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OSU Multiracial Beavers Oral History Project 2016-2017

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Interviewees/Interviewers: Sofia Baum and Kim McAloney
Transcriber: Jalen Todd

SB: Sofia Baum
KM: Kim McAloney

[00:00:00]

[Recorder static]

KM: I'm Kim McAloney.

SB: I'm Sofia Baum.

KM: And here we go on our oral history—Multiracial Oral History Project. So Sofia, I'm actually really exce—I should have said this before we started the interview, the recording, but I know we met at the retreat and then connected at the Connect event earlier in the year. I was really excited when I saw the email and the conversation if we could do this together so I'm really glad I get to know you a little more. So thanks for jumping in this with me. So yeah, connected to that: what motivated you to participate in the interview?

SB: Mostly because Charlene was like 'hey you should do this.' [laughs] And I was like, 'oh, okay.' But I think, since multiracial students or student connections, I realized that there was one previously at the university that had kind of like died out and they're reviving it. To be the student rep for that program or that group, I might as well put my story out there.

KM: That's awesome. I feel like I was connected to the former group and then once we all graduated it was kind of on hiatus for a little bit. It's really great to be here and to—I think one of the things that has been so amazing about this experience in the last couple years is finding community with other faculty and staff and students. Thinking about that community that we had had a little while ago and then being able to look now and see some seeds maybe were planted earlier and I think some amazingness now, right? With the student group and with the faculty/staff group and then all that. I'm really excited to be in space and for the community. How do you identify in terms of racial and ethnic identity? And what are some of your other salient identities?

SB: I identify as a Mexican Jew. And what do you mean by salient identities? As far as like, racial identities that we connect with or like anything else?

KM: Anything else that you think is—that are salient for you that you want to share.

SB: Probably being female identified, using she/her pronouns, and able-bodied is a good one for me. What about you?

KM: I identify as black and multiracial and other salient identities I think for me right now that are really on my mind a lot lately is education and this sort of new-- very new sort of experience of having this identity as a mother. This sort of "becoming" in a very different way so I think that's very salient to me right now. Has your—do you feel like your identity has changed over time? Particularly thinking about your racial and ethnic identity.

SB: I didn't know until I asked my parents when I was probably five, because I realized that I was darker than most of the people in my community, because it was a very small rural town, mostly white. I didn't know, 'cos I asked my mom 'what am I?' I saw books of Native Americans and I was like 'oh, I look like them so I'm probably Native American' but then I asked my mom like 'no, am I really?' Because that looks different than you do so, I don't think that's what I am and then she had told me. So over time it has kind of evolved to not knowing or thinking that I was something else to kind of like, I really wanted to be Latina so bad and have darker skin and speak Spanish better. And phenotype played into that as far as the shape of my face and my nose and the curly hair. Then it transferred to being Jewish 'cos I got picked on a lot for that, so that was something that I was holding on to a lot. Now as I've gone through high school and I'm in my second year of school—I'm mixed. Being able to be more comfortable with using my different lenses at one time.

[00:05:15]

KM: Yeah, that resonates with me in the sort of—interesting how like it does shift and shape over time. And other people will have a big impact on that [laughs], right? Is what I heard from that? Yeah, I think that when I was little my [sigh] my grandfather was in the Klan, the KKK. So I knew—I've always known—and in my family, like I've always known that I am different. And I've always known that I'm black. And in the context of my family that was very clear always and the longer that we've been in Oregon the lighter my skin gets and yet that identity so shaped my childhood. So trying to figure out what does it mean be black in an all-white family? So my immediate family, my step-dad is white and my sister—my half-sister is white. My mom is white. So what does it mean to grow up in this white family but to be black and to be treated differently because of that. And I think my mom did her best, I think in the '80s you know, she would tell me that I'm biracial or mulatto and finding those things and then I think I identify very strongly as black and very strongly as biracial or multiracial and then now I think I'm pretty solid in the black and multiracial space. And then I think,

just different places that I'm in and situations that I identify differently based on, again, other people engagement, interaction.

SB: What are some of the earliest memories of other people making assumptions about your racial or ethnic identity.

