was just like, I'm just happy to [see] people [besides my friend in the apartment complex]. I felt really lonely not being around my family and stuff. It was a lot of emotions; it was a really emotional time for different reasons. Then also knowing that you have a graduation coming soon, but you have to create that feeling for yourself, because there's no physical thing.

And Spelman, they go hard with the graduation. They told me this when I was a freshman; they only care about you if you're a freshman or a senior there. Our graduation is, I would say a two-week process. People fly in to Atlanta from all over. They have all these different ceremonies and traditions. There's a special arch at Spelman that we walk underneath when you finally become an alumna. You don't walk under it during your whole time there. But when you walk through it, you're walking with your sisters and before you are all the classes that have come before you. And then you're the newest alumni class. That's what keeps you going throughout your time at Spelman.

But, like I said, they really did help with the different virtual programs. The Sisters Chapel, the communal space at Spelman—the Sisters Chapel dean and all them, they had this beautiful sendoff ceremony with drums. Our organist is really old. She's been working there for like sixty years. She came on the Zoom call and played for us in our house, so it was really special, despite the fact that it wasn't ideal. I do really hold those memories in my heart.

Even when I presented my senior thesis, it was kind of to my advantage because I could—because it was on Zoom, I could invite my family from California. So my dad and my aunt were

able to watch. I was definitely really nervous because I had Mellon people there, my professors, and then my parents. I was kind of shook. But even after that, my professor, [KP], who was my advisor, she sent me flowers and a teddy bear after the program. I was just bawling. (laughs) It was just so dramatic. I did feel really loved. It was a whirlwind of emotions, I will say.

"At one point there was this idea that Black people couldn't get COVID, which was stupid."

Like I said, trying to make meaning of this rite of passage without necessarily having the pomp and circumstance was a little difficult. But I had to realize, at the end of the day, I am done. I would very much not rather be in the middle of my career at Spelman. Spelman is definitely a place where it's better to be there than do it online, honestly. I mean, the classes are great. The classes are fantastic. But when you're saying like, "Hey, girl!" in the hallway, it's cute, yeah.

So as far as moving is concerned, we were in the weird pseudo-lockdown that wasn't really a lockdown. Being in Georgia during this time was really dramatic because Brian Kemp³ was garbage in his response. So we're going back and forth with: "It's a lockdown, but it's not really." At one point there was this idea that Black people couldn't get COVID, which was stupid. And then the news was like, "Hey, you guys are dying of this." The news was helpful in getting us to go inside. But it was very racially charged. I felt like it was almost a spectacle. And then for them to say, "Oh, Blacks, Natives, and Mexicans are dying especially," and then still not having any help from people in charge, on both the federal and the state level, was ridiculous and frustrating.

I decided to stay in Georgia all summer because my lease didn't expire until the end of July, instead of going back home. Because I was like, there's nothing for me at home. I can't work. I usually would work at the Hollywood Bowl in the summer. This summer I was planning to do more gig-related stuff, because I play tuba. But

I was like, there's no point.

During that time, we also had the George Floyd murder and the resulting chaos that ensued from that.⁴ I definitely got involved in the protests. I really am not a big protest person. But it did hit close to home because on the second day of the protest, these two students— They had enacted a curfew like forty-five minutes before. There's thousands of people on the street, right? These two students from my school, from Morehouse and Spelman, they were driving and they were stuck in traffic. Atlanta gets a lot of traffic. And these six police officers swarmed their car, tazed them, pulled them out of the car, and were beating up on them and arrested them. One kid, the kid—his name was Messiah, actually, which had a lot of symbolism—he had a seizure from getting tazed. All for not obeying this stupid curfew.⁵

So that really inspired me to get out there. I worked a lot with my best friend, Nile, here this summer. We didn't go to every one. Some people were there like every single day. But she started a program called Letters for Freedom, where you could get paired up with a political prisoner and write to them in jail. I decided to do a journaling project. I wrote down everything. You could also trace the before and after George Floyd thing in that. Did a lot of videos. Did a lot of walking around because I had no car and I was bored all the time. So kind of fashioning a different lens this whole entire summer because everything was falling apart, I felt like, especially in my life.

Like I said, from when I was small, I really wanted to be really smart. My biggest achievement, up until this point, was graduating from college. And for that to be stripped away from me, I was like, okay, well, where do I go now? It was happening in slow motion in real time. I just had to kind of figure it out.

The moving part was ridiculous when it did finally get to it. I had a lot of stuff that I had accumulated over the years, and so did my brother, because he went to Morehouse. I had to pack it all up.

We had a moving company. It was also really expensive to get a moving company to do this. They didn't end up telling us where the stuff was for a month. So when I got back home, for the whole month of August, I was like, where is my stuff? "It's just like out here." It was like okay, I went to college for four years. I had all my band t-shirts. I had all these books. I had a lot of books that were expensive. I was like, where are they? Then one day they called us, they were like, "We're delivering your stuff tomorrow." And that was like, "Guys, this is the worst, yeah."

But one thing that kept me going was knowing that I was going to graduate school. Because I was like, life is so much better than this. I know UC Santa Cruz is so beautiful. And if I can just keep it going, I have students that I want to teach. I would definitely say UCSC was the light at the end of the tunnel

Duncan: Thank you for sharing all that. It gave me a lot more questions that I want to ask. Something you said that stood out to me is you said in Georgia, going to the store was difficult. Could you talk about what that means to you, if you want.

Brown-Gaines: Oh my God. I didn't have a car in Atlanta because I was just like, how am I going to get it back [to California]? I relied either on public transportation, walking, or Uber and Lyft. So going to the grocery store—

So, first of all, we have to talk about this whole toilet paper panic-buying. I know it's going to go all raunchy but I, again, was in the middle of my senior year. I'm deep-focused on my senior thesis and my sisters leaving and stuff. So I kind of missed the whole panic-buying phase. It was something. But then there was no toilet paper anywhere. I had gotten this sustainable toilet paper: the worst experience of my life. (laughs)

But going back to either Uber, walking, or Lyfting, they decided in Atlanta to raise the prices a stupid amount for Uber after this. I think it was because of racism. They really didn't have to do that.

You could have easily just told the people who were driving to wear a mask and maybe give them hazard pay. I didn't think it needed to fall on me to pay seventeen dollars to go to the store.

"It's like, do you want to get your life sucked away from you from a deadly coronavirus? Like, no."

Instead of leadership, there's ideologies and myths and misinformation all the time. This is a little bit later, but it still is in this time. It was hard to sometimes even wear a mask in places because people were offended by it. They were like, "Why would you do this? It's fake." I wasn't treated that well at this one restaurant because I came in there and wore a mask. A little boy came up to me. He was like, "Well, why are you wearing a mask? If you don't have it and I don't have it, then we both don't have it." I'm like, "Sir, no, you don't know where I've been. I don't know where you've been." Having family and things in California where they actually had a lockdown, I'm getting that sort of information. And then my experience in Georgia is really haphazard. So wearing a mask in a store—which I already hated to do anyway, because I felt like I'm too pretty to wear a mask (laughs)—I was so irritated with even just having a facial covering. I feel like there has not been a point in this pandemic that I've ever gotten used to that, you know? But I've been doing it because I care about other people and I really don't want to get other people sick. And I also don't want coronavirus. It's just not that difficult.

Which brings me back to how I feel about this whole thing. It's like, do you want to get your life sucked away from you from a deadly coronavirus? Like, no. So it was dramatic.

I had to pay extra Uber fees, or walked, or public transportation. Public transportation is just garbage in Atlanta, with the exception of the fact that the train goes into the airport. That's the only thing that they have. But the buses don't come on time. The streets are really wonky. I remember when I was going to go vote in the primaries, I literally asked the bus driver, "Do you stop at this street?" They're

like, "I don't know." I was like—(laughs) So just dealing with Atlanta stuff was really frustrating in a global pandemic.

Duncan: That leads to my next question about some of the big differences you've noticed between Atlanta and now Santa Cruz, in terms of COVID or anything else that stands out as a big difference to you.

Brown-Gaines: Oh, yeah. It's like night and day, honestly, not that I'm privileging any one over each other. I think it's easy to be like, oh, that's a Southern thing, or like oh, the South is backwards. But, I would definitely say that it really is night and day. Atlanta's a chocolate city, for real. And moving here, I'm definitely the minority.

"Anybody could have turned mask-wearing into a patriotic act, you know what I mean?"

My landlady was talking about how masks were bad for you. And I was like, "Girl, come on, it can't be as bad as coronavirus, but okay." But then in Atlanta you have this, "Oh, I'm invincible," issue. Like, "There's no way I could get it, because we're both clean." Honestly, seeing it now from over here with my friends, my friends [there] still go out. I'm like, "So you guys have the vaccine over there. Like, got it." (laughs) You definitely see a lot of personalities.

I do know also that some people took it really much more seriously because of the inadequacies. Like my professor, KP, I went to her house right before I left, which was the end of July. She told me that I was the first person who had been in her house since March. She had been getting her groceries delivered. She didn't leave. Everything was virtual. I would definitely say older Black people were very smart about it. I think it is the younger generations who really think they are invincible. And then at one point, it was spiking among youth. I was like, "Okay, guys, come on."

Here in Santa Cruz, people wear the masks outside. I like to think that it's very normal, yeah, which I appreciate. It's the failed

leadership at the federal level. It really didn't have to be like this. Anybody could have turned mask-wearing into a patriotic act, you know what I mean? And it really is: to care for other people above your own. Like I said, I really was anti-mask for a while. I wore—I call them freedom flags (laughs) bandanas instead, because I was just like, I don't want this to last for that long. But at the end of the day, I did it because I didn't want to get people sick.

Duncan: Sure. And you mentioned, too, that the experience of Spelman online was obviously not the same as in person and that a lot was lost having it be online. Did you have any concerns about starting at an entirely new school in a new graduate program entirely online?

Brown-Gaines: I think I wasn't that upset because the UCs, they announced it really early, I think like in June, that the fall was going to be online. I had time to get used to it. The one concern I did have was the Zoom. I was just like, I don't know how I'm going to continue on with Zoom. Because my first experiences with Zoom in this one class that I had, I really didn't care for the professor and she made Zoom much more terrible than it needed to be. She would go back and look at the video of people's faces. Prior to this, the only time I used video calls were in casual situations. I have, and lots of other Black girls have very expressive faces. If you say something, I'm really going to be like [indicates] and you can tell. So she would literally go back and watch them and then get mad at us. And I was like, "Girl, I don't even know how this stuff works. (laughs) I just got on Zoom and I'm still struggling with all these other things going on. I can't control my face." So I was a little worried about Zoom. And I understood it. I couldn't be like no, I want to go on campus and sit by somebody. For what, you know what I mean?

"I've been able to read at the beach. I'm not rushing to get on the freeway and drive up to the school and find parking."

Honestly, now, living through it, I am kind of enjoying it—I have

no choice. (laughs) But also, it is a good thing for me specifically. Being an introverted type of person, a lot of the newness and the welcome and all those different types of things can be a little overstimulating. It's allowing me to be home. Maybe it's a little bit more of a curse than a gift. We'll see when we get back on campus (laughs) but I've been appreciating it so far. I've been able to read at the beach. I'm not rushing to get on the freeway and drive up to the school and find parking.

That's making the whole transition into higher-level thinking a little bit smoother, honestly. Because even the first year, isn't it mostly reading? And it's nice to be a little bit safe in that way, in this way. I really am appreciative of it. Honestly, I wouldn't want to do it any other way. I'm like, wow, (laughs) I have a nice little library here on my desk. I do want to go back. It's never like this is what I want forever. But for specifically me, it is great. (laughs)

Duncan: Well, that's good. I wanted to ask you—and maybe you alluded to it a little bit—is if you have been up to campus at UCSC since you moved here, and how that has been, going to the physical location of the campus that you haven't actually started at physically, but you are a part of now. What is that like?

Brown-Gaines: Weird. (laughs) It's really weird. I've been a couple of times. I went, and I really like it. It's such a gorgeous campus. I went to the bookstore and got a bunch of gear. That made it really special. Like I said, my dad and I went to visit Santa Cruz before, in 2019.

It is a little odd that we have these schools, and it makes me kind of reassess. Like I said, throughout this whole time, I've kind of been having this different lens, because I'm in such a weird place being a part of the class of 2020, which is a politically charged term. (laughs) But I still feel really connected to the school. Like I said, Santa Cruz's ideals of community and togetherness really are evident, even in the physical buildings themselves. I do feel at home, and it gets me excited for when I go back because I'm just

like, this is such a gorgeous campus. And it's now a new experience in my life. I get to grow with it. So in the absence of it, I've been thinking of what I want to do at this school, what types of programs I want to get involved with, different people, and what I want to push for and all these different things. I think that's kind of the good part about it. Also, I have the space to think about that, rather than being dropped in it and just having to survive and push on.

Duncan: Sure. I'm curious, too, the other people that I've interviewed for this project have been at Santa Cruz for a number of years. The timeline of the last year in their head is: the power safety shutoffs last December, tons of power outages and missed classes. And then the peak of the COLA [Cost of Living Adjustment] strike with campus being shut down—lots going on with that—and then COVID. Then you come in. And then we have the fires, which you did get to experience. But I wonder what your perspective is of the past events and maybe hearing about them and how you see that has affected campus?

Brown-Gaines: Yeah, it's really interesting that you say that. I don't know if this is the situation at other schools, but I feel like if I were to describe my timeline— Last year, at the beginning of the year, we had a lot of freshman activities. And during one of the freshman block parties that they had, these shooters came by and started shooting into the crowd. That shook the community a lot. And then later on we had this really heinous murder that happened at Clark-Atlanta [University] of a girl and her boyfriend who murdered her roommate. So it's kind of interesting that schools are just really going through it at the same time.

I remember reading all the articles that I could about the graduate student strike. I knew it was at its peak, I hadn't been accepted yet, but I knew about them. I understood it. I was like shoot, I can't afford to go there. (laughs) Sorry, I kind of forgot the question.

Duncan: I think you're answering it. It's how you see the past events and how they've affected campus, which I think is fascinating,

because you have a different timeline of other tragedies, it sounds like, from your undergrad. And then coming here, you're entering into a narrative of people that have already been here going, "This year has been terrible for these reasons." You, having not experienced them, you're only hearing about it—but then also bringing in your own timeline of good and bad. How do you process that?

"The wildfires... back in August, really did tear me up inside."

Brown-Gaines: Well yeah, I just have to breathe through it. I would say I'm a very spiritual person. I believe God does everything for a reason. And when you have two of the best schools in the nation shaking their foundations, I think it all kind of—you know, hindsight is our gift or whatever—but I think it was all for this greater release that we needed as people.

The wildfires, though, back in August, really did tear me up inside. For like a week I was kind of checked out, maybe even two weeks. Because I, at one point, didn't graduate from one school, and then my other one was at risk of getting burned down. I felt really defeated at that point, even though I persevered. My whole life has been around education and schools. I was raised by a teacher, and around teachers in my community. School means everything to me. Education means everything to me. So I was like, wow, God, I just feel very targeted and attacked all the time. I think I did internalize it a lot for a while. I was just like, why is this all happening to me? But then I had to remember that other people's lives were being affected by this in ways that were much worse, I would say, than my situation. I'm not saying that I need other people's pain to feel good, but finding community in that.

Fortunately, Santa Cruz didn't burn down and Spelman is still planning our little graduation. So I'm glad that I stuck in here the whole time. One thing I have learned is that you have to trust and have faith in the future and tomorrow will be better. Or, if it's not, then there's always the day after that, so just keeping on stepping.

I mean, there were times where I did get (sighs) really depressed. There are some weeks I can't even recall because I just would lay in bed all day. I was reliving the same day, every day. But Santa Cruz was the guiding light. And I'm glad to be here.

Duncan: Thank you for sharing that. I want to transition hopefully to something a little lighter, because I know I've been hitting you with the heavy questions—and thank you for sharing that. I think it's really important to hear that. But I'm curious, too, you've never lived in Santa Cruz before, right?

Brown-Gaines: No.

Duncan: So moving to a new city in the time of a pandemic, what is your day-to-day like? What are things you do that hopefully bring you a little happiness or relief? Or strategies to keep you going?

"I try to at least every other day go to the beach and sit out, look at the ocean. It's such a healing practice."

Brown-Gaines: Well, my grandmother was born in California. My mom was born in California. I was born in California. So California's really my origin story. I feel very at home here.

I honestly wanted to get away. I like Santa Cruz because it's between San Francisco and Los Angeles, and I have family in both places. So I'm far away, but not that far away. My day-to-day—honestly, after living in Atlanta, which is a landlocked city, for four years, a lot of my day, I try to at least every other day go to the beach and sit out, look at the ocean. It's such a healing practice. I've been doing a lot of shopping, decorating my room. You know, just standard moving things, while also balancing starting, you know, reading—

And then also reading other books that I didn't get a chance to read while I was in undergrad. I have this huge library right here of all these books. So I've been expanding—using the time to flesh

out what I want, or what I like, what makes me happy, and narratives I haven't been able—because half of my library was in Atlanta, half of my library was in California. It's nice to conjoin it, see what that looks like. So I spend time thinking about that.

"I watched this 1968 documentary and they talked about when everything was falling apart and they were like, 'There's no way it could get worse.' And then it did."

I spend a lot of time thinking, also trying not to go crazy from all the mess, especially with this election season. And I knew—I knew that the second half of 2020 was going to be even more ridiculous than the first half. I watched this 1968 documentary and they talked about that, when everything was falling apart and they were like, "There's no way it could get worse." And then it did. So I was aware that it would, which was good. I think the quote unquote "unprecedented nature" of 2020 was just the fact that it had come from years and years of following the status quo. Whereas now, halfway through it, we're kind of—at least I was used to it, because I had to be used to everything falling apart then for the second half.

Like I said, going to the beach helps with the whole ugliness of the election. You've just got to breathe, like take some in. I'm loving the sunshine, too. My apartment was in this weird corner in Atlanta, and I only had a slit; I only had an hour of sunlight every day and the rest was darkness. Here I have three windows and all this fresh sunlight and air and sea breeze. So that's been really helping me get through it.

I try to call my friends. I speak to my Spelman sisters all the time. And just doing personal projects, too. I recently published an open letter to Senator Kamala Harris, calling on her to prioritize the environment—well, first of all, Mother Earth before anything.⁶ I'm like, "If we don't have a planet to live on, then everything else is in vain, Girl." (laughs) I also asked her to designate federal funding for reusable and sustainable menstrual products for every person who

menstruated in the nation because women have been bearing the brunt of all of this in the fields of education, healthcare, essential services and childrearing—and we should be compensated. And then also, that’s the way to “build back better”⁷—you know what I mean—by investing in physical manifestations of Mother Earth. So I did that. I’ve been recently trying to get that to different newspapers. I published it on the UNCF Mellon website, which was exciting. I had been thinking about this for a long time. Like the director, Dr. Cynthia Spence, she was like, “Jacqueline, if there’s something that you want to say, you have a spot on the website.” I was like, “Thank you.” It took me maybe a month and a half. I would just sit around angsty, (laughs) just so angsty for so long until I finally came up with this.

So you know, just trying not to let this define us. Because at the end of the day, it was preventable, which can lead to a lot of frustration. But I won’t let that frustration define me. I have students to teach. I have children to raise later on. This is temporary. And it’s also manmade. Like, let’s not forget that Donald Trump knew about all this way back when and decided to— So that’s why I also just don’t internalize it. I’m like this is some BS and it affects me, but it’s not the end-all, be-all of everything.

“Both of my grandmothers on either side were very adamant about ensuring that people could vote.”

Duncan: Yeah, I did want to touch on the election a little bit, too. The two other interviews I did were right before the election. I think there’s going to be a big difference in interviews obviously before and after. I wonder, specifically to COVID and maybe your outlook at Santa Cruz, how did the outcome of your election change your views of the future of COVID and the future of your time at UCSC?

Brown-Gaines: Interesting. I’ve always been a huge participant and lover of democracy. Both of my grandmothers on either side were very adamant about ensuring that people could vote. My grandmother, Hazel, she was a poll worker. My grandmother

Jacqueline, she would go down to places in the South and make sure that there was no intimidation and that they were actually doing what they had to do. So since fricking 2016, I've been wanting this guy to get out of office.

I think that it's amazing that Kamala Harris is who she is, that she was selected to be vice president. It's kind of funny, because I feel like sometimes people only focus on her (laughs), as opposed to Joe Biden. But, you know, as a Black girl, she's what I look for the most. I see the capacity for change. And we'll see: I think that she has the capacity to gut the whole entire system because fundamentally, her very existence was not supposed to be in that seat. And the fact that it was done in the most transparent election, the most representative election, the most contentious, the most intense election, I think is just really a gem.

I think it will force us to do away with the ideas of race and gender because those are socially constructed ideas and leadership has no color or gender. She was elected here in California, you know what I mean? Nobody has really ever questioned the validity of elections until Donald Trump did. So knowing that people like her, and that she has unique lived experience that she has no problem inserting in places is really, really inspiring to me. It also makes me feel much more comfortable with doing that. I think that we can't continue to believe that our lived experience doesn't matter. It really does! I think we should be proud of it and we should learn from it. Or, if you don't like your lived experience, you can use every day as a new day to change., I don't know what the future will look like, because this wasn't supposed to "happen," quote unquote. So it's really just up for grabs.

"... prior to this pandemic, people weren't doing all right. People were working three and four jobs and it was documented that more than 50 percent of the nation didn't have 400 dollars for an extra emergency."

I think I'm also taking advantage of that, too, and transforming

my life around, maybe because we can do it now. I think other people should too. I mean, prior to this pandemic, people weren't doing all right. People were working three and four jobs and it was documented that more than 50 percent of the nation didn't have 400 dollars for an extra emergency. This pandemic has shown how much money this country has. (laughs) That was one thing to me that I was shook: trillion-dollar CARES Act. I was like, excuse me?

We're already living on pennies. The minimum wage when I got to Atlanta, I don't know if it was seven or nine dollars. Like, it was bad. Why? You know what I mean? We are really limiting—and like I said, this whole resulting kind of lens that I've developed as a result of all this stuff: people do better when you invest in them. You know what I mean? When you're oppressing people through too many means, you're only stunting your own self. I'm excited to see more Black women in charge. I'm also excited for all the other voices that we can now hear because she has uplifted her own.

There are combinations of people we've never even seen before, or not that we've never seen before, because they're seen by themselves—but that will be uplifted and celebrated, instead of, "We're running from that." Even my own experience as a Black woman with Native ancestry, it's nice that now I feel comfortable bringing both of those parts in, whereas before I felt like it was very much just Black, white, Mexican, blah, blah, blah—all these different racial categories that serve nobody, literally nobody.

Duncan: Thank you. We have about five minutes left. The last question I always ask my oral history interviews is, do you feel like there's something that I should have asked you?

Brown-Gaines: I love that question. (laughs) No. Honestly, this is a healing experience because—and I hope you don't feel like I'm putting in on you—but it does feel nice to share this story because it's in the cracks (laughs) of mainstream discourse. I'm really proud to be a historian going into the future. I feel that we have a very important role to play in trying to make sense of this time, but then

also using this as a way to transform the ways that we understand every other time. Because this isn't an isolated event. It's a result of years and years and years. I remember at one point, I was thinking, damn, these are some deep-rooted problems that are bubbling up as a result of this. Especially when it came to, like I said, the point where they were so loud, CNN was so loud about, "Black people, you are dying! Dying!" And I was like damn, okay. Why?

So, yeah. But thank you, thank you.

Duncan: No, thank you very much. It really was a pleasure.



Deer wanders through the empty campus
Photo by Irene Reti

Endnotes

¹Dr. Eugene Cota-Robles was nationally prominent as a microbiologist, as a leader in higher education, and for his efforts on behalf of minority students and faculty. Cota-Robles came to UC Santa Cruz in 1973 as vice chancellor of academic administration, director of affirmative action, and professor of biology. In recognition of his contributions toward advancing minority achievement at the University of California, the UC Regents named the Eugene H. Cota-Robles Fellowships for graduate students in his honor.

²An open source learning platform.

³Brian Kemp has been governor of Georgia since 2019.

⁴George Floyd was murdered on May 25, 2020.

⁵The tazing and arrest of the two students occurred on May 30th. It was captured and broadcast live by news cameras. At least two of the officers involved were ultimately charged with aggravated assault.

⁶See:<https://uncfmellon.org/story/jacqueline-hazel-brown-gaines-open-letter-2020/>

⁷“Build Back Better” was a frequent campaign refrain for the Biden-Harris ticket. It refers in particular to economy recovery.



CZU Lightning Complex Fire
Photo by Jaden Schaul

Karrie Dennis

Interviewed by Aitanna Parker

Karrie Dennis is a third-year undergraduate Literature and Critical Race and Ethnic studies major at UCSC. I chose Karrie because she is a black queer woman presently living on campus. With those intersections, I knew it was important to include her in this project. I've known Karrie for two years. I met her as a freshman and I've acted as somewhat of a mentor to her. I have seen her grow throughout the years as she has taken on leadership roles in the African American Resource and Cultural Center as an intern.

Some things we talked about in the interview are culturally specific so I'll explain them here. When we referred to talking about how social media reacted to the election results, we talked about "people putting bundles on Kamala Harris." That means that people are photoshopping wigs and weaves on Kamala Harris. This is specific to the black community and Black Culture on social media. Referring to Kamala Harris as an "AKA" is in reference to a black sorority known as Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. They were the first black sorority started in 1908 and are stereotyped to hold the same colorist standards today as in 1908.
—Aitanna Parker

Parker: Okay, my name is Aitanna Rene Parker, she/hers. I am here interviewing Karrie Dennis for the oral history project at UCSC. Karrie, do you want to introduce yourself?

Dennis: Yes. My name's Karrie. I am a Black queer woman, pronouns she/her. UCSC student, third year. Twenty years old, four-eleven (laughs)—all that.

Parker: I love that for you. Thank you for saying all of the heights and all of the ages. Thank you so much.

Dennis: You're welcome.

Coming to UC Santa Cruz

Parker: Okay. So I wanted to ask you how you found yourself here at Santa Cruz. How and why did you even come to UCSC?

Dennis: Oh, it was definitely not my first option; definitely not even on my radar at all. I was supposed to go to NYU, but couldn't afford it. Found out that at the last minute, the VA—it was a whole thing. Basically, this government, this bureaucracy was supposed to pay for my education. Turns out they can only do that if you go to school in California. Only got into UC Riverside and UC Santa Cruz, in terms of UCs; did not want to go to UC Riverside.

So UC Santa Cruz was it. And that's how I came here. (laughs)

Parker: So, you're an Army brat? Like, what's your affiliation?

Dennis: No. My dad was in the war in like the '70s. My dad is seventy-three years old. So he was in the war. I think it might have been Vietnam—Vietnam or Korea, one of those. Maybe Korea—I don't really know. But he was in the war.

Yeah, not an Army brat, but my dad was in the war. He is a veteran.

Parker: Okay, Given that we are post-2020 election, basically, I wanted to ask like how are your feelings around what just happened in this moment? This is November the 8th, 2020.

Let me contextualize this a little bit. We had the election November 3, 2020, right, but we had a bunch of mail-in ballots, so that we couldn't get the projected election results until about yesterday. And so Trump and Biden were neck and neck up until yesterday, when Biden was counted as the new president-elect.

Dennis: Yeah, he won.

Parker: He won, there you go. And so I wanted to ask you about how you feel around that. Also, this project is about memories, and like just taking you on a journey through your life, so feel free to get into it.

"...when Donald Trump was elected. I actually cried."

Dennis: For sure, for sure. Since we're talking about memories, let's just go back a little bit; let's go back to 2016, when Donald Trump was elected. I actually cried—like, I actually cried. I remember waking up and I had to go to school the next day, and I was sobbing, like literally sad.

But anyway, I did not think that Joe was going to win. Happy he did—I guess I'm happy he did. Did not think that was going to happen. I guess I'm happy that it did. I was talking to my dad yesterday and he was like, "Aren't you happy that a Black woman is the vice president?"

And I was like, "Not really, because I don't think any Black person that's for liberation of all Black people should aspire to be a president, or a vice president." That just doesn't really make any sense to me personally—I don't get it. And also like, okay, she's a Black woman, but let's look at her track record. I'm not gonna be like, "Oh, he was stealing from me but he was Black, so it's okay. I'm actually happy about it, because he was Black." I feel like that's what people want me to be happy about.

So that's a little annoying, to be honest. When I seen people in the streets dancing, I was like, oh, y'all are weird. (laughs) Like literally, I've seen so many videos on Twitter and Instagram and TikTok of people just losing their shit in the street. Like, y'all know shit is not about to be better? (laughs) People—I don't know, I think people are under the impression that just because Trump is gone, that everything is cool now.

Also, he is about to do the most craziest things he can think of in these next two months. He's about to turn it up a notch. We should be afraid.

Parker: Yeah. Is that how you feel right now?

Dennis: I'm not afraid; let me say that. Because I also saw a lot of things that were like, oh, stay in the house after the election—which I understand. You know, people are about to, so they say, "go crazy." But I'm not like—the MAGA people been here. If they get a little emboldened, damn near Santa Cruz is a sundown town anyway. So I'm fine. I'm gonna stay in, but I'm not scared; I'm not scared to go outside. Those are my thoughts.

Parker: Thank you for your thoughts. Everybody's been relating this election to 2016 and how they were feeling, which is a lot; which is low-key the same anxiety I at least had. And that was just too much. And the whites who—why am I talking about myself? Aitanna, focus. (groans)

Dennis: Say it, say it, say it.

Parker: I'm just like, they were literally elated. They were elated [crosstalk].

Dennis: No, it was like—

Parker: I cannot take it.

Dennis: Like, "The Blacks have their rights again. [ironically] Let's celebrate that. Let's celebrate *that*." [mock snaps]

Parker: Can you talk about what you've been seeing on social media, like Instagram and Twitter?

Dennis: (laughs) I follow stupid people and I follow smart people.

Oh, speaking of, just a small anecdote. I did tell you that I was in Cleveland for my grandmother's funeral. My dad—okay, my cousin told him that Joe Biden is supporting the LGBTQIA community and adding the "P" letter for "pedophiles." Because I'm guessing she saw an infographic on Instagram that has no source, no reliability. So my dad was like, "I have to ask you, is this true?" Because I'm his only gay daughter. So he was like, "I have to ask you, is this true?" I was like, "No. She's dumb. And that's how you know she's not smart."

"I've been seeing people putting bundles on Kamala Harris."

So that happened. So things like that are happening on social media. But in terms of the election, I've been seeing a lot. I've been seeing fan cams, which are like when you do a thing—it's like a reel of a celebrity looking cute. I've been seeing a lot of those with Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. I've been seeing people putting bundles on Kamala Harris. I've been seeing the AKAs are really happy.¹ A lot of people that—

Parker: She's an AKA?

Dennis: She's an AKA. (Parker reacts) Yeah, (laughs) it explains a lot, right? It puts everything like a puzzle piece.

Parker: Like a puzzle piece! (laughs)

Dennis: Like, really hit the nail on the head with that one. (laughs)

But yeah, I've been seeing a lot of TikToks of people that are hating on Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, like as they should, just being like, "Why are y'all idolizing these public servants? Okay, yes, we're happy Trump is out—but what are y'all finna do now? What is about to happen, you know?"

So I've been seeing a lot of that. I've just been seeing hella people super-duper excited. Like, oh my God, Mindy Kaling posted—

Parker: Who is that?

Dennis: The Indian woman that was on *The Office*. You know who I'm talking about?

Parker: Yes, yes, yes. Go ahead.

Dennis: She posted a picture of Kamala Harris and said, "Me and my little girl have someone that looks like us in the White House now." Which is not true, also. I get that Kamala Harris is half Indian, but you're pushing it. You're kind of doing a lot right now. (laughs)

She also had a sweater on a couple of weeks ago that said, "Sojourner, Harriet, and Rosa, and Michelle, and Kamala." I was like, "Ooh," like, "Oooh," [groaning] you put like the FBI with people that were freeing slaves.

So, that's kind of crazy to me. But to each their own.

Parker: To each their own? (laughs)

Dennis: Gotta let 'em live.

Parker: Yes, social media has been going up. So I know exactly what you're talking about the bundles. I'm just going to help the transcriber out and the audience.

So there have been wigmakers—is that what we call them?—who make a lot of wigs for rappers, male and female, and influencers and stuff like that. So they're pretty popular. They put bundles on Kamala Harris because she's Black and this is like "a Black space." So that's what's been going on—which is hilarious to me.

Dennis: She looks real good with them; she looks really good with the bundles. She looks like she could be on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*.

Parker: No, yeah, it's not a bad bundle. It's not a bad wig.

Dennis: No, it's really good.

Parker: No. I actually want some colors in there, but we're not going to talk about that. Because sometimes I want an orange sizzle wig on her, but she's real light-skinned.

Dennis: They need to get that next, or the lime green one.

Parker: Yes. I don't know if she would actually do the lime green one, though. But the orange, with like the little—?

Dennis: That would be a look.

Parker: I think that would be such a look.

Dennis: Maybe for the inauguration.

Parker: Yeah. Anyway, social media's been a mess. It's been a lot. Has it been affecting you at all in a positive, negative, or neutral way?

Dennis: Not really. I see it and I leave. It's not really having a hold on me in any type of way.

Parker: Got it: you're letting go.

Dennis: Exactly.

"I was in the airport after the election—I was just like, oh my God, what if one of these people that sits next to me is a Trump supporter?"

Parker: Thank you for sharing. I want to actually ask, because we talked about the election, we talked about MAGA, like lowkey—not "lowkey." Like highkey, the serious threat of violence on you as a person. I just want to ask if you feel safe right now?

Dennis: That's a good question. Actually, my just being Black and walking around, I'm on campus right now, and I feel safe on campus. But when I leave campus, like no. Like when I was in the airport after the election—because I was in the airport after the election—I was just like, oh my God, what if one of these people that sits next to me is a Trump supporter, like hates Black— I'm hyperaware of everything around me, like the way this white person is looking at me. It's all very much double-consciousness.

Parker: Come on.

Dennis: Thank you. (laughs) But like deadass, though, in that it's always there, but I think that right now it's definitely heightened. I'm looking at people and I'm very much aware of my surroundings just because I don't feel the safest right now. I think I always feel that way. I think the only place where I wouldn't feel that way is if I was at home in L.A., because I live around only Black people and Latinx people that didn't vote for Trump.

Parker: Way to point that out. Yeah, so pre-election but during COVID did you also feel safe? Or did that safety change its definitions between the transitions?

Dennis: Pre-election, I felt fine. I didn't feel how I feel now, which is on guard. I mean, in terms of COVID I definitely didn't feel safe because I was like, I'm about to get sick, like, ah shit. But yeah—

Parker: Okay. And then changing gears to COVID stuff, could you take me back to when you realized that COVID was—

Dennis: A thing?

Parker: Yeah, like it was actually a thing, and it was dangerous.

Dennis: Okay. It was so crazy. (laughs) It was so crazy, because for a minute it was like—I think it might have been February, end of February, beginning of March—shit was still going on. We was moving and shaking; we was going to work. I remember going to work and I was so fucking scared because I was like, don't nobody got a mask on. I don't got a mask on. What if I get it?

*“Yeah, it was hella scary—like hella scary.
But hella people didn't care.”*

It was the beginning of it. I don't think anybody had gotten it—it had been a couple of people in the US that had gotten it, and it was starting to get real. And I was like, oh shit. I think I had heard somebody in Santa Cruz had gotten it. And I was like, oh, they're going to come in the library. I worked at the library. I was like, this is a central place. This is crazy.

