“Untold Stories: Histories of People of Color in Oregon”
U-Engage ALS 199 Fall 2014
OSU Faculty/Staff Oral History Project

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Interviewee: Juan “Tony” Trujillo
Interviewers: Buddy Terry, Reilly Quinn, and William Rowley
Transcriber: William Rowley and Avery Sorensen

BT: So, our names are Buddy Terry and Reilly Quinn. We are students at Oregon State University’s U-Engage class, “Untold Stories of People of Color in Oregon.” Today's date is October 29th, 2014, and we are conducting an oral history interview with Juan Trujillo. Okay, so we'll start out with some, kind of, personal-level questions, just general information. Please state your name and spell it out loud.


BT: Excellent. thank you. What is your birthday and birthplace?

JT: October 7th, 1964, and I was born in Tacoma, Washington.

BT: Great. With which ethnic or cultural background do you identify?

JT: Uh, okay well, that's a good question actually because it's something that I think shifts over people’s lifetime. Right now, I think my strongest cultural, ethnic identity would be Chicano.

BT: Okay, and when and where were your parents born and what are their backgrounds?
JT: Okay. My mom was born in Canada, so I'm actually second generation, and it's because of the English-speaking Canadian part. Her family moved to Washington just after World War II when she was just about high school age, I think she was about 14 when she came here. My dad's side of the family, on the other hand, has been here for about 400 years. And my dad was born in a small town fairly close to Taos, New Mexico, where most of my relatives still live.

BT: And where did you mainly grow up?

JT: I grew up in Tacoma, yeah.

BT: And what was your transition from high school to college like?

JT: My transition from high school to college was rapid. I've graduated from high school at the age of 17, and within two weeks, I was all settled into my dorm at college. I went to BYU for my undergraduate. So I was really anxious to get away from home. I was—I really never went back after that. So I was 17 and didn't really spend much time at home after that.

BT: And your work was done in Texas?

JT: Well my PhD was in Texas. And so, yeah, I mean, I guess I never thought of that as much of a transition, but it was an important one. I was at BYU for a long time, so I did not only my undergraduate there but I got my master's degree from BYU as well. So in 1990, there were a lot of connections between the BYU language department and the Spanish program at University of Texas. One of my mentors, professors, at BYU had gone through that program himself many, many years before, and so there was a bit of a pipeline that kind of funneled students from BYU to the University of Texas, and I was just yet another one in the pipeline. I don't know that there were that many after me; it was sort of slowing down after that.

BT: And, you answered that. Who are your mentors mainly? You said your professor you just mentioned.
JT: Yeah, and I guess, let's see. There are kind of mentors that you have assigned to you and then there are mentors that you just, sort of, end up informally interacting with for one reason or another. So yeah, I guess I did mention that my mentor, I guess, during my undergraduate and master's programs was a professor in the Spanish program. And Hal Clegg was his name. It’s interesting because his own son, actually, has followed in his footsteps, as well, and is doing the exact same kinds of academic papers that his father was doing back when I was a student at BYU. I don't think that he's someone I would really consider a mentor anymore, he was important as a professional mentor and, I think, in other ways as well, at the time. But, you know, your life ends up sometimes going in different directions, and I haven't had a chance to really talk with him recently, meaning in the last 15 years. But, I suspect it would be a really difficult conversation. And, I was saying that you end up with sort of assigned mentors too. So when I was at the University of Texas, I had a dissertation advisor who, I think, filled sort of the same role that the other guy at BYU had before. He was a student who had been at BYU himself, he was part of this pipeline; he took a little different route because his Ph.D. wasn't from the University of Texas. He ended up there as a faculty member he'd actually gone to Berkley.

But, everybody knew everybody. It's kind of a small world, and so there are a lot of people who do Hispanic linguistics who have connections with BYU. So he was someone I would have thought of as a mentor, at least during my Texas years, mostly in an academic sense. But there are a lot of social challenges in graduate school, as well. And, I think that he really did his best to make himself available and help smooth over some of the difficulties that you end up having with other professors, or a lot of ego, and a lot of stuff goes on in those programs, politically, that he helped me work through.

BT: Is there anyone on campus right now you would consider to be a mentor?

JT: I really can't think of anybody that I’d think of as a mentor right now on campus, no.

BT: And so, the following questions will be about your position working on campus.

JT: Okay.
BT: Why did you decide OSU?

JT: I decided OSU really based on how close it was to my family and, just, the landscape that I'm used to. This is like--like I said I grew up in Tacoma, so having a chance to get back in the Pacific Northwest was really a great opportunity. Most of the time when you get an advanced degree and go on the academic job market, you really have no say over what part of the country you end up in. We're all super hyper specialized and there aren't very many positions available for the kinds of training that we get in graduate school. So I really considered myself fortunate that there was a position that lined up with my training in a part of the country that I like being in that kind of feels like home.

BT: Sure. What were your first impressions of the University and the community?