KM: Well I think I started to share with you a little bit about my grandfather and so I think there was all kinds of assumptions put on me while I was in the womb even of who I was going to be or how I was going to be and the way in which our family dynamic would change because of that. So I think that's, not necessarily memories I have, but things I've been told and things that I think really helped shaped my childhood and such. I think in Cali—so we lived in California until I was nine and lived in a very white community in the Big Bear Mountains area and I feel like, you know, I was one of the only black kids at my school and so it was very much sort of I was black. And then I moved to Georgia and that's when I think I really started—other people found me more racially ambiguous, which is interesting because there are some communities that would—they knew that I was mixed black and then there was other folks—mostly white—but other folks who thought I was Latina or—and specifically Puerto Rican because the military base that we were at has a very large Puerto Rican population. So that was an interesting sort of space to navigate, that sometimes people knew and then I—you know there were other kids that were mixed too. Then there were other times were I was identified differently. So yeah, I think those are some of my earliest sort of memories, but also earliest emotions that kind of shaped too. What about you? Earliest memories of people making assumptions of your racial and ethnic identity?

SB: Because I am Mexican people never thought that I wasn't 'cos a lot of the community that I was brought up in, there was no other type of Latinx person outside of Mexican. Which has its own issues and its own like—but because I was a part of that category—

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[00:10:12]

It was like I was too white for the brown kids and too brown for the white kids. Which was—that's very interesting, that's always very interesting but I would have my Latinx friends and Chicanx friends say 'are you Latina?' We've been friends for like two years and they'd be like 'are you? Like I can't really tell' Like look at my face like that. It was always kind of like a prodding question but more recently, since I've been at the university I've had a lot of questions like 'where are you from?' And I always kind of gauge that to mean: do you want to know just 'cos you can't place me or do you want to know because you want to understand and get to know me and know my backstory? Sometimes I give up that information a lot of times don't 'cos of the exoticising piece of being mixed which is never fun. I think the most salient one that stands out to me is I

was in an internship that I never ended up completing because it was a scam, but I was doing an internship and it was painting houses the college was painting and I went and I was talking to a client and I ended up—I got the house or I booked the house and after he wrote the initial deposit check he goes 'alright well now I have a proposition for you.' I was like okay. He was like 'I'm a photographer and your features are very ambiguous and very exotic so I'd like to photograph you - what are you?' And I told him and he laughed in my face. And I was like 'oof! that's really interesting.' And I'm like 'I don't want to continue to do this.' But that was probably the one that stood out the most and that was last spring when I was 19. I just turned 20. That's the one that sticks out the most.

KM: Yeah, that exotification, exactly. And the fact that he used that word specifically, right? What are some—so I think we started to just get into this, some more recent memorable experiences you've had related to your racial and ethnic identity. And I think that was an example of—do you have others that you want to share, either connected to campus or not? Some of those recent things that kind of stick in your mind.

SB: Um, it's very—I don't know—it's very interesting. There's a few that are popping up in my mind sometimes when I—when people ask me that I'm mixed and then they're like 'oh I'm mixed too' - that's a way to build community. But a lot of the time when I have white male cisgender folks ask me what I am then it is that type of exoticizing example. Which has happened like twice in the past two weeks [laughs]. But one that kind of sticks out again is like the ambiguity of different things. People might not know that you have this history or this background with someone. I was doing staff training, student-staff training 'cos I live and work in the residence halls as a community relations facilitator, and these two guys—who I assume to be male identified I don't know if they were—were talking about Bernie Sanders and being Jewish and I just pointed out 'hey, I'm Jewish.' And then one of the other guys was like 'oh, my god me too' which was another way to build community but it's also like—stuff that people say and they don't know who could be around them is also a very interesting part of being mixed.

KM: Yeah, I agree. And I think there's a piece that I connect with in the sort of awareness of people, of where they are. I am in a PhD program and I have a classmate who—I guess I am a safe black person to ask questions about on behalf of all black people. So [laughs] the first five weeks after class it was 'Kim can I—' she would hang back and then take the elevator or stairs down with me from class. 'What does the black community think about x or y?' I was trying very politely—I don't know, just responding and I think she got the message the last time but that was not okay. Things that I think—sometimes I think that the lack of awareness of people of who's around but also the—I don't know there's something else there, but I imagine that she would not ask a white person that, right? But those pieces of that awareness that just is not

even there. Anyways, sorry. What about stories of belonging or not belonging in your racial or ethnic group?