I remember the day before they basically kicked us out of school, me and my girlfriend went downtown to get pizza. We were so scared. We were like, we're gonna get sick. We're gonna get it. It's as simple as that. It was really, really scary and really, really sad.

Yeah I went home. My parents were stocked; it was the first time we had ever had that much food in the house. I was like, okay COVID, come through. My mom's getting the cereal I like, period.

But yeah, it was hella scary—like hella scary. But hella people didn't care. I know hella people that are like—like my brother doesn't believe that corona is real.

Parker: Even to this day?

Dennis: Even to this day, yes. To this day, yeah, could give a fuck about a mask. (laughs) Could give a fuck about a mask. Went to Dallas, ate in a restaurant—no mask.

So you have those people. Which I'm like, I don't want to be around you, because you probably got it. To me, everyone has it, personally. So yeah, but that's how I feel.

The Strike

Parker: I don't want to put your business out there, but I know you were at the picket line during COLA [Cost of Living Adjustment strikes], right?

Dennis: Yeah.

Parker: And during that time, how did you feel about that, especially as it was transitioning to being unsafe. And before then, I know the setting was like, "We are all in community with everyone."

Dennis: Yeah! I'm not going to lie, I was like, fuck the picket. (laughs) I can't go back. But I think I did. I was still there, but there was definitely this anxiety that I had wherever I was at [it], like, I'm going to get it.

I think people were still at the picket when it was getting real, like actually popping off, which like more power to you, but I couldn't do it. But I don't know, I really don't remember. That whole time like is a blur lowkey.

Parker: I know. To be honest, COVID and time—because one, time isn't real and it's not linear. Like okay, we get it. But also there's so many things that are happening in between there, like I feel like we just skipped over the fires. Did the fires affect you at all?

Dennis: The fires?

Parker: We were in an apocalypse!

“COVID is happening, and the fires are happening, and Trump is happening. It was all too much.”

Dennis: No, that was scary. Because I live in L.A—but I realized that I live in the hood, so the fires would never get to us. The fires all started in the hills of Los Angeles and Echo Park and places like that. I remember that day when the sky was orange and we had a cast. And I was like, oh my god, it’s really about to be over! But then I was like, oh, I live in the hood. I don’t think the fires are going to get all the way down here. Maybe they might one day. But for now, I think at least my people are safe.

But that was really scary, though, because my girlfriend lives in Oakland and it was really bad over there. And it was just a crazy time. So it was like much shit happening: COVID is happening, and the fires are happening, and Trump is happening. It was all too much.

Parker: And school was about to start, right?

Dennis: And school was about to start. Yeah, school literally started two weeks after the fires. I didn’t know if I was going to be able to come back to school. It was very much an anxiety-ridden time.

Parker: Right. And how are you dealing with school now?

Dennis: (groan) School is a factor in my life. It’s fine. I’m definitely not learning anything. I can’t find any will within me to be excited about school, or really be like, okay, I’m about to sit down and do my work. It’s all just like, okay, let me turn this in real fast, let me get this out of the way. I’m leaving the Zoom class when they say “breakout rooms.” It’s not that cool.

Speaking of school, I wanted to tell you something that was really funny. So I'm taking this class called *Black Queer Sexuality in Popular Culture*, Shange.² She's still making us do a group project, by the way, which is crazy. But we were talking about Blackness and queerness. I thought it was really funny because she was like, "So what does it mean to be Black? Like what does it take to be Black?"

And it took like seven things until we got to skin color. And I was like, "Oh my God, you guys, that's a pretty big one!"

Someone said, "It's how you identify." And I was like, "Oh—oh, well, it is, but it's also how you *look*, (laughs) how *I* identify you."

Parker: For real. Okay, to derail a little bit—because this is really important—I was just watching *The Grapevine*. Do you watch *The Grapevine*?³

Dennis: I do.

Parker: Great. So they had one about, it wasn't just colorism. It was done a few months ago, I forgot. But anyway, Uchechi, my favorite cast member--

Dennis: (snapping) Oh, Uchechi!

Parker: I love her. She was like, "Yes, Black people can gatekeep Blackness, because it's really violent when we don't." Oh, they were talking about Jessica Cruz⁴ the—

Dennis: The fake, the white woman! The white Jewish woman, the white Jewish woman that was pretending to be Afro Latina.

Parker: Yes!

Dennis: Because we scared to say, "Are you Black?"

Parker: Yes! So it's so important, so thank you for bringing that up. Because it is, and it's like (groans) skin color is important, and it's also so much more. And it's violent when people are like, "Let's just be all-inclusive." Like no, Black—

Dennis: I know. That's how you get Rachel Dolezal, like—

Parker: That's how you get so many one-drop rules that are actually violent to you. [Groans] Uh!

Dennis: [Groans] Uh!

Parker: Yikes.

Dennis: And it's like, if I wasn't—baby, you got it. Baby, you don't need to—you got it. The privilege is just *there*. The jobs are *there*. The money is *there*.

Parker: How many people have brought up why privileged people want oppression so bad?

Dennis: Because I promise you, it's not fun. It gave me a mental illness. It's not what you think it is, (laughter) I promise you.

Parker: (laughs) Yeah, that's just a mess. I hear you, though, bro; I hear you; I see you.

Dennis: And also, she said, "What does it mean to be queer?" And someone said, "Resilient." I just thought that was funny. (laughs)

Parker: I'm just holding back so much, and I'm really upset—"Resilience?" Were they like a white woman with a shaved head who said that?

Dennis: Yeah.

Parker: Of course, of course.

Dennis: It's 'resilience?' Are you kidding me?

Parker: I'm releasing so much right now. So much! (frustrated groan)

Okay. Are you working right now?

Dennis: I'm currently unemployed, collecting unemployment.

Parker: Are you unemployed because of COVID?

Dennis: Yes.

Parker: That's a lot. Are you okay?

Dennis: Yeah, I'm getting unemployment.

Parker: Okay, so I wanted to also ask you about any—you're scared of getting COVID, right, which is valid. I wanted to know, are you vulnerable to anything that would happen to you while you got COVID? Are you immunocompromised, is what I'm trying to ask.

Dennis: Oh. I'm not immunocompromised, but I do smoke a lot. So I know if I got COVID, that would be it for me.

But I don't know, maybe it wouldn't because I am young. I don't know, but I think about that often. I'm a big smoker, so I am going to say that I'm lowkey immunocompromised. That wouldn't be good for me.

But other than that, no. But I have old parents that I'm concerned about, which is a lot of the reason why I moved—

Parker: Seventy-three. You said one of the wars?

Dennis: Yeah, (laughs) he's very old. 1947—he was born in 1947, "colored" times, "colored."

Parker: I'm watching *Lovecraft Country* right now. I think it's set in the '50s. And I'm like, that was his reality.

Dennis: Yeah. He got in trouble for dating a white girl—like crazy shit. Which is bad on him, because why would you do that?

Parker: Okay, Karrie, what are you doing right now? (laughter)

Dennis: Okay, okay. I'm gay, it's different. (laughs)

Parker: He walked so you can run.

Dennis: Exactly.

Parker: I'm really upset, I'm so upset. Okay, I'm going to change gears a little bit to more of childhood and how that was for you.

Dennis: Okay.

Parker: Not as in, I don't need you to give me trauma if you don't want to. I'm not searching for traumatic whatever-the-fuck. If I could have a guiding question, it was, what have your parents taught you that has been the most valuable lesson today?

Dennis: Hmm, I don't know. My parents never really put a lot of restrictions on me in the way I could express myself, and who I am, and what I want to do. So I feel like, maybe not a lesson so much as an *example* of who I could be. And also, I could be whoever I wanted to be. Even though they be having they little shit to say, they've never really stopped me from being me, doing Karrie, doing me. Which I'm really grateful for, because I feel like I would be so fucked up. Because I see so many people that are just like,

"Baby, please know yourself better." It's really crazy.

My parents, not to say I'm built different—but I'm just *built different*. I'm sorry, my parents really are like them nig— Can I say that?

Parker: Yeah, it's cool.

Dennis: They are them people, for real; they are them niggas. I don't know, I think they're both just very good examples of what you can do as a Black person in this world. Yeah, that's how I feel; that's how I feel about that.

Parker: I love that. We don't need to go no further.

Dennis: Period, period.

Parker: Period, because I respect you. Okay, are you ready? This is another metaphorical question. I want to know what accomplishments are you most proud of, and why?

Dennis: Okay. (laughs) That's a very swift shift.

Parker: It is, but I didn't want to go there. It seemed uncomfortable.

Dennis: Where? No.

Parker: I asked you about your childhood and you were like (tense sound)—

Dennis: Oh no, I just didn't know what we were gonna get into. I'm gonna to share it all, like—

Parker: Oh, we could get into it.

Dennis: Let's get into it.

Looking Backwards

Parker: Okay! So what do you remember about your childhood?

Dennis: Really, a lot of it is a big blur. I went to a Christian school from a baby until fourth grade. It was a Christian private school, and my mom worked there in the finance office. This is the most detailed memory of my childhood that I have, and it's recorded in a Netflix documentary somewhere.

But when I was in third grade, Prop 8 was happening. Prop 8 was the prop for gay marriage. I don't remember if it was yes was to let them get married or—I don't remember.⁵ But my school/church held this rally and they had all of us come out. I remember we were holding signs that said, "[Yes] on Prop 8," like all this stuff. I was a little kid, so I didn't know. Mind you, at the time I knew I was gay. I don't think I had the language for it, but I definitely knew. And I was like, oh, but I can't be this way, because I was going to a Christian school. I was like, no, no way, not me, no.

But then I went home and I heard my parents talking about it, and it was [against] gay marriage. And I was like, oh my God, I can't believe I just did that.

And I remember I was watching this documentary years later, and it was about gay marriage or something. And they had *that* recording of us at that rally, protesting gay marriage. I was watching it and I was like, oh my God, that's me. I was there. That's me right there. That was really crazy. That's my hottest memory from my childhood.

Parker: Yeah. We love the hot goss. That's wild, because you're super gay now. (Dennis laughs) Not to put your business out there, but you're super, like ten out of ten.

Dennis: Yeah.

Parker: You know what I'm saying?

Dennis: Yeah.

Parker: Yeah.

Dennis: It's like a six on the Kinsey scale.

Parker: Six?

Dennis: It's the gayest, it's the gayest.

Parker: I didn't know if you got a ten or six. And I'm so proud of you.

Dennis: Thank you.

Parker: So proud of you. Welcome back!

So, that was fourth grade, correct?

Dennis: Third grade.

Parker: Third grade—wow, you were a child. So how was middle school and high school for you, if you were growing up in that type of environment?

Dennis: I definitely repressed a lot and it made me a little crazy. I think that everyone around me knew that I was gay, on some level. Like it was definitely there: I was playing basketball; all my friends were boys; I was going to sleepovers with all boys in elementary school and playing basketball with them, and really saying no to my mom on everything.

Oh, this brings up another memory. When I was seven or six, I

looked up girls kissing on YouTube, as you do. (laughs) My mom came in the room and I turned the computer off hella fast. But it was hella sus, like, what are you doing? Before I turned around, I was like, "Mommy, please, like I'm not like that. Please believe me. I promise you I'm not like that, I promise you." And I turned it on, and I tried to blame it on my cousin. I was like, "[My cousin] showed it to me. It wasn't me. I just wanted to see what she was talking about." I was like, "Please don't tell Daddy. Please don't tell Daddy." And this was Thanksgiving Day, so crazy shit.

And she was just like, "It's okay. Just turn it off. We're about to eat soon." So she knew. She definitely knew.

Then when I was in high school, I had a little girlfriend or whatever. My mom found out, and it was crazy as fuck. I remember I was making her this thing for Christmas, and it had Polaroids of us kissing in it. I was going to my friend's sleepover for the weekend, so I just threw it under my bed.

And so my mom picks me up at the end of the weekend, acting normal, like just acting cool. And then we get in the car and she's like, "I want to show you this thing your cousin got me." And then she throws the box in my lap, and then she's like, "What is this?"

And I'm like, "What? What did you say? Like, huh?" I just cried for like an hour, like did not answer her question. She was like, "What is this? What's going on?" Just saying crazy shit.

And then we went home—and shout-out to my fucking dad. First of all, he already knew. He was keeping that shit under wraps. Like, "Don't tell your mother. You good." I remember he picked me up from school one day, and he was like—because old girl, she came to my house. We were hanging out.

And my dad was like, "I know you like her." And I was like, "What did he say?" (laughs) Like, "Huh?" And he's like, "I love you. It's no big deal. Just don't tell your mom, because she'll go crazy."

So then she went crazy. And he was like, “You know, you don’t have to stay here if she’s going to keep acting like that. I want you to be safe,” like all this stuff. I was like, shout out to you, that’s really my guy.

But yeah, that happened. And our relationship was, for like a year, it was kind of *fucked*. Because she really was not cool with it—Like at all. We had to go to therapy. It was not cool. But I don’t know, I never really gave a fuck. I kind of wanted her to find out on some level—I kind of wanted her to know.

And then after that, after she found out—everybody always says I’m so crazy with how I do stuff. Like I just be doing stuff, and I don’t really care what anybody really says about it. And after that, I just did me; she wasn’t going to stop me. Got a new girl, fell in love, you feel me? (laughter)

And eventually she did lowkey come around. I know she don’t like it, but she was like, “Oh, Raven can come over. Oh, I made you guys something.” Like you know, trying to be cool about it. But I know she still don’t like it, but she trying.

But yeah, high school and middle school, crazy times. But I was always cool though in school. I was lowkey very popular in school.

Parker: Absolutely, absolutely. Four-eleven Karrie walking down the hall, “Yo what up Karrie!”

Dennis: That’s literally like, yes, people loved me.

Parker: Wow.

Dennis: Not to flex, but—

Parker: No, no, no, no.

Dennis: They loved me. (laughter)

Parker: "They love you." I love that for you. That's so iconic. Thank you for sharing that, it was great. I love to know more about you; I love the memory. That's what this project is about. Yo, okay, so you're popular, didn't peak in high school.

Dennis: I did not peak in high school, just to make that clear. I was popular, but I did not peak in high school.

Parker: No, no, no, no, it's okay. I was too, but I also did not peak, as you can see.

Dennis: Of course, duh.

Parker: What is the one thing you want most people to remember about you?

Dennis: *Damn*, that's a *tough* one. That's a *tough* one.

Parker: Pause, pause, I'm gonna give you some time to think. But you're really like a West Coast nigga, and I'm really upset. (laughs)

Dennis: Why? What did I do, what did I do?

Parker: [imitating Karrie] "*Damn*, that's a *tough* one." (laughter) I just needed to acknowledge that and I want that to be present.

Dennis: I don't really share it that much, but I want people to remember me by my writing, I think. That's something that I'm very proud of. I would like that. And that I was down for my people, you know, you feel me?

Parker: I feel you, I feel you. So what have we been writing about?

Dennis: Actually, the most recent thing I've written about is my mommy issues in a memoir-type thing, and just a lot of poems.

Parker: And how can a fan base get access to these words?

Dennis: They can DM [direct message] me. (laughs) Yep, they can DM me.

Parker: You don't want to put it out there like—?

Dennis: Not yet. Portfolio's coming together, portfolio's coming together right now.

Parker: Okay, okay.

Dennis: (thinking) Actually, yeah—*actually*, there's a portfolio that I could send out right now if anybody's interested, so yeah.

Parker: I mean, I would love to.

Dennis: If you want that, I could get that to you.

Parker: All right, period, period, thanks. I don't know if you want to spit something for the transcriber right now, but—

Dennis: Nah, nah, nah.

Parker: But that's beautiful. And you're a literature major, right?

Dennis: I am.

Parker: And you're doubling in Black Studies?

Dennis: In CRES.⁶

Parker: In CRES, in CRES. Never mind, we're not going to get into that.

Dennis: Black Studies came along a little too late.

Parker: CRES only takes ten classes; I think Black studies does too. You're fine. You can literally get, if you've taken all the Negro classes—

Dennis: I have.

Parker: —you can get the Black Studies. It's fine.

Dennis: You're right, you're right.

Parker: I know, I know. But that's really exciting, Karrie, and I'm really proud of you. And you're doing such great work.

I'm trying to figure out if we left out anything or if— Is there anything you want to share that you think would be important to document, like the biggest takeaway from this year that we didn't cover yet?

Dennis: Voting will not bring any type of liberation to anyone. What else? No Black person should ever aspire to be the president or the vice president of an imperialist, white supremacist, colonialist state.

Parker: Right.

Darkskin Supremacy 2021. That's all I want to say. Nothing lighter than a paper bag, thank you.

Parker: So reverse colors then.

Dennis: Yes.

Parker: Absolutely, I love that idea, super happy to be a part of it. Let's start a campaign.

Dennis: I think we should. Let's make an infographic. Why not? Throw it on the Gram.⁷

Parker: Throw it on the gram with your written words as a manifesto.

Dennis: Why not?

Parker: Why not? You're already so good. (conversation)

I want to say thank you so much for talking with me. I'm going to end the recording here. Are there any last words for the audience?

Dennis: Thank you for having me.

Endnotes

¹Alpha Kappa Alpha, a historically Black sorority founded at Howard University.

²Savannah Shange, UCSC assistant professor in anthropology and critical race and ethnic studies.

³The Grapevine is an online revisioning of the panel/topical issue show format by and for “this generation” of “young game changers.”

⁴Jessica Krug (AKA “Jessica Cruz”) is a former professor of history. In 2020, it emerged that Krug—who had asserted she was Afro Latina from the Bronx, among other identities of color—was in fact a white Jewish woman from the Kansas City area.

⁵Proposition 8 was a 2008 California ballot initiative to constitutionally ban same-sex marriage in the state, which had been briefly sanctioned statewide following a court ruling. A “Yes” vote would have been to ban same-sex marriage. Prop 8 passed, but has since been declared unconstitutional by the courts and struck down.

⁶Critical Race and Ethnic Studies

⁷Instagram



2020 Garden, Capitola
Photo by Irene Reti.

Queenie Don

Interviewed by Isabella Crespin

Queenie Don and I have been co-workers for over a year and are also in the same year and major. Despite our many shared interests, we bonded over food, which we touch upon in the interview. Both of us are anthropology majors in our third year, and we are also part of Minorities in Anthropology. Don has had a wild journey in this pandemic, and is just one of many that has had their lives upended. Don was zooming in from Santa Cruz, but for the majority of the pandemic was living in San Francisco. There are moments where we reminisce about shared memories, and we have tried our best to explain the events so that the audience can understand those moments and places important to us.

At this time, COVID-19 cases are constantly growing. There have been new statewide mandates in California on staying in for a three-week period leading up to Christmas. Christmas is an anxiety-inducing event for many, especially since we have now seen a large uptick in cases since Thanksgiving. There continues to be this amalgamation of things of importance happening at once, from the continued drawn-out election, to the anti-lockdown protest that only seems to be growing. There is also exciting news of vaccine distribution. Many are hopeful that by the end of next year we will all have access to the vaccine. Whether this is true or not is something we will have to see in the future.

—Isabella Crespin

Crespin: Hello. This is Isabella Crespin with Queenie Don for the UCSC COVID-19 project. Today is December 9, 2020. Hello, Queenie.

Don: Hello.

Coming to UC Santa Cruz

Crespin: So tell me how you got to UCSC. Why'd you pick this school? What drew you to it?

Don: Well, I generally wanted to go to a college in Northern California because I'm from Southern California. I'm from South Pasadena. That's fifteen minutes away from L.A. So I hadn't really been outside of the Southern California area. So I just don't want to be too close to home, but don't want to be super far away.

So I applied to some of the UCs and then got rejected from some, and got accepted from ones that were too close. Not UCLA; UCLA I didn't even try, because I—(laughs) But Santa Cruz accepted me. I'm like, why not? I didn't think about the fact that it's in the middle of nowhere. But we still love it for our reasons, and also hate it for other reasons. (laughs) But, yeah, Santa Cruz.

Crespin: Yeah. You mentioned growing up in Pasadena. What communities were you part of? How does it differ from Santa Cruz?

Don: I grew up in a little town south of Pasadena, literally called South Pasadena. It was a majority white and Asian community. And it was a very wealthy community, because everyone was there for the quality school district. I somehow got there because my parents rented a one-bedroom apartment. [They had] three kids, but worked really hard to stay in that area and provided us the opportunity of getting into that really good school district.

And to answer your question—how it's different from Santa Cruz—I'd say Santa Cruz has a lot more white people, but there is a more diverse population of other minority students, which is really cool to communicate and connect with.

Missing UCSC

Crespin: What was your regular routine before the pandemic?

Don: Pre-Covid, I had an apartment at College Nine and Ten on campus. I was a social science student, so I mostly had my classes around that area. Most days I'd just venture out, go to my lectures, and then come back and eat some lunch, and then go back out again and go to sections or lectures and do my work somewhere outside, which was so nice and peaceful. Oh, I miss that.

Crespin: What's the thing you miss most about UCSC?

Don: Oh, okay, like in person?

Crespin: Yeah. In person.

Don: Okay. Definitely being with friends, being in such close proximity with them, and having that easy, accessible chance to talk together, like meet for thirty minutes and just catch up or anything. I do miss the in-person classes. Although I would zone out for half of the class, the other half I'd be like wow, this is great. I'm here. I made it. That's all I want to say. (emotional)

Crespin: Where are you currently?

Don: I am currently off-campus, still in Santa Cruz. Somehow.

Crespin: Yeah. Santa Cruz is nice.

It was like, "Go fend for yourselves; we're going to just kick you out. Figure it out for yourself."

Let's get into the pandemic questions. When was the first time you heard of COVID, or something like it, not necessarily by name.

Don: Okay. Well, I remember—I have a really bad memory—but I think maybe somewhere in February, everyone was talking about it. But they were mostly just talking about it in passing, like it wasn't really a major thing. They were just like, "Oh, something happened in China, or it's spreading to another country." It was just a very distant disconnected thing until March. And then everyone had to move out. It was like, "Go fend for yourselves; we're going to just kick you out. Figure it out for yourself."

Crespin: Yeah, how do you feel about the university's response at the start of the pandemic?

Don: It could have been handled a lot better, I'd say. I don't remember a lot that happened. Maybe I blocked it out of my memory. (laughs) But I remember trying to figure out where I would live for the rest of the quarter or the rest of this year, the next academic year.

What happened was in March I was going to visit my brother and sister-in-law in San Francisco. It was only going to be for spring break and then we'd drive down to visit my parents in L.A. But we didn't end up visiting because it got worse. So I ended up staying with my brother and sister-in-law in SF for almost six months until I moved into an off-campus apartment in Santa Cruz.

I was thankfully offered a space from my past housemates and friends. I was very fortunate to find a place for this year. I was relying mostly on trying to have a spot on campus for this year. But the school really just didn't confirm anything, solidify anything concrete. And I was always thinking in the back of my head—like, I understand things are changing a lot, but the fact that you're not making this concrete for some students is really, really anxiety-inducing because it's too last-minute for them to find anywhere else. And it's just—it was not okay. I'm just going to end it there.

Crespin: Okay. Yeah, you don't have to go on if you're not comfortable.

Moving Home: "I became a couch potato."

So how would you say that your routine, what you regularly did, changed once you were on lockdown or quarantine?

Don: I'd say compared to pre-COVID, when I was in Santa Cruz and going to classes, I was still kind of a homebody, I have to admit. When I moved in with my brother and sister-in-law. I wouldn't go out for days unless we'd go on weekly trips to grocery shop, or I'd have to drop something off at the mail, the post office. And those were maybe once in a week things. I'd just mostly stay home. I became a couch potato. I was sleeping on their couch. So me and the couch was just—we were one. (laughs) And that was my routine compared to going around a very large campus in the middle of the forest in Santa Cruz and getting that daily cardio in.

Crespin: I remember when we tried to go to the gym together.

Don: (laughs) I do remember that. And then I fell off the treadmill.

Crespin: That was the last time we went. (laughter)

Don: Yeah. Traumatized.

Crespin: (laughs) I don't remember what I was going to ask. Yeah, so how would you say your relationships have changed since COVID?

Don: My relationships?

Crespin: Like with friends or family. Because you mentioned earlier you used to hang out with people, but can't really hang out with people now.

Don: Yeah—friendships, I guess they're less physically there, I suppose. But I think there are still friendships that you can maintain,

even if you don't text them or call them like 24/7, or even once a week. But they're there. And if you just send a random text one day just saying, "How are you? How have you been?" it's just nice to have that once in a while, too. I'm super close to a couple of friends back home in L.A. I haven't seen them in almost a year because last time I saw them was December or something. At the beginning of COVID, we Zoomed a lot. And we'd either do team workouts over Zoom, or we'd watch Game of Thrones over Zoom. That really helped a lot going through staying at home every day, like 24/7.

"Even in this very uncertain time, I still had that network of support from my family and friends."

And in terms of family, I had to live with my brother and sister-in-law for six months. So I got really close to them, which I hadn't really thought I would be able to. My brother is seven years older than me, so I never really thought I'd be living under the same roof with him again. But it was nice to live with him. It was really fun seeing that side of him after so many years not really being in the same part of California. I'm very fortunate that they took me in because I was literally homeless. Yeah, really thankful.

Crespin: What has been one of your favorite moments during this time?

Don: I guess they'd be just small moments, like as I mentioned before, just Zooming with friends and talking about random things for hours on end, at the most random hours, Facetiming and talking so much stuff that I don't even remember. It's just a lot of the small moments. Also getting takeout in SF with my brother and sister-in-law and eating it at their little small dining table, just spending that time with them. Even in this very uncertain time, I still had that network of support from my family and friends. That was really, really nice to have.

Crespin: Okay. So we'll do a little pivot. Sorry. The garage door under me is opening, which shakes the floors of my house. (laughs)

Yeah, so how would you—we kind of touched on it earlier— but how do you feel about online classes? We're kind of forced to do them online.

"Online classes are rough."

Don: Online classes are rough. (laughs) I keep forgetting that it's been since spring. I also took summer classes, and those were obviously online. So spring, summer, this quarter, too. It's so weird how I feel like I've gotten used to it, but also it sucks because there is definitely such a thing as Zoom fatigue. And just being on the screen for so long is also—not even on Zoom—but just working on a screen is tiring, to have to do that hours on end.

And specifically I'd say this quarter—yeah, we talked about having a lot of projects for this quarter, too. Previously, I hadn't had a lot of group project experience, except freshman year in my writing class, but that was it. And that was very brief. This quarter, out of three of my classes, two of them were group projects. One of them went well. I was able to meet two other anthropology majors that were really nice and pretty cool to work with. My other class, it was not as good, at all. It was stressful and I'm really glad that work was done. Out of all the times to have an insane amount of group project things, we had to do it over Zoom, over online classes, which is very inconvenient sometimes.

Crespin: Yeah, I definitely feel that. We also work remote. Would you mind speaking about that experience, of how things changed?

Don: Yeah, I definitely miss working in person. That, I miss a lot.

"I miss when you got me banh mi."

Crespin: Just to preface this for whoever's watching, we [both] work at the DSI [Digital Scholarship Innovation Studio at the UCSC Library] 3D printing space with a bunch of other tech. Sorry. I felt

like that would help people.

Don: Yeah, we just jumped in without context. (laughs) Working at the DSI was really fun. Working with you and the other students and just doing our work, but also talking and just doing other random stuff was really fun, too. And my second boss ever, Kristy [Golubiewski-Davis] is such an understanding and such a kind person. I'm really thankful for having her as my second boss ever. And I really miss that environment of learning all these new technologies and just doing random stuff with you all. And compared to now, where it's more concentrated on—although we have Discord [gaming platform] to share stuff and talk about whatever work-related stuff—I feel like remote work nowadays is more solo, where it's just concentrated on doing training for Adobe or other audio/video software. It's mostly on your own. Sometimes that's nice for me, because I can do that on my own pace. But I miss having that community, in a way.

Crespin: Yeah, we definitely did a lot together as a group. I miss when you got me banh mi.¹

Don: We got banh mi so much. Those were the good days.

Crespin: Yeah, so getting back into COVID and the times we live in, what is a key moment, you would say, of the pandemic? Not necessarily personally for you, but something that happened within this timeframe? I can give examples.

Don: Okay.

Crespin: Some people I've asked have said the fires in Santa Cruz. Some have said the Black Lives Matter protest. Recently, the election.

Don: There was a lot.

“Everyone would take pictures and share on social media about how it looked like the apocalypse.”

Crespin: Anti-mask protests. Yeah, there’s been a lot. But what is something that you have found to be one of the key moments? We don’t have to get into all of them. There’s too many to name.

Don: Yeah, there are a lot to name. I’d say the fires, because proximity-wise they’re like the closest. And physically you could see the effect of them, like in the sky and everything. That was wild. Everyone would take pictures and share on social media about how it looked like the apocalypse. And I’m like, it *feels* like the apocalypse. I’d say the wildfires were—wow, yeah. There was a lot else that happened, but—

Crespin: And how do you feel the UCSC community dealt with that, whether administrative, or just the people part of school?

Don: UCSC specifically, or Santa Cruz?

Crespin: Let’s go with UCSC specifically. How do you think it affected the *community*, is probably a better word, of UCSC?

Don: I think it was more like towards the summer and early fall, I believe, that the wildfires happened. I remember hearing about how people were still kind of on campus. And families do still live here, I believe. But a lot of people had to move out and maybe move into some of the residences on campus. So that’s one thing I do remember. UC did kind of help with during the fires.

Crespin: So, with the current uptick in cases this past Thanksgiving and everybody went home for some reason, how do you feel about the state of COVID in California, or the world, or whatever? How do you feel like things are going?

Don: I feel like the holidays did definitely make it worse. There’s

an increase, but I'm thankful that there have been more measures of lockdown throughout California. There that recent news about the first vaccine being given to some ninety-year-old woman in the UK? I think that really opens up that hope that it will get better and we just need to take some time and hunker down and still not go outside. But I feel like—this is me maybe being a pessimist—but I feel like with that news of the vaccine being out there, people might just still do stuff they're not supposed to, just with that hope.

Crespin: How do you feel about the way people have been not taking COVID seriously?

"You can't put a Band-Aid on it anymore."

Don: I don't understand them, I'm going to admit. (laughs) I don't understand how they put two and two together and just think that COVID is a hoax, or wearing a mask isn't effective. Some of the arguments of anti-maskers are like, "My body, my choice." But I'm like, but what about other people you're around? It affects other people, not just your body. I don't understand what their logic is.

Crespin: What do you think COVID has revealed about our society? Or things it uncovered?

Don: COVID has amplified problems that were already preexisting, but we just ignored and were just like, put a Band-Aid on it. But with the pandemic, everything is amplified. And it's just something you can't really ignore or put a Band-Aid on anymore, because then it will exponentially get worse. With Black Lives Matter, with the wildfires and the political atmosphere—oh, many things—it's amplified a lot of the things that we need to work on and reconstruct and then rebuild.

Crespin: Do you think this pandemic will bring positive change when it's over?

Don: Optimistically, I want to say yes because it's brought so many things into people's faces. Like there's this problem, it's, as I said, amplified by COVID. You just can't ignore it. You can't put a Band-Aid on it anymore. I hope that that brings a lot more people to commit to that change. Maybe for some, like not really. But because it's shoved in our faces—you can't ignore this anymore—into more people's faces, they'll be committed to that progression forward.

Self-care

Crespin: Since we talked about how these are stressful and crazy times, how do you do self-care? How do you keep yourself sane? As tips for people in the future who also get stuck in a pandemic (laughs) how do you keep yourself sane?

Don: Personally, as I mentioned before, I am a homebody. I am very comfortable being alone sometimes. I feel like I'm blessed because of that. (laughs) I recently took up a hobby and started hand embroidery. That's a hobby I took up and that's really fun. And it helps me focus. Because with some other things, it's hard to focus on. But with this project, hand embroidery, I have to focus on it because I'm using a needle. And unless I want to stab myself multiple times— That helps. It's a nice creative outlet. I've watched a lot of TV shows and K dramas. So that is some quality therapy there. (laughs)

Crespin: What's something you've embroidered so far?

Don: I have embroidered two small little designs as gifts for my friends back home as a holiday gift. I'm planning to just mail it along with some other things for their gifts. One of my friends owns a pet tortoise. So for one of the designs, I did like—it looks like a badge kind of thing. But I embroidered a little tortoise and put "Tort Mom." So hopefully she likes that. And then another design for another friend, I made a little AmongUs² character, but hers specifically that she always uses. I put that on a black fabric with little stars. It was a scrap fabric that my housemate thankfully had,

because it worked perfectly. I know, I did an AmongUs character because we also played Among Us over Zoom sometimes. It lowkey stresses me out, but she loves playing it. So, hopefully she'll like that.

Crespin: Yeah, since you mentioned the holidays, what are your plans for Christmas? Staying home? Going home? Eating baked ham?

Don: (laughs) I can't really go home home to LA, because that's a distance away and my parents are kind of old, so I don't feel safe being with them. I think I will just stay with my brother and sister-in-law in SF. I stayed with them for Thanksgiving. I got tested before, tested negative. I just got a test today so I could get a negative before I leave on Saturday. My roommate—she also lives in SF, so she's giving me a ride, I'm so thankful, up to SF and dropping me off. I'm just going to hunker down for a couple of weeks in their apartment and eat all their food.

Crespin: What's one of your favorite Christmas traditions in your family?

Don: I don't know. We don't really do traditional Christmas things. We don't really exchange gifts. I guess just being together, all of us. And just eating, like eating anything. Not even a big, I don't know, ham or whatever you usually eat on Christmas. (laughs)

Crespin: I don't, either. That's just what I see in commercials.

Don: Oh, geez. (laughs) Yeah, just being with family. That's a great time with them. Thankfully, I have family in SF, so.

Crespin: What's the first thing you'll do when this pandemic is over? Let's say it all of a sudden stopped. What would be the first thing?

Don: What would I do? Realistically, I'd have to go back home to

L.A. to visit my parents because I also haven't seen them in almost a year. And see my dogs, too! Oh my God, my dogs! And see my friends and visit my family. But mostly—driving down to LA and just see my parents.

Crespin: Yeah. This is a bit of a shift, but it is almost finals week at UC Santa Cruz. Currently dead week, right? So how has that been different since we're in this pandemic?

Don: Specifically for me, this finals week for this quarter, two of my classes were group projects. Our group projects were our final projects. One of them I got done this past weekend, so I'm done with that, thankfully. That one was a bad one. The second group project, our final presentation, is actually today at 5:20. So that's exciting to be done with. We mostly have all of the meat work done, and I'm so glad for that. The only final I have left is a five-page essay due Tuesday.

So I feel like I'm chilling. I'm so grateful I am. That's why I'm being a social sciences major. I guess for this quarter specifically, being on remote, although I think my finals haven't really changed a lot because my finals in the past were mostly just essays that I submitted over Canvas or online. So, not too much change on that part.

Crespin: What's something you're looking forward to next quarter?

Don: There was a CRES class that I enrolled in. It's the Asian-American environmental justice class. I know nothing about it, except for the title. It sounds interesting. I'm excited about that. And our new DSI space is being renovated, so that's exciting to be a part of and just see how that goes.

Crespin: Well, looking at the big picture, what's something you're excited about in the future future?

Don: Future future. Future future. Being twenty-one is exciting. I turn twenty-one in July next year. So that's fun. Oh my God. Any more past that just stresses me out because graduating in this economic situation isn't ideal. So. (laughs) Entering that job market is a whole other thing I just don't want to think about.