JT: Well like I said, I’d been away from the northwest for a while, and so, having a chance to visit the campus the first time, it felt a lot like coming home. It was a climate that I was used to. People were making all sorts of excuses for what I was experiencing weather-wise while I was here, it’s like, this if fine, I got it, you know, it’s not a problem. I liked being back here in the cold, damp weather after being in Texas where it was so hot and muggy all the time. The campus itself, you know, the architecture of the grounds, it all looked very appealing. I liked seeing the rhododendron bushes in bloom, I liked seeing the grass and the trees, it was such a change from what I was experiencing in Texas and what I’d experiences in Utah for so long as well. So, it looked welcoming.

BT: And how long have you been with OSU?

JT: I came in ’97, so I guess this is my 18th year about. Don’t hold me to that, I’m a linguist, not a mathematician.

BT: Do you see yourself moving at any point in time?

JT: That's a really tricky question. I mean, I kind of would like to at this point, and I think some of the questions that I’ve seen on your list that we'll be getting to later might explain a little bit why it is I might want to at least want to leave here. I don't think I’m going to end up leaving anytime soon. Once you've gone through the process of getting
tenure at an academic institution, you really have to have something much, much better lined-up because it's not a process that you want to have to go through again. So yeah, that's something that honestly keeps me here, keeps me from really looking too seriously at other career opportunities.

BT: And your current position.

JT: I am currently an assistant professor in the School of Language, Culture, and Society. That's a bit of a shift from what I was hired to do. We've had some consolidations in the programs here. So when I came to OSU, I was hired to be an assistant professor of Spanish and Linguistics in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures. That's not a department that exists anymore—it's been merged into the School of Language, Culture, and Society along with anthropology, ethnic studies, and women, gender and sexuality studies. Now, most people have retained some sort of connection with the original programming—we're referring to them as programs these days rather than departments—but the positions are still associated with that program. And, last year, I made a shift so that my position is officially associated with the school now. And I have access to different kinds of collaborations in teaching across the entire set of programs rather than the expectation that all of my research, all of my scholarship, and all of my teaching is going to be in the language program, that's not the case anymore.

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BT: So, have you held any other positions within OSU besides that?

JT: Nope, I’ve just been that the whole time.

BT: And your job duties, can you describe those for us?

JT: Sure. It's a pretty standard academic appointment. I haven't pulled out my job description for a long time, so I can't give you the exact percentages, but roughly what we're looking at is about 40% teaching and my service level percentage has been a little bit higher than a lot of faculty members, much to the dismay of some of the people who have been my supervisors over the years. And that's something that we can probably talk about a little bit too, about why the service percentage is a little bit higher. And then, I’d guess probably they'd expect me to have another, maybe, 40% of my job
committed to scholarship of some sort. And in real life, that ends up being a little bit lower as well. I don't currently have administrative responsibilities. But up until just this last year, I did actually have a percentage of my position that was allocated to working with the contemporary Hispanic studies program. I was directing that program. And, I still am, but we didn't admit any new students this year, so I'm just helping the 3 or 4 students we have in the program right now wrap up their degrees, and it's not taking the kind of time that I had to give it before.

BT: And the types of duties, it's kind of a similar question.

JT: Well, I mean, teaching is pretty self-explanatory when it’s classroom instruction. I was assigned an e-campus course to go along with my face-to-face class this quarter. And that hasn't been happening very frequently in the past, but I think that that's something we're going to see more, moving ahead. I think I'm probably going to end up not having courses that are exclusively taught only on campus. I would prefer that my work-load be all courses taught on campus, but, we'll see what happens. Scholarship, there's a lot of breadth in what counts for that too. What I spend my time doing is preparing conference presentations. I go to a couple of professional meetings a year,-- for example I've got one coming up, I hope--I’ve sent my proposal—then I’ve got one coming up in Puerto Rico in May for the Latin America Studies Association. I've also got another proposal in for a conference in San Francisco for the National Association of Chicano and Chicana Studies. So that's that part of the scholarship. I also have been doing my own creative writing that I've submitted for publication and had some accepted. And just recently finished working on a short documentary and plan to spend more of my scholarship time on that moving forward as well. I've got an idea for a film for winter quarter, we'll see if it works out.

BT: So, can you describe the types of classes you teach?

JT: Yeah, there's a wide range of classes that I teach. I was hired, as I said before, to teach Spanish and linguistics, and so, for most of the years that I've been at OSU, I have taught either Spanish language classes, Spanish culture classes, linguistics classes, mostly linguistics in Spanish, but also a few courses in English about linguistics. There's a DPD course that I developed, and, strangely enough, even though we’re a department that deals with language and culture, it’s a hot bed of DPD-type issues, that’s the--I happen to have the only class in the program right now that's a DPD course, and it's an
English language linguistics course. So that's mostly what I do. I think the other course that people would think of, associate with me, is the Spanish Learning Community. And it’s a course that I developed with two colleagues, Loren Chavarría and María Olaya, who’s no longer with us. And, there have been different faculty members who have cycled through the program throughout the last, you know, ten years that we've been doing it. But, it's an intensive course--it's kind of like study abroad but here on campus. It started out at 12 credits, and the next year we bumped it up to 15 and that's what it's been since then. A 15 credit course--the students are with the instructors in the classroom for, yeah, about 15 hours a week. And then they do service learning activities for an additional 8 hours a week, so it's a huge commitment for everybody involved. And, it’s a course that actually the team got a university-level teaching award for as well. And it’s been a really meaningful part of my teaching life; it’s really kind of helped keep me enthusiastic about teaching in ways that my other courses don't always.