[00:15:50]

SB: I think a story of not belonging—some of it actually comes from my grandparents. My grandma on my father's side was a holocaust survivor and so she doesn't—she does have a very strong Jewish identity 'cos that's what she was basically like attacked for and she has a very traumatic history. But hearing her tell me that I'm not Jewish—it was a very—it was interesting though because she had said it before but then I also would spend a lot effort to defend the Jewish community where I was growing up 'cos there wasn't one, I was the only Jew in my high school. And being that I was like a representative, even though I don't want to be. But I don't know. Other people say 'oh what does the Jewish community feel about that' but my grandma who has the strongest Jewish identity in my family saying 'you're not' is very interesting. But also, my grandfather on my mom's side, who's a sweetheart, like total badass but sweetheart now and he's in his 80s, but he calls me like half-breed but as an endearing thing, that he thinks is endearing but like, I'm also not going to try to reprimand him for it because he's in his 80s. There's a lot of stuff that he's gone through, there's a lot of stuff that he's seen that I can't understand.

KM: There's power dynamics there too, right? He's your grandfather.

SB: Yeah. As far as belonging—I think I've found the most community, like being in spaces with mixed people regardless of their mix with me or not, like have the same identities as myself or not. But because it's very similar experiences even though it could be completely different the concepts or different stuff that happened could be similar.

KM: Yes, I agree with you so much. Yeah, I think about—I remember, goodness, in Georgia I had an experience where in my fifth grade classroom I walked in day one and—on a military base—and the black kids are sitting on one side, white kids the other and there's two of us who are mixed and one Asian-American student and I remember like 'okay well, I know my place', right? And remember that first recess where the kids asked, 'okay who are you going to play with? Are you going to play with the black kids or are you going to play with the white kids?' And so, that for me was intres—like a very systemically, like a teacher had set up the room in a specific space and then to kind of feel that the students continued that was hard at first. And I think that it wasn't—there was that moment were there was one other mixed kid in my class but she hung out with the black kids and I hung out with the kids that nobody else wanted to hang out with. So we had a mixed group of friends. So we didn't interact as much and so from that to when I was sitting in an African American history class—or African American identity development class here at OSU, as an older than average undergrad, and there was a mixed student in the class also who sat right behind me in class. I

remember that was one of the first times I was like okay—I was seeing myself represented in course work. Then there were these pieces that certainly I felt connected with and I didn't, but then to have someone else who—someone else right behind me who I could hear agreeing or disagreeing with—just in discussions and things and so I think he was the first person that I'd had a conversation with about—like another mixed person that we had a conversation with about our identity.

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And it wasn't until I was at a conference and I was in a room full of mixed folks for the first time in my life, I probably was 26-27. And I just remember crying—just balling. I'm in this business meeting and I was trying to keep myself together because, I think exactly what you said, we all have very different mixed identities but there's some shared connections that we have of belonging and not belonging. The ways in which people make assumptions or ask questions or—you know all of these things to us and I think that was such an affirming space. And I feel like, dang how did I live a quarter of my life without having that feeling of—feeling like a belong and feeling whole there? And then I would say more recently belonging now like all of the Multiracial Beaver components are like these pieces of belonging and I would say—yeah, it's very salient for me right now too. What is it like for you to be in Oregon? Because you shared with me that you're from not too far down the road is that—did you grow up there? So, have you always been in Oregon and what about OSU specifically—what is it like being mixed, and you shared some of those, but kind of tying together for this.

SB: So I was born in Sitka, Alaska which is a tiny town—a tiny island in Alaska and then we moved to Junction City, Oregon for a variety of reasons. Mostly because my father—he is a physical therapist, but he worked in Valejo and he worked in rehab and stuff and he was treating a lot of gunshot injuries in California. That's specifically why we ended up in Oregon, my father didn't want my brother to be shot at sixteen. Which would have happened. It's very interesting how certain things play out and how they could have. When I think of that and the sacrifices that they made for us, like sacrificing not being in a diverse community, not being around their families, but to find a safe town because they didn't want their kids to join gangs or get into too much trouble. And I only say that would have happened because of my own personal knowledge of how my brother was growing up. But I - my experience growing up in Oregon was very—I don't know—it was very interesting. I grew up in Junction City, Oregon; the population is about five thousand people. After the recession hit Country Couch, which is a big manufacturer, they were a big employer in that town ended up—they went out of business and so now it's a very low socio-economic status town. Half of the students in the public school system have to get a free or reduced lunch, there's not a lot of money for different programs to go on at the school. They started—I remember more specifically when the recession happened—they started cutting back a lot of different programs. Then as I got older, I just graduated in 2015, a lot of those had come back. But the community itself is very white. There's just not that many people with more than a

high school education, there’s not that many people with higher-ed or have gone to trade school in that community. It was—I don’t know—it was very interesting because I always felt like I had to be on guard about like ‘don’t say that shit because I’m going to get super pissed at you,’ or like I have to represent this community. I remember I worked so hard in school to just get the fuck out of there.