Crespin: Okay. Then we won't think about it.

Don: (laughs) Okay.

Crespin: Is there anything that I've missed so far about your experience during the pandemic that you would like to discuss or talk about?

Don: I feel like we covered a lot. Can't think of anything else.

Crespin: What will be the first thing you'll eat when you get out of the pandemic?

Don: Oh my God, the first thing I eat. I've been craving my mom's food that she cooks. She makes great pho and spring rolls, so that, I've been craving for a long time. That's something I'd be looking forward to eating after this pandemic.

Crespin: That is so delicious. Okay. Well, thank you.

Endnotes

¹Bahn mi is a Vietnamese bread filled with savory substances.

²AmongUs is a multiplayer video game.



Apocalyptic Sky, CZU Lightning Complex Fire
Photo by Irene Reti



UCSC Warning Signs
Photo by Irene Reti

Liv Kaproff

Interviewed by Kathia Damian

Liv Kaproff plays an essential role in the DIY music scene in Santa Cruz. They book shows at SubRosa, the Anarchist cafe in downtown Santa Cruz. They also write music for their music project, a pop punk band called Practicing Sincerity. It was really refreshing to talk to someone who, despite the pandemic, is still creating art and adapting to the circumstances. We reminisced about attending live shows and reflected on the state of the music scene during the pandemic. Liv is a thoughtful, insightful thinker and I believe that's reflected in the transcript. I hope you enjoy this conversation as much as I did. —Kathia Damian

Coming to UCSC

Damian: Okay, today is December 2, 2020. And can you start off by giving a one or two-sentence introduction of yourself?

Kaproff: Sure. My name is Liv Kaproff. I use they/them pronouns. And I'm a musician and show promoter here in Santa Cruz.

Damian: And I'm curious, what brought you to Santa Cruz?

Kaproff: So I originally came to Santa Cruz to go to UCSC. I went there from 2010 until I graduated in 2014. And what drew me here originally was I'm from near Los Angeles. I knew I wanted to live in Northern California, Bay Area-ish. The natural beauty of Santa Cruz was one of the first things that really brought me here.

But also, in my last year of high school I started learning about the music scene here. I had some friends who were juniors at UCSC already and they were telling me a little bit about some of the bands here and music scene, and it sounded really cool. Yeah, so I came here and I moved away for one year. I lived in New York from

2014 to 2015, and then I moved back to Santa Cruz. Since then, I've been booking shows at SubRosa and playing either solo or with my band Practicing Sincerity.

Damian: Wow, can you talk about your role as an organizer, or in the community in Santa Cruz?

SubRosa Anarchist Community Space

Kaproff: Yeah, so what I basically do is I book all-ages shows for touring and local bands. I mostly do this through SubRosa, which is an anarchist community space in downtown Santa Cruz that is collectively run.¹ I'm a collective member. We're a completely non-hierarchical collective, so there's no managers, or senior members, or things like that. Once you're a collective member, you have just as much say as anyone else in the collective and an amount of autonomy to do what you feel you want to do with the space, so long as it vibes with some of the general rules that we have.

So what I do is I book shows. And it's largely centered around bands, smaller bands from out of town who want to come play in Santa Cruz. They're on tour from—often it's as close as San Francisco or Los Angeles or Portland, Oregon. And sometimes it's all the way from New York. I've booked a band from Mexico; I've booked a band from France and a band from Spain. And I've helped book a band from Japan.

We host a space where these bands can come. The model of how we book shows is very non-capitalist. We collect donations at the door. We usually ask for seven dollars and the idea is no one is turned away for lack of funds. Shorthand is notaflof. We ask for a seven-dollar donation. If you don't have seven dollars but you have four, that's fine. If you don't have any money, that's fine. Some people even give more, especially parents, when they come see their kid's band play, they always give us like twenty dollars, which is wonderful. And most of that goes to the touring band, because that's how they manage to get from place to place, for gas money.

Some of it goes to keeping SubRosa open.

And all of our shows are all ages, so no matter what age you are, you're allowed to come to this show. A lot of venues are twenty-one and up, eighteen and up, what have you. We don't do any of that. And we provide a safe space for marginalized groups. We have a policy of we A, won't book a band whose name or lyrics contain any sort of hate speech, or if we know that the members of them are bigots or whatever, we won't book them. And we try to prioritize the voices of marginalized artists. So we try to prioritize booking women, BIPOC folks,² like gay, trans, you know, just more or less trying to avoid the all-cis white male show bill, which you will find at almost any venue you go to, anywhere in the United States, at least. We try to avoid that as much as possible. That also extends largely to our audience of we want to be a safe space for, especially BIPOC and gay and trans youth to come and feel safe. A lot of these kids, if they're under twenty-one, really have nowhere to go hang out. And even if they're above twenty-one, don't feel comfortable going to bars that might have shows because they're going to be discriminated against there. So we provide a safe space for them to come and be able to be themselves and be in a community of people like themselves.

One of the most amazing things about SubRosa and the shows that we have had, will have in the future, is that people really do come and find their community there. I've spoken to so many people who've told me that maybe they just moved to Santa Cruz and really didn't know anybody, but heard about a show happening at the space and came and ended up meeting a bunch of amazing people who they related to and it becomes part of their life. I mean, that's such a huge part of it for me. It's like, music on its own is great. Live music on its own is great, but that sense of community that a space like SubRosa can bring—

There are other places somewhat like it. When I was living in New York, there were places like the Silent Barn andst Shea Stadium you could go to. And around the country there are these unique spaces.

But it's this feeling that you are doing more than paying money to watch someone play music. You're a part of an experience; you're a part of a community. And you feel that difference. You really do feel that difference when you're there.

Damian: And how has the space influenced you as a person since you've been involved in it?

Kaproff: I mean, it's honestly shifted my politics to an extent. Without giving away too much of our internal processes—when someone is trying to become a collective member, we have them fill out a questionnaire. And it's a very no-wrong-answers type thing. We just want to try to get a vibe for where you're at coming to us. And one of the questions is: what does anarchism mean to you, and what is your relationship to it? And in 2015, when I joined the collective, I was very honest. I said, "I don't identify as an anarchist. I am closer to being a socialist or a communist." But a lot of our ideals align and this is the space I want to be involved in.

As I've been involved there more over the years, I've started to understand more of anarchism and realizing that that was a lot of what I believed in, at least, as an end goal. So it's shifted my politics and it's really changed the way I thought about what I do.

I was booking shows before I became a collective member at SubRosa. When I was in college at UCSC, I lived in a punk house called Storey House, and booked shows there, along with a couple of other people who also booked shows at that house. I booked shows also at a queer housing coop that used to exist here called Zami!

When I became a collective member at SubRosa, it was very different because I had this group of people who were encouraging me to do what I was doing. It's hard to put into words, but the scale of what I was doing changed, partially because of some of the bands I was getting asked to book became a little higher profile. Within my first few months of booking there, I got asked to book a

show for this band Winter Break that was popular at the time. You know, it just puts you on more people's radar.

And one of the coolest things I sort of found—especially as momentum started to pick up and I was booking a lot more shows, I got to the point where I was booking four shows a month—was that people started asking me how they could help. That was one of the coolest things that I wasn't really expecting. People started coming to me and being like, "Hey, I'm so grateful that I get to come see shows at SubRosa," or play shows at SubRosa or whatever, "and I see you doing all of this work. What can I do to help you?" And more and more I started seeing people coming to me and being like, "How can I get involved? What can I do to help?" That made me think about my role in the community differently. I had been going about this in a way of like, this is my job and I'm going to just do it. It's a lot of work. I'm going to put my head down and do it. And I started realizing oh, no, other people want to be doing what I'm doing, want to help me do what I'm doing. They don't necessarily know where to get started. They don't necessarily have the connections or whatever they have to have to start. But they wanted to get involved.

That really changed the way I was doing things, trying to create a model that was more open to collaboration, more open to asking people to do different things for me, whether it was asking people to design flyers, asking people to do something as simple as work the door at the show, be the person sitting at the table who asks you for seven dollars. Or asking people to work sound, people who wanted to learn how a PA works. I've taught multiple people just how to set up a PA. To me, it's the most boring thing in the world. I'm like yeah, this is this thing you have to do four times a month and it's really annoying and I have to move all this gear. But when you're showing someone new, they're wide-eyed and like, "Oh, that's so cool! How does that work? How do you do that?" So that's been an interesting shift, seeing how many people want to be a part of it, and finding ways to let people be a part of it. It's not just about this capitalist exchange of—I give you money and I get to see this person play. It's about this community. That's a part of it.

People want to be involved and that's part of people's connection to it. Like to me, whenever I ask someone to work door, I'm like, "I'm so sorry. This is such a boring job I'm asking you to do. It's so annoying." And they're just so excited to help and they end up having fun and enjoying it. I'm like, "Okay, cool." It makes me look at things differently. I'm like okay, it's different to everybody.

Damian: Definitely. I've been to SubRosa shows. I see how much work you put in. And you kind of touched on this, but what motivates you to keep the space alive and to keep doing what you do?

Kaproff: A number of things. What motivates me? I mean, music is my life. From a very young age, music was really important to me. I think, even before I realized this is what I was doing, it was a way for me to process my emotions, even just listening to it before I started making it. My dad is a musician. His dad was a musician. I was very much raised around music. My dad had a home studio and once I was old enough, he would bring me in to the recording studio while he was doing stuff. and show me what he was doing, or ask my opinion on things.

I started writing music when I was a teenager and going to shows as much as possible. I would drive an hour into the city to go to Hollywood or Silver Lake or Echo Park to go to shows. Live music became really important to me, especially because I hated where I was going to school. I just needed an escape. And shows were also—even if I didn't talk to anybody—where I felt like I belonged. When I was in high school, I very much felt, not like a social outcast, but I didn't really relate to any of the people around me. They didn't have the same values and priorities as me. But when I went to these shows, I felt like I was around my people. And even when I was going to college here in Santa Cruz, seeing the scope of what DIY can be. It can be anything from your friends playing acoustic guitar in the living room, to ten people—

It creates the potential for these very magic moments. Like I remember in 2012, two artists who at the time I had never heard of;

these were not popular names at all. But Swearin' and Waxahatchee came and played at Storey House. I remember sitting in my living room with maybe fifteen people watching Waxahatchee play. There was just this feeling in the room. I don't know anywhere else you can get that. I don't know how to describe it, but it's this feeling that you and everyone else in this room are having. It's magical. Or it's, we had this fucking blow-out show at Storey House once that was—it was Leer, Pity Sex, Dads and The World is a Beautiful Place and I am No Longer Afraid to Die. I've never seen so many people packed into a house. Members of the bands had to find places to stand and play. It was wild. But again, it was magical—like this isn't going to happen anywhere else. If this show had happened at The Catalyst, it would be a good show, but it wouldn't have this sort of chaotic, magical feeling to it. I experienced the same thing when I went to New York, of going to these shows where the space you're experiencing something in, and the people, and the nature of that space plays such a big part in how you're experiencing music.

So a big part of doing what I do at SubRosa is acknowledging that and wanting to carry that forward, of knowing that having this show at SubRosa is going to affect what kind of show it is. There are other venues in town that I like and I've even booked shows at. I've booked a couple of shows at The Crepe Place and a couple of other places. Every space is different.

But SubRosa is this very special thing and you can get a bunch of people packed in there. Even people from out of town commented on it all the time. Bands will come through and tell me that this is one of their favorite places to play. There are bands who tour around who make a point anytime they're on tour of coming and playing SubRosa, who have never lived in Santa Cruz before, but they fall in love with that space. And every time they're on tour, they're like, "All right, can you book me at SubRosa?" And if the date that they want isn't available, they'll try to find a different date that they can play. So that's such a big part of it for me, knowing how special that experience can be, and really wanting to make that happen.

Damian: Yeah, I miss live music so much. That just made me think of the shows I've seen at SubRosa and live music. Oh, my God.

Kaproff: Yeah, I miss it so bad.

"At the very beginning of quarantine, Instagram Live seemed like the thing."

Damian: On that note, what has changed during corona? The community—how has that become socially distant? How does a venue that relies on live music get through this virus and pandemic?

Kaproff: So there's a couple of different questions in there I'm going to try to sort through.

Damian: I know, sorry. (laughs)

Kaproff: In terms of the community aspect surrounding live music, I mean, there is no substitute for being there. There's no substitute for being in that sweaty room with amps and drums blaring at you and this person screaming into a microphone. There's no substitute for that. At the very beginning of quarantine, Instagram Live seemed like the thing. I think within the first week or two of lockdown, someone I know named Bob, who used to be based in San Jose and is a big part of the music scene, hosted this livestream that Diners played, Mike Huguenor played. Jeff Rosenstock played. It was this beautiful thing. They announced him as a secret guest right before he went on. He was just standing in his bedroom playing an acoustic guitar. And you had everyone in the comments section of Instagram Live just going off and saying hi to each other in there and all that kind of stuff. That felt very special because it was a different kind of intimacy. Instead of the intimacy of you're right there in front of me, it's the intimacy of like oh wow, you're in your room. You're just in your room. This is so raw. So there was that element of it.

I hosted a couple of Instagram Live shows through the Cactus Bloom Collective page. I guess I should have mentioned Cactus Bloom Collective earlier in this interview (laughter) but Cactus Bloom Collective is a collective that I started in 2018, largely out of the thing I mentioned before, of finding that other people wanted to get involved and just didn't really know how. So I created this collective so that people could get involved in some aspect or another of booking shows without having to necessarily have their name be attached to something. Because that's one of the weirdest parts of what I do, it's sort of made me a public figure. People know who I am. I'm personally fine with that, but I know people who want to do what I do and don't want to have people know who they are. So this was a way where you can book the shows and your name doesn't have to be on any of the events. It doesn't have to be on the Facebook event, blah, blah, blah. You don't even have to be the person people contact. It can be this page that someone contacts, so then you're just the person responding to their message. So I hosted a couple of Instagram Live shows through Cactus Bloom Collective earlier on in the quarantine. Those were really fun.

"Everybody thought it was going to be a few weeks."

And that leads into—how does SubRosa stay afloat right now? Once we realized that lockdown was going to be more permanent than we originally thought— It's so funny to think back on March, when we first started hearing about this, and when shelter in place first started, or even before shelter in place started, because we started canceling shows before that. We were like, we are a safe space, and that doesn't just mean that we're safe from hate. It also means that we can't just keep operating knowing that we could be jeopardizing the health of people who come to these shows. We can't do that in good conscience.

But once shelter in place started, we thought it was going to be a few weeks. Everybody thought it was going to be a few weeks. All of us were like, okay, we're going to cancel all of our shows through the end of March and just to be safe, we'll cancel all of our shows

in April, too. And then, a couple of weeks in, we were like, oh, it's looking like we should probably cancel shows for May as well. Then we started realizing, oh, shit, we're not going to be able to be open for—at the time we were trying to not believe it was going to be an entire year. But we knew it was going to be months and months of really not being able to be open and especially not being able to have shows.

And this wasn't just affecting SubRosa. SubRosa is a part of a larger collective called the Hub for Sustainable Living, which contains the Bike Church and the Fabrica³ and recent additions, Tenant Sanctuary, and another one whose name I can never remember. We share that building at the corner of Pacific Avenue and Spruce Street and we were all sort of in this together. Because once we couldn't have shows, it's not like the Bike Church could safely operate. They couldn't have a bunch of people in there working on bikes all time. The Fabrica, really the same thing.

“So we started a GoFundMe, basically, asking for donations.”

So we started a GoFundMe, basically, asking for donations. It was really cool to see, at least from my end on the music scene side of things, people who didn't even live in Santa Cruz, artists who had come and played there on tour to varying degrees of notoriety, or whatever, started posting the GoFundMe on their socials, and being like, “Hey, this is a really special space that we've gotten to play at a couple of times on tour. If you're able to give to them, please do.” So we started getting donations from people who didn't even live in Santa Cruz who wanted to keep the space open.

And then, this hardcore band—I want to say it was Gulch; it might have been Drain, I don't remember—made a special edition t-shirt and all the proceeds were going to go to SubRosa. I think they raised over a thousand dollars in a day. Yeah. (laughs) And then I hosted a fundraiser for us over the Cactus Bloom Instagram that's raised close to seven hundred dollars. We've been surviving on

donations to varying amounts. I think the way it works is we pay rent to the Hub and then the Hub pays rent to our landlord. And it sounds like our landlord has sort of given us some leeway. I don't think we're getting an overall discount on our rent, but I think we're at least getting some leniency on the timing of it.

So far, I think we've been managing to stay afloat. We've gotten a good amount of donations. We continue to. My friend Shannon, who's in the band *awakebutstillinbed*, just hosted an all-day Twitch-stream⁴ for her birthday and was like, "All of the proceeds for this are going to go to SubRosa and 924 Gilman." I think we're getting a little over six hundred dollars from that, which is great. The community has really shown up for us, which has been incredible to see in our time of need. People have really shown up and been like, "Hey, it's really important to me that you guys stay open. I will do whatever." A lot of people are being like, "I will do whatever I can to make sure that this space doesn't close."

Damian: And what about your personal music projects, like your band. How has creating changed during quarantine?

"My timeline of when things happened is completely screwed. I have no sense of time anymore."

Kaproff: Creating itself hasn't changed that much for me. The way that my band works is I write the songs on my own and then once I'm done writing the lyrics and some guitar parts, like enough for me to be able to play the song, then I bring it to my band and they start figuring their parts out, and we start figuring out if things need to change a little bit or move. But the first part of it is very much just me just in my head, creating. So that part hasn't really changed because I've had endless amounts of time to be in my room with my thoughts. And my job is also a lot of me not actually working directly with somebody, and having a lot of time to be in my thoughts. I have seen my band at most a handful of times since March. I've hung out with a couple, like we had one full band hangout where we all sat outside and hung out.

But as far as us playing music together, all of the livestream shows I've done mostly on my own. There was one that I played with Fernly and our friends. And that was the first time I'd played music with anybody during quarantine. That was in, August? I want to say it was in August. And it was like—it was such a weird moment. There was a moment in it where we were practicing the first song and the feeling just rose up in all of us: oh, my God, I forgot what it feels like to play music with people. And we've done one full band show, I want to say that was in September. It was after the fires that happened. My timeline of when things happened is completely screwed. I have no sense of time anymore. But around then, we did one full band show that we actually played at the courtyard at SubRosa that was filmed for BFF.fm [community radio station] in San Francisco.

Then recently we started recording an album, so that's been a little bit more of getting together with different parts of my band. But it's still not all together. I went to a recording studio with my drummer and my bassist to record their parts. And now I'm going over to Grandpa's house to record parts with Fernly. And it's very sectioned off, because we have to be socially distanced. And if we're all inside, we have to be wearing masks.

Damian: It's a whole thing.

Kaproff: But it's been an interesting opportunity to not be constantly playing shows, and to be able to be in my head a little bit more with it, thinking a little bit more about what I want the future of this project to look like, and just things like that, thinking more conceptually. I've also been trying to branch off into other creative avenues that I used to do a lot more. I have a degree in fiction writing, so I've been trying to do that a little bit more. I would like to get back into writing poetry. I've been trying to start getting those gears moving in my head. It's just been a lot of solitary reflection time.

Damian: Yeah, Lit majors, go for it. (laughs)

“That Saturday...everyone gathered around Pacific Avenue, around the clock tower and knelt in silence and remembrance of George Floyd and of all the Black people murdered by police.”

And you mentioned the fires. I haven't been in Santa Cruz, so honestly, that feels remote to me. We've been using singular pandemic to talk about coronavirus. But there's a lot of other things happening in conjunction. Do you want to talk about the fires, or Black Lives Matter, other things that have happened this time, also?

Kaproff: Yeah, that's also been such a wild part of this year. Really ever since the pandemic started, like really, really started in March, there's constantly been something coming down. Elements of that are skewed by my personal life. Things happened in my life that affected me throughout the year. So it felt like every single month there was like oh, here's a new thing; here's a new thing; here's a new thing.

But yeah, I mean, the Black Lives Matter stuff was huge. That was a big shift for me. I was pretty involved in protests when I was going to UCSC. But I sort of dropped off of that, I think mostly because I was just disillusioned. I started having this feeling of—I don't really know what good me standing in this intersection and yelling about tuition hikes is going to do. It feels good to be doing it, but actually, I'm just pissing off the people who are trying to get to school. That was how I started feeling about it.

But the weekend that the protests kicked off, that Saturday, Sunday, there was a kneel, you know; everyone gathered around Pacific Avenue, around the clock tower and knelt in silence and remembrance of George Floyd and of all the Black people murdered by police. And people started saying the names of so many people. Some of the people had signs that had lists of as many names as they could fit on these pieces of paper. And kneeling there watching this happen and listening really changed how I thought about it. I had this moment of: oh, this is different.

This is huge and it's happening. I'm not just here to be a body. I don't know, something shifted in me, and I started going to the protests. I really did. I went to as many of the protests and demonstrations as I could and used my online platforms to get the word out about them. That was really huge.

"People I know, their houses burnt down."

And then the fires were so much. I mean, here in Santa Cruz, you couldn't be outside. Parts of my work were shut down. Trying to just be alive (laughs) was getting harder and harder and harder. It was this moment where it really felt like you just couldn't do anything. You had already been restricted by the pandemic, but one of the few things you could do was go outside and go on hikes and do stuff like that. Then it was suddenly like oh, no (snaps fingers) you can't do that, either. And you really can't even have your window open because the air quality was that bad. I mean, there were days where you couldn't see the sky. We had that red sky one day that was terrifying. People I knew were being evacuated. People I know, their houses burnt down. Yeah—it's weird to think that that was only a couple of months ago. This year has really felt like so much more than a year. So much has been packed into it.

One of the interesting things, I think a couple of people have commented on—one of the hardest parts of this year is you're not really given a chance to process anything. You're not really given a chance to grieve. Everything that has happened, you've just been forced to move on to the next thing, to keep going. Like if you're an essential worker—I've been working throughout this entire pandemic. I've been working forty hours a week since May. You're really not given a chance to process.

It's funny that I haven't thought about the fires in a while. (laughs) But they just happened. I actually was just driving through Bonny Doon and Boulder Creek and for the first time, I actually saw the fire damage. I saw the houses burnt down. I saw the trees burnt down. I realized I hadn't been up there. I hadn't been up in the forest

since the fires happened. I basically forgot that they happened.

Damian: Yeah, it's too much, 2020.

Kaproff: Yeah.

Damian: You said you haven't had time to process. But are there things that you're doing, self-care practices, that have helped gotten you through the moment?

Kaproff: To an extent. I mean, I have diagnosed major depression. Luckily, I have a therapist and take antidepressants. If I didn't have those things, I do not know what this year would have been like. It would not have been good. But it's been a sort of back and forth, of actively taking care of myself, doing things that I know I need to do to feel fulfilled as a person, and then just going on autopilot. I mean, it's a defense mechanism. But when you're being barraged with constant crisis, you know, I sort of just shut off. I tried to come back in.

"At a certain point I had to just be like, okay, I need to just stay alive and keep my job and not die."

I don't want to just become completely apathetic. But also it's like, I need to survive. I need to go to sleep and go to work tomorrow morning. I need to feed myself. I need to do all of these things. And I really can't just be present. That's been a big thing—trying to find the balance of being present and allowing myself to just like zone off or whatever. Because trying to be present for this entire year, even to the extent that I normally am in a year, is impossible. A lot of it has just been giving myself extra allowance to spend the whole day watching TV. Get stoned at three in the afternoon and watch movies, do whatever you need to do to feel like you can just get to the next day, has really been what a lot of this year has been for me. And that's been through a combination of what the entire world has been going through and what's just been happening in my personal life. At a certain point I had to just be like, okay, I need

to just stay alive and keep my job and not die. I just need to get to the next day. That's been a lot of it, honestly.

Damian: I feel that so hard. Mulled wine and British TV, here I come. But you said you work forty hours a week. What do you do for work?

Being an Essential Worker

Kaproff: I am currently a roaster at Verve. When you go to the café and they have the beans in the bags, and they have the beans in the hoppers and everything, I'm the one who roasts them. I started that job a year and a half ago. It's been a weird first year to be in a job. I'm fortunate enough that my job is not public-facing. All of our cafes closed in March and we had to lay off all of our café employees, and a lot of our packaging staff, even. But I was one of a few people who—it's sort of funny of finding yourself at this position at a company where it's like oh, yeah, if I don't show up for work, they don't have something to sell. So I've had a job this entire time, which is good.

Damian: Yeah, people are recognizing how essential workers are to the company. Do you see any opportunity in the present moment for corona to shift the world to a more just society? Do you see any hope in that? Or are you nervous about how it's shaping the world?

Kaproff: I think there's some column A; some column B. It was interesting in the beginning of this having conversations with people about the potential for this moment. You're rarely given an opportunity to stop and reassess. The way that our entire world works is that everything is constantly going, going, going, going, going. And the most chance you get is a little bit of a slowdown so that you can think about things and do incremental change. Because the flow can never stop. That's the most important thing is the flow never stops. It can slow down a little bit, but it can't stop. We were given this moment where everything stopped. The potential for that could have been huge. This is one of those

times where having universal basic income would be really fucking helpful. Having universal healthcare because all these people just got laid off by their employers who provided them with health insurance and now they're uninsured in the middle of a pandemic. There was a lot of potential for—like if we can actually stop and restructure everything, we can create a fairer world.

"My biggest hope is that at least the American populace has seen how badly capitalism has failed..."

But what we've sort of seen instead is—I think Amazon had a record year. You know, stuff like that. This company that's infamous for treating its employees like absolute garbage recorded record profits in a year when everyone was unemployed and broke. And where we were all told that this twelve hundred dollars that if we were lucky we got—you know, a lot of people I know still haven't gotten their twelve hundred dollars—but we were told, "Here's twelve hundred dollars. Good luck." If you live in California, that's your rent for one month. But yeah, Amazon made all this money and they don't have to pay taxes on it because capitalism is broken.

I mean, if anything, that is my hope. What I'm hoping is that the end stages of COVID-19—my biggest hope is that at least the American populace has seen how badly capitalism has failed, has seen that your boss doesn't care about you; your government doesn't care about you. All they want is money. And if you're not making them that money—this sounds hyperbolic, but it's literally what politicians have said—it's like, you can go die. I wish that was exaggerating. But there are actual American politicians who basically just said no, they can't keep the stores closed any longer. If your grandma dies or whatever, that sucks.

Damian: Yeah, that was unreal. Markets over lives.

Kaproff: That happened! That was a real thing that happened. That was something that a publicly elected US official said on national television multiple times.

Damian: Yeah, I'll sacrifice myself for the market. (laughs)

Kaproff: Yeah, getting paid eight dollars an hour is definitely worth risking my life (laughs) so that people can go to Walmart.

So my hope is that people have seen that this doesn't work, that we need things like universal basic income, that we need universal healthcare, that we need a higher minimum wage, that we need rent control. I mean, so many people have found themselves without a job to pay rent and with a landlord who was like, "It's not my problem. You owe me however much money this month. You either get it to me or you're evicted."

Or doing the thing that my landlord did back in March. We were like, "Hey, we can't afford to pay our full rent during the pandemic." And she was basically like, "Okay, if you could pay me some amount that would be better. But you either have to pay me back the full amount that you owe when this is over, or I'm going to evict you once the ban is lifted." That was what so many people were told across this country. They put an eviction ban for three months. As soon as that's up, you're gone. So I think people are starting to see that we need at least some form of aid.

Damian: Yeah, some sort of social safety net.

Kaproff: Exactly.

"Music has been such a big part of how people have gotten through this..."

Damian: Yeah, this has been an enlightening interview. So many of the things that you said resonate so much with me. I was just wondering if there's anything I missed that you want to mention in the transcript.

Kaproff: Hmm. Going back to my role in this community and

everything, I do think that lockdown and being forced to be inside has given people a newfound appreciation for some things that they potentially took for granted before. I've talked to people, or even seen people online talking about, "Oh, all these times I should have gone to shows and I just didn't, because I thought oh, I could just go next time, or whatever. Once shows come back, I'm going to every one." Music has been such a big part of how people have gotten through this, but not live music.

But this is kind of timely, I think it was yesterday or the day before, that Spotify wrapped. So everyone's seeing all the things they've been listening to through quarantine. This has been a record year for people listening to music. Spotify is not a very intentional way to listen to music and it does not pay artists at all. But I do think you've seen a lot of people trying to support the artists they care about. Like, I got back into buying vinyl this year because it was a way for me to support artists I care about. I know people have been doing a lot of buying albums from bands that they love, t-shirts, whatever merch people are putting out. I think that people are really appreciating what musicians do for them that they don't really get compensated for. You know, if you stream a song on Spotify, that artist gets like .0000001 cent or something like that.

I think that people have started to engage a little bit more intentionally with music. That's been cool to see. I think and I hope that when we come back with live music, it will be different. I think it will be more intentional. I think there's going to be more people wanting to get involved. That's something I'm excited to see.

Damian: I can't wait. The first show.

Kaproff: It's going to be wild. (laughs)

Damian: Yeah, I'm so ready. All right. Thank you. I'm going to stop recording now.

Endnotes

¹See: <http://www.subrosaproject.org>

²BIPOC is a recent acronym which means Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. See, for example: "We use the term BIPOC to highlight the unique relationship to whiteness that Indigenous and Black (African Americans) people have, which shapes the experiences of and relationship to white supremacy for all people of color within a U.S. context. We unapologetically focus on and center relationships among BIPOC folks." <https://www.thebipocproject.org/about-us>

³See: <http://www.santacruzhub.org>

⁴Twitch is a live video streaming platform for gamers.



Downtown Santa Cruz during the early days of the pandemic.
Photo by Shmuel Thaler.

Enrique Lopez

Interviewed by Kathia Damian

On November 30th, 2020 I interviewed Enrique Lopez. I knew Enrique mostly as the manager of the DelMarette, where I worked as a baker before the pandemic. Enrique is also one of the founding members of the Little Giant Print Collective based in downtown Santa Cruz. I was interested in learning how his artistic practice had changed during the pandemic and how a small business like the DelMarette was managing to stay afloat. It was interesting to see how similarities in our background, both coming from immigrant families in SoCal, had created similarities in our attitude towards the pandemic, as well as where our experiences diverged.

—Kathia Damian

Coming to UC Santa Cruz

Damian: All right, can you just get started with an introduction? Like who is Enrique Lopez? Who are you?

Lopez: I'm Enrique Lopez. I have lived in Santa Cruz for twelve years or thirteen years now, something like that. I went to the university there. I studied art, focused on printmaking.

Damian: I'm also interested in what brought you to Santa Cruz.

Lopez: Well, it was school, really. I didn't have a lot of options after high school. I actually went to community college after. I did that for a bit, and then I decided to transfer. And in the transferring, there wasn't a lot of places I was able to go to. Santa Cruz was pretty much my only option; if I wanted to continue any kind of higher education, that was going to be it. So I decided to go.

Actually, I'd never been to Santa Cruz before move-in. That was the first time I ever showed up. I got on a plane. I showed up. My

older sister, Diana, was living here. She went to the university here in Santa Cruz. So she picked us up. [laughs]

When I transferred my younger sister, Lorena, was also moving to Santa Cruz for school. Diana picked us up at the airport. Lorena had been here before; my first time. She picked us up at San Jose. She drove us down here. And my first time seeing the campus was when I had all my stuff with me, looking for my place, my apartment, living on campus.

Yeah, so I had nothing. I didn't really know anything about the place. But like I said, if I wanted to pursue higher education, this was going to be it. So, yeah, I got here and I transferred as an art major, and there were some hiccups in that. But I don't know that you need to know all that.

Damian: [laughs] Yeah, I'm curious, where did you live previous to Santa Cruz?

Lopez: Los Angeles. Echo Park, specifically. I had lived there for twenty-one years when I transferred. I left the house at, I think it was twenty-one, or something like that. And then I've been here for the last twelve, thirteen years, or something like that.

Damian: And what motivated you to pursue higher education?

Lopez: I don't know, to be honest. I graduated high school and I didn't go into university after that. But I didn't have a job, either. So I was like, well, I guess I'll just go to community college and just kind of get some general ed. I figured you know, cover that if I decide to go on past the community college level or whatever. I was at GCC, Glendale Community College; I was there for four years. I was just going to school. I did all my general ed, and then I stuck around mainly because, at the time—I don't know that it's like this anymore—but at the time, I was getting financial aid. GCC would pay for my classes and they would also pay for my books.

So I was basically getting paid to go to school because I didn't have to pay anything. I only had to pay a twenty-dollar student fee or something like that. But I was getting money from financial aid that I obviously didn't have to pay back. So I just kind of kept going to school to get this money, right? I ended up staying for about four years. The last two years, I was doing a lot of elective courses, a lot of art, and I took a dance class and theater class.

I don't know. Something in me was like, well maybe I should try to go beyond this. So I decided to fill out the paperwork and do the transfer thing. Yeah, I don't know, I just felt like I needed to grow, I guess. And it turned out Santa Cruz was where I needed to be. So I went.

Damian: And what motivated you to study art?

Lopez: It was always something I enjoyed. You know, growing up, and even to the day, I watch a lot of TV; a lot of cartoons; watch a lot of movies, stuff like that. I read some comics and things. But it was always kind of around me. My oldest brother is an artist. I would see him drawing. I think it was maybe my junior year in high school, or senior year, something like that, I needed to take art. The way classes are set up, it's one of the things you have to do. And I didn't do it. Most of the people who do it, do it when they first get there, freshman, sophomore, whatever. I didn't do it till the tail end of my high school education.

It was a lot of fun. One of the teachers actually, for whatever reason, took an interest in me. He would pull me aside and give me extra assignments, or different assignments. I don't know, it just felt cool. He was a younger guy, too. But he was like, "Hey, you know, try this, do that. Use these materials." Yada, yada. So I did it the following semester or whatever, however that works. I can't remember anymore. And yeah, it was him again and—I don't know, we had this relationship. He always pushed me a little bit, and it was easy to talk to him about anything and everything. I think that's where it clicked.

When I went to GCC, I mostly focused on the general ed stuff, but I did want to keep pursuing art to some degree. I took a couple of drawing classes. There was a lot of things that I couldn't get into because those classes fill up fast. But I ended up doing ceramics for three of the years that I was there. I really got into that. I was one class away from getting an AA in ceramics—

Damian: What?!

Lopez: —which I didn't take. But you don't need to know about that, either. Yeah, and in doing the ceramics, again, the instructors there were really interested, like, "Hey, do this, try that," or, "I want you to make these things," or, "Try doing these things using these materials." There was always a mentor of sorts, backing me, and there to help and push. I think that's how it's been since the high school days, where there was that one person who was active in trying to shape what I do or how I do things.

Damian: That's cool. I'm also interested, because you mentioned your brother is an artist and you talked about your sisters. What role has your family played in your development as an artist, or to get you where you are now?

Lopez: Well, so my older brother, like I said, he is a graffiti artist. And so street art has always been an influence in what I do, seeing how he does things and what he does. And it's still something I try to adopt and put into my work, some way, somehow.

My folks were always supportive. They weren't ever like, "No, well, why are you doing that? You should be studying to be a doctor!" They were never like that. It was like, "If this makes you happy, then do it," you know? "We're not going to stop you or prevent you from doing that. Just make sure you know that that's what you want." So they've always been supportive in that way. And they never talked me down, or put me down like, "Oh, you know, so and so does this and this. Why aren't you doing that and that?" If I needed anything, "Oh, yeah, sure, we'll see what we can do. Try

to make that happen.”

My sisters, more recently, in the past ten years or whatever, have been really supportive. I've had a lot of shows. There's a lot of work that goes behind putting up a show. And they've been really good in helping organizing, and writing labels, and getting flyers, and just a huge, huge support you don't necessarily see because it's not what's in the foreground, right? Like getting stuff for the receptions. And always, "Hey, do you need help carrying your things down to whatever?" and stuff like that. That's been huge, because it's, like I said, really difficult to try to get that done on your own. It takes a lot to make something happen, and they've been a big part of that. And also just creatively they've done in their various jobs, done like design work for a lot of things. They enjoy that sort of creative outlet, but don't necessarily consider themselves—that's not who they are, you know what I mean? So it's always been around, and one way or another, they've always been there to help with something, some way, somehow.

Little Giant Collective

Damian: And I'm curious, I want to bring this to the present moment. So can you tell me about your involvement as a printmaker with the Little Giant Collective and a little bit more about what that is?¹

Lopez: Little Giant has gone through a couple of iterations. Initially it was me and maybe five other, six other people. It's not what it is today. It was us and we were in this barn somewhere—and we were trying to convert this barn into a studio space that never really panned out—for a year or so. And then after that, there was more interest from other people that we knew and wanted to have a space to work, so they got involved.

And then it became what it is now. I think it's going to be two years now that we've been where we are now in this new location. So from like six people, it turned into twelve people or something like that. I don't want to say I was a founding member, but there's

thirteen of us who are the core group that started and organized and tried to do this thing together.

It's basically a studio space for printing; it's a printing studio, because out of the thirteen of us, the majority are printmakers.

And then everybody also does things outside of printmaking: people paint, people do graphic design, people illustrate, tattoos—you know, tattoo artists. And there's any number of things: people sew. I don't know, they do everything and anything, basically. We all bring different skill sets to this place.

One of the main things we have wanted to do with Little Giant Collective is be a community space where we have this studio available for people to come in and use, and to a certain degree have community membership. You pay some dues and you have access to the place and you can come in, you work on your project, and you create something that you've wanted to create.

So that's one of the major goals that we have. A lot of it revolves around community and having a space for people to come in. That also includes having shows. We did this big anniversary show where we invited anybody and everybody, the whole community, to submit a piece of artwork and we would put it on the wall. We had over 150 pieces; I think we had close to 200 pieces up on this giant gallery wall, so to speak.

And it was really cool, because a lot of people showed up. We didn't know how it was going to turn out, but it was really successful and really awesome to see. Everybody was so excited to be a part of something. People who have done this for years submitted something, and people who have never done it at all submitted something. So there was a huge range in quality, and a huge range in subject and material, and all that. It was cool to see everything come together. So it's a really community-oriented shop.

Damian: And how has that changed because of the pandemic?

Lopez: The biggest thing has been the lack of shows. So here in Santa Cruz, there's First Friday. We would have a show every First Friday of the month. It was mostly us members having a show. That was a big part of bringing community together. You have the show; you have it open to everybody. They come in, they look at the work, they ask questions; they are involved, to some degree, in this space.

Because of the pandemic, we have had to cut that out of what we do. For obvious reasons, you can't have all these people all together in one—and the space isn't very large. You get in there and it becomes elbow-to-elbow really quickly. You can't have that now. So that's been gone. That was also a big part of our income because we sell our artwork from the space, but people aren't coming in because of that.

We're not letting people in, either. We used to be open regularly a few times out of the week. But that's out of the question, now too, because everybody's adjusting to their own things that they have to adjust to. And like I said, we don't necessarily want people coming in and out of the space. So the shop itself is shut down. It's not really being used as much. People aren't really going in anymore.

But we did do this bandana fundraiser recently, which was also really successful. I hadn't printed anything for almost a year, for various reasons. But I wanted to participate, so I made a design, and I had to print my bandana. So I was in there printing, which felt nice and felt good. Some people kind of partnered up and were in there at the same time. So we got to see each other a little bit and kind of in person, as opposed to this format, you know. Yeah, and like everybody else, just trying to adjust to ways to keep doing what we do, to some degree.

Finding Community

Damian: So how have you been finding community? How have you

been making community at a time when we need to enforce social distancing?

Lopez: This way, I think, is kind of big. As far as me and Little Giant go, we have a group message thing where it's like, "Hey, I'm going to be in the shop today." We recently had a couple of birthdays. "Oh, Happy Birthday to so and so," and everyone will say, "Oh, Happy Birthday." That's the Little Giant community that I'm a part of. My friends have also played a big part in my support system.

I personally have been lucky, where I live with my sister. We've been spending a lot more time together. Before this, you know, both working forty hours plus a week, right? We kind of lived different lives, where we'd maybe see each other in the morning before we go to work; we'd maybe see each other at night. Because either I'm out or she's out, or what have you, right? We would cross paths very little. But now, because of everything, we've been spending more time together. We cook a lot together. We have breakfast together. We have dinner together. Before we maybe ate together once or twice a week. We've run some 5Ks together virtually, where you sign up for it then you run however you want, whatever your path may be, and then you just submit your time. We've done, I think, six of them or something like that. Yeah, we kind of like doing some workout stuff together. So just me and her, I think are—not that we weren't close before everything—but it's a different kind of closeness, you know?

I still go to work three days out of the week, so I see some of the old coworkers and just kind of chat, "How are you, and this happened this week, or I did that." Yeah, I think you find the little things that you maybe normally or usually would have taken for granted in the past. You know, passing by somebody, it's just like, "Hey." But now it's like, "So hey, how are you?" You really try to engage a little bit more, because you don't always have the opportunity, right? Yeah, so just really kind of honing in on the little things that maybe before, not that they were insignificant, but before seemed less necessary, even. I don't know, does that make sense?

Damian: Yeah, I get that. I definitely latch onto people when they say, "How are you?" I'm like, "Hello."

Finding Hope During a Pandemic

Yeah, I'm curious. Where else have you found hope during this pandemic? Like even though things have changed, are there some times when things have changed for the better?

Lopez: Yeah, I actually was talking to somebody yesterday. I was at the shop. I hadn't seen them in a while—in person, anyway. So I was like, "Oh, how are you?" And yada, yada. I told her something about feeling a little guilty saying, "I'm good"—like, "I feel good." I know a lot of people aren't necessarily there, for whatever reason, but I feel really good about how things are at the moment, just personally—you know, obviously not globally, or anything like that. I work three days a week. It's basically part time, which isn't great, because we've still got bills and we've still got rent and all that. But I'm realizing that an ideal work week is like a three, four-day week where you get paid twenty dollars an hour or something like that, you know? And you have two, three, four days off to kind of do whatever you want.

And it's not exactly what it is right now, but I have four days off, basically, which is a lot of time to do things that I might not have been able to do before, right? Like I said, I'm running these 5Ks that I probably wouldn't be doing before. And I'm doing all these other kind of workout things that I wouldn't be doing.

It's allowed me to work on—something I have been doing a lot is framing. In the past I'd had maybe one or two days to work on a number of frames for a few hours. Now I have eight hours to work on frames if I wanted to; I have four days to work on frames, if I want to. I've framed a lot of my work; I've been framing a lot of other people's work. It's something that I've wanted to do more of anyway. It just allowed me to do it now because of all these time restrictions or what have you or whatever, right?

I also noticed in the past—the past being six months ago—I used to go to bed around two, two-thirty in the morning pretty regularly. And I'd wake up around eight, something like that. So I'd be getting five, six hours of sleep. Now I'm in bed before midnight. I'm getting up at the same time, but I'm getting a pretty solid eight hours sleep. I don't even know when the last time I was doing that. I feel better, I feel more rested. I feel more alert.

I think it's the little things you kind of find and attach to and you try to do more of, right? Yeah, I think that's where I am, as far as hopeful, or why I feel good, or why I'm not necessarily kind of—you know, don't feel good, or I'm always all—oh, woe is me—or whatever.

“...a lot of people don't have support systems. I'm lucky enough that I do.”

Damian: Do you think there's anything about your life experience that has made you more resilient? Because there's a lot of people struggling with this moment. Do you think you are fortunate to be in the place you are?

Lopez: Yeah, absolutely. That's not to say that I'm not struggling, either. But I think being who I am, having my sister as my support system; a lot of people don't have support systems. I'm lucky enough that I do. I have one *in* my household. And my family outside of Santa Cruz, in Los Angeles, are willing to help. My mom calls me up still every now and then and is like, “Hey, how are you? Do you have enough for rent today, or to eat, or whatever?” And I'm like, “Yeah, you know, I'm good; everything's good.”

So they check in a lot. I have that, and I know I have that. So I guess I don't necessarily feel like, damn, what am I going to do this month, or damn, how am I going to get by this month or the next three months, or what have you. I'm still working, which I'm grateful for. Granted, it's part time. But I am still getting some sort of income.

I'm on unemployment as well. So there is a little bit and it helps. It's not what I was bringing in prior, but it is helpful. And it's also allowed me to save, like create my savings a little bit. And before, I'd go out to eat and go get a drink and hang out with people. That was pretty regular. So now that I'm not necessarily doing this stuff, there's this extra income that I have. And just even going to buy some shoes or something, it's like, oh, I want to go get something or, this shirt looks cool. None of that. I'm not doing any of that anymore.

So I have some savings that I've been able to accumulate. And it's not a huge thing, but it's something that's been happening regularly. I feel good about it. I don't know if "lucky" is the right word, but I think I am lucky to have these things and to have these people.

I've always been kind of a roll-with-the-punches kind of guy. So even if it gets really bad, you figure something out, or I'll figure something out. I think, again, that goes back to having a support system. I think that's probably the main thing. My sister's here with me. My family is down there, and they're always willing to help one way or another. So I'm never stressing too much about that sort of stuff.

Damian: I get that. We've talked about this before, but do you have immigrant parents?

Lopez: Yes, yes I do.

Damian: Because I feel like sometimes they're on a different level.

Lopez: Yeah. And their experiences, I think growing up and dealing with the things they have to deal with or had to deal with makes a difference, right? Because they basically have been struggling most of their life, to some degree, right? I think that's something they instilled: if you need help, ask for help. Don't try to get by. Don't try to fix it on your own if you don't know how to do that.

They're doing what they had to do; it takes a lot of strength. I think they did instill that in all of us, some way, somehow. Coming from different places, different eras, they have different ideas, for the most part. I think some of those experiences have been passed on, or the lessons they might have learned have been passed on. So I feel good about who I am because of that stuff, and I feel good about how to carry myself because of that stuff.

Restaurant Work During a Pandemic

Damian: I love that. You've mentioned work a couple of times, so I just want to get it on this transcript. Where do you work? And how does that look now because of the pandemic?

Lopez: I work in a small café, a little café in downtown Santa Cruz, Café Delmarette. I've been there for eleven years or something like that. I've been there for a long time. It's a mostly popular place, I'd say. A lot of people come through. We have a pretty, I think, diverse menu in terms of what we serve and how we serve. A lot of what we do there is more lunch-oriented. It's supposed to be—or feel, anyway—kind of homey—like something-you'd-have-at-home kind of meals. But now, because of the whole pandemic, it's changed, mainly in the way it operates. Before, people would come in and there'd be a line out the door, and you'd try to rush through these customers to get their orders and get the drinks and the food out in time.

Now there's less people showing up for various reasons. A lot of our business came from people downtown, you know, walking around, shopping, tourists, and things like that. Now because there's not a lot of that happening, we've taken a hit. To try to maintain some sort of normalcy, nobody is allowed inside right now. Granted, the space was pretty small to begin with. We'd maybe seat like twenty people at the max inside. So now nobody comes inside. We created this whole thing where there's this barrier between you and the individual. You've got to wear all these things so you can't see; you know, you're only looking at this. You still smile and stuff like

that, but obviously, you can't see any of it.

We used to have maybe anywhere from three to five people working at once, depending on the day, depending on the hour. Now there's two of us at a time, so we're in teams of two. We've adjusted our hours a couple of times. Now Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday we're open till 3:30. We used to be open till about 5:30 or 6:00. And then Wednesday through Saturday, we're open till 6:30. We got onto online ordering and stuff like that to continue to have people order from us. They're not showing up to the café anymore, but we can get it delivered, or you can just pick it up, and things like that. That's one of the things we've done, like I said, the reducing of manpower in the space itself.

I can't remember how many employees we had, but we had slightly more employees than we do now. And that's not because we had to let them go, necessarily. It was because they opted not to work. Whoever opted to stay and work is like two, four, six—there's seven people, or something like that. I think there was maybe ten to maybe twelve. I can't remember exactly. Some of the names I forget now.

We tried to make the adjustments, and we kind of hope for the best. It seems like every week, every other week we're making a new adjustment because of, "Oh, now you can't do this,"—whatever the government has sanctioned us what you should do or what is recommended. Our prepping is significantly less because we're not bringing in the same amount of numbers we used to bring in. So everything has been an adjustment, from left to right.

So far, it's mostly working. I think we're just going to have to keep going until it becomes a thing where, "Hey, this isn't going to work anymore," and it's time to let go, or we're lucky, where things kind of go back to how they operated and we can be in a more comfortable place and feel good about keeping the business open or what have you. A lot of places have close, or hours are significantly lowered, and manpower is significantly lowered. So we're plugging away. So

far it's working, and hopefully that continues.

Damian: Yeah. Do you think that it will get to that point? Or are you optimistic?

Lopez: Which point?

Damian: The point where you just have to shutter it and be like, we should move on.

"I like to believe I'm more of the optimistic kind of individual who thinks we'll just ride the wave a little bit and come out the other end and make it work..."

Lopez: I don't know. I try not to think about it too much—not that you shouldn't, or anything like that. But if you are thinking a lot about those things, or are constantly on your mind, it really takes a toll on you, physically, mentally, spiritually, that sort of thing. Not that I don't care or not that I'm not thinking about it, but I try not to as much as possible because it's not healthy. I don't know if that's the right word. But it's just not good for the body, you know what I mean? There's definitely worry for it. I think that's the case for everybody—not just our small shop, but everyplace.

But if I have to say one way or the other, I like to believe I'm more of the optimistic kind of individual who thinks we'll just ride the wave a little bit and come out the other end and make it work, you know?

Damian: I feel like you keep talking about "the other end," like this is temporary. Do you think things are going to go back to normal eventually? Or do you think things are going to be changed?

Lopez: I think the word "normal" is maybe not the best word to use. I understand that "normal" goes back to what it was six, seven months ago, where you can go out and have a drink with your

friends and go to the party you want to go to and things like that, right, and have business be business. Yeah, I think a lot of those things will come back. But I also think that there's going to be a lot of changes. I think this wearing your mask—I think that's going to be pretty permanent. Maybe not till the end of time, necessarily, but I think for a long time after things kind of settle down and we get some sort of control over all this.

"I want a normal where you can have the one job; where you get paid what you should be getting paid; where you have time off because it's human to have time off; and you don't have to worry about living paycheck to paycheck..."

I think, like I said earlier, an ideal work week is four days out of the week with a significant wage increase, right? I think a lot of people feel that way. These are some of the "normal" that I would like to not have, right, where you go back to working forty plus hours working six days a week, working two, three jobs to get by. That's the normal that I don't want, you know? I want a normal where you can have the one job; where you get paid what you should be getting paid; where you have time off because it's human to have time off; and you don't have to worry about living paycheck to paycheck and things like that. I would love for that to change, but unfortunately—and this is a whole other conversation—but the system isn't necessarily going to allow that unless we really make a stink about it, which I think is possible because people have begun to realize some of that stuff, you know?

I think there is a positive at the end, whatever that may be, even if that means no more global pandemic. I want to be able to travel again and go to these places and see these things and see some things and eat this food and stuff like that. So, yeah, normal in that sense—I want that to be normal.

But a lot of normal in what the past was—you know, seven months ago, eight months ago, a year ago—I think there was a lot wrong with it. So if you can kind of cut this out and then put in this new

thing and flip that over and then bring that to the—that would be awesome. And that's great, if everything we want happens. And if it doesn't, yeah, I'm glad everything isn't "normal," you know? But like I said, a lot of that is for a different kind of conversation, I think.

Damian: Is it?

Lopez: I think so. (laughs)

Damian: This is your oral history. If you just want to get this stuff down, you can get down for us, you know? (laughter) But yeah, let's see what else. Oh yeah, I'm interested if you've ever, have you ever experienced anything like the current moment we're facing before?

"I don't know that anybody really has faced something like what currently we're facing..."

Lopez: I can't say that I have. I don't know that anybody really has faced something like what currently we're facing, you know what I mean? I think the majority of the people—or I don't know, maybe not, I don't know what the hell—I'm thirty-five years old. So in my lifetime, which isn't a lot, there hasn't been anything, maybe outside of 9/11, which was kind of big in the sense in a global sense. I think that is maybe the closest thing that I can remember that I can kind of put in the same category as what we're seeing right now.

Living where we happen to live in the United States, California, specifically, there hasn't been a lot of big—I mean, the United States alone isn't that old, you know what I mean? I'm not sure if I'm reaching a point here, but I think historically a lot of people haven't seen a lot of things, or have been a part of—at any point in time in history—a lot of things. I mentioned 9/11. I was what, I think a sophomore or something in high school. So I have a pretty good recollection of that, right? That was what, in 2000 or something like that. I was what, fifteen or something, sixteen or something like



Sheltering in Place
Photo by Irene Reti

that? So yeah, I don't know.

That's not to say that other people haven't seen things. Older people, I think, have experienced things maybe similar to what we're facing. In general, the United States isn't that old, right? But we're also maybe more modernized than other places that might be more susceptible to stuff. Other countries might experience more of a pandemic of sorts, or experience more "tragedy," is the word I guess I'll use—but whether it's some sort of genocide, or any number of things that we as people kind of do.

Damian: On September 11 you were a sophomore.

Lopez: Lorena, my sister, she's four years younger than me, and she remembers. If I'm a sophomore I'm what, fifteen, and she was ten, maybe. I think that's maybe the most significant thing she might—she actually remembers more things than I do. But there's definitely a generation that only knows 9/11 as history and not as seeing it happen and watching it on the TV and being like, "What the hell's going on?" You know what I mean?

Damian: So crazy. Now that we're at this third wave, have your expectations of corona from the beginning shifted? Now that we've been in it for a long haul.

Lopez: You know, not that I've never not taken it seriously, but I think early on it seemed more like something that might not [have] the capacity or the ability to get pretty close to my realm of space, whatever that space might be, however I define that space—I saw it as being kind of far away, you know? I never saw it as a threat, necessarily.

*"I think wearing your mask is going to continue
for years to come."*

Now, as it's kind of progressed and as we as people have kind of

kept going, it seems like, not that I would never get it or anything like that. I hope I never do, but it seems like there is a higher probability. To me, it is a serious thing and it is closer to me than I initially had thought, or wanted to think, you know what I mean? It's in people that I kind of know in various ways. It's been basically one person away from me, so to speak. Which I mean, it seems crazy, right?

Before I was like—it's hard to imagine that being normal, or hard to imagine it coming that close to me, you know what I mean? I think in that way it's maybe being a little more cautious—not that I wasn't before. But being like okay, yeah, even if I'm just kind of going down to this thing, or maybe I won't take a walk today. Or, I don't know, just anything, right? It is always kind of like, yeah, well, should I? And will I? And how kind of prepared am I?

Where I'm at now is taking every precaution possible, where before that wasn't necessarily the case. But I also do see it—I don't know at what point that will be—but I think there is a point where it is going to, I wouldn't say stop, because I don't know that it ever, that anything ever really stops, right? I mean, people still get the flu and get stuff like that. But I think there will come a time where it is controlled, or slightly more controlled, where we don't have to take all these lockdowns and only go out when you absolutely need to go out.

Like I said earlier, I think wearing your mask is going to continue for years to come. I really do believe that. Shaking hands is maybe going to be—you're going to think twice about it—you know what I mean? And stuff like that. So, yeah, I hope I answered that question.

Damian: Yeah, you did. That's crazy. We're basically done here. Is there anything else you want to mention that I didn't get to, anything else about this moment?

Lopez: Like this moment right here? Or like this moment in time?

Damian: This moment in time.

Lopez: I don't think so. Like I said earlier, it's been, maybe "revelation" is kind of a big word to use. But to me, it's been a revelation to have extra time.

And something I didn't mention was I'm reading. I didn't really read before. But I take the time to, even if it's just half an hour or something. I've gone through—and my sister brought it up the other day—it's been like six books or something that I've read. Granted they're not these big novels or anything, but that's six books that I've, one, never read before, and two, I can't even remember reading six books before this, to be honest. So, yeah, the extra time has been good.

I haven't necessarily been active in printing, but I have been active in other ways, which has been nice. I mean, I love printing and I always will, and that's something I'll always do. But it has been nice not to be in this constant grind mode to make and produce—oh, there's a show I have; or there's this sale that I want to be a part of and I need to make new work, because everything is a year old now, or everybody is expecting something new.

It's been nice to take this hiatus. I don't know that I needed it, necessarily, but I am appreciative of it. Like I said, it's been nice to kind of lounge. Lounging isn't something I did a lot. I was always kind of go, go, go. So yeah, it's good. There's a lot of good things for me that have happened. I don't want to say that's the case for everybody, because it's not. That's not to say that I don't miss doing a lot of those other things. But for now, it's good. Like I said, just kind of keep rolling with it until things change—or they don't. If they don't, that's okay, too, I think.

Something I like to think of as being of who I am is adjusting. When I came to Santa Cruz, it's significantly different from Los Angeles and I'd never been here before. But I've stayed here for ten-plus years now and I've been able to do a lot of things that maybe I

wouldn't have been able to do if I was down there, or anywhere else, even. But yeah, just keep moving forward.

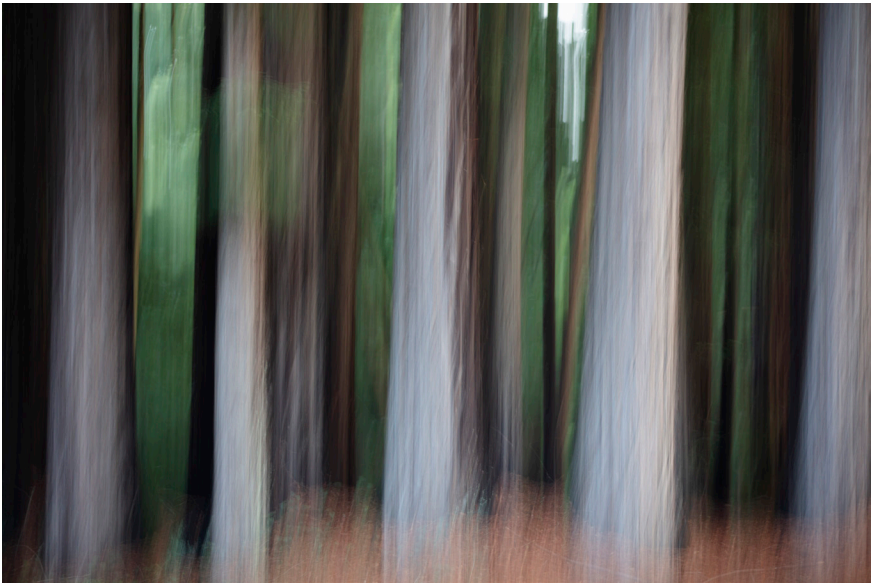
Damian: Yeah, that's good. I like that about you, resilient. Okay. Thank you.



Photo by Irene Reti

Endnotes

¹See <https://www.littlegiantcollective.com>



The Enduring Redwoods, UCSC
Photo by Irene Reti

Piper Milton

Interviewed by David Duncan

Piper Milton is a third-year history PhD Student at UCSC. I wanted to interview Piper because I think her experience best captures what it has been like for graduate students who have transitioned from a relative normal graduate school experience to what we are going through now. Piper is one of the few history graduate students that started in Fall of 2018 that entered the program's Master's and has been a leader among the initial eleven students that were in her cohort. Having the pleasure of knowing Piper these past three years, I was also aware of some of the challenges that COVID-19 has created for her personal and graduate student life.

This interview was the first one that I conducted for this project. It was done over Zoom just before Halloween and the presidential election, in the last days of warm weather here in Santa Cruz County. There was a detectable and shared feeling of dread as we retraced the emergence of COVID-19 and also looked to the future. I greatly appreciated Piper's openness and honesty in explaining how her life has been affected by the pandemic.

—David Duncan

Duncan: This is David Duncan interviewing Piper Milton—it is October 28, 2020—for the Regional History Project's COVID-19 Oral History Project. Thank you for being here, Piper. I appreciate it.

Milton: You're welcome.

Coming to UC Santa Cruz

Duncan: And just to get started, can you tell me a little bit about how you came to be at UCSC and what your role is here today?

Milton: I am a third-year PhD student in the history department. I came here after getting an MA in art history at UC Davis. Prior to that, I got my BA in art history as well from the University of Washington, from Seattle—which is where I’m from and grew up in, the kind of general Seattle area—and moved to Santa Cruz in summer 2018 to start coursework for the history PhD program. I lived in Santa Cruz up until about, I think, July 2020. We recently moved to Aptos. So still in Santa Cruz County, but a bit further away from actual campus.

Duncan: Got you. And what were some of the reasons that made you decide to come to UC Santa Cruz?

Milton: I think some of the reasons were that out of everywhere I interviewed and toured for grad school, I felt like there was the most support for what I was interested in at Santa Cruz. It seems like a really interdisciplinary campus that also has a lot of support for humanities graduate students in various forms. So I think it was probably a combination of the process of interviewing and getting to know potential faculty advisors. I liked the area it was in. Not to base grad school decisions on only superficial things like location, but in addition to liking the department and feeling like there was a lot of interesting faculty to work with and opportunities for funding and exploring research projects, it was also nice to stay generally within the greater northern central California sphere. My partner and I have lived in this part of California—I’ve been here for seven years, and he’s been here his whole life. So that was an added bonus.

Duncan: And what’s the first thing that comes to mind when you think of UCSC?

Milton: That’s an interesting question. I think probably the physical and aesthetic aspect of the campus, because prior to actually enrolling at Santa Cruz, I had been to Santa Cruz several times and had gone through the campus. It has such a distinct and very different layout and feel than a lot of the other campuses that I’ve

spent a lot of time on, that have a more kind of traditional quad area. Both UW and UC Davis have that more formal, traditional layout. So I think of the bridges through the forest and the way it's set up for walking across campus; I think of the environment, the redwoods. That's the first thing I think of, is a campus nestled away in the woods.

A Rising Pandemic

Duncan: Yeah, for sure. And then thinking about COVID and the pandemic, could you talk a little bit about the first time you can recall hearing about COVID-19 and what your initial thoughts were?

Milton: Yeah. The first time I heard about it—so as I mentioned, I'm from Seattle, which, you may remember, was one of the very early epicenters of COVID, especially the metropolitan Seattle area, which is where my parents lived until very recently. I actually went to visit them in early February. That was the last really normal month.

I think within a few weeks after I visited them, there was worries. My dad has several health issues that require pretty regular hospital visits. And there were some concerns and some questions being raised about whether there was something flu-like spreading through the city. That seemed kind of late for peak flu season, and it was pretty quick. He was in the hospital setting, they were in one of the first places to really acknowledge that there was a big risk if people were getting sick, and this was not the normal flu that they were expecting.

So I think it was probably right in the beginning of March, like a month or so before a lot of the official lockdowns and things went in place. I remember there was a lot of talking in Seattle and at UW, where I went to school. That has a really big medical school and a lot of research into disease and pathology. There were a lot of things coming out of Seattle that seemed to be raising more alarms than I was seeing in other places at the time. I think part of

that is also travel proximity, in that Seattle is a big stopping point or destination for a lot of travel from East Asia, which obviously was dealing with the very early initial waves of a lot of COVID-related breakouts and clusters of disease.

Duncan: Was it on your radar at all before it had potentially reached Seattle, like when it was only overseas? Do you remember initial thoughts about that time?

Milton: I do. And looking back on it, I feel kind of silly. (laughs) I had traveled to various places over the past decade or fifteen years right when there were other breakouts. Like I remember swine flu and Zika, and I had traveled to or from places that were dealing with those clusters fairly recently. I just remember thinking that it would be somewhat similar, where it was a lot more concentrated and isolated. I remember a month later just thinking how incredibly wrong I was. (laughs)

It was amazing to me how differently I had to think really quickly about COVID as compared to something like—like I traveled to the Yucatan Peninsula when Zika was becoming a huge problem and was on a trip in the jungle, in the exact type of setting and environment that the potential for mosquito-borne disease is really high. I was there in the summer and I was not worried about it at all.

COVID developed so differently from previous things like that that I had kind of passively encountered or read about in the news over the last couple of decades. So initially I thought it was going to develop in a much more specific regional cluster. And yeah, it very quickly became apparent that it was going to be much more global and widespread and that there were not the same kind of plans and kind of precautions in place.

Duncan: So COVID was on your radar for Seattle because of your family being up there. When did it transition to thinking, oh, this is going to affect my time here at Santa Cruz?

Milton: I have a graduate class that was meeting in downtown Santa Cruz because there were various kind of campus access closures during a lot of the strike activity in winter quarter 2020.¹ I believe it was just before spring break. I remember that was the first time I heard a lot of people in town, and within the history department, saying that they thought that things might really close down and that campus would be closed for far longer, and for reasons other than something like strike activity, a picket line, et cetera.

I remember being really taken aback and surprised, because it was about to be spring break, so there was already going to be this period of a lot of stuff being closed down, way less people on campus. But I think it was in March shortly before spring break that some people seemed to be getting way more worried about this than a lot of other people. I wondered, what they were thinking, or do they know something else? And it just became apparent that not going back to campus was going to become the norm very quickly, especially here in California where we had a pretty early recommended set of restrictions related to slowing the spread of COVID.

Duncan: Do have a memory of the last “normal” thing you did before everything shifted, in terms of the pandemic?

Milton: The last normal thing I did. I remember in the weeks leading up to campus closure, there were a couple socializing events amongst graduate students in the history department, especially within my cohort, the people who are third-years. I remember there was something, maybe like trivia, or some sort of gathering in the public space in the very beginning of March, or something right around there. Maybe partway through March. That really felt like the last normal series of weeks, where it was kind of like coursework and doing things as normal and seeing people.

I think it was really, really fast that all of a sudden it became clear that nothing that had been occurring the week before was going to either be open or allowed. So I think the quick and abrupt end to

any sort of social interaction beyond the person I live with, that was what I remember being the last moment of normalcy. Like going to restaurants and bars in downtown Santa Cruz, that ended really quickly.

Duncan: And as those things started to change, what were some of the concerns you had with your education at UCSC?

Milton: I study colonial Mexico, and the Spanish empire is the broader category. And I had recently heard that I had gotten a research and travel grant. I actually remember working on it in a very crowded coffee shop just a couple of weeks before all of the lockdowns went in place. (laughs) And I found out I got it very early in the spring. It was kind of this thing where they kept extending the deadline. I was supposed to use it summer 2020. And as of right now, it stands that it can be used, I think through fall 2021. So in spring I was waiting to hear about this potential funding opportunity. I was going to plan my summer around that, if I got it: travel to Mexico City.

So I think it was thinking about okay, well, a lot of what I study at least previously is largely centered around going on research trips outside of the country—and realizing in the spring quarter that that was probably not going to happen. So having to really rethink how I was going to approach both things like working on my own research, getting ready for qualifying exams, and also planning the trajectory of what I thought the summer after my second year of PhD would look like.

Duncan: Yeah. And going off that, too, what's your take on the response of UCSC in changing your graduate classes and changing your employment experience as a TA?

Milton: I think California being really early, ahead of a lot of states in terms of shutting down certain sectors, encouraging a lot of remote work, I think that probably helped. Because things like, my partner also started working remotely at roughly the same time Santa Cruz

started to really recommend thinking about transitioning to what was first described as maybe a hybrid experience and then quickly became a remote experience, both for students and anyone kind of in an employment capacity, like a TA. So I think that there was a leg up, in that it was implemented much sooner than I know some of my other friends in other graduate programs—there was much more of a kind of “will they, won’t they” all of spring, kind of waiting week-to-week to see what was going to unfold.

So I appreciated Santa Cruz just deciding pretty well in advance, both for spring and then now also for fall quarter, just to kind of eliminate the uncertainty. It affects things like where people are going to move, commuting, if they need to plan to be going back to campus. So I feel like there was a pretty good system in place at least for a lot of Californians, mentally preparing for a remote lifestyle just in terms of school and work, because of how early the lockdowns were. Especially the greater Bay Area lockdowns, which I felt like Santa Cruz was often following suit very quickly.

Teaching Remotely

It’s been a huge shift and a huge change, for sure. I think teaching remotely presents a lot more challenges and problems than something like a graduate seminar. Just because while everyone would probably prefer to have classes in person, a graduate seminar is usually no more than maybe fifteen people. That would be a really big seminar. So just having those numbers, as a student I’m not in like a hundred-person class in a student capacity. So I felt like the transition for coursework as a graduate student was as good as it could be. The small numbers allow for things like Zoom to feel a little more intuitive.

I will say that as a TA for a class that has, I think, 118 people in it now, I think that that [Zoom] much different and much more challenging. Because you just can’t really engage and have that rapport that you normally would as an instructor or teaching assistant. I think that’s something that everyone is still struggling with, even in the

second fully remote academic year quarter.

So as a TA and as a graduate student, they felt different. I also was not a TA spring quarter. I was a graduate student researcher. So I felt like I was somewhat removed from the online teaching transition until just these past two months.

Duncan: And with your experience being a grad student at Davis and a grad student at UCSC, what do you think is the biggest loss of moving to virtual?

Milton: That's a good question. I would say as a graduate student, honestly, not having access to the library has been the thing that I notice the most. Even though it's been a really big shift mentally to have class online, it's been really hard to be searching the library website. Now it defaults to only show you what's accessible in a digital format. And even in just the last couple of weeks, there have been so many things that are only accessible as a physical copy. You can often find copies of things on resources like Hathi Trust.

But it is really hard as a grad student in the humanities to not be able to go get physical books. That was such an integral part of being a grad student that I didn't even really think about or notice because I would go to the library all the time. So I would say that not being able to work with physical materials and have the library as a physical space to do work and research, but also to get those materials, has been pretty challenging. They've done an amazing job of digitizing and getting a lot of open access to other resources. But I think for a grad student in the humanities, not being able to go to the central library is a huge change in how you do your weekly work and where you get materials that you need, where you grade. All sorts of daily routine stuff is centered around the library. I don't think I realized how much of it was until the library was no longer a physical option.

Duncan: Mm-hmm. And with changes at UCSC, obviously you've had some changes, too, with how things are in your household. I

know you've changed homes during the pandemic. I'm curious, in general, how your day-to-day's been affected by COVID and what those changes have been.

"My day-to-day routine is going for walks in the woods and then going upstairs to my office."

Milton: (laughs) My day-to-day is completely different. I was just thinking about that this morning, actually. Because when we moved to Santa Cruz, we moved to an apartment complex on the west side of Santa Cruz, very close to campus, like a ten, fifteen-minute bus ride. I have never been really a driver. I've always been someone that walks and uses public transportation. I think that's a holdover from going to undergrad in a big city. So we wanted to live so that it would be easy for me to commute to school. And my partner also, shortly after we moved here, got a job in downtown Santa Cruz. So he also wanted to be able to bike easily. So our location was really strategic. And Santa Cruz rent, as many people know, is not the most affordable. So location was the premium factor.