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I remember my mom telling me that I have to go to college and that I have to finish because I’d be another Latina or another person of color to get an education and how important that was. Here, specifically at OSU, from what I've heard for my other friends who are students of color, my experience has been backwards from theirs. The community I grew up with was, I guess oppressive, because there was a lot of stuff that was never talked about and there was a lot of underline, hidden racism and anger. But when I got to OSU it was super diverse compared to where I came from. I was like 'oh my goodness, this is awesome'. There are international students here. I'd never seen anyone with a hijab in my home town and people are speaking different languages which is amazing. But what I've heard from other students of color is that OSU is very oppressive because it is predominantly white and that was not--that was the complete opposite of what I’d experienced when I got here. And when I heard there was actually acknowledgement of multiracial, or multicultural, or multiethnic peoples, I was like 'oh my goodness, this is so cool.' I didn't even know this was talked about at all so that's how I hooked up with the multiracial student connections group. And how I've just--how that community has really helped me kind of guide my journey through my undergrad. That was a really long explanation, sorry about that.

KM: No that’s good. That's good and powerful and I think that--we're talking about our stories so that's the point. So yes, thank you. Thanks for sharing. Yeah, I feel like I went from Southern California where I was one of the only kids of color in my class, to Georgia, which was a whole ‘nother racialized experience and there were folks there. In a way, every day, I got to see people who looked like me or people who were black or people of color. And a diversity, somewhat of a diversity in that, and blatant acts of racism, but very clearly knowing where I stood all the time. It was very in your face. In grade school before we moved on base, I lived in a super small town where, maybe this is similar to Junction City, I don't know, but the elementary school, middle school--well there was only elementary and high school really--but they all rode the bus together. So I would ride the bus with Klan members who were in high school and things. So I went from that to Oregon. Small town where we would go into Rite Aid because where else do you go in town, right? That's the one place that's open besides the grocery store, and people would just stare at us. We'd go into restaurants and it'd take a really long time for us to get service and things like that. Sort of covert racist stuff that I was not prepared for. Someone at school calling me the n-word and the principle saying 'oh it's not that bad. You'll be okay.' Like, wow okay, okay. So it was a very different sort of space and then being in a rural town. As far as we can tell and what--we hard stories.

The last black person in the town that we moved to was ran out of town, the last family. So it wasn't until I had graduated high school--so we came when I was thirteen, so I was in middle school—and it wasn't until I'd graduated, that another black family moved to the town and now there's a handful of people there. Twenty years later. So that was I think really hard. There was other folks of color, a handful, but certainly not any black folks. From there I gravitated to the coast, also rural, and I think when I got here to Corvallis I think I had a similar sort of response that you did. Coming from rural, small town Oregon of like, 'wow, here I can see black people every week.'

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It's still not every day, but there was this part of my soul that felt this connection because I didn't have that before. So I think in some ways it was really great and in other ways I think it's taken me a while to--it wasn't until I got into grad school that I felt comfortable at the BCC because I felt like that wasn't a space for me. So that was hard to find and to navigate. It was then in that grad student space that there was a couple other grad students who, we kind of connected around the multiraciality piece. You know, I think now as a professional its fascinating because I went on campus for a while and I think, it may be partially my personality, I feel like I'm a fairly chill person and try to, I don't know. But the instant some folks that I've been working with for almost, probably 8 or 9 years now, and there are some that the instant I might be remotely upset or bothered by something instantly go to the angry black woman space. So that's a fascinating place or space to be in that, showing any emotion that would be not positive kind of immediately takes folks there. I think there's something too about the way that covertness of racism there, that psychologically is different. I feel like in Georgia I knew where to avoid, I knew people to avoid, things not to do or what not because there are very clear rules. Whereas here I think I--especially younger maybe not as much now, but still sometimes--spending so much time on 'dang was that--what just happened?' Or reflecting back at all of these instances with a particular person or office or something like that. And dang, like I thought that maybe they just didn't--I don't know, sometimes people just doing mesh or something like that. But maybe it is something deeper. So that psychological and emotional space I think is, there's something about OSU and there's something about Oregon and our histories that make that hard.