And then in spring 2020 when we were a couple months in, our lease was up. It seemed like any summer TAship would definitely be remote and there were a lot of unknowns about the fall. My partner works in the tech and web development sector, which has really gone fully remote and doesn't need physical office space in the same way that some other industries do. So it was made pretty clear that he was going to be working from home indefinitely.

So we moved to Aptos, which is a good half an hour drive with some normal traffic from Santa Cruz. We live in the middle of the woods, in the Aptos Hills, not even in the town proper. It's super remote and super isolated. I think the walking distance to the town center of Aptos, it's like three miles. So I'm not going to run to the store or something like I used to almost every day.

So my whole routine is totally different. I was someone that would walk and run errands almost every day. You know, taking the bus

to campus. I've lived in apartments pretty much since I moved out of my parents' house, when I graduated high school and started college. I'm living in a house for the first time in many, many years, and super far from any kind of commercial center, which I'm just not really used to. So it was a big, big shift in terms of location and getting used to not having neighbors all around you, which I'm very used to as someone who's lived in a lot of apartments.

My day-to-day routine is going for walks in the woods and then going upstairs to my office. The most important factor in us moving was that we wanted to be able to move somewhere bigger so we could each have an office, because we both got the impression things would be remote for a really long time. And it has made a huge difference. Now I can't imagine if we didn't both have dedicated spaces. It was definitely the right decision. But it was unforeseen, to think of moving so far away from physical campus was—I mean, if you had told me a year ago, I would have laughed, because it seemed so impractical. But it turns out moving further away and having more options in our price range where there's space for us to have offices and be able to go to work within our house, it has really changed productivity. Yeah, it's been a big shift. There was like a 180 in my daily routine.

Duncan: I'm curious if you felt any added concern with COVID living in an apartment, being in close proximity with other people.

Milton: Yeah, that was also definitely something that was weighing on our mind, just because in an apartment building it is so hard to fully isolate from other people. Especially the type we were in, where it's not like everyone has an external door outside. Everyone has to go through the stairs or the elevator. Everyone's doors open into a shared hallway. It was much more intense when we lived in the apartment. It was putting on the mask all the time just to open the door to go get the mail or something like that.

Now we don't really see other people unless we really seek them out or see that a neighbor is also outside and say hi from a distance.

So it's totally different. Living in an apartment, there was a lot more added stress in functioning day-to-day. Taking our dogs outside, for example, was this massive production in suiting up and waiting and avoiding neighbors to give people enough space. So there was a lot more daily thinking about wearing a mask, even while at home. Like there was the potential for maybe the manager has to come by and drop something off. There was just so many more factors of risk of interaction that don't really exist now, now that we don't have shared walls and hallways.

Duncan: Besides the immediate threat of COVID, have your concerns changed, moving to a more remote place? Or is it still, even being more remote, something that you worry about?

Milton: I think living more remote and not having as much risk of day-to-day interaction has made me personally feel like my risk of COVID has been somewhat mitigated. I'm still super-aware of it and obviously we follow all the rules and wear our masks and everything whenever we leave our property. But I would say that us moving to such a remote space where we have a lot more control over when and how we interact with anyone else, I would say it's caused my worry to shift much more onto my friends and family who don't have that option. I would say that that's more of a preoccupation now that we're just so isolated from other people. The only time we really interact with anyone is if there's some sort of emergency at our house, like an electrical emergency, or if we're leaving the house specifically to do something like go to the store and we're already wearing a mask and distancing and that sort of thing.

"... moving is already pretty grim. And it made it a lot more grim, because there was no having your friends help you move and then celebrating at your new place."

Duncan: What was moving like in the middle of a pandemic?

Milton: It was very difficult. I understand a lot more why people

pay movers. (laughs) We also didn't feel super comfortable hiring movers, because we moved in July, and that was the first big national peak of cases. Especially in California, there was this big summer increase in a lot of counties. Also, we didn't hire a lot of movers. We also didn't have any friends really help us because we just felt like we couldn't ask anyone because moving is so physical and you can't really keep your distance if you're carrying stuff. So it was just me and my partner and we had to move down three flights from our apartment and then move to a very remote house up in the woods. We rented a U-Haul and we moved everything ourselves.

But moving is already pretty grim. And it made it a lot more grim, because there was no having your friends help you move and then celebrating at your new place. There was none of that. It was much more of a really intense grind. I am not the strongest person in terms of, you know, I'm no mover. So it was also physically very, very demanding.

We didn't realize until the move was on us just how hard it was to not really feel like you even could ask for help, or even hire someone to come help you in any sort of situation like that. So yeah, moving was, it's never that fun. But it was definitely made much, much darker and more grim by the COVID-19 backdrop.

Duncan: I imagine, too, I know you have some pets, some adorable pets.

Milton: We do.

Duncan: That must have added a different layer of your COVID experience, having pets throughout this whole time and then moving as well.

Milton: Yes. The pets are a big part. Of , our pets also have had some health problems that coincided with COVID. We've actually had to go to the vet I think more in the last nine months than

we have in the last few years put together. So going to the vet regularly and seeing the COVID restrictions change there, because that's one of those places where—people are always going to need a vet. And the vet having to adapt to, “No one gets out of their car. We come up to the car.” And figuring out how to adjust to have the least amount of interaction but still be functional.

I actually had a telehealth appointment with our vet last week, a checkup for one of our dogs. So rolling with the punches and getting used to the fact that we started having to go to the vet a lot actually in March, right as things were changing. And so we saw it unfold through our many visits to the vet every few weeks, how restrictions were affecting them and how they were adapting to have people still be able to have their pets have access to veterinary services. But it's been really hard. You can't go into the vet with your pet anymore, basically. So depending on your pet, that can be really challenging and add another dimension of stress.

But yeah, having pets and having to take them outside. And you know, anything like that, there's just a lot more instances of potential contact and interaction. They've added a whole other kind of dimension to COVID and dealing with restrictions and adapting to new ways of doing things that I just didn't really think about before.

Duncan: Yeah. And I'm curious, too—everyone has come up with different ways to do fun things again. I'm curious with your experience, if you've ventured out for anything social or fun things like that, and what that's been like.

Milton: Yeah, there have been a couple of socially distanced outdoor gatherings just within mostly my cohort in the history department and other graduate students within the department. But there's only been a few. And obviously we still have to take into consideration a lot of the restrictions. I am really grateful that being a student at Santa Cruz and living fairly close to the health center, we can get tested really regularly. That has alleviated a lot of stress, just being able to fairly rapidly know what your COVID status is

if you need to. I think that that really shifted and at least allows for something, like if you want to plan several weeks in advance, getting multiple tests, or making sure that everyone in a given circle is tested.

But I will say that I'm someone that usually sees my family a lot. I have not seen them since I visited Seattle in February. My partner, his family, they're from Sonoma County. But I think he's only seen them maybe twice in the last kind of nine months or so. So, having parents that are older and knowing, you know, anyone that has a health problem that could make them potentially more at risk for COVID complications—it's definitely, our social circle has really shrunk.

Zoom Fatigue

I would say other than the occasional socially distanced gathering with fellow cohort members, most social interactions are via Zoom. I personally have a lot of Zoom fatigue, being both a student and a teaching assistant. I think people in academia, or anyone who's in a teaching capacity or student capacity, I think Zoom has a different set of fatigues. Obviously someone who's using it for any kind of work is going to have some level, but I've noticed that myself and other people in academia seem to have a very high level of fatigue related to interacting on Zoom. I know my partner has been doing a lot more playing games online or doing group activities remotely using Zoom or other kind of platforms. I found that by the end of the week, I'm not always willing to socialize if it involves more Zoom, just because I'm on it for hours and hours actively at a time. It's not like a meeting here or a meeting there. So I think that people have adapted to doing things via the form of videoconferencing really differently.

Most of my social interactions either come from when I'm in class with my fellow grad students, or they're in other forms. Like I started writing letters, which I have not done in a really long time, to some of my family members in the Seattle area, and some of my

friends who are still up there. And just a lot more checking in via email and text, much more check-ins with a lot of people, since I'm not visiting my family and friends every few months like I normally would.

"It's a constant, it's always in the back of my head when I'm not at home, basically. I'm thinking about how I'm interacting with people spatially..."

Duncan: I'm curious, too, with the few socially-distanced in-person interactions you've had—in other interviews, I've found that people have the sort of roller coaster relationship with the whole idea. That at first they feel bad, and then they feel like they're doing something wrong. And then they kind of come at ease to it, and then they worry again. It seems like this cyclical mental battle that people have to do with themselves to justify seeing people in person. I'm curious if that rings true to your own thoughts on it.

Milton: I think so. And we also, my partner and I, maybe once a month, maybe twice a month, will go to one of the restaurants that has an expanded outdoor distanced area in Aptos. And even that, like it feels really weird to sit down and then take off your mask. (laughs) It feels like this really big move to do after being so aware of having it on. Luckily we live somewhere where there's a fair amount of space nearby and there's lots of parks and places that you can go to do something recreational that you can guarantee a lot of social distancing. Which I know is not the case for everybody, especially if you're in a much more densely populated area.

But I would say I definitely also have the roller coaster effect. And the few social distanced gatherings I've had, I've had a lot of back and forths where I'm like, do I need to go get a COVID test before I do this? And the fear of being responsible for inadvertently getting someone ill, because there were so many stories about that coming out of Seattle earlier in the spring. Not from people I knew personally, but kind of several degrees removed, of asymptomatic people then unknowingly getting somebody ill in their family or

friend group who maybe have a compromised immune system or something like that. So that's always in the back of my mind. I'm glad that we have a circle of people and we live in a place where it's relatively easy to have an outdoor, distanced gathering.

But it's still definitely something that I'm thinking about a lot and all the time. I think about it when I go to the store. You're just so aware of—your personal space bubble is so much bigger than it was. It's a constant, it's always in the back of my head when I'm not at home, basically. I'm thinking about how I'm interacting with people spatially, whether they're friends or just kind of strangers at the grocery store or post office or something.

Duncan: Mm-hmm. I think this project in particular, even though it's focused on COVID, it can't be ignored that UC Santa Cruz has been through a lot, with the first round of the safety shutoffs in winter of 2019, and then the COLA strike, and then COVID, and then fire risk. (laughs) I wonder, out of that long list, how do you contextualize your experience of your first year in grad school, which is probably what you assumed it would be like, and then to this year that's been pretty hectic?

Milton: My partner and I have had several experiences in the years leading up to 2020 that somewhat helped prepare us for the constant onslaught of really high-octane, high-stress situations. My dad has had multiple kind of health scares since 2017. And my partner, actually his family lost their home in the 2017 fires in Santa Rosa. So the last three years, there's constantly this really intensely stressful situation that's happened, kind of depending, it's been with my family or his family. So I think that we've both gotten really adept at compartmentalizing, for better or for worse. And the last year with all of the different factors of campus being closed, of wondering week to week of what the status is, of adapting to changing conditions either due to things like weather or strikes.

I feel like the last few years have been so stressful in terms of climate change events and personal family health-related things. 2020 in

some ways has just felt like this amplified version of what I think a lot of people have been dealing with, especially in California, which is increasingly stressful seasons for things like especially fire-related danger. It's just kind of like a way of living for several months, as grim as that sounds. I know a lot of people who have just had to kind of—like you don't really have any other option, because it's where you live. You have to mentally live in a space where you might need to evacuate at any moment for months, depending on the weather patterns. So unfortunately, a lot of stressful things have happened to a lot of people I know over the last few years.

“There are so many different factors that are creating stress on a national level, on a state level, on a personal level.”

2020 has felt much more intense. The very rapidly-changing news has only added to that. I think our increasingly 24-hour news cycle makes that feel even more intense. But I think 2020 has also just—especially being stuck at home and you don't really have a lot of things you can do to distract yourself in the same way as when you could physically maybe go do something social or go on a trip, you know, something like that. Now that that's no longer an option, the first few months were really, really difficult for me. I would say once it reached like a six-month mark, I feel like a lot of people I knew had crested over the initial very, very difficult period of 2020. That was March to September or so. I feel like everyone has just had to really get adept at compartmentalizing stress because there's just not really another option. There are so many different factors that are creating stress on a national level, on a state level, on a personal level. All of these factors are combining. Santa Cruz has had a lot of really intense events happen over the last twelve months or so, and people are constantly having to adjust and figure out how they're going to deal with the new stressor.

But it definitely was super challenging in the first part of the pandemic. I think knowing that everything would be remote helped alleviate some of that. Because it was like, okay, this is the new normal for me as a Santa Cruz grad student for the given immediate

future. I think that that helped in some ways, just kind of accepting that I really have to shift and change how I'm working and how I'm balancing work and school and life when they all happen in the same few rooms.

Duncan: Yeah. (laughs) You mentioned the rapidly changing news. And it's an interesting part of this project, too, that I think the results of these interviews could change dramatically on a week-to-week basis. I mean, we've got an election next week. It could be a whole different story if we did this interview after that.

Milton: Right. (laughs)

Duncan: So I wonder how your idea of the virus has evolved throughout the last nine months, how it's changed. Maybe you've seen it as a greater threat, or a smaller threat, or anything like that.

Milton: Yeah. I think, I mean, luckily again, the early lockdowns. I know some other regions labeled California's public health approach as really aggressive in the beginning of the pandemic. But I think it was definitely for the best. I think San Francisco was recently, it was released, and it's one of the only metropolitan areas that's really improving in terms of its negative case rate and hospitalization rate. So I think living in the greater sphere of influence of the Bay Area, which I think already had pretty strong public health and safety relationships—that, from everything I've read, seems to have really developed during the AIDS crisis, especially within San Francisco—there's a lot of messaging and a lot of public health measures and also an adherence to the rules that I think made it really clear that this was the new normal very quickly. I think that, and also living pretty far from my parents and knowing that travel was no longer an option, really, like in an easy sense of the word—I think that that made it from the very beginning of the pandemic feel really serious.

I saw a range of initial reactions across some of my friends and family in different areas. Because there was such a pronounced kind

of spike in a lot of cities, especially in the beginning, and especially people were very worried about the West Coast as that first initial point of contact, often especially with travel, coming again when we saw a lot of the first initial cases that were being documented coming out of China.

So I think I've always felt that it was really serious. I've kept an eye on a lot of the Santa Cruz townie stuff, but also the national level of engagement and awareness. I know we're literally, right now on October 28, we're less than a week away from the election, but we're also entering a period of new highs in hospitalization rates—in different regions, though, than that the very beginning. So I think in some ways it's the double-edged sword of living in an area that was really afraid there would be a spike both here, in close proximity to the Bay Area, and also my family in Seattle. I think from the beginning it's been this very prescient, very real threat.

I think changing my daily habits has been the biggest way I felt like I could have some level of control. I'm someone who—I actually looked at this recently, I usually would take a flight almost every month of the year prior to 2020. There were usually only three months out of a total year that I wouldn't be at the airport, either for travel to see family, or for research related to school, or something like that. So having that whole part of my life and identity just cease to exist in 2020, I think made it super clear as early as March that ways of living were going to be dramatically different for the immediate future.

It's been really interesting, and sometimes really scary, to see other places have a delay in being really afraid of it. I remember I was super afraid of contracting it and then giving it to someone like my parents, and seeing a lot of other stuff where people were kind of like, "Oh, that's a city problem," or, "Oh, that's a problem on the West Coast" or something. And how that has changed. Every few weeks there's new areas that are becoming the geographic focus. It's moved from urban to more rural areas being the epicenter.

So I think the rapidly changing news, that's just been another key feature of 2020 and COVID. I tend to assume the worst. (laughs) I think in some cases, that may have been a good thing in this situation because I've been super wary about it, pretty much since I would say, yeah, end of March, beginning of April.

"I think Santa Cruz is going to come out of it having adapted and changed a lot."

Duncan: How do you foresee UCSC changing, coming out of this?

Milton: That's a good question. It's hard to think about 2021, because there's so much happening and unfolding, even though there's only two months left of 2020 somehow. I don't think there will be a lot of dramatic shifts until there's something like a vaccine or very reliable rapid testing. I do think that living in proximity to a university, there's, like I mentioned, a lot of benefits of having access to the health center and the greater sphere of the UC, if there is something like a vaccine developed. But I think that, given the type of imbalanced and unequal nature of healthcare access in the US, even in a county that's doing really pretty well, like Santa Cruz, I just don't know that there's any way to effectively ensure moving beyond or past this phase of a lot of lockdowns and people isolating until there's a more cohesive public health policy specifically for COVID in place.

I think Santa Cruz is obviously paying attention and adapting as much as it can. I know that there are some students on campus and they're required to get tested, like at a lot of college campuses. I think that maybe there could be shifts in the coming months toward something like more on-campus classes, potentially. But also that would have to go hand-in-hand with a lot of testing.

I think Santa Cruz is going to come out of it having adapted and changed a lot. I do think that universities, in some ways, are placed in a way to be able to adapt. Being able to use Zoom, as fatiguing as it is, having that option obviously allows for classes to at least

continue, even if they're not similar to the form that we wish they were in from "the before times" (laughs) as I like to say. Yeah, I think Santa Cruz will come out of this okay. I think that they've been doing a lot of planning and have been pretty strategic.

But I think the bigger question is the larger community level and state level. It will be interesting to see how changes are implemented at the various tiers, and how that affects things like the student population, the surrounding community, and things like that.

Duncan: The last question I have for you that I ask everyone in all my interviews is, do you feel like there's something that I should have asked you?

Milton: Oh, that's a good question. Oh, I feel like your questions covered a lot of ground. I can't think of anything specific.

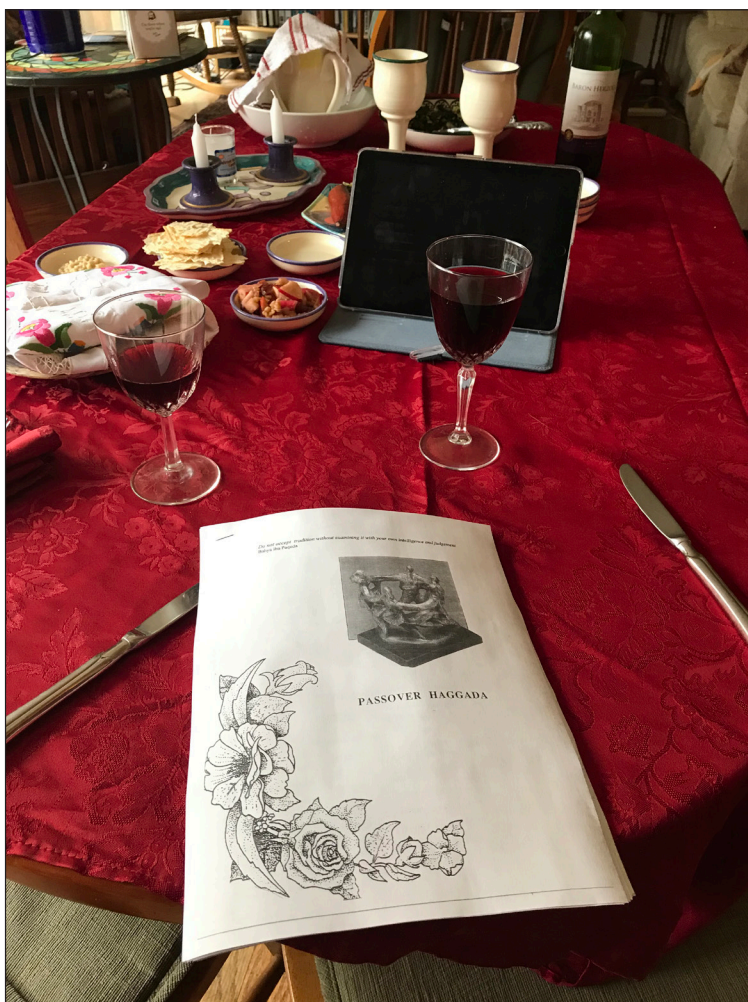
I think maybe the one thing would be I feel like I know a lot of people who are from California and their families still live in California. I feel like their experience has been really different from me. I only have one family member in any easily drivable distance. They're in San Francisco. So it's also not been, you know, freedom of movement. And again, I'm not a big driver. So obviously a lot of transportation forms I would normally rely on are super dangerous when it comes to spreading of COVID. I've had a lot of friends who've been able to go and see their family at a social distance. That's been something that I feel like I don't even really have the option of, as someone whose parents don't live in the same state. So I think the different COVID experiences of people who live in proximity to family, versus those who really don't. I was going to try and see them over the holidays. But the way things are trending, now it doesn't seem like a very good idea, unless my partner and I can drive down and have a lot of control over where we stay and whether we interact with anyone. On a plane ride you just can't control those factors, really.

So I think that's maybe the only thing is how COVID has been

different for people who can see their family if they want to, versus those who there are a lot more barriers in place.

Duncan: That makes sense. All right, that's all I have. And I appreciate it.

Milton: Thank you so much.



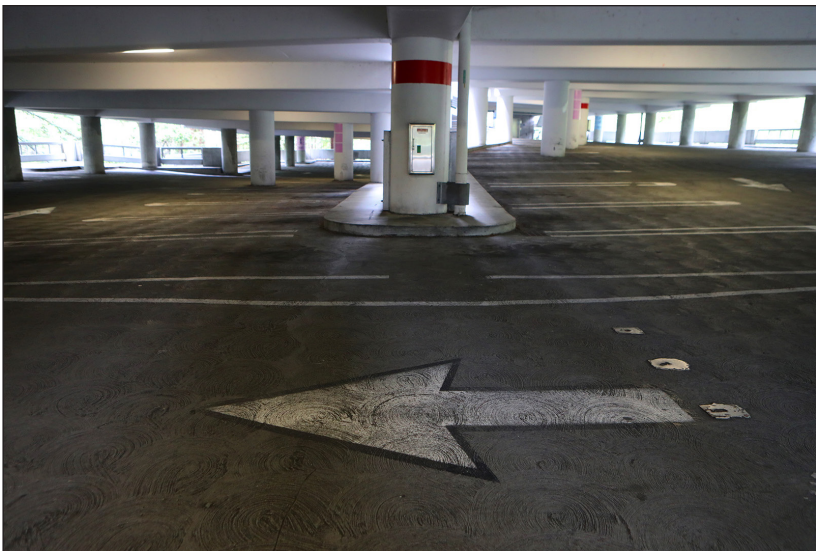
Zooming to Passover, 2020. Photo by Irene Reti

Endnotes

¹The Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) strikes. - Editor



Deserted Quarry Plaza
Photo by Shmuel Thaler



Empty Core West Parking Garage
Photo by Shmuel Thaler



Pandemic Beach Walk, Fourth of July, 2020
Photo by Irene Reti

Veronica Solis

Interviewed by Isabella Crespín

The interview with Veronica Solis was done just two days before the presidential election in 2020. Tensions were high, especially for Solis, who was at one point undocumented. In the interview we cover a variety of topics, mainly how the pandemic has affected her living situation and routine. This interview was conducted on Zoom.

Solis is a Mexican transfer student who is heavily involved in her community. We have been friends for a few years since we are both leaders of the Minorities in Anthropology club. Solis integrates her knowledge of anthropology with the way people have adapted to the pandemic. We also delve into her ideas of what the post-pandemic world will look like, especially under a new administration. Due to election tensions from misinformation and because of how heavily our communities are affected by the decision, we spent a considerable amount of time discussing the failings of the government at this time. Solis also brings up the response of UCSC during the pandemic, and how it was complicit in the retraumatization of students of color due to its stance on the past local and national protests against inequality. This interview gives a great insight into how this pandemic has had a larger impact on communities of color. This is not only because of the industries we work in, but also due to the protests and outcry against inequality that have swept the nation.

—Isabella Crespín

Isabella Crespín: This is Veronica Solis with Isabella Crespín for the UCSC COVID-19 project. Today is November 1, 2020. All right, so let's get started. I was thinking that we open up with, how exactly did you end up in Santa Cruz?

Coming to UC Santa Cruz

Veronica Solis: I'm a transfer student. That's how I ended up here. I never actually thought that I was going to transfer. I've been living in United States most of my time as an undocumented immigrant. I'm a former undocumented student. That's how I also started community college.

But things change in life. And one class in community college made me realize that I liked anthropology and I would like to do that kind of work, or study more about it. So, I took one class that is about Native Californians. That class really flipped my plans in life. I was thinking to go back to Mexico after I'd done my AA, and that definitely made me realize that anthropology was a life path. It really made me feel more passionate. I felt, I need to keep learning. I need to keep studying. That's how I ended up here in Santa Cruz.

"The Before Times"

Crespin: What exactly did you like about your time in Santa Cruz? I know you still live on campus. But like before COVID, how was it?

Solis: I was not here in my first year. I was commuting from San Francisco. There were a couple of quarters I actually stayed here with a friend in Santa Cruz. The first year it was a little bit intimidating, as life always is for us new students and also as minorities. You don't really feel that you belong within the spaces in this society. I felt that I needed to have more time away from the school, just coming for my classes.

But then I realized that learning is also sharing with people in the classroom and the people that I meet outside of my classes—but here in the community. And also the space, the space—I realized that being on the campus, there is a lot of learning outside of the classroom, learning about the history and the space of the Native people here, who this land belonged to, who are still living here.¹

So I decided to move here and kept learning around me within the classroom, but also by connecting more with the space and with the people here.

Crespin: Give me like a picture of what your regular routine was back when—the before times.

Solis: Before COVID? It was— (laughs)

Crespin: You were always busy, huh?

Solis: Yes. When I transferred, I was required to take a certain number of units. I thought it was a lot. But then after the second quarter, I felt more comfortable and I could handle many more units than what was required.

So I was really busy. I didn't need to spend a lot of time outside of campus. I arrived in the morning and I stayed here till 11:00pm. My life was here. I could eat in the cafeterias, and also moving in the campus was for me like a gym. I was doing my exercise moving from one classroom to another, one class to another. Also, it's very relaxing. I really felt fulfilled in learning here.

So I was busy. I think that was the way that I want to study. Like having all those things that the campus was giving me, the space was giving me: that was my routine. I spent the whole day here. That's how I also met people. That's what it takes to meet people, invest your time in their spaces and connect with them.

In the first year, the end of the first year, I connected more with the professors, because I could have more flexible time just being around. I could meet or take different classes and meet different people. So it was a good time to grow, just by being here. Learning for me is, it's also being with others. Learning is not only having new information, but it's spending time with people. We learn from each other.

So that was my time before.

Crespin: So you talk about social, like learning with others. How is that looking now since we're kind of isolated?

Solis: It's a little bit harder because this is not the way that actually I learn. I'm a multisensorial learner. I am a visual learner. I really need the stories of others, because my story is incomplete, to have the deep perspective of this world. It's important always to hear others. It resonates so much with anthropology. This is what evolution is *not*, actually. We're called to be together. Our cooperation is what makes us.

Going back to the information that we have been getting in the classes, it's like: this is not us. This is not the way that we are. That's why it feels so unsettling. You feel so unfulfilled. Everybody feels the same way. We have a lot more time; I feel that we have a lot more time. I remember sometimes how many people or friends said, "Oh, I wish I could spend more time at home." Now we have a lot of time, but this is not (laughs) the ideal way to spend or have free time. This is not part of our nature, to be apart. That's how we became who we are, the species that we are, because of our cooperation. Our survival depends so much on working together. That's why it's unsettling: it's not the way that we should be.

"I felt at the beginning that this was going to end soon, like two months and things were going back to normal."

Crespin: Yeah. I guess we might as well dive into the pandemic full on. When did you first hear about COVID?

Solis: Oh. That was really interesting because I remember in winter, early winter quarter, I saw some people here on campus wearing their masks. I thought, maybe they are sick. They were Asian students. I saw them with their masks. What I thought is that since they are very careful and they take care of themselves, maybe they are sick and they are very cautious. But months later, I heard a

professor that gave a talk, and some international students, they knew what was going on. Because I think in China, it was already known by then.

We were in this strike all together.² (laughs) That was something funny, that I think back, why were we not told, why were we not informed? That was in January, the strike. In February was I think the last part of the strike, something like that.

By March, I was paying more attention and reading more, investing my time in reading about the virus. That was again taking me back to anthropology lessons and our relation with the environment, and how we've been evolving in our environment, how we've been messing with it. So it was understanding the whole situation and why and where this is coming from. It's really, really a good lesson for us to rethink ourselves as a species, but also how we relate with other species. The classes in the field, the information that we got in anthropology is really helping me to understand events in life. It helps me personally. But it's not only a career, as I said: it's something that really helps you to understand life, and the world.

Crespin: I'm wondering what you have to say about how the pandemic shows how we're so connected?

Solis: Yes. The way that we move is not the same way that we used to move in everything. They state that things will impact us is faster than before. And so here we are. (laughs) Even with all the technology and all the knowledge that we have, we cannot solve events like this faster.

Crespin: And what were the first few days like when the pandemic was starting to be taken seriously on campus? What was it like for you? What emotions or feelings did you have?

Solis: I was here. I was doing an internship until mid-March. This was just so sudden. I felt at the beginning that this was going to end soon, like two months and things were going back to normal.

But it wasn't. I was in disbelief, like it cannot change our daily lives that much. Here we are almost a year [later].

I saw this student that I used to see all the time in the library. It's a friend of a friend. I'd ride my bike on the campus, like at the beginning of COVID, April, and he was there. He was just studying on the bench outside the library. It was hard to not do everything indoors as we used to do it.

Crespin: We kind of talked about routines from before, but what are your routines now?

Solis: My routines, they are all over. At the beginning of COVID, actually, after reading about it, I felt like, well, they're going to find a way to fight this virus and a vaccine eventually will happen.

I tried to maintain a routine. I was doing yoga. I was living in a smaller space than what I am right now. So I was trying to do yoga and not go out, because after reading I was seeing that it was something serious and it's very unpredictable how our immune systems could respond. Everybody's different. So I was very careful in not going out. Probably going like every three weeks to the market.

But at one point, one month or two months after, it really became unbearable. I guess that happened to many people. I fell into sort of a depression. I was taking classes on a screen and it was really hard. It was really hard.

"Then the events happened with George Floyd and all those events in the spring quarter..."

Then the events happened with George Floyd and all those events in the spring quarter.³ It was very hard. It was really hard to take classes. Luckily, the professors that I have, they were very understanding. But there were people that would turn off their cameras [on Zoom] and you could hear people sobbing, especially

with the protests. Because we were not only having COVID, but then we are having these issues that we haven't dealt with in our society. This is overwhelming. I taught and I went to protests, being very cautious. That was a priority for me. In my class, we talked about it; I just told them, "It's a priority."

There are some things that we need to work on. Yes, it's COVID, and eventually I guess our systems will cope with that virus, as we have coped with other viruses through our human history. But we have other issues that are here and are impacting us every day. That inequality, that systemic racism, has pushed many people to do what they have been doing, like not taking care of our environment, not having information and the tools to understand that and to care for the environment, understand that the relations between us have affected also profoundly the relations with nature and with other species.

And here we are with COVID. So yeah, so spring was really—it was a very difficult quarter. I think we are still on that. The elections are here. Everything happened in this year. But I feel positive—I think that we're going to have good lessons.

Summer, I took classes, and it was hard because we had the fire. We had to evacuate. So on top of COVID and all the other things we've been dealing with—also, personal issues. Personally, I had one of the most difficult years in my life. And luckily, it's not about health. So I still have to see the positives. This quarter, fall, I felt that a lot more things in my life have been solved. But it's still, I feel it's the worst quarter I've ever taken. I'm thinking it's because I feel exhausted, probably, from the whole year's events.

But I feel very positive. We will still work together.

Crespin: What kind of changes do you wish to see after quarantine?

Solis: Work together and really see each other as important and relevant for our learning. Understand that the inequity, it always

will affect everybody—and to some degree, it will come back to us. We are seeing that with COVID. Who is doing the work? Who is actually feeding us? Are we responding humanely? Are we responding ethically to the workers, the farmers, the people in the medical field? How our government, how we are involved to see that those rights, like work for the farmers and having their papers, it's always important. It's not something that is foreign to us; it will be impacting us if we don't support the voice and the demands of others.

Crespin: (moved) You just resonated with me. What were some big events that really stuck with you? You mentioned George Floyd and we kind of touched on the Black Lives Matter, the fires in Santa Cruz. Are there any others that stuck with you or that you want to elaborate on?

Solis: I think all of that. That's why I feel so grateful studying anthropology because it really helps me to, not only understand our species; if anthropology is about humans, it's also the relations that we create, not only among each other, but with other cultures or societies. It's also how we relate with our environment, how we relate with other species.

Crespin: How do you feel about the government's response, the federal response, in these crises?

Solis: Well, I'm very disappointed in how they respond, though it's not a surprise. It's not only this government; I see it also back in my country. Yeah, I felt really disappointed, but I feel that will help us to get more united and demand more.

Crespin: How do you feel about the election in two days?

Solis: I feel hopeful. Again, I feel that people are seeing that we need to work together; we need to see what is best for all. We cannot remain silent. Voting is important; it's a way to state our voice. Yeah, I feel hopeful. No matter who wins, I think we need

to keep pressing our government, not only by voting, but in other ways.

Crespin: On a smaller scale, how do you feel UC Santa Cruz responded to a variety of crises?

Solis: With COVID, I feel really good. I feel very good being here. I think the school has responded very well.

“They cannot understand that just by having police here inside the campus, for us it’s a re-traumatizing event.”

With the George Floyd thing, we are constantly re-traumatized. What I don’t like of the school, and the whole UC system, is that they have the police here.⁴ They cannot understand that just by having police here inside the campus, for us it’s a re-traumatizing event. They are here, and we know that we are not seen the same way as people that are not people of color.

So I don’t like that from the campus. Basically, it’s my fees, your fees, and everybody’s fees which is paying for that service that is actually oppressing us. It’s not oppressing us physically at some moments, but psychologically, it’s not helpful. I’m not feeling safe when I see policemen around.

I think we can respond in a very different way to feel safety. After these events, hopefully things change. But this is the way that we feel, even when the events are not happening, are not showing in media. George Floyd or Breonna Taylor, I think the school should respond differently. They said that they are serving people of color and they are like now, what is it called, a Latino-serving [Hispanic-serving] institution.⁵ We don’t want just the title and the names or labels on the institution. We really need actions and change. And we all know that police is more there to arrest than to serve the communities.

Crespin: Yeah, we kind of saw that with the grad students, all the police.

Solis: Yes. The lesson with Carlos was not for him.⁶ I'm an undergrad. I'm a woman of color. And in my family, we have also a tragedy of police brutality without having committed any fault. This is something that many students like me are carrying in their bodies. Coming here, where we think that we're going to be learning and it feels like a refuge, it happens that it's not. Because what they did with Carlos—and I was there on that Wednesday, and I saw how the students were there. And the police violent response is, of course, there to harm us, to hurt us, to be violent against us. I think what happened with Carlos is not that they are punishing him; they are punishing our community. They are punishing people of color here, students of color. They said that they are serving us, but I feel that it's a lesson for us to tell us where we belong, what we are accepted to do or not to do, how far we can say things or protest.

Crespin: How do you feel technology has played a role in that, by helping things come to light? Does it seem like a good thing, a bad thing?

Solis: I think technology has helped. But even without technology, we can be inventive. That's our nature: we will be inventive. Many of us at this moment, we've [found] that we can't bear to be in front of screens anymore. At the beginning, I felt like it was helping many of us, including myself. I was connected with my family that is not here. I was connected with my friends. And that helped. I have some artist friends, and technology helped some communities keep their activity and try to make daily life bearable by trying to do some activities that we were doing before COVID.

"I miss hugs with my friends. I miss dancing together."

Crespin: What communities are you part of and how has that changed due to COVID?

Solis: My community—well, I’m living here in Santa Cruz. But I was living in San Francisco before coming here. I used to participate a lot in neighborhood events or cultural events. That changed a lot. Disconnection—the quarantine has forced us to be disconnected. That is not only affecting us in our life, but also the jobs and other things that the connection provides to the community. It’s gone now. And it brings a lot of stress, worry, preoccupation to people, especially families, how’re they going to do it. Because what the government has offered is not enough—it’s not enough.

Crespin: How has your relationship been with friends or family during this time? Has it changed in any way?

Solis: Yes. I’d really like to spend time with my friends. I miss hugs with my friends. I miss dancing together. I miss going to the beach with them. I miss the parties with them. And yeah, this is us learning; this is what makes life bearable, the hard times, spending time close to others. That’s what I miss a lot. I cannot go to see my family. I was thinking to spend a whole summer there in Mexico, and I cannot go. I don’t know when I’m going to see them. I want to go, but it’s not also safe there. It’s not—it’s a little bit different. Here in Santa Cruz, and especially on the campus, I feel like I’m in a bubble. It feels safe. It feels like people take more care and are more serious about the virus.

It changed a lot of family plans. I’d really hope this goes away and I can go back and see them. I really need to spend time in my culture, because that’s me, too. Sometimes I think that yes, I’m going there. But I don’t know yet. Hopefully this goes soon.

Crespin: What’s the first thing you’ll do when this is gone?

Solis: (laughs) I want to dance with people I love, dance salsa. I used to dance salsa in San Francisco. I want to go and dance in Cuba; I’d love to go to Cuba. Yeah, baila—there are places that I like to go for dancing and hearing music and being with people. Mexico City, I used to like to go and dance salsa—in the plazas we

danced as well. Those are the things that I miss, being in a city and to step out of the house to be with thousands of people dancing and connecting—as we humans should be.

Crespin: What's the first time you learned to dance, or that you felt like you were good at it?

Solis: Oh, well back in my country we dance a lot, cumbia, yeah; in childhood, you grew up dancing. Then when I came here, I learned more about other rhythms. My dad actually, he used to hear a lot of Cuban music. Here I hear many more rhythms from the Americas and other parts of the world. And as a former undocumented immigrant, for me, that was a way to bear my situation. It's literally moving, but mentally it also takes you away and lifts your spirit from the floor. Yeah, it's something that I like to do. That's how I learned.

Crespin: What's something you do for self-care now?

Solis: I like to do yoga. Actually, here on campus it's an activity that I like to do because the professor, she's really great. It's not just body, but it's grounding myself; it's not only my physical energy, but it appeased me a lot. I actually restarted this week because I was just all over and unfocused—I feel like I need energy back.

It has been taking me a while to see her videos; she sent us her videos so that we can keep practicing now that we are not meeting. She's very encouraging and caring. I feel I need to keep taking care of myself doing that.

Also walking in the woods, which is a great gift to be here on the campus, having this beautiful backyard.

" It really saved me, music."

Crespin: And for people watching in a hundred years, fifty years,

whatever—you name it—what are some important takeaways they should take from time in quarantine? Like survival tips for dealing with isolation?

Solis: At the beginning of COVID, I was alone the whole time. I was in a hotel at the beginning of the COVID, or the whole spring quarter. Music—listening to music and singing made me think that what makes us human is not always the material things. What we conceive as a culture, it's usually what we see as real things, what is constructed by humans. But I think all of that comes from how we feel and how can we express—and that's music and dancing. That's what I was doing, just giving myself moments of music and dancing. It's what can save us in the future; it's always what we are, who we are.

And yeah, I think our expressions, our feelings, and not being afraid to feel that crying through music or through dance—or be happy by doing that too. It really saved me, music. If that happened again, technology was so helpful in having music because I had no community around me. I had no friends to play guitar or to sing.

Crespin: We're kind of coming to the end in a minute—not in a minute, but in a bit. But what are some hopes and fears for the future?

Hopes and Fears for the Future

Solis: Fears? That we don't get the lessons we're getting today. When the beaches in Santa Cruz were reopened, people from other counties came to this county, mostly people from the city. I went one day to walk on the beach later in the day and there was a lot of trash. And I felt that we were not ready to go out. It doesn't take much: carry your own trash back home. I don't understand, I don't understand that—what is the hard work? That is a small act of caring for our environment and our neighborhoods.

I think that's my fear: that we are not ready. I don't know if we're

ready. I don't know if we will be ready just to do very simple acts of caring like this. Somewhere I heard or read "communities clean after themselves." Yes, there are so many things that our government must do and invest, but let's not always keep waiting. Like little things like that, we still can do and show caring.

So that's my fear. Are we getting that we need to take care of our environment? Because taking care of our environment is taking care of ourselves.

My hope is that we get these lessons: that if we're going to be affecting our environment and other species and not really investing in learning about them, we're going to keep wrecking our world and ourselves with that. I hope that we get this lesson. I hope that we are able to treasure this planet and see that we are important; we are all connected; they are all connected; and not be isolated on the planet. We are part of the planet. We are not over anything or anyone.

Crespin: Is there anything you're looking forward to in the future, near or far?

Solis: Despite everything, I want to keep learning about anthropology. My other interest is geology, earth science. I want to keep learning. That sounds pretty odd, but this is a good way to die, by living and learning and understanding a little more of this wonderful world. This is what I'm thinking about my near future. I want to work with communities. I want to maintain a creative aspect of my life. I've been itching to do things I used to do in San Francisco and back in my city in Acapulco by working with communities and doing projects that connect me with my communities. So yeah, that's what I'm looking forward to.

"We need to keep dreaming."

Crespin: Before we wrap up, is there anything you think I missed, or anything you want to share?

Solis: What I miss? I miss you. (laughs) I miss everybody in the department—I miss everybody in the department. I work there a couple of days per week and it feels so different being in empty buildings.

Someone was telling me, “Aren’t you afraid that you’re going to be just alone there with COVID in the hotel? Are you safe?” I feel good. I think that one thing that I realize is that home is not a building. Home is not construction. Home is a feeling inside us, and because we share with others.

So that’s how I feel in the department. I feel excited about rediscovering the world through the classes, through the information and through the connection with others. I miss that part.

Crespin: Is there anything else you want to share before we stop?

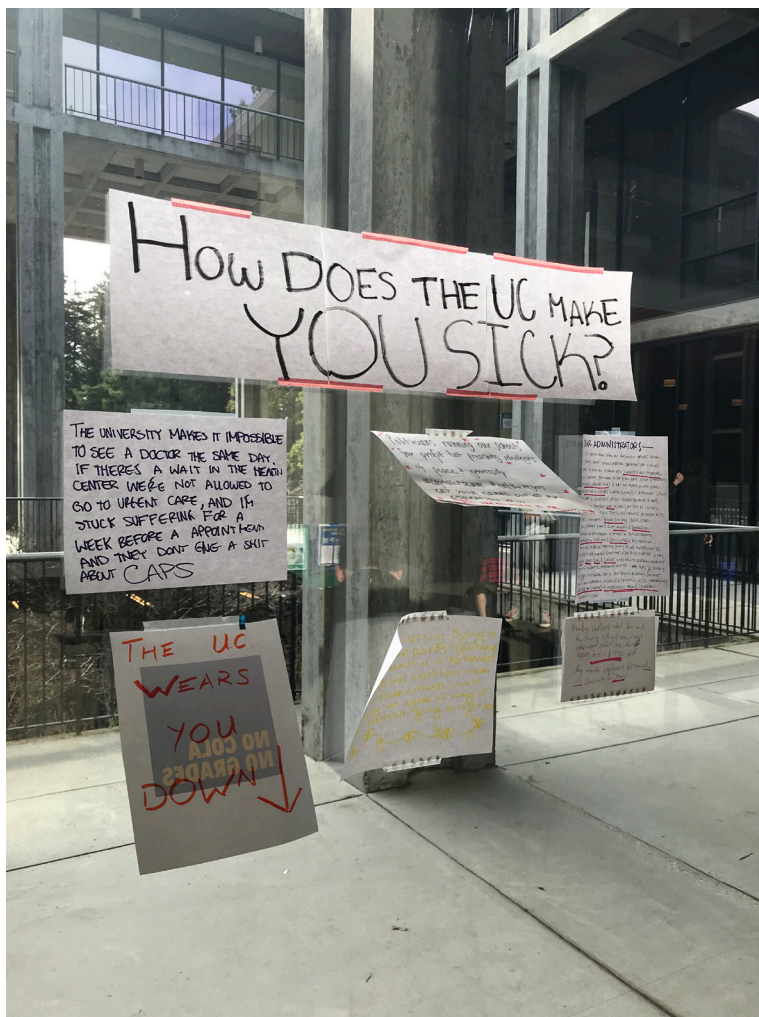
Solis: I feel hopeful. (laughs) I really feel hopeful. I can’t wait to see what we’re going to do. Because the way that you and I have been connected, we’ve seen each other—we can count the times. But we’ve been working a lot. We’ve been working a lot. We’ve been dreaming a lot. That’s what I want to keep thinking, that reality is not what we see and what we live always. And as we also learn from other cultures, Indigenous cultures, reality takes on more than the dimensions that we are being exposed to. What we’ve been living and going through is not always what is happening. We need to keep dreaming. We need to keep imagining the role that we decide—this is fundamental, for us to get out of this time and imagine our role. This is how I feel with you and other people that we’ve been working with. It’s almost impossible, the whole work that we’ve been doing, because we all are full-time students and we’re trying to change the systematic way anthropology works. We are dreaming and inserting ourselves in our own ways, the ways we are inventing.

So yes, I think this is what I will keep doing. Right now, it’s something that makes me feel that I want to keep doing things, when I meet

with you and other people in the club, and also other projects that are happening. I'm trying to get involved, reinventing ourselves.

Crespin: Good. I think that's a great point to end on. Thank you for sitting here and talking to me for an hour.

Solis: Thank you so much.



COLA Strike Signs, McHenry Library
Photo by Irene Reti

Endnotes

¹UC Santa Cruz sits on the land of the historical Uypi Tribe of the Awaswas nation, who are today present in the region as part of the contemporary Amah Mutsun Tribal Band.

²The Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) strikes.

³George Floyd was murdered on May 25, 2020. Unlike semester system schools, which were mostly finished with the academic year by this time, in the UC Santa Cruz quarter system this occurred in later part of spring quarter. Among other early 2020 events that further galvanized pain, outrage, and a new wave of the Black Lives Matter Movement, the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor occurred during UCSC's winter quarter. - Editor

⁴There is a UC Santa Cruz Police Department, part of the broader UCPD, which is headquartered on campus. City police and other law enforcement officials at times also have a presence on campus.

⁵"Hispanic-Serving Institution" is a formal designation from the Department of Education based on a series of metrics, including the overall percentage of Hispanic students. UCSC was designated an HSI in 2015.

⁶Carlos Cruz was one of the founders of the COLA Movement, a protest and strike that demanded UCSC to pay graduate students a living wage. At this time, Cruz is the only grad student being punished for participating in the strike. The University is planning on giving him a two-year suspension, despite widespread support from students.



Playground Sign, Capitola Beach
Photo by Irene Reti

Shay Stoklos

Interviewed by Kathia Damian

On November 11, 2020 I interviewed Shay Stoklos, who is currently residing at their parent's house in North Carolina. Shay is currently a lecturer for CROWN 70, the class all KZSC DJ's must take in order to program on air. I've known Shay since 2017 through our time at the radio station, but we've mostly had casual encounters of the acquaintance variety.

Simply put, I was interested in interviewing Shay because I admire them. Shay is a passionate, thoughtful, and determined person. Shay's DIY tiny home, made from the back of a box truck, burned down during the August CZU Lightning Complex Fires. Shay is currently building a home out of a school bus. I was interested to learn about the process of loss and rebuilding from someone who is currently a climate refugee as well as her thoughts about the future.

—Kathia Damian

"...it really hit home, like oh, things are going to be changing."

Damian: All right. So it is Wednesday, November 11th. I'm here with Shay to talk about COVID-19. So can you go ahead and give a brief introduction of who you are?

Stoklos: Yeah, of course. Thank you, Kathia. I am Shay Leigh Stoklos. I use she and they pronouns, and I am a lecturer at UC Santa Cruz. I am also an alumna of UC Santa Cruz, and mostly of KZSC, the radio station on campus, which is where I now lecture a class in coordination with Crown College for KZSC to teach radio broadcasting to people who are coming to campus or coming into our community space and want to be involved at the radio station. I have been lecturing that course for two years. And half of the course is very hands-on. It is a lab section where students get to come in to KZSC and learn how to program and feel the gravity

of amplifying voices on a radio transmitter, so that their entire community can hear it.

And so when COVID-19 hit, that element of our teaching was eliminated. We're slowly trying to make steps to get people back in the building. But that's just kind of the first part of my experience with COVID-19. That's probably the first place where it really hit home, like oh, things are going to be changing.

Damian: Yeah, so when did coronavirus get real for you?

Stoklos: I was a little bit of a news junkie earlier this year. And I also have historically worked a lot of jobs at one time, both out of obligation to communities that I'm close with and out of necessity in living in Santa Cruz. So in January I was following updates about coronavirus pretty closely, mostly through listening to the *New York Times* podcast, *The Daily*.

"Keeping up with the Coronavirus"

So I think I tried to anticipate what might have happened. But it really didn't—I still remember working at the grocery store that I was at and asking my manager, "You don't really think we're going to have to wear masks soon, do you?" Sometime in early March. A month later, fourteen of my coworkers at that store contracted COVID-19.

And so, sometime around when the shelter in place orders were put out, it really started to click. That entire winter quarter was very challenging for a lot of students, a lot of lecturers, and particularly grad students, as the COLA strikes began.¹ Starting week six, I believe, through the end of the quarter, our class was meeting at the picket line. And that final week, it was the Monday before Tuesday lecture of week ten, we received an email that said that classes would no longer be meeting in person starting Wednesday, which I believe, if I'm not mistaken, it was exactly a week, maybe, before the shelter in place order began.

And so when we met at what was left of the picket line outside of the Earth and Marine Sciences buildings, it was just our class and then a few grad students who were showing up to kind of have a meeting. I could sense amongst this class—there were a lot of freshmen in this class, and a lot of first-year transfer students as well—and I could just feel that everybody collectively knew that it was the last time that they would really be socializing in that capacity. Of course, we didn't know how long. We thought it might be just a quarter. Maybe three months. And here we still are. So, around that time, it was very eventful.

Damian: Yeah, it was a crazy quarter. And I'm wondering how did your expectations for coronavirus differ from how it's actually been unfolding?

Stoklos: What's really fun about that question is that I began a talk show called "Keeping Up with the Coronavirus" in spring quarter to cover what was happening, mostly in our local community, and at large, and to also have lighter conversations about how to stay sane and find things to do. So there is audio of my closest friend, who is a nutritionist. Together we were figuring out what this was going to mean for ourselves, our jobs, our communities, the world at large. And in those first few weeks of doing that radio program, we speculated a lot about how long it was going to last, not just from our own knowledge, but from what we were seeing online as well.

And, in reality, I think I figured come the end of June, this will taper off. And then a few weeks into spring quarter and doing that program, I remember seeing something on social media that suggested the best way to anticipate how long we're going to be in quote unquote "lockdown," or how long we're going to be fighting the virus, is to look at big companies and what they're telling their employees to expect in terms of coming back into the workplace. Google had told their employees that they wouldn't be coming back into the offices for one year, until June 2021. That is when I really started to change my expectations of what might

happen during a pandemic.

"...there have been so many pandemics that have come to light this year."

Damian: Have you ever experienced anything else like this, like this crisis we're facing now?

Stoklos: I can surely say no. It's also—(pause) there have been so many pandemics that have come to light this year. And we know that it's not a product of this year alone. We know that it's a product of decades, centuries of misuse of the land, of ignoring Indigenous knowledge, of treating Black bodies as if they're disposable. And everything that we're seeing with coronavirus, with Black Lives Matter uprisings in the light of George Floyd's murder, as well as fires, etcetera—just to name a few things that have happened this year—but the things that have most closely affected our community, I think, in Santa Cruz and at UCSC. So it's hard to say that I haven't seen anything like it, because everything is in relationship to the pandemic. In retrospect, it almost kind of seems inevitable. It feels silly to imagine that there wasn't going to be something else on top of the pandemic, and something else on top of that, to exacerbate what issues we're dealing with, and how we need to effect change, and what systemically that looks like in terms of power and capital.

I definitely can't say that I've ever experienced anything like this. I was a baby child when 9/11 happened. I was in the first grade and I showed up in class with a photo of me standing on a ferry in front of the Twin Towers from the previous summer. And that was the last thing I had, and the thing that my mom sent me to school with. So my memories of that are all very like, of course buildings can be flown into; of course thousands of people can die in one event, one act of terrorism; of course, now we're rethinking what terrorism looks like and who's really at fault for a lot of that happening. I think it would be really irresponsible for the US to not take some responsibility for the ways that terror has played out here, and the way that we've enabled terror to exist in the world. And we're

seeing it happen today. So there's definitely some common threads that I think foreshadowed this happening. And pandemics have happened before. It's just been a while. It's been a hundred years. So, not in my lifetime. Or it's been so—I've been so desensitized to mass scales of trauma.

Damian: I totally agree. Especially I feel like with climate disasters happening so often—body counts—we don't grasp them. So I agree. And also, you were talking about the murder of George Floyd and the awakening that a lot of people have had to have about anti-racism. And on that note, what are some of your greatest concerns about how COVID-19 is shaping the world?

*"In fact, [COVID-19] was not the great equalizer.
It was the opposite."*

Stoklos: It must have been sometime in May—I think probably actually before George Floyd's murder—I remember hearing some commentaries about people suggesting that COVID-19 was the great equalizer, that everybody was at home experiencing similar feelings of isolation and unemployment and a feeling of helplessness. No doubt elements of those things maybe were common.

But in fact, it was not the great equalizer. It was the opposite. And we know that now because we can look at how COVID-19 has disproportionately affected communities of color, working class people, people who don't have the option to not go to work, and people who aren't getting hazard pay in the midst of a pandemic, either. I'm also a farmer, and throughout the pandemic, none of my coworkers who were in the field way more than I was, nor myself, nor was I at a grocery store ever compensated for doing something that was hazardous to my health and to my coworkers' health, who are much more at risk than I am, particularly my coworkers who are undocumented and aren't eligible to receive the stimulus package and aren't eligible for all of these ways that the government is attempting to help.

"It's mostly white people out there suggesting that they shouldn't have to wear a mask in public."

I know I'm derailing maybe a little bit from your question. But yeah, in light of everything, I think we all come back to the example of people who are protesting in defense of Black life or social justice and human rights at large, versus people who are protesting for their right to go out in public without a mask on, right? Like there's clearly a discrepancy between where those people are at economically. There's a huge racial difference. It's mostly white people out there suggesting that they shouldn't have to wear a mask in public. And the financial privilege that comes with that. Because a lot of people who were upset about having to stay home, or having to wear a mask out in public, weren't put in positions where they were forced to wear a mask and be around people for eight-plus hours a day and put themselves at risk.

Like I said, fourteen of my coworkers had COVID. We shut down our store for five days. Personally, that meant that I couldn't go to my other jobs because I was waiting to get test results. So, it's really shined the light heavily on privilege and whether people are willing to acknowledge it and do anything with their privilege. I could allude to Jeff Bezos and everyone who is making money off of the pandemic, but you can let me know if you want more on that.

The Role of Media

Damian: I'm always down to talk about capitalists and robber barons, and be like, what is happening there? We're media makers. You teach about media. And I'm curious about your thoughts on the role of media in a time where we can't communicate with each other face-to-face.

Stoklos: I'm hesitating because there are so many ways to approach this. I think about it similarly to the way that I think about this question that my acquaintance asked me a couple of months ago

when she said, "Do you think it's better that we have technology, like do you think it's better that we have social media, or would it have been better if we never had it? Just in terms of how people get caught up in it, the ways that it can affect us and cause harm in certain ways. Or does it kind of bridge a gap?" And I replied to her that I can't imagine another universe right now without social media, without the amount of screen time that people are getting these days. Of course, I think there is still an ability to reduce it. I'm not generally a pro-screen person. But you know, there's only so many different walks you can go on near your house without feeling like you have to drive around. Or especially I think a lot about high schoolers in this situation, or middle schoolers, and what they have the capacity to do. In that way, we need social media to continue interacting with people.

Additionally, the role of the media, in that sense, I think is also great. I think a lot of people are tapping into podcasts. It's really a correlation. I can't say that it's causation. But more and more, when I poll students about how much they listen to podcasts, since the winter quarter it's increased so much. And it's only a correlation that it's been during the pandemic. Who knows? Podcasting is getting older and more commonly consumed.

And at the same time, I really, really worry for people who have a tendency to tune in to corporate-biased, particularly right-wing biased, media. Or people who don't feel safe at home with their family members who do exclusively tune into that and are forced to listen to it all the time.

So it's kind of a necessarily evil, I think. Especially as somebody who was affected by the fires, who was permanently displaced by the fires, I have a relationship to media where I know that I can experience empathy fatigue very, very easily. There are times where I have to limit it, where I have to change sources and think about what kind of news I want to take on. So maybe I can listen to an Indigenous podcast because it's about the perspective of the election from an Indigenous community. But I really don't want to

hear at large what's happening with white America because I know what's happening with white America, because I'm living it. I have family members who supported Trump, right? So there's these kinds of limitations that I have to set in my own life and it's a careful balance.

I'm hoping that in general, media is used to inspire people right now, and to tell stories, and to experience the kind of humanity that we're not getting to because of a lack of being in person and having social relationships. That's just my optimistic side, is that people are really embracing it as an artistic medium, and a way to experience stories, and that they're not having to endure the really dangerous side of media, which is all corporate, constant fear mongering, and a lot of scary biases, in my opinion.

"I stopped drinking coffee for a good couple of months because my anxiety was already through the roof.."

Damian: Yeah, and I'm curious about, can you talk more about empathy fatigue and how you're taking care of yourself in this time?

Stoklos: Yeah. Empathy and compassion fatigue, for me, almost before I reach the point of fatigue, there is this adrenaline and addiction to news and finding out what's going on in the world. That's where I was at when the pandemic began and lots of my coworkers and friends were like, I don't want to hear it anymore. I don't want updates. I understood where they were at and that's part of my understanding where other people are experiencing empathy fatigue and being unable to process what's happening in the moment.

And then in my own personal life, at the same time that COVID hit, Black Lives Matters protests began again. The spring quarter was ending; I was training to be a domestic violence hotline advocate and self-care was something that came up a lot then. And at that point in time, it was like, all right, if I want to volunteer and do this work; if I want to encourage and inspire students to continue

creating media when they really haven't had any physical interaction with any equipment, with a microphone, other than what's on their headphones or their laptop; if I want to be able to raise my voice in the streets in a safe way and also be mindful of the fact that I work around a lot of people and I don't want to potentially spread a life-threatening virus; how am I going to manage this and what am I going to do?

At that point in time, I did reduce some of my work hours, so that I could take some time to be at home and make sure that I was doing everything from eating regularly—I stopped drinking coffee for a good couple of months because my anxiety was already through the roof, and I needed to cut back on any amount of caffeine. And you know, there were still a number of social events, or my bubble was still kind of active. And around that time, I also just really needed to cut back and say no to hanging out with even my best friend. I was exercising all the time.

And then there's also the point at which—at what point am I using these coping mechanisms to kind of latch onto, instead of using them as self-care? So I mean, there was some combination of, you're still trying to do too much; you're still trying to pay too much attention, hang out with your friends, blah, blah, blah, blah, in my life.

“... when my house burned down, it was the ultimate sign of, you can't keep up with this.”

I think self-care has really, self-care has really changed because when my house burned down, it was the ultimate sign of, you can't keep up with this. Then it just became a daily thing of like, have I eaten? Where am I sleeping? What am I going to do? What is my shelter? Have I filled out paperwork online? Just getting the basics done. So, that's a very personal look into how self-care has been a part of my life. But I think really, if I reflect on it from a different perspective, it's that I've continued to dance every day. It's that I've continued to sing every day. And just do little things. This makes

me content in the world. And the rest of it is the surface coping mechanism.

The CZU Lightning Complex Fire:

"I wake up every day wondering when I'm not going to think about the fact that I am a climate refugee."

Damian: I'm glad you keep dancing. I like those videos that you put out. I'm like, cutie. (laughter) And I am curious in talking about, if you're down to go there, about the fires. And if I'm not mistaken, you're in North Carolina now?

Stoklos: Yeah. I am.

Damian: And I'm interested in hearing how that happened. How did you end up in North Carolina?

Stoklos: Totally. Yeah. The fires. I mean, it's something that I've never really felt uncomfortable talking about. In fact, I think talking about it is generally helpful, and was from the very beginning. I never have really gotten emotional around people. It's when people get emotional around me talking about my experience that I'm like, oh, yeah, this is real. And quite frankly, there was a lot of gaslighting myself about my own situation. Because I am one of a handful of people that I know who lost their homes in the CZU August Lightning Complex Fires.

I was living in Bonny Doon in a converted mobile home on the farm that I worked for. I remember waking up when the storm was happening, being totally freaked out, wondering if I was going to survive, if my home was going to flip over because the winds were very strong.

And then when it finally got light enough to go outside, I could tell that there was smoke in the air and our electricity was out. We have no service up there. There was no water, because it was on a well.



Lightning storm August 16, 2020 that ignited the CZU fires.
The roll cloud blew through at 3 a.m.
Photos by Jaden Schaul

So there were basically no utilities whatsoever, and I had no way of contacting anybody. And I was living there alone.

Luckily, the fire was not around the corner from my house; I would have known by then. However, I did leave to go to work that morning and saw my neighbors out on the street kind of looking around and they were all like, "You know, I think we're going to be okay." And I had found out that my coworker didn't show up for work because she—a former firefighter—decided to immediately pack her family up and leave the area. And she was right down the street from me. I kind of had this conversation with myself where I was like, was that alarmist of her? Or am I doubting her because she was a woman in the fire service? I kind of had to ask myself, why am I giving myself reason to not believe everything she's saying, or to doubt the seriousness of the situation?

And then within three days—I hadn't spent much time up at my house, because it was 95, 100 degrees up there, but I had gone back a couple of times to grab some things. And one night when I went back once more, my landlord said, "You know, I really don't want you sleeping here tonight. We just don't know what's going to happen." And when burnt madrone leaves were falling around my friend and I, we thought you know, it's better for us to just leave.

So now, I'm in North Carolina, where I've moved out with my mom and my stepdad. I'm living here converting a school bus that I will be returning to Santa Cruz in to live in. That was a decision made within seven days of finding out that my house burned down. And while it kind of seemed a little bit—I don't know, it didn't necessarily feel too soon, there was just a lot of like mulling it over. Like all right, how am I going to live now? Santa Cruz is my home. I'm originally from Los Angeles, but Santa Cruz is my home. And with the feelings that I have about Indigenous land sovereignty and the capacity for landlords to take advantage of people to an extent that it runs people out of town when they're contributing to the community, it didn't feel like the right time to try and find a place to live, a room to live in, an apartment, etcetera. Obviously, the



Shay Stoklos by the ruins of her home.
Photo by Madia Jamgochian.

entire world can't be on wheels. Not everyone—that's not how we should be living—because it is somewhat deleterious to the land, but I'd rather be able to choose where and how I help steward in a way that renting won't allow me to do financially.

So, now as a young fire survivor, teacher person in the world, I wake up every day wondering when I'm not going to think about the fact that I am a climate refugee again. I wonder every day. Like is it going to take a year? Is it going to take two? Is it going to take ten? I don't know.

And you know, there are memories everywhere. One of the first things that I grabbed when I knew it was actually time to get out at 2:00 AM, was an envelope full of all my KZSC memories. It has a bunch of old program guides. And it just was one of those things—it was like this is the bulk of my college memories and the things that I think were the origin of radicalizing me, whether I knew it or not at the time. It was because we were creating media and telling stories that didn't exist elsewhere on the radio or in the world. That means a lot to me and I wanted that paper trail. So those are the things that I took and will be able to implement into my new residence. I'm sure I could say a ton more about the fires, but it's like—

I guess the only other thing that I think is really relevant is that we hear stories about the Loma Prieta earthquake from some of our fellow deejays, and what that was like being there. And I think it really activated me to think about what it would mean if the radio station did burn down in those fires because they did get relatively close to campus. And the painful part was that I knew that the university would in no way be able to prioritize rebuilding a radio station. And that it would mean a different kind of homelessness for a lot of students and community members with their relationship to the radio station.

And then also for me, on a personal note, I was like, I already lost one home. I can't lose my other home in this town. That is also

another thing that has radicalized me and made me think about how I can continue to advocate for students in Crown 70, KZSC's Intro to Radio Broadcasting course, and all of my former students and colleagues at KZSC who are working tirelessly, and usually without pay, to get a bunch of stuff done on campus and promote KZSC because it's their home and it's the place that they found that made them want to stay at UC Santa Cruz and continue paying tuition and fees to an institution that does not care about them alone, because it does not care about their home, which is KZSC.

So really kind of using all of these experiences to continue protecting the radio station, and everyone's collective memory and experience of being there and what that means for us. Because it's really, I think, kept a lot of people in Santa Cruz involved at UCSC and has been a family for a lot of us.

"There's no possible way to continue a campus environment in a place with rent that is over a thousand dollars a month per person to live in a room or share a room."

Damian: I fully relate. And I am inspired by the work that you do for KZSC. You kind of touched on this, but you've had to do a lot of rebuilding recently and I'm curious, what are your hopes for the future? How do you see this, or do you see this as an opportunity to change things?

Stoklos: Yeah, absolutely. I think the how is where I get stuck. And that is where I look to a lot of Black leaders, Indigenous leaders, leaders of color who have A, had more experiences being deprioritized, forcibly removed, put into carceral situations, had their families ripped apart in so many of these ways that we can relate to in the campus community and that people who aren't in the campus community can also experience outside of this. So like when I talk about potentially losing KZSC and that being a home for so many of us, there are plenty of people who have come through the university, not to mention Santa Cruz alone, as having

a really large homeless population. That is a relatable issue. There's so many things impacting our community.

The how is where I get stuck. But I do; I do firmly believe that everyone needs to have a relationship with their land, with their food. That food needs to be accessible and needs to either be affordable or free. There needs to be more affordable housing in Santa Cruz. There's no possible way to continue a campus environment in a place with rent that is over a thousand dollars a month per person to live in a room or share a room. It doesn't make any sense to suggest that Santa Cruz is a liberal town, or that it is fostering community, if we're not actually doing things to invite everybody and welcome and keep everybody in that community. That could be achieved through distribution of wealth and resources and really changing how we're using resources, right? And I say changing because it's not reform. It's getting rid of certain systems in our town and using that funding to really support everyone in the way that makes it accessible to them. So I do think that there is room—

*“My diploma burned up.
But some people will never have a diploma.”*

It's also interesting because Santa Cruz is set up so well to really start a lot of those processes. Like there are ways for people to create more coops, to create more, I mean, dare I say, even communes—it sounds really radical, which it's really not— people living in community, and supporting each other, and helping raise each other's children, and grow food, and teach, and learn in ways that aren't academic or classroom-based.

I think it's coming together. It's just a matter of feeling that—dare I say, fire—inside of you and that can't leave my body because my home is gone. And everything I owned is gone. And so, every day I walk around thinking, what is it like for people who experience this and don't get to have a roof over their head? What is it like if you have never had any of the things that I had? Like my diploma

burned up. But some people will never have a diploma. What makes it so that everyone can feel safe and secure and free of harm and how do we do it in a way that is environmentally responsible? And not just saying we want this perfect little cookie cutter society, which is not what I'm saying, then it's exclusively rich white people who get to live here. In fact, it's the opposite.

I think it's possible. There are just a lot of people to radicalize. In fact, like 28 percent of Santa Cruz needs to be radicalized. That's the percentage of people that voted for Trump in the 2020 election.

Damian: I did not know that in Santa Cruz. And yeah, climate justice, and social justice. Do you have any projects that you're working on now, either creative or otherwise?

Stoklos: Besides converting a school bus.

Damian: You can talk about that.

Stoklos: No, I mean, it's a fun project. I didn't think about the repercussions of having to jump into a really labor-intensive project after experiencing a traumatic life event. So there are times where it's challenging. We had to jump the bus the other day, jumpstart it. And I was in tears because I don't understand electricity. And I was like, what if it catches on fire? I can't endure this again. So there are moments like that, that make what is a creative project not really feel that artistic, I guess.

Otherwise, I've been writing a lot. And something that I have intended to do—and I don't know if it's that it feels like it will be burdensome or if I'm just past the idea—but for a while I wanted to make a zine out of drawings of the things that I remember that I lost in the fires. But now that I say that out loud, it might just be a zine of things that I lost in 2020, which has kind of expanded beyond—like there are people I've had to cut out of my life; there are so many events I thought would happen, social engagements, etcetera, in addition to all of the material possessions that are gone

now. So that's a project that I have in mind, but otherwise, making it through the year is project enough.

Damian: Yeah, 2020. Who knew that the world would end this year?

Stoklos: Truly.

Damian: All right. And just, a last question. Anything else that I haven't touched on that you want to be known on the record?

Stoklos: A week ago I was doing some research about grad schools and basic statistics about different schools, and I learned via this website that is effectively a college ranking system—it's sort of like Rate My Professor, but for universities—and in their ranking system, which isn't necessarily a reflection of what is actually happening, but I wouldn't be surprised, under UC Santa Cruz, the first ranking that came up was that we are the third most liberal university in the nation. I simultaneously felt really empowered by that—I think that "liberal" is a misnomer—I think that there's a sense of liberation that comes with identifying why you want everyone to have equal rights. and an equitable future, and why you'd want to reduce harm in your community. So I was definitely proud, in that sense, to think that the university that I am affiliated with and come from harbors so much radical thinking.

And at the same time, I felt really hindered by the idea that that university *is* the third most liberal in the country, knowing what has happened this year with the COLA strikes and the way that the UCPD has been not only enacted, but paid heavily to be on campus and to incite violence with peaceful student protestors. To think about all the ways that the university isn't liberated, and to know that if that is the third most in the nation, then what do other universities look like? I don't think I would want to know. I don't think I would fare well knowing.

But also, we have to push other universities to get there as well, right? And that's why there's kind of like this idea. And that's not to

say that like UCSC is the smartest. But I do think that there is a lot of thinking that can be taken elsewhere and challenge people. It may not always be in the right way, or the most friendly discussion, but I think it's important to challenge people's ideas. And if that is what's happening at UCSC, then I'm proud of that. But I'm always going to be frustrated by the idea that the administration uses its reputation as being liberal to suggest that they're doing the most they can, because they're not. On the record.

Damian: Hearing it. Thank you.



CZU Lightning Fire
Photo by Shmuel Thaler

Endnotes

¹The COLA [Cost of Living Adjustment] graduate strikes.



CZU Lightning Fire
Photo by Shmuel Thaler



CZU Lightning Fire, Burned Neighborhood Santa Cruz Mountains
Photo by Shmuel Thaler

Alyssa Tamboura

Interviewed by Aitanna Parker

On December 10th 2020 I interviewed Alyssa Tamboura. I met Alyssa at Black Academy which is a black frosh welcoming committee here at UCSC. Alyssa also started a non-profit this year to give books to children who have at least one parent who has been incarcerated, which is amazing. I came into this interview knowing by word-of-mouth about Alyssa but not actually knowing her story. She talked extensively about her trials and tribulations throughout the last decade and then how she came to overcome several pandemics regarding her identities. This was a very insightful conversation.