SB: I think that I agree with you. Oregon's racism or status of racism around college is interesting, because it was made to be like a white utopia. Blacks or mixed peoples weren't allowed until 1926 and they had this super ugly history that no one wants to acknowledge. Even the town that's in between my home town and here, Monroe was a KKK spot, so was Eugene, so was Junction City. How Oregon is seen as very liberal, but only when it comes to the environment, which is very, very interesting.

KM: Right, right, right, right, yes. Yeah, I agree. Oregon is something else. [laughs].

SB: It is very interesting. I've been working at my parent's physical therapy clinic in the summers since I was fifteen, I'm twenty now, but this past summer when I was working there I was helping guard a patient, make sure they wouldn't fall because there had been a big liability issue. They knew that I was mixed because they had seen my mother, we have a family run practice in JC, and she had said to me—and this was someone who had worked for Ron Wyden. And she has said to me 'oh I don't know if I want you to guard me because I know about those minorities.' Right in front of my father who—he didn't hear it at the time—but that's really, that's unbelievably shitty and you work for a state representative. That just blew me away. So after that I was like 'I'm not going to come back because I can't. I can't deal with people here.'

[00:35:28]

KM: I think that the embeddedness, what you were just saying that Oregon was founded to be this white utopia sort of space, there has been this environment cultivated that is incredibly unwelcoming and comes up in the most random times. And in the most, what seem to be, random ways. My guess is that—I don't know, yeah. I comes out in these interesting, fascinating ways at all levels. People engaging differently, like checkers at the grocery store engaging differently, to aides for our legislators, right? That all plays in and has an effect and people—it's harder to see too for some white folks here. It gets easy to be like 'oh that's not what it is,' or to write it off.

SB: It's also interesting—I think for my family it's interesting, particularly for me because I do a lot of social justice work on campus, but to go home and then be told that people just need to put their head down and ride through it because there's nothing we can do about it. Particularly by my father, who has been through hell and back in his own way, absolutely, and is by far the toughest person that I know. But also it's very invalidating, super invalidating. It's very interesting because my brother is mixed as well and when he was in high school and I was in middle school for some reason in our public school education system of JC at that time it was very popular for kids to call other kids 'stupid Jew' when they're being silly or I guess were doing something dumb. So I know that he has—not he has been through more stuff, but he has been through different stuff that may have impacted him harder. But, I don't know. It's very interesting that we have such different stand points but yet have the same background.

KM: I think there's some similar pieces for us as a community in general, right? Folks who—why their family or not could not have similar mixes but very different interpretations and ways in which we've processed or not processed those sorts of things. And that's part of the hard – the difficulty, the complexities with multiraciality. I think about the question that we talked about earlier, about the other salient identities that we have, and I wonder about how that might play in with your family. You and your brother and those pieces that might help provide for different experiences, right?

Oregon. [laughs]. Oh dear. Alright, last but not—well anything else you want to say about multiraciality or your experience? We'll go a little off script.

SB: I would say, just to clarify, because there's not one blanket, mixed experience. How people identify can vary across geography, education, age, gender, income level - a lot of these things play into the experiences of these things—either being accepted into certain communities or not. I think that language and religion actually play into that a lot as well. Just to clarify that this is just my experience, this is just Kim's experience, but there is a multitude of varying stories within the multiracial community.

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KM: I think I would add to that, I think there's also this level that how we identify can also change. So this is your story and this is my story. We might have things that happen today or tomorrow that impact how we situate our identity. Identities are fluid and every changing and impacted by others. I would add that too. What is a two-sentence biography we could use for Oregon Multicultural Archives and this interview?

SB: As just part of summing up?

KM: Like about you that we can—you know, so here's the recording and then here's Sofia—what do you want it to say about you and Kim, what do I want it to say about me?

SB: Is it two sentences per person or two—

KM: Yeah.

SB: Darn, I should have written this out. I would say that Sofia Baum is an undergraduate here at OSU who identifies as mixed person or Mexican Jew. She has grown up in Junction City, Oregon, 30 miles south of Corvallis and her story evolves as you listen to the tape. Period.

KM: That's good, that's good.

SB: [laughs] Cliffhanger, right?

KM: As you said, you should have written it down and I was like 'dang, I should have written mine down too.' So, here goes. I'll try to channel your strength a little bit

SB: [laughs]

KM: Kim McAloney is a professional faculty member who works in the Educational Opportunities Program and a current doctoral student in the College of Education. Kim identifies as multiracial and black, and is appreciative for the space to share her story and engage with other people's stories as we find community in multiraciality.

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