—Aitanna Parker

Parker: I am here with Alyssa Tamboura. This is Aitanna Parker, recording for the oral history interview on December 19, 2020. Do you want to introduce yourself however you feel comfortable?

Tamboura: Sure, my name is Alyssa. I'm a senior at UCSC. I'm a double major of philosophy and legal studies. I transferred into UC Santa Cruz from community college. I'm also a reentry student, which means I'm over the age of twenty-five. I'm a parent; I was a single parent for most of my time at UC Santa Cruz. And yeah, that's pretty much it. That's me.

"I was not going to slow down because of COVID"

Parker: Okay, awesome. And I really want to add this, because I know all of your business. Um, hello, law school? Do you want to talk, flex on a little bit?

Tamboura: Yeah, I'm applying, or I already applied to law school. I finished my last application about a month ago. I finished my last LSAT a month ago. I've already received some acceptances, which

I'm excited about. I got an email this morning inviting me to go and interview with Harvard Law School. So I'm very excited about that, too. Yeah, that's pretty much it; just waiting to see where I end up.

Parker: And for the record, because I know all of your business, Duke also wants you. All the Ivy Leagues want you. Basically, they're begging. They're on their knees. They're saying, "Alyssa, please. Take me. Love me."

Tamboura: Yeah, I've gotten into Duke, Georgetown, University of Virginia, University of Michigan. Those are all top schools. I had an interview with Columbia yesterday. I have my interview with Harvard on Monday. And then outside of that, I've gotten into UC Davis, Santa Clara, and a couple other random California schools I applied to because I was like, oh my gosh, I'm not going to get in anywhere. I need to apply to twenty schools, because no one's going to accept me. And that's definitely not been the case.

Parker: Wow, I'm so proud of you, might I say. And also, you applied this year, but this whole year has been messed up. So how was applying to grad school? How did you stay focused? How did you work through applying to twenty different schools, that you all got into, by the way, and I'm so proud. Go ahead.

Tamboura: I haven't got into all of them. I'm still waiting to hear back from quite a few. But yeah, I've known that I wanted to go to law school ever since I transferred to UCSC. I'm a senior, but I transferred as a sophomore, so this is my third year at UC Santa Cruz. When I was a sophomore my first quarter here, a professor introduced me to a class that was like an LSAT prep course, so my first quarter at UCSC, I started studying for the LSAT. I have been working on applications, honestly, over the last couple of years. I've been studying for this test; I haven't necessarily been writing out my applications, but I've been researching schools. I've been looking at different programs. I looked at what I was maybe going to write my personal statement about. I did a lot of brainstorming.

I took the LSAT five times. My first few times it was really hard—being in school full time, work basically full time, taking care of a child as a single parent on my own. And then once the LSAT moved to an online version from home, I decided to take it again.

Then again, a couple of months ago. I was like, you know what? I think I can do better. So I took it again. My point is, I've been doing this process over the last few years. I wrote my personal statements over the summer, got my letters of rec. So I'd already put in so much work to get to this point that I was not going to let 2020 throw me off.

Definitely suffering from it. My mental health lately has not been good, because I push, push, push, push, pushed the last six to eight months to get these applications in. And now that they're in, I'm sort of crashing emotionally. So it's like yes, I got it done, but at the expense of other things. And it was mostly I had the momentum going for so many years that I was not going to slow down because of COVID. Does that make sense?

Parker: That makes absolute sense. And also, tell me your zodiac sign, please.

Tamboura: I'm a Virgo.

Parker: Of course you are! It was between that and a Taurus.

Tamboura: Yeah. I'm a Virgo. I saw this thing on Insta yesterday and it was someone making fun of the signs. And the Virgo (laughs) she was like, "Nobody's perfect. It's okay that you messed up. Except for me, I'm perfect." She was like, "But even then, I still hate myself." And I was like, oh my gosh, that's so me.

Parker: Whoa! Beyonce's a Virgo and so is Michael Jackson. So you're in great company of excellence, of Black excellence.

I'm so proud of you. Yeah, that's super exciting and I want to touch off on that because personally, I'm very invested in your success because when you get your lawyer degree, we all get our lawyer degree. Amen. That is what happens and how logic works. (laughter)

2020 at UC Santa Cruz: "Extra Traumatizing"

The rest of 2020—how was that for you? I know each month changes, a drastic moment to remember. But can you take me through your whole year of COVID, basically?

Tamboura: Oh, yeah, sure. So March was an interesting month because we were still sort of in classes at UC Santa Cruz, not really, because of the strikes.¹ I keep telling folks that this year for UCSC students has been really extra traumatizing because we had the wildfires and PG&E outages, and the wildcat strikes, and COVID.

[During the strikes], January and February were already stressful, just being on campus. I lived in Family Student Housing which was right near the west entrance, so there was a lot of movement, a lot of protest movement. It was really stressful just getting home a lot of the times. So I wasn't really having too hot of a February.

And then when March hit, I was in the process of moving. My partner and I—he lives in San Jose. And we decided okay, we're going to move in together, but we're going to look for a house in March because his lease was up. And I was like, I'll just pay rent on Santa Cruz and on our new house in San Jose, and then I'll move in in June, when classes are over at UCSC, so Christopher, my son, can finish out at school and I can finish out at school, too.

Then COVID hit. So in March, I was in the middle of moving, when the pandemic started during the lockdown, which was really stressful, having to deal with my son doing online learning *and* moving. And then April, once we realized that UC Santa Cruz wasn't going back to school and that my son wasn't going back to school

anytime soon, I was like, fuck it, I'll just leave--Oh, sorry, I cursed.

Parker: Oh, please do.

Tamboura: Oh, okay. I'll just give up my apartment in Santa Cruz and move to San Jose. So then April was moving all of my stuff from Santa Cruz after I had already helped my fiancé move all of his stuff from his house. And then May and June was this weird time of all of us being home together. My fiancé has two kids and I have one kid, so there's five of us. We had a roommate at the time, too, who was unemployed, and so we were letting him live with us. And it was just a lot of energy, a lot of people, a lot of getting used to this new normal. I feel like my mental health was okay; it wasn't super great, but it was okay.

And then over the summer, I took summer classes. It was nice to not have to worry about my son in online school. He just frolicked and played a lot. He was bored. So that was a lot, trying to do my classes. And then I was working on my law school statements and essays. So that was a lot.

And then September came and I did Black Academy, which was disappointing. I've done Black Academy the last two years. I was a participant my first year, and then a mentor my second year. This was my third year, and I was a mentor again this year. I love Black Academy, and being with my people and my community, and it sucked to do it online. No disrespect to Dr. Jones or Rhianna, and all the folks that put in the hard work for that. It's the reality of the situation. But I was really disappointed to not be in person, breaking bread, you know, chilling with my community. It was disappointing.

And then I decided I was going to take the LSAT one more time in November. So I spent September, October, November, really focusing on the LSAT and on trying to work on my thesis, being part time at UC Santa Cruz. Studying for this stupid test three to four hours a day. And then doing my last applications in November. And here we are in December. That's literally been my year.

"I feel super disconnected from UC Santa Cruz because I'm not taking any live classes right now."

My mental health in the beginning was okay. Over the summer it was kind of okay. And now that we're in cold season and we're indoors a lot more, I feel like I'm not getting as much socialization even just because it's colder. It's not like I'm having friends come over in the backyard for social distancing or whatever. I feel exhausted. This year has been so exhausting. I could only hold it together for so long before I feel extremely tired and exhausted.

I feel super disconnected from UC Santa Cruz because I'm not taking any live classes right now. Online classes are okay for me because I worked full time and did community college and did online classes in community college, too. So I'm used to it. It works for me. It's fine. I miss people in my community and structure, and I miss going to kickboxing, and Santa Cruz. I miss going to the beach with Christopher. There's a lot of losses and grief that this year are finally catching up to me, now that I'm not busy focusing on getting those law school applications done.

That was a very long-winded, 2020 answer. But that's literally my life right now.

Parker: You're doing fantastic. I'm really proud of you. Also, I give a lot of affirmations. so if they ever get annoying, let me know. Yeah, so also, I wanted to follow up on that and ask how you're taking care of yourself. What does that look like?

Tamboura: That's a good question. This past week I've just been resting a lot, or maybe the last week and a half. I've been so tired and I feel physically ill because I'm so exhausted that I'm just resting. I'm giving myself permission to sleep, to watch Netflix, to leave things undone.

We've eaten out three nights in a row. We had tacos last night. The night before—actually, no, I made dinner the night before. And

then the night before that, we had Thai food. So two out of the past three nights we've gotten takeout. And I'm just like, you know what? That's okay. I don't need to be super student, super person, super Mom, super fiancée. I don't need to get up and work nine hours, then go grocery shopping, then cook this elaborate meal, and then everyone comes home and entertain them. Like nope—I'm going to do my bare minimum. I'm going to watch Netflix and we're going to get takeout. I'm going to rest. So that's been really nice, to allow myself permission to do that.

I'm not exercising because I hate exercising at home. It sucks so much. So that's the one thing I am not doing too hot in. I could go for more walks. These are my goals more than anything. Oh, I go to therapy. I do that. And I talk to friends when I feel like I need support.

And also, I just don't deal with toxic people right now. I can deal with toxic people when my cup is full, or at least almost full. But when my cup is sort of running empty, I don't have time for people's bullshit. So I'm doing a real good job of not talking to folks right now. And that is amazing. I really like that.

Parker: Way to set those boundaries and know where they are. And stick to them, because you need it.

I wanted to ask—because you mentioned being disconnected to UCSC—have you ever felt connected to UCSC? And how and where did that happen?

Tamboura: Yeah, I definitely felt connected to UCSC when I lived there. Black Academy was really grounding for me, getting to meet a lot of folks. I wasn't as active in the Black community at UCSC. I didn't do BSU [Black Students Union] and I didn't go to a lot of events. That was mostly because I was a single parent to a small child and it was hard to get to events. But the folks that I was and still am friends with were helpful, and that helped me feel connected.

Finding Community at Family Student Housing

And then also, too, living in Family Student Housing was amazing. There are so many people that I really love and got along with very well. We hung out and we did play dates with our kids and had dinners together and carpooled, picked each other's kids up from daycare. I really loved that community. That helped me feel very connected to UC Santa Cruz and the success and wellbeing of my fellow student parents. UCSC has a lot of things wrong with it. But having family housing—even though it is expensive, but still significantly below market—that's one thing that Santa Cruz manages to get at least decently right.

Parker: Yeah, I know there are a lot of problems with UC Santa Cruz. And just hearing you say that, and hearing you find your community in Family Student Housing that's amazing and something great to look back on. (laughs) I'm sorry.

Tamboura: That's okay.

Parker: Because we were just talking about how much you don't feel supported right now, and it's hard.

Tamboura: I'm really okay.

Parker: Okay, for sure. But thank you so much for sharing and talking about that and getting us through that.

Black Academy

I also wanted the tea on Black Academy, if you do not mind. Because I am also familiar with Black Academy. But just for general purposes—what is Black Academy? Who is it for? How did you get to know it? And what happened this year? Give me the real tea. Set the scene, and then give me the tea. Go on.

Tamboura: So, Black Academy is a six-day-long transition program to the university for ABC-identified students (and for y'all that don't manage to learn about other folks, ABC means African, Black and Caribbean). It's a week of bonding, of building community. Workshops, field trips, tours, activities. I think the past couple of years it's been maybe fifty students, sixty students per year. There's a mentorship aspect, too, so one mentor will have five or six, sometimes seven, mentees that are in or around the same major and checks in on the mentees and makes sure they're getting the sessions, if they have any questions. They run activities.

We eat so much food. We eat so much food. We get a lot of food. We get breakfast; we get lunch and we get dinner. Last year, 2019, we had this really nice ending ceremony where everyone got certificates and we got to say really nice things about our mentees. Actually, we do that every year. Then we get cool t-shirts, some cool swag. And we have meetings with ABC faculty at UCSC, so we know who our folks are. It is a really nice, amazing program that, honestly, I think retains a lot of folks at this school, or at least welcomes them. And so, yeah, so that's Black Academy. I was a participant my first year here. I got involved because I got an email from the school like, "Hey, you're Black, you want to do this thing?" Pretty much. So I signed up for it.

My first year, it was good. I liked my first year. That's where I met my two closest peeps at UCSC. Then I was a mentor last year, 2019. And again, that was really cool. I got to be in a new role with my mentees and being able to support them was awesome.

Then this year, it was all online. The best thing about Black Academy is hanging out, chilling, eating, being together, joking, laughing, dancing, you know, hanging out. When it's online, you can't really do that. It's harder. At least in person you can find your people and break off, right? It's not like all sixty or seventy of us are in one room and there's one person talking at a time. You know, it just isn't like that. Zoom is like that. You can't have side conversations with people on Zoom. You can over Chat, but it's not the same. For the

most part, it's one person talking.

And that was interesting, just because there are people who are stronger personalities than others. There are people who are more outgoing than others. And the way it sort of manifested is some dominance in the Zoom meetings, in the Zoom chats. I say that very lovingly. There's no animosity or shame there. It is what it is, you know? It's just folks are outgoing and they're in this space and they're there, which is awesome. I just think about those who are maybe a little bit more shy and prefer maybe smaller, more intimate settings to get to know people. And I wonder how their experience was. I'm very much a smaller, setting, intimate person. That's how I make my friendships the most. I like to talk to people one-on-one, more than in a group.

So, I don't know. It was just not as impactful or great as I think it usually is. And again, no fault of anyone. It's just COVID. I'm not knocking the people who did make it happen. We did the best that we could, given the circumstances. It just is what it is. I don't know. I don't want to talk smack. I want to be honest. But I don't want it to reflect bad on those who create the program. Because it's just—it's COVID. You know, everything sucks right now.

Parker: Everything does. And I hope people that read this, or hear that, also understand nuance, and understand how I would be concerned if Black Academy was even decent during this time. Because I feel so much of me going through it as well. So much of it is about in-person connections.

Tamboura: Period.

Parker: So I would also be concerned. I think that speaks to how powerful Black Academy is, and how much more funding it should get. So, yeah, thanks for sharing. I love tea. Love the dramas.

I wanted to ask you, because it just happened, about the election. I also know that was a significant time during this year. I know at

least I was shaking, up until then and even now. I wanted to ask how you're doing around that.

"This country is racist and there's white supremacists everywhere."

Tamboura: Around the election?

Parker: Yeah.

Tamboura: I honestly—so before UC Santa Cruz, I was the person who listened to NPR on the way to work and on the way home, and read the news, and was very up-to-date on things. And my mental health suffered a lot. So over the last couple of years, I've pumped the brakes on staying up-to-date on all the news.

I think I did it mostly just because I was like, I want to seem intelligent when I'm talking to people, right? Like, "Oh, yes, I did read that *New York Times* article." I was working at Stanford in this hoity-toity office with these stuffy people. Who I loved, they're awesome. They're all journalists and writers and editors. So I tried to keep up with the times. So over the last few years, I've pumped the brakes. I see major headlines but I don't follow every single thing that's going on.

So it's the same thing with the presidential election. I knew generally what was going on. But I maybe watched like half a debate. I maybe read a couple of articles. I don't really—like, I already know what it is, you know what I mean? I don't really need to be diving in deep there. So I don't think it affected me maybe as much as it affected other folks.

Honestly, nothing surprises me with this fucking country anymore. I honestly thought Donald Trump was going to win, not because I wanted him to win. But this country is racist and there's white supremacists everywhere. It just did not surprise me. It was not

going to surprise me if Donald Trump won. So I honestly had zero expectations. I have no expectations for this country. It's to the point where I don't even get all worked up and upset about it, as I used to in the past, because *nothing* surprises me anymore. So I was honestly just like chilling. I had a little bit of anxiety before the election, like the week before.

"So we don't have Trump, but we have another old white man who's just going to do the bidding of his capitalist overlord masters."

And then when Biden won I was just like, okay, like cool, I guess. So we don't have Trump, but we have another old white man who's just going to do the bidding of his capitalist overlord masters. Like all right, whatever. Like, yay! (laughs) It just—I don't know. It was just—is this making sense? I don't want to seem like I don't care about the things that go on in this world or this country. I do. It's just nothing surprises me anymore, so why let myself get all upset about it?

Parker: It makes perfect sense. I have a follow-up to that. You want to be a lawyer. So in some sense, do you believe in the judicial system? Or is that morphing as you continue to grow and learn more?

Tamboura: I mean, there's legal realism and then there's legal formalism, right?

Parker: Like come on, philosopher! Yes, go off.

Tamboura: There's what the law says, and then there's how the law actually is interpreted and applied, and then how it actually manifests in the reality of the people who the law is supposed to govern, right? So in our country, it's us, the United States citizens. So, I don't know. It's not that I don't believe in the law, or think—I can't remember how you phrased it. I do want to be a lawyer. I believe in the law. I believe that the law is flawed, which is why I

want to be a lawyer, to get out there and change the law, to go and try to make these system changes so the law will be more fair and equitable and just, for people of color, particularly. So I believe in it to that extent.

I also think, too, that the law is used to do things that are not right. Like, why is it that Amazon can pay zero dollars in taxes? Why is it that super PACs can exist, and people can donate unlimited funds to people who are running for president, or senator, or whatever, governor. There are things about this country, any country, really—laws that benefit the white, the wealthy, and capitalism. I get that. But that doesn't dissuade me from wanting to be a lawyer. Like I said, there's what the law is and then what the law actually does. And I see myself as being someone who's going to dedicate my life and my career to merging that so there's not as much disparity between the two. You know?

Parker: I hear you. And you honestly in this moment gave me a new perspective. I think I need to read up on more philosophers. (laughs) I'll ask you for recommendations after this because that was really thought provoking. Yeah, I have no follow-up questions on that, because I'm still letting that marinate.

"My journey has been this weird combination of luck and hard work."

So I wanted to get into how you as a person have come to be, why you chose to come back to college, how were your other experiences with secondary education, and what made you decide to come back.

Tamboura: That is a loaded question.

Parker: It is. But take it where you want to go. There is no pressure.

Tamboura: I have always really loved school and learning. I've

always been very curious. I overthink a lot. I'm in my head all the time, which makes sense why I would choose philosophy as a major. I've always been one that's so concerned with what is right and what is just, right? Like, what is fair. Oh, my God! It was a thing when I was little. I challenged all the adults and all the teachers in my life for reasons why: Why are you doing that? Why are you saying that? Why is this rule a rule? Why is this the right action and that the wrong action? I've always been one to push up against authority and challenge and be like, "Give me reasons." You know? And also, I want to learn. I've always been this person.

My dad went to prison when I was nine and that definitely has stunted my growth, right? I really struggled in school to keep things together. I struggled with making friends. I struggled with my relationships with other kids, other people, other adults. It was a hard time, honestly.

When I got to high school, it got so much worse. I mean, my dad got a fifteen-year sentence, so it wasn't like he was coming home anytime soon. It was so much worse in high school. I struggled academically. I don't even know how to explain it. Like I would go to class but I wouldn't pay attention. Or I would not complete assignments. And I really wanted friends. I had no friends in high school. I really struggled with it because I felt so alone and so isolated because of my father's incarceration. And also, my mom was really abusive. So I could never be me. I always wanted to be what other people wanted me to be so maybe then they would like me, right? I really struggled.

I got kicked out of this private high school. I went to a public high school after. And I found people who I could party with. I was like wow, these people accept me. Well, yeah, duh, because I'm smoking and drinking with them and partying and living this life that I don't really want. And at the same time, I'm watching all of these people around me prepare to get ready to go to college, take AP classes. And it's not that I wasn't smart. I arguably was as smart, if not smarter than some of these white kids that I went

to school with that seemed to have it all together. It's just I didn't have the guidance; I didn't have the structure; I didn't have the self-esteem. I didn't think I deserved it, honestly. My mom was so abusive. And my self-esteem was so low.

When I was sixteen, my mom was like, "Well, you can't live with me anymore." So I became homeless and was really struggling. I wandered in and out of my grandma's house. She didn't really have a lot of space for me. I slept at random people's houses and cars. There's this guy that lived down the street and his car was always unlocked. And we would go and sleep in it. It was very stressful.

"For people like me, success is so much fucking luck."

I stopped going to high school. I dropped out. I got pregnant during this time, with my son. And literally, it was like the world was over, you know? I was seventeen and I had a baby. And everyone I knew was going to college and moving in the dorms. This was when Facebook was still a thing; Instagram was barely starting to happen. So everyone's posting on Facebook, them going off and living their lives. I begged my mom to let me live with her again because I had this baby. So I'm living in this abusive situation with a baby and no college. No high school diploma and nowhere near going to college. Like just so depressed. It was just awful.

I spent a lot of good years just spiraling after that, not doing well. Spiraling. I won't go into detail because this is on the record, but not a good time.

I realized one day, if I want to get a job, I need to get my GED. So I got my GED. I actually wrote about this for one of my law school essays that I never turned in. But they were like, "What does being a first-generation college student mean to you?" I didn't turn this essay in, but I wrote this really salty essay about luck. For people like me, success is so much fucking luck. Like the day I had to go get my GED. I had to go take the test. I didn't have enough money for the bus. I called someone I knew from high school and I was like,

“Hey, can you take me, drop me off so I can get my GED so I can take this test?” And it just so happened she was rescheduled for work or something that day and could take me. What would have happened if I didn’t have a ride? Just shit like that where these things kept happening where the universe conspired to make it so that I could kind of get it together.

So I got my GED. I started working full time as a receptionist at some medical office. I worked there for a few years. Then I got a job at Stanford, at the hospital. I was working there for a while. I was making good money. I was twenty-one, making like sixty thousand dollars, which is pretty good for that age without a college degree. And I was thinking, I don’t want to do this for the rest of my life. I have a small child. By God’s grace I somehow managed to get a GED and scrape up to be in this job where I can maybe afford to live on my own.

I kept looking for another job. I ended up getting a job as the executive assistant to the chief communications officer at the medical school. I don’t know how the fuck that happened, but it did. So I was making even more money. And it was like okay, I can afford to live on my own. So I moved out of my mom’s house with this crazy abusive situation. And here I was just twenty-one, working at Stanford’s medical school, in my own tiny 500-square-foot apartment with a four-year-old, going all right, what’s my next move; I can’t even believe I made it here. I don’t even know how this happened, but what’s my next move?

I started taking classes at community college at night, and online. I’d get up at six, take my son to school, and go to work from eight to five. My grandma would watch him and I would go to community college at night or take online classes. And financially—barely living, paying thousands of dollars for his daycare and school and rent and my car and my phone bill and my gas and my food and my insurance and clothes for him. I look back. I’m like, how did I do that all? I remember sitting in a parking lot on my lunch break, feeling so exhausted. I’m working sixty, eighty-hour weeks, raising

this kid. School, work. I can't do this anymore.

I called someone, she's like a mentor to me. I said, "I really want to just quit my job and go to school full time. I don't know how I'm going to do that. I don't know how I'm going to afford it. I don't know if this is ever going to be a reality for me. But you know, I have a few credits under my belt. I've done a year's worth of college. At this rate, if I work full time and go to school part-time, I'll get my bachelor's when I'm like thirty-two." And talking to her and saying, "All right, you know what? I'm going to see if I can transfer somewhere as a sophomore. I'm just going to apply to colleges and look to see what will happen, what my financial aid will be like, how can I make this happen? But the first step is applying."

So I had to take the SAT. It was just like a whole-ass deal. And the whole time I'm thinking this has been my dream, right? I want to get a college education. I want to live my life. I don't want to be stuck here. You know? I don't want to be stuck in a tiny little apartment, working this much, barely seeing my kid. I need something different. I need something better.

My community college lecturer encouraged me to apply to UC Santa Cruz. And I applied to other places in the Bay Area. UC Santa Cruz was the only place I got in, which was kind of wild. But they let me in, and as a sophomore. That's when I looked into family housing. I looked into financial aid. I thought all right, it's not going to be fun financially. But I can do this. I can make this happen.

I quit my job and I went to Santa Cruz full time and worked part time. And just used financial aid. And found my community there to help me with Christopher. All these years later, now I'm at this point of applying to law school and not housing insecure anymore. I'm getting that degree I wanted so bad.

You know, I think about me at sixteen, seventeen, pregnant, homeless, watching everyone I know go off to college, and feeling like, my life is over and I'm so depressed. What is my life going to

look like? Who am I going to be in this world? How am I going to take care of this kid? When's my dad coming home from prison? When's my mom going to stop drinking? Just so fucking sad. So fucking sad. And I don't know how it happened, but I managed to get from there to here over—how old am I? I'm twenty-seven—ten years. Ten years to get from there to here.

So that's the evolution of Alyssa in a nutshell. I don't really know who I am today. I like to think I'm someone who works hard, who can persevere in the face of adversity. I know what I want. I want a good life. I want to take care of my son. I want to be happy. I want stability, which I have today, and I'm really grateful for that.

And also, like I said in that salty-ass essay I wrote for law school that I didn't end up submitting, I understand that my journey has been this weird combination of luck and hard work. There were so many times I was just lucky. UC Santa Cruz didn't have to let me in. Then what would have happened, you know? I happened to meet this professor who was like, "Take this LSAT class if you want to go to law school." What if I never went to her office that day? You know what I mean? Just these things. And then I wouldn't have found this free LSAT class that helped me get the score where now I'm getting interviews from Harvard and Columbia. It's so wild to think about the time and the spaces that we're in, and how things work out so that we end up where we're supposed to be. That's the biggest thing I've learned from my life—I don't know where I'm going to end up, I just know I'm going to end up there. Does that make sense? That was a very long, long, long answer to your loaded question. All right. I'm done. (laughs)

Parker: It was. But that's the point of this. This whole interview is about you. And I love that you're so honest and you're open and sharing. And please don't ever feel like you're taking up space. This space is here for you, meant for you. Yeah. So please don't apologize. Don't ever be self-conscious about giving long answers. It's the point. Okay?

Tamboura: Mm-hm.

...“at the end of the day, I really think we should focus on gratitude for what we do have, and the life that we do have.”

Parker: I wanted, because I know we’re approaching the end of our time, unfortunately. I wanted to ask you— (laughs) You’re such a philosopher, so you’re really going to take this. So what is something that you want people to remember about you?

Tamboura: Ooh. [pause] Hmm. [pause] What’s something I want people to remember about me? I did it. I made it. I want people to remember that I made it. And it took so much from me. It took years and years and years of hard work. Of tears, of a broken heart. Of trying to heal. Of sleepless nights wondering if I’m going to be okay, if my kid is going to be okay. Like I said earlier, acknowledging my luck and my privilege in that, too. But I’m here and I made it. And at the end of the day, everything we have—this computer; this house I’m sitting in; the clothes I’m wearing; the car I drive; everything, everything we have in this life that people think is so valuable and so important, right? It doesn’t mean shit.

If I want people to remember one thing about me, it’s that I know that I value and love the people in my life and myself, because I’ve worked hard to earn that. I don’t wish some of the things I’ve been through on people. I’m around folks, mostly white folks— just going to slip that in there—but I’m around folks who I feel like they don’t appreciate the things that they have. I know what it’s like to have nothing. And I want folks to remember that they’re blessed. You are blessed. There is always someone who has it worse than you. There’s always someone who probably has it better than you. But at the end of the day, I really think we should focus on gratitude for what we do have, and the life that we do have. Because there’s real suffering out there and a lot of folks I’m around, at least now in higher education, haven’t really experienced that. I think we should all stay humble and stay grateful. And so, yeah, I want folks to know

that I'm here, I made it. I'm humblish. I'm grateful and I think others should be, too.

Parker: Wow. You're such an icon. Okay. And then if you could sum up this year for you in a phrase—I'm not going to limit you to number of words, but just give me a phrase—what would that be?

Tamboura: This will sound really cheesy, but I'm just going to pick one word.

Parker: Okay.

Tamboura: *Time.* I'm just going to pick the word *time*. Because I've been thinking about time this year a lot more than other years. And it's not just because of COVID. I mean, it is COVID, partially. I'm ready to go to law school where I don't even feel like I'm starting a new chapter; I'm starting a whole ass new book of my life. And this year has made me think about the concept of time and how can I exist in all these—like how could I have existed ten years ago in a totally different space? Time is the thing that brought me from that space to where I am now and time is going to be the thing that carries me from this year to my future. It's a weird thing to think about because we're in it, right? Time doesn't stop; we're just here.

In 2020, it seems like the world has stopped and kept going all at the same time. I think everyone is in this space of reckoning, of realizing—I'm in this moment where things are maybe paused a little bit, but not really. And who am I? Where have I been? Where am I going? And the uncertainty of the future. That uncertainty means you really think about time. Like, how much time is going to pass before things get back to whatever we think our normal is, you know? Who are we going to be then? And what's life going to be like? I don't know, I've been thinking a lot about that this year, the concept of time and who we are over years and years and years, the things we go through. Because ten years from now, we'll look back on this and be like wow, 2020 was fucking crazy. But you know what? It's going to be like, how I'm sitting here going wow, when I

was seventeen, that was fucking crazy. You know what I mean?

Parker: Yeah, I think also the theme of this project is COVID is a pandemic, but there's also nonmedical pandemics that different people have been going through.

Tamboura: Right!

Parker: Yeah, so I hear you and I see you and that's the complete point. You nailed it with this interview. Is there anything that you think we should touch on, or you want to add to the conversation with these themes in mind? Like multiple and plural pandemics going on at once. This whole year of craziness—COVID, life, family—anything that you would want to add to these themes.

Tamboura: Life is always changing. We're always changing. Life is evolving. We're evolving. And things are—life is just life. That's what one of my friends says. Life is just life. We're just here doing the best we can, living our lives. And I want to be someone who says I lived it to the fullest, and I did the most, and I learned my lessons. 2020 is a lesson for a lot of us in our own ways, because we all have our own experiences. I think that if folks could really take this year and what they've learned and move forward in their life being, I don't know, just a little bit more present, more engaged, more grateful, maybe we'll all be better for it.

Parker: Alyssa, I'm giving you a round of applause right now.

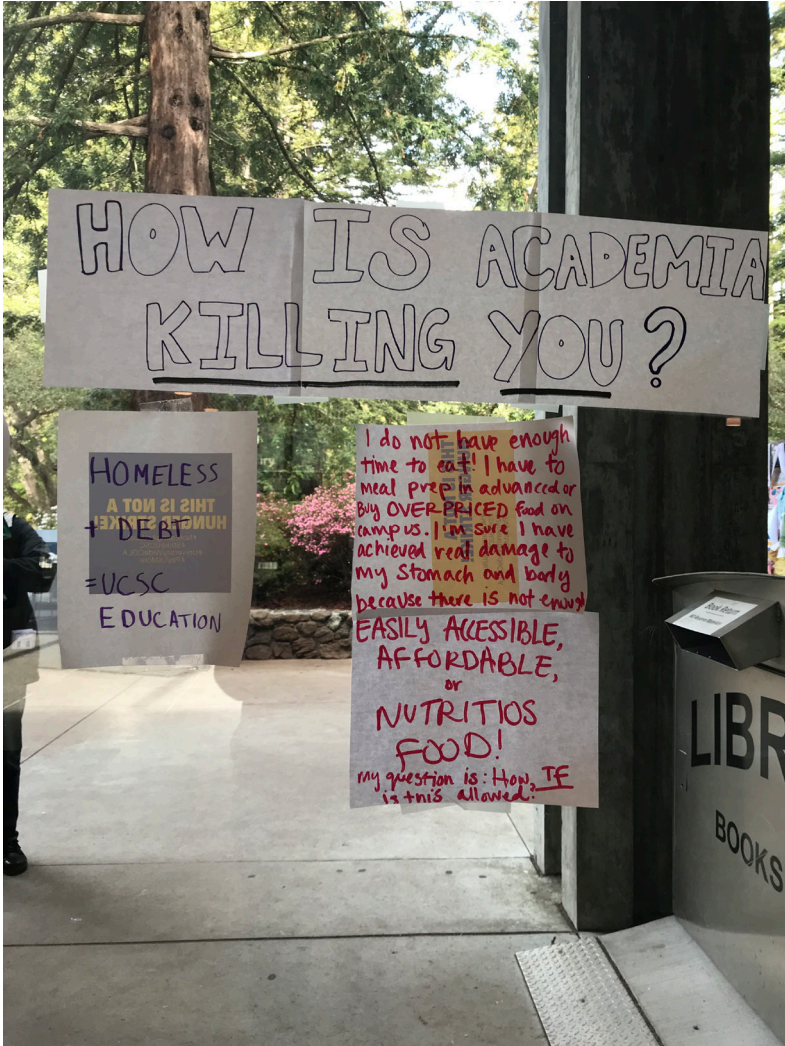
Tamboura: Thanks.

Parker: Thank you so much for this interview. And also, I feel like I know you a little bit better. Thank you for letting me in. You're so great.

Tamboura: Yeah. Of course.

Parker: Okay. I'm going to stop the recording now.

Tamboura: Okay.



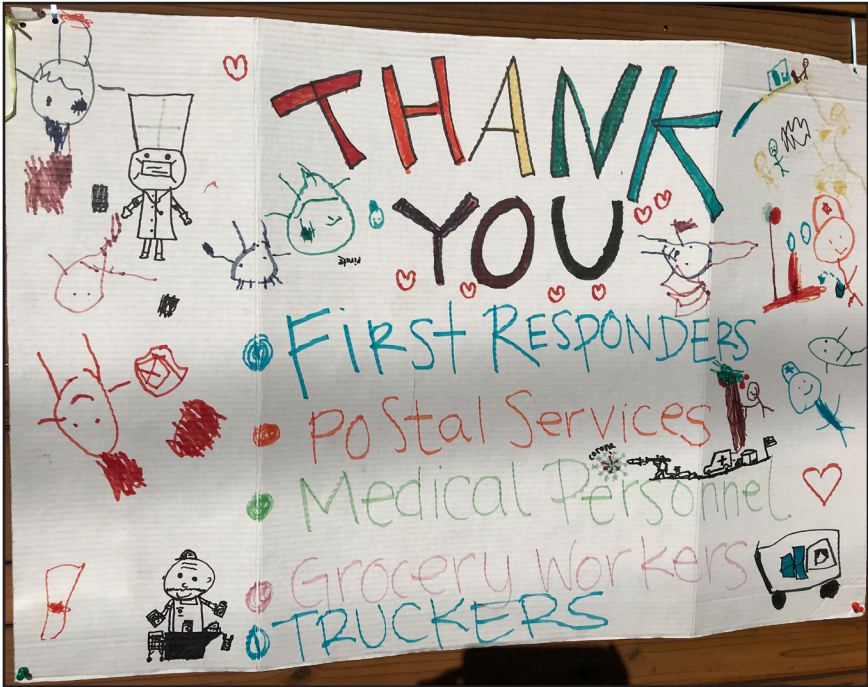
COLA Strike Signs, McHenry Library
Photo by Irene Reti

Endnotes

¹ The COLA [Cost of Living Adjustment] graduate strikes.



Morning after the Lightning, but Before the Fires.
Photo by Irene Reti



Gratitude, 2020
Photo by Irene Reti

Alyssa Uyeda

Interviewed by Isabella Crespín

During the time of this interview, COVID-19 cases had skyrocketed. The numbers were going up as we headed into Thanksgiving. The election was still being contested by Trump, along with conflicting information by the government on how to handle the upward tick. There was also an increase in anti-mask people, despite health officials warning that masks are essential for survival.

California instituted a curfew for counties in the purple tier (which was the worst possible tier). Businesses in those areas were being asked to stop indoor operations unless they were an essential business. Some were hopeful, since news of an effective vaccine had arrived, and others were preparing for what seemed to be an unavoidable increase in death rates across the globe.

Alyssa Uyeda and I have been close friends since we were five years old and have shared many memories together. We talked about some of our childhood memories from being brought up in a Japanese immersion school and discussed the differing attitudes about the pandemic in different cultures. Uyeda's mother is a nurse and her whole family had no contact with anyone outside of the household during the pandemic.

During this time Uyeda was living in a part of Los Angeles, called Culver City. Los Angeles was one of the areas that was having a large increase in cases and was in the purple tier.

Crespín: Hello, this is Isabella Crespín with Alyssa Uyeda for the UCSC COVID-19 Project. Today is November 21, 2020. All right, so Alyssa, we have known each other for what, fifty years, I think? We've known each other for a long time. (laughs)

Uyeda: Something like that.

"A Slow Vibe": Coming to UC Santa Cruz

Crespin: Yeah, so this will be interesting. Okay, so how did you end up in Santa Cruz, at UCSC? What made you want to come to Santa Cruz?

Uyeda: When I was applying to colleges, I first looked at the academic departments and the types of majors that UCSC or the variety of colleges I applied to offered. Santa Cruz had human bio, and I was specifically interested in human bio. So I was looking at colleges that had that major.

But after looking at that aspect of it, I guess location was a very big factor in my decision making. I come from LA and LA is a very urban, crowded place, when compared to Santa Cruz. There's people everywhere. You don't get any privacy. Everything's expensive. I think what made me want to go to Santa Cruz is that it was a very different vibe from that. Santa Cruz, even though it is a very big tourist attractor, it has more nature and is a bit more of a slow vibe compared to L.A. And I feel like one aspect of high school, or just the location I was learning in back at home lacked, was the nature aspect. Everything was just buildings, and the most amount of nature that I saw was a tree with a squirrel climbing up in like the corner. (laughs)

Santa Cruz is definitely a big transition, because we have the redwoods and the ocean nearby, which is so cool, in my opinion. I think that it's nice.

Crespin: In LA, you live next to the ocean.

Uyeda: (laughs) Even though we do, it's not like right there. I mean, I guess it is, but you know what I mean. Santa Cruz is a very big change from that. I think getting outside and taking a deep breath can really help you focus your time, and not get as much anxiety when studying and stress and jobs and all of those come into play

Crespin: Yeah. I remember you didn't even pick a school until the last day possible. (laughs) You called me, you were like, "I don't know yet." That was fun. Besides nature, what is something that you think is unique to Santa Cruz that you miss?

Uyeda: Specifically to campus, or just Santa Cruz in general?

Crespin: Either one works, but you can go campus, if that's easier.

Uyeda: I think that especially on campus, everyone is super open-minded, usually. It's a very diverse campus that's populated by a bunch of students with different opinions. UCSC emphasizes the idea of collaboration and talking and listening to other people's opinions, and having a voice, too. One thing they really emphasized in my college core course is being able to project your voice and having your opinions heard and stuff like that. I feel like they really emphasize individuality and how everyone can express their own thoughts in their own way. I think that was pretty cool.

Crespin: What communities or clubs were you part of in Santa Cruz? (laughter)

Uyeda: Well, this year I joined OMI, which is the Okinawa Memories Initiative.¹ I just joined this year. I attended a couple of meetings last year, but I didn't really get fully into it until this year. I've always been a part of this organization called Circle K, which is a volunteer club on campus. I'm not so involved this year, because it's very hard to volunteer remotely and have events regarding helping the community remotely. I mean, we've had guest speakers and stuff. But it's pretty difficult during these times.

I've tried out other clubs, but they just weren't a fit for me.

Family Background

Crespin: I was supposed to ask this earlier—but what would you

say your background is, like where's your family from? What groups do you identify with?

Uyeda: Okay, my pronouns are she/her/hers. Let's see, in terms of family history, both of my parents are Japanese American. On my dad's side, if you just look from that side of the family, I'm fifth-generation Japanese American. But if you look from my mom's side, I think I'm third. So maybe a combination of those two makes me fourth. But yeah, I'm, I guess, fourth-generation Japanese American.

My grandparents from both sides, or from my dad's side, were in the internment camps, in Manzanar. So they experienced that whole part of history. They're also from Hiroshima, which, as you know, was a big place in Japan that everyone knows because of World War II.

And both of my grandparents and families are Buddhist. My grandpa is a Buddhist, I want to say monk, but I don't know the correct term. He's used to be in charge of the Southern Californian Buddhist Association. I don't know the exact details of that.

I've lived in Culver City/LA my whole entire life. I haven't moved, except for going to Santa Cruz. So that was a big transition. But yeah, I'm an LA native and I've been here my whole life and have a lot to say about LA, definitely been interesting.

Crespin: What would you say was the last major thing that happened to you, or in your life, before the pandemic happened?

Uyeda: Oh my gosh, "major" meaning a big, significant event?

Crespin: No, just a memory you have before everything happened. Like the last memory you have of things being normal, or the last thing just before that had somewhat of an impact on you.

Uyeda: Well, I guess starting off with this year before the pandemic, 2019-2020 was kind of a mess in general. What I remember from 2020 pre-pandemic was already pretty, pretty bad. But I guess in terms of public health-wise, honestly, I was just living my life, going to school at UCSC, attending Spanish and being stressed out every day, but worth it, I guess.

The COLA strike

Let's see. Oh wow, yeah, actually, before the pandemic, the thing that comes to mind was the UCSC strike—

Crespin: Oh, yeah.

Uyeda: —that happened on campus.² That's one of the major events that I remember before going into pandemic mode. First, it was the power outages with PG&E at the beginning of the school year, and then it transitioned into that whole wildcat strike movement at our school with the TAs. I think that significantly impacted me, not only from classes, but in the way I perceived the living conditions, and how TAs were really treated at school. Because I always knew that them being underpaid is a huge thing, and housing is a big struggle for TAs. But I didn't really realize the huge impact that it had on numerous TAs across different departments. I think I really learned a lot about the sucky conditions they have to deal with, especially because my Spanish teacher at the time was super involved with that whole movement. She moved our class to the base of campus when the strike was happening because she wanted us to be there and to witness a moment in history, UCSC history happening.

"Time Feels Different"

Pre-pandemic, I think that was the biggest thing that I experienced. But I guess before that, I mean, I was just on winter break, going to Disneyland and chilling.

Crespin: What would you say your usual routine during school was, like before, when you could go outside and hang out with people.

Uyeda: I would actually get up pretty early usually because I had morning classes. I'm not a big fan of having classes in the evening, because I just want to get it over with. So I'd usually wake up, get breakfast from the dining hall if I had the time, but usually I didn't, so I just had a granola bar or something. And then I'd go to class, my first class. And then after class, I'd usually study with people in the study centers, and I guess occasionally the library—I'm not sure—and just exploring Santa Cruz. Well, also being focused on academics, of course, and clubs in the evening, because that's when clubs usually are.

Before the pandemic, I had a more set schedule, like I would eat at *exactly this time*. Or I would eat *exactly this time* and *this time* and *this time* and *this time* during the day, and then I would go study during these few times, and then I would go to class during these times. I feel like my schedule was way more regimented. I think it was easier to manage my time and dedicate a set amount of time for homework, and then a set amount of time for rest and recharging, and then a set amount of time for going to class.

Now because of the pandemic, I feel like school life and social life and all of that just kind of blends into one, and it's really hard to turn off your brain when going between each section that you want to dedicate to a certain time; they just get all mixed and it's really hard to separate all of these aspects of your life. I think that's one thing that's really changed because of the pandemic.

Crespin: Yeah, time definitely feels different.

*“My TA thought that it was going
to be like another Ebola.”*

When was the first time you heard about COVID-19, not necessarily when you first started taking it seriously and stuff started shutting

down, but when was the first time you heard of it?

Uyeda: I'm not exactly sure. It might have either been via my phone—because I get National Geographic notifications every day or so—but I think it might have been during a chem lab when somebody brought it up in class. I guess my TA at the time was talking with all of us about the severity of it and what his opinion on the situation was. At that time, it hadn't hit the United States yet. It was mostly abroad.

My TA thought that it was going to be like another Ebola. Obviously, Ebola's horrible and not great. But he thought it was going to be the type of virus/disease that would affect certain people that came across it, but that would be pretty rare. I know some people got Ebola in the United States, when that whole thing was happening. But it wasn't a widespread disease that affected millions. It affected a select amount of people and usually those people were hospitalized and treated. So he thought it was going to be more of an isolated-type case.

And I guess my lab partner at the time also was talking about it with me on the side. I don't know, he was really into stocks, and he was like, "Oh, what do you think is the chance that this thing's going to be widespread, I should put some money in right now?" And I was like, "No, don't do that. Those are literally people's lives. I don't think you should be thinking of it as a way to make money." I guess to each its own.

But yeah, it wasn't super—we didn't really expect it to be as big as it is. But that's the first time that I heard about it.

"Toilet paper started running low."

Crespin: When did you first realize like, "Oh, it's happening," it's going to affect your personal life?

Uyeda: I mean, this may sound, I don't know, lame to say, but when UCSC (laughs) kind of sent out the whole Cruz Alert and plans for the next couple of weeks, when UCSC officially started sending out notifications, like, "Hey, there could be a chance that you may need to go home and this may become serious. We may need to relocate some people." I was like, "Wow, it's really affecting now our education and our lives in general."

I think during that time it was something that people had in the back of their minds but never really took seriously until big organizations started shutting down, or toilet paper started running (laughs) low at Costco and stuff. People don't—I mean, it's sad, but people don't really think about how big the extent could be until it affects them and until their environment around them significantly changes. And I feel like UCSC saying, "Oh, you've got to go back home" was a significant change. Or like, "Oh, there's like a shortage of toilet paper." People were lining up at 7 am at Costco just to get that. Big changes in routine like that made people realize that it's as big as it really is and it's going to impact their personal lives.

Universities' Response to the Pandemic

Crespin: How'd you feel about the school's entire response to the coronavirus, like from the start to now?

Uyeda: Okay. Well, I don't really remember the time that passed between when they first sent the emails and when I had to go home. It may have been a couple of weeks; I'm not sure. But during that time, all the UCs and all the universities were sending their kids back home. And it just seemed like a bandwagon sort of thing that all the universities were like, "Hey, you need to leave because it's not safe." I don't really know at what point of the pandemic scale that was at, but it's good that they took action immediately if it was close to when it started getting bad and sent people home.

I think in terms of right now with the testing and stuff, I have a few friends that are living on campus. I think they get tested twice a

week. I'm not completely sure, but I think that's what they do, which I think is great. Testing does need to happen in those facilities.

Is it okay if I talk about not UCSC for a short second?

Crespin: Yeah. You can talk about whatever you want.

Uyeda: Okay. (laughs) I think that—let's see, I think that it was Cal State or Chico State, I think, they were like one of the first California schools to have—or was it Fullerton? Well, I remember in the news that they said, "Okay, we're welcoming kids back to school. And we're going to take really, really safe precautions and everyone's going to be in the dorms and it's all going to be safe." Then within a couple of weeks, they're like, "Never mind. Bye." And they sent everybody back home.

In terms of that response, I think it's very naïve of the university to think that incoming freshman that have never been at school before, that have been waiting for this day for a long time, are just going to be isolated in their rooms and stay there, and are not going to interact with any people. Even though that's probably optimal, it's never going to happen. There are always going to be outliers. Just considering that population of people, I think that it was a bad call on their case, and especially because they were having dorm rooms in a hall. But everybody, I think they allowed triples and doubles. They didn't limit it to doubles and singles.

Crespin: I think you're talking about SDSU,³ because they had a huge outbreak because they didn't properly house students and all that. Everyone in San Diego's upset about it.

Uyeda: Well yeah, it might have been that school, I guess. But it was a big problem. And when looking at it on the news, I'm like, how can they be so naïve to think that if you're just going to put everybody back to how they were and just say, "Oh, watch out," it's going to magically solve all your problems? You sent students home for a reason.

And it was even more of a bad decision, I think, on their part to house students in the student housing or the dorms. And then immediately when a surge started happening, they sent all the students back home. If there's a surge happening, why would you send students—students who may have the virus—back home so they can infect their whole entire family that they live with? I think that that response could have been better and those students should have isolated somewhere for a while. And the university shouldn't have said, "Okay, you've got to pack up your things within the next two days and leave."

Crespin: Yeah.

Uyeda: I think that was a bad decision on their part. I don't think there has been anything like that happening in the UC System. So far I think that UCSC has done an okay job at managing the COVID cases and their response. Although I don't know the details, I don't think there has been a surge on campus.

"I think that mixing school life and personal life and social life all together and trying to handle the timing of it all and the scheduling of it all is really difficult."

Crespin: Yeah, I don't think there's been a surge on campus, either. What was your first week back at home like, when you went back?

Uyeda: It was kind of weird because at that point, I think my sister was also back home from high school. So it was kind of like—I mean, aside from the part that I was going back home in the middle of, was it winter? Yeah, it was winter.

Crespin: March.

Uyeda: Yeah. Besides the timing of everything, I think that it was weird how when I got back home my sister was studying at home, my dad was working at home; so everybody being at home and

doing their responsibilities all at once in one space was, I guess kind of a new experience for me. Because usually I'm at school, my sister's at school, everyone's at work. But now there's a shared space that everybody has to work in. So I think that was a big adjustment. I guess that was probably the biggest adjustment.

Crespin: You kind of touched on it earlier, but how has this new environment changed your regular routine?

Uyeda: Yeah, just to reiterate what I said earlier, I think that mixing school life and personal life and social life all together and trying to handle the timing of it all and the scheduling of it all is really difficult. I don't know if this applies to other people, but I think for sections for classes and stuff, I'm much more motivated to go to section and go to class if it's in person. That's just my thing: I really like an environment where I can go somewhere and focus all my attention towards that one thing for a certain amount of time. At home, you know, you're not in a lecture hall or you're not in a classroom, and other people are doing other work around you. Like someone else is in another Zoom session, or not everyone is dedicating their time to the same thing.

*"I feel like active learning doesn't really work
in an online setting."*

I do feel like focusing is an issue. I mean, I guess it's not much of a problem for me, but if you take time out of your day to go to section, you're going to be at section because you want to be there and you want to learn the material. I feel like at home it's much easier to get distracted and multitask, like be on your phone, play a game while being at section technically, but not really paying attention to the material.

Scheduling everything is difficult. I remember things more if I have somewhere to be, or if I have to take time out of my schedule to change something up. But since everything is on the computer now, I don't have that sense of urgency that I once had, like, oh, I

need to go to class. Okay, it's fifteen minutes before class. Okay, I've got to go now. I feel like everything is much more last minute.

Crespin: How do you feel that teachers have transitioned to online learning? Do you think those classes that are asynchronous, do you feel like those are well-structured or not? I know you just said it's hard to pay attention. But do you think it's good enough or something?

Uyeda: That's actually a pretty loaded question because I've had differing experiences with online learning. We did it in the spring, which was fine for me, I guess. One of my classes, he prerecorded all of his lectures beforehand and you just watched it whenever you wanted to. Then my other class was very much in person at a certain time. I think both of those structures for online learning were fine, because those teachers made it manageable and they provided enough resources to help us in that way.

And in addition, over the summer I took the whole O-chem series.⁴ The teachers for O-chem over the summer, even though it was supposed to be an extremely rigorous course and there was limited time and it was online, I think they did a pretty good job, given the circumstances. Especially because labs are now taught online and you obviously can't, when stuff is taught online, you can't be in a lab pouring chemicals and learn from experience. You have to watch someone do the whole experiment in front of you and hopefully you understand. I think given the circumstances, I think they did a good job with labs. I think labs in general are really hard to teach online and a lot of students don't really understand unless they use their motor skills and pour stuff themselves. But given the circumstances, it was fine.

I do think this quarter, though, that a lot of my teachers don't have a really structured way of teaching, as opposed to my previous experiences. I mean, for one, like my stats class, it was already a mess because we've had three different stats teachers in the span of this whole quarter teaching the class with very different methods

of teaching. I guess the structure that I have to learn from now from statistics is pretty bad. And I think a lot of the students in that class with me can agree, because we've all sent complaints.

I feel like active learning doesn't really work in an online setting. Because for that class, we were expected to read the textbook and the designated chapters beforehand and then come to class 100 percent knowing how to do all the problems and knowing what to do. In previous active learning classrooms, it was easier to ask the professor questions, or point out something on a whiteboard if you had a question like that, or work together with other people.

I mean, there are breakout rooms. But it's much harder to show people your work and what you're doing when you're having to screenshare. Because not everybody can screenshare at once; only one person can do it at a time. So it's not like everyone can exchange work and we can all compare our methods of getting to that answer at the same time. So I feel like active learning is a bit more tough than online learning.

For my physics class this quarter, nothing is in person and everything is just uploaded online prerecorded. I personally prefer a classroom where like it's live and I get to take notes. That's how my brain works. So this quarter has been a bit tough for me, given those two classes.

"Communication is hard through Zoom."

Crespin: Now how do you feel about like communicating through Zoom or remotely hanging out with people? Because you mentioned breakout rooms and how it's hard to communicate.

Uyeda: Mm-hmm.

Crespin: So can you elaborate on how that has affected your personal life and stuff?

Uyeda: Well, I think that meeting with people online and hanging out with people via Zoom when it's a big group is much more difficult when it's just you and another person. Number one, because I think like when it comes to online socials or hanging out, it's hard to tell, especially if people's cameras are off—I don't know, some people just don't want their camera on—but especially when people's cameras are off, a lot of the way humans communicate is through gestures, through their hands and other ways of communicating. If you can't see somebody's face, you can't really understand the cues for when someone's going to speak. A lot of the times in a Zoom platform, people tend to interrupt each other accidentally. I feel like talking in big groups on Zoom is really difficult because of that aspect, because you don't have cues to when someone's going to talk; you just see their microphone go on. I feel like that's definitely harder.

And in terms of social life, I like watching movies with friends. I know you can screen share and watch a movie together. But not everybody's Wi-Fi is of the same quality. There's always going to be somebody who has really breaky internet and can't really watch the show, or can't have the same experience as someone in the group who has perfect internet and can hear what people are saying.

So communication is hard through Zoom, especially in a social setting, because not everybody has the same internet, number one. And because of the people who don't have as great of an internet connection, some people tend to feel more isolated because when they do talk, nobody can really hear them, or when somebody else talks, it's super muffled. So it's just harder to be in a conversation on Zoom because hearing what somebody else says is not always a given.

Crespin: What have you reevaluated in your life due to the pandemic? We've been in isolation, basically, had a lot of time to think.

Uyeda: Yes, definitely. I feel like everybody took for granted how

often they can see family, or how often you can see friends. I mean, a lot of people didn't really discover how that social part of your life has such a big impact on the other parts of your life. Because like as I said before, going back to the communication thing on Zoom, if you have terrible internet connection, number one, or you don't have even access to technology or stuff where you can call people; if you don't have access to those items, how can you communicate? People who don't have access to computers or phones or that sort of stuff, I guess it's really hard for them to be able to feel like it's somewhat normal, because then they have no way of communicating or having a social life with other people. I just feel like people really took for granted, as I said before, friends and family and having a support system right there in your life.

At the beginning of the pandemic, people took necessities for granted because of the whole toilet paper shortage and hand sanitizer and all of that. Hand sanitizer and toilet paper: before the pandemic those were two items that people really took for granted. Now that everybody is in a frenzy to get them, people really realize the importance of those items. What else?

Crespin: I was thinking of asking you about Thanksgiving because it's coming up next week. And cases are ever so high, record-breaking every day.

Uyeda: Yes.

"If the entire country of Japan is wearing a mask and they're not fainting every day, I think your logic is flawed."

Crespin: So how do you feel about certain people's reactions to COVID? And how do you feel about Thanksgiving, and what do you think will happen after? Kind of a loaded question.

Uyeda: Oh, man. I'm taking an elective this quarter, a bio elective. It's called *Life and Medicine*. And the whole first week we talked about the COVID response and our current situation. I guess, answering

your question to my opinion on the US, or people in general and their reactions to the pandemic, and my opinion on what certain people decide to do and not to do during the situation—let's see, where should I start? One thing we did talk about is, I think in the US especially, you know how cases have skyrocketed? Our numbers, compared to a lot of other countries are really, really high.⁵ I think it's not just a US population thing, even though the US is so vast and we have so many people in our country; I think it's not only the amount of people but it's also—just how do I say this? I feel like in a lot of Asian countries, or like in a lot of other countries—I know specifically Japan because I'm Japanese, but like—

Crespin: I mean, we went to Japanese school. We got that shoved in our heads about community and the greater good of the people.

Uyeda: Yeah. In countries like Japan, wearing masks was such a normal thing. When somebody gets sick in Japan, or let's say I was in Japan, if I got sick pre-COVID, I would automatically be wearing a mask. Mask culture is so prevalent in Japan. Because, as you said, that country is like, "Oh, it's for the society's sake. It's not for my sake; it's for the greater good." I definitely think that Japan as a country has its problems. But one thing that I can say that Japan does better than the US right now is probably handling this whole coronavirus situation. The reason why cases are so low in Japan is because everybody was already accustomed to mask culture and everybody respects it. And everybody believes that wearing a mask can really help other people. It's not such a new thing for them.⁶

In the United States, on the other hand, there was not much mask culture, aside from people who were coming from other countries, or people who have that background, who already were accustomed to that. I don't want to generalize the entire US, but our country was founded on independence: we have the right to do what we want, and we have the right to have our own opinion and we have the right to be an individual. And I feel like people are taking that to the next level in the coronavirus situation, where like, "I have the right to not wear a mask if I don't want to." They're

using the excuse like, “My body, my choice” for masking. (laughs) It’s an interesting trend that I have seen throughout the last couple of months. “My body, my choice” was originally intended for something completely different. But now these people who are anti-maskers are using that argument and applying that to it’s their right not to wear a mask.

But what they don’t realize is okay, yeah, sure, not wearing a mask? I guess it’s your right. But it’s also the-person-next-to-you’s right to not be exposed to that, you know? You’re infringing upon other people’s rights. If they are not comfortable with you—(groans) It’s such a complicated situation. There’re so many anti-maskers. The excuses for not wearing a mask have been crazy.

Many videos online have been uploaded where people make bogus excuses not to wear a mask. I don’t mean to get sidetracked, but I saw this one YouTube video where this lady was going on a rant about how it was her right to not wear a mask and how she was suffocating wearing a mask to Walmart; it was really affecting her health and she thought she was going to faint.

Number one, I don’t think you’re going to faint because you’re wearing a mask. If the entire country of Japan is wearing a mask and they’re not fainting every day, I think your logic is flawed.

There was another case where this other man tried to get into a store. He wasn’t wearing a mask. The person at the front that was in charge of the store was saying, “Hey, you can’t come into the store if you don’t have a mask.” The guy’s response was, “Oh, I have a medical condition where wearing a mask is just going to worsen my asthma.” I think that those people publicizing their opinions and their stories online and exaggerating the whole situation—I think anecdotal evidence and stuff like that really sways a lot of people online.

Anti-maskers and that whole population have become ever so present in the US. I think it’s because anecdotal evidence is the

easiest thing to access. And even though it can be valid, I think that you have to sift through what is true and what isn't to really find the truth of the situation. The sources that people get their news from, and the facts that people look at and decide to believe online and in person, really affect people's opinions on masks and just anything in general.

I forgot where I was going with this. Sorry, can you reiterate the question? (laughs)

Crespin: Oh, oh, the question, yeah: we have record numbers of cases, and clearly people aren't going to stop and not go anywhere on Thanksgiving. How do you feel things will be in the next month, basically, with the aftermath of that?

Uyeda: I think it will be worse. I think they're going to continue to rise until the holidays are over. As much as I want to be optimistic, I don't really see it improving during the holiday season.

A COVID Thanksgiving

Crespin: I was going to ask what your plans were for Thanksgiving.

Uyeda: Oh yeah, I'm not going anywhere. Well, okay, on one hand, I do understand people's sadness when it comes to not being able to get together with family that you really don't see until that time of the year. It's really hard not to see your loved ones and not to get together with people that you really care about. At least for me, usually every year I go to my dad's side and my mom's side for Thanksgiving. I have an early, early dinner with my dad's side, and then I go to my mom's side and have a late, late dinner. I get to see both sides of the family, which is great. And usually my cousins from Colorado come over during Thanksgiving to my mom's side and we get to see them. That's the one time a year we get to see them every year. So on the one hand, I am really sad about that situation. I understand people's feelings being disappointed that they don't get to see their loved ones this year.

But on the other hand, you also have to think about the greater good. And if you love them so much, then you would love them enough not to get together with them and have the potential of you passing on the coronavirus to them, if you know what I mean. If you love them enough, then you should love them enough to also look out for their safety and health, especially because family get-togethers are a big part of Thanksgiving, and “family” usually means elders and old people. And that population is really at risk the most in terms of being heavily impacted once they get the coronavirus. So I think for the greater good, I’m going to stay home.

Crespin: Were you planning anything at home, like having a fun dinner with your family at home, the people you quarantine with?

Uyeda: Yeah, I think we’re making turkey. I know my dad likes to make these certain yams. I know that we’re probably going to do a lot of home cooking, so that will be fun. I guess since we’re not going out, we might as well start watching the Christmas movies. So yeah, that’s my plan. (laughs)

A New President

Crespin: Sounds fun. I had a few other questions. Well, as you know, we do have a new president-elect, right? I don’t know if you really want to get into that. Some people don’t think he is; don’t know why. Votes came in. But how do you feel that Joe Biden’s response will be? Or do you feel like it will be better than Trump’s? Or do you think things will be the same as we look into the future?

Uyeda: Okay, that’s a very loaded question. I do think that Trump’s response was a very below average, (laughs) or very below what is needed for this country. I don’t completely agree with some of the stuff that Biden says, either. I know that obviously, in my opinion, Trump is the worst candidate. But I do think there are a lot of things that Biden needs to work on. I think in terms of coronavirus response—I feel like I should have looked into this, but correct me if I’m wrong and you’ve heard different—but I swear I could

have read on the news the other day that Biden's health advisor, or someone on Biden's team that could be in charge of the coronavirus response, he was saying if the US completely shut down, nobody went outside and nobody did anything for like four to five weeks, numbers would significantly decrease. And the thing is that yeah, they probably would. But as we saw before in March with the anti-maskers, even though that's what public health officials suggest, that's not necessarily what people are going to follow.

I don't really know the solution to this whole thing. I mean, I know that for LA at least—I don't know if it was California, I think it was just LA—but our governor just implemented this new mandate where there's going to be a curfew for the whole holiday season. I think it was from ten PM to five AM.

Crespin: Yeah, we got that, too. It's all purple tier counties, in LA—all purple tier counties in California have the curfew.⁷

Uyeda: I'm going more towards local government, as opposed to Biden's whole cabinet, but I just don't know the solution. If I did, I would definitely be more vocal about it. I think that the most people can do— Like LA, I guess, right now is putting mandates like this so that people will listen instead of—because if the governor *suggests* something, no one's going to do it. I mean, granted, there are people who actually follow those suggestions. But a large amount of people won't do anything unless it's implemented officially. I guess that's pretty sad, but it is what it is.

And I don't know, I just—getting onto more of a national level, I think there's just such a discrepancy; I mean, there's such a difference in the way each state handles stuff. Because let's say if you were to, I don't know, compare like Disneyland versus Disneyworld, they're both Disney parks in the United States. But they both have completely different ways of dealing with the situation. LA, everything is closed except Downtown Disney, I think, because you can do shopping there. But the park is closed. You can't ride on any rides. No "limited capacity" anything, because it's just shut down

in general. But when you compare that to Florida, it's all open. So I think local governments especially have a big role to play, as well as the president.

Black Lives Matter

Crespin: A lot of things have happened this year, from the pandemic, strikes on campus, Black Lives Matters, the election and aftermath of said election that we're currently living in. From all of that, what—you don't have to do one for all of them; just pick one—do you see any social change coming from it, from any of those different things that have happened?

Uyeda: Yeah, I think from Black Lives Matter—especially Black Lives Matter—there's been a lot of social change happening. Even though Black Lives Matter has always existed for years because there have been multiple cases of African American individuals experiencing injustice—the ones that happen to be highlighted this year include George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.⁸ And through the amplification of those particular stories—even though this whole movement has so many other stories to tell—but through those couple of stories, it really made headlines this year. I think it really made a lot of people aware about the injustice regarding African Americans and how it's a real thing.

You know, you read about it in textbooks; you hear people's anecdotes regarding their own personal experience. I think that a lot of people tend to not believe that. Either, one, because they're racist; or number two, they tend to live in a very, very, very homogenous community where there's only one race and not much else, so they don't really hear about those stories or have friends who can educate them on that matter. So when it's blown up into nationwide media, I think it's an opportunity for a lot of America to really try to understand and be informed on those important topics and the injustices that still exist in our society. I think that situation really sparked social change this year—among other things.

“I really miss going to the movies.”

Crespin: Yeah, it's been a jam-packed year. What are you looking forward to do once the pandemic's over? What's the first thing you'll do?

Uyeda: Oh man, (laughs) that's also a loaded question, because there's so many things I want to do. And it's also pretty ambiguous when the end of this pandemic is going to be. Because even though, sure, the stay at home order will be lifted, people still need to be cautious about going outside and still wear a mask. There's like so many different levels or so many different stages of this being done.

Crespin: Okay, I'll clarify: when we get vaccinated. Because you know, in the news at this point in time, there's two vaccines that have been 90 percent effective, something like that, that may or may not be available the start of next year. So let's say everyone gets vaccinated. You get your vaccine. What's the first thing you're going to do?

Uyeda: (laughs) Okay. This may sound trivial, but okay, number one, seeing my grandparents and family. That's probably number one on my priority list, just because it's hard for elders, too, to be cooped up inside and not see their family. I feel like for sure seeing family and my grandparents, everyone, is high on my priority list at number one—as well as friends.

And then after that, (laughs) I really miss going to the movie theaters. I'm a big movie theater-goer. I don't want to watch something when it's released on DVD. I want to go when it premieres, when it's in theaters on the big screen. I also think that going to the movie theaters and stuff like that is going to help build up those businesses again because they've been hurting for a long, long time, among small business owners and stuff like that. I personally want to go to theaters near me, because I know they're hurting like a lot, as well as small businesses and stuff.

I think eating at a restaurant and enjoying a meal would be nice. I don't know, this will probably be more towards the bottom, because I feel like it's not as important: but I do want to go to a theme park again.

Crespin: Is there anything that I haven't asked that you want to talk about before we end? Anything I've missed?

Uyeda: I don't think so. You covered a lot of interesting topics. I don't think there's anything else I want to add, other than everyone should stay safe and not endanger their loved ones and family members.

"And everyone from the funeral got the coronavirus."

I guess one anecdote I want to share before we go is my aunt works at this company, and one of her coworkers, his aunt passed away from the coronavirus. And the family, his whole entire family wanted to get together for a funeral. And he was like, "But she just died from COVID. The last thing she would [want] is for there to be a mass gathering of family members where that could be transmitted. I'm sure she would understand if we held off a little bit more so we can have a funeral in a safe environment."

But the family members were like, "Uh, nope. You're being disrespectful toward your aunt. And how dare you, you disgrace?" So he didn't end up going. But all of his family flew in from the East Coast to LA to have a funeral for this deceased aunt. And everyone from the funeral got the coronavirus. Because flying in an airplane is not very safe. And then not quarantining after that and immediately seeing people is not safe.

So all the family got coronavirus. And that guy's mom, uncle, and cousin, they're all in the ICU right now because of it.

Crespin: Yeah. That sucks.

Uyeda: There's a lesson to be learned: please prioritize other people and your health above other things, because a funeral is something—and if you really want to do it immediately, you don't have to do it in person. You can do it online. Or you can hold off.

Crespin: In Brazil, we bury people the day you die; the day you die, you get buried. So not everyone makes the funeral.

Uyeda: Yeah. If there's anything to learn, just stay safe, everyone, and be smart.

Crespin: All right, I will stop the recording. Hopefully this is useful to someone in the future. Goodbye.



An Empty Oakes College
Photo by Irene Reti

Endnotes

¹The Okinawa Memories Initiative is an experiential education and community dialogue project founded and based at UCSC. It focuses on the story of Okinawa in the world, and the world in Okinawa.

²The COLA [Cost of Living Adjustment] graduate student strikes.

³San Diego State University

⁴Organic Chemistry, an infamously difficult class at UCSC.

⁵In late November 2020, according to New York Times estimates, nationwide daily deaths were rapidly climbing to numbers not seen since the peak of the first wave in April and early May. New records were set in early December.

⁶As of this writing, according to Johns Hopkins University, Japan has logged 390,000 cases—less than total deaths in the US—and less than 6,000 deaths overall. The US has tallied more than 4,000 deaths in a single day (emphasis added).

⁷California uses a color-coded system, with each county designated with one of four tiered colors to indicate its current COVID status and, correspondingly, its containment mandates. Purple, which indicates a “widespread...county risk level,” is the highest tier, and is indicated in counties with a test positivity rate of greater than 8%. As of January 26th, 2021, 54 of the state’s 58 counties were designated purple. Zero counties are currently designed yellow, or “Minimal.”

⁸Breonna Taylor and George Floyd were both killed by police in 2020, on March 13 and May 25th, respectively. Their murders, along with those of other Black folks like Ahmaud Arbery (February 23), sparked a new wave of racial justice protests nationwide.

About the Photographers

Irene Reti: In addition to being an editor of this project and the director of the Regional History Project, Reti is a landscape photographer, writer, and book publisher. Her photographs of the UCSC campus have been featured in UCSC publications such as the 2019 Chancellor's Holiday Card and *Seeds of Something Different: an Oral History of the University of California, Santa Cruz*, as well as the Sesnon Gallery's 2015 exhibit *Rhythms of Place: Photographic Explorations of the UCSC Campus*. See:

<https://www.irenereti.com>

Shmuel Thaler: From triathlons to earthquakes, from clam chowder cook-offs to murder trials, from burning brush to breaching humpback whales, Shmuel Thaler's photographs of Santa Cruz County fuse a recognizable artistic, graphical aesthetic with a driving documentary impulse. Thaler's most recent project is *2020 Hindsight: Looking Back on a Tumultuous Year in Santa Cruz County*. See: <https://www.hindsightsantacruz.com>. An oral history with Thaler conducted by the Regional History Project is available at: <https://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/Thaler>.

Jaden Schaul was raised in Santa Cruz and is a freelance photojournalist who documents the effects of climate change and wildfires across California through photography, but also covers social justice movements and spot news from time-to-time. Schaul's work can be found at: jadenschaul.com

Elizabeth Van Dyke is a photographer and conservationist based in Santa Cruz, California. She served on the Board of the Ventana Wildlife Society for about ten years and helped write their early strategic plan for conserving California Condors, Peregrine Falcons and Bald Eagles. Most recently, her photographs were part of the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History's exhibit and book *2020 Vision*. For more of her photography see:

<https://www.evandyke.com/index>



Water Tank Art, UC Santa Cruz
Photo by Irene Reti



Pandemic Sidewalk Art, Santa Cruz
Photo by Irene Reti