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BT: Who's been important to you at OSU? This is a little similar to the previous question, but I think more of it.

JT: Hm. So, we're talking people who’re important, but we maybe don't want to call them mentors, I guess, right? Well, the chair who hired me, Dr. Joseph Crouse, has over the years, been, I think, an important ally in the program. I think that we’ve had a shared vision about what language and culture and education ought to be like. And so, within my own program, I think that he’s a person who comes to mind. I remember looking down the list of questions before, that there’s some questions that deal with people of color on campus. And, I think that one of the things that’s been important is to find some community outside of the academic department. And so, other people who I think have been important to me, really kind of in a peer relationship and not necessarily a mentor kind-of situation. Dwaine Plaza for sure is someone who I think has been a tremendous support, both personally and academically. Who else? I’m thinking people who aren't really even around here anymore. Eileen Waldschmidt is someone who impacted my teaching philosophy a lot, and she's no longer here at OSU as well, she moved to UNM. Michael Ingram who was also a teacher educator and a poet who left OSU after some health issues was really an important person in my life at OSU, prior to his leaving campus. Off the top of my head, I think that’s, you know, those are people that I would name. And, of course, my colleague, Loren Chavarria,
who I mentioned before who developed Learning Community Program with me. That's been a really important relationship in a lot of different ways.

BT: So the next set of questions is just about OSU community. Have you seen the OSU community change over time as far as diversity?

JT: You know, this is a difficult thing to address because the administration is constantly pulling out all of these statistics that show favorable trends when it comes to diversity, and somehow, I think, in the last couple of years, I have ended up feeling a little bit more isolated than before when it comes to diversity. There was a faculty group, well, I mean, it still formally exists I think, but hasn't been very active lately: The Association of Faculty for the Advancement of People of Color. It involved Dwaine Plaza and some of the people I mentioned. That’s--it's not something that really seems to have a strong presence on campus anymore, and so that's one change that I’d point to that kind of makes it feel like the diversity climate’s a little bit less hospitable than it used to be. I think one of the things that the administrators are relying on when they say that things are getting better in terms of diversity are the changes in student enrollment. But, I have to say from my perspective--this is anecdotal, I don't have the figures in front of me--I think that really it's the INTO program that probably is what they’re relying on the most when they point to numbers, increasing numbers, of a diverse student body. And I think that that is a situation that really is covering over a failure to address what I think they need to be addressing, which is access of U.S. underrepresented groups to the university. I'm not really seeing huge numbers of Native American students on campus that I didn't see before; I'm not seeing huge numbers of Latino students on campus that I wasn’t seeing before. And, sure, the numbers do show some incremental growth, but I think that their optimism is a little bit overplayed when it comes to changes in a positive direction for diversity on campus.

BT: Kind of a side question, what's your opinion on the potential blackout for the upcoming game?

JT: Oh, are they doing one of those again? You know, I don't know.

BT: Don’t quote me; I do not know that it’s official.
JT: Yeah? It's just always been trouble; I just really wish the people would stick with orange or something else. Orange is equally festive, why not. I don't know. I guess we'll just have to wait and see what happens and see if people have the good sense to not go all out with afro fright wigs and black makeup. I just, you know.

BT: And along with that, are there any events or programs that stand out to you? These can be programs that you think have a negative effect or a positive effect on campus.

JT: Well, I mean, there’s so many different kinds of programs too. I mean, if you’re looking at what sorts of programs the students end up creating, you know, I don’t really see a lot of change in that. It seems to me that the cultural centers are present and active and are doing the same kind of work that they’ve done ever since I got here, which is good. They’re keeping—I mean, their mission is really being advanced, advanced pretty effectively, I think. I think they’re doing a good job at opening the doors to a lot of cultural experiences that students on the OSU campus otherwise wouldn’t have access to. If you look at the institutional-level, if you look at some of the reorganization of the diversity and equity programing, again, I think this is one of these things that the university would say, “Look, we’ve got a director of diversity and inclusion and we’ve got all this good stuff going on, the departments are being, are consolidated in a space where they can all interact with each other and coordinate.’” But, these days I’m really not seeing as much of the live faces of these people as I used to. I used to see, you know, Angelo Gomez, the director, I used to see a lot of him on campus. But, the way that this has been set up these days, I mean, it’s just, it’s an institutional position, it’s, I think, a huge time commitment on his part, and it’s the kinds of face-to-face interactions that he used to have with people of color on campus. But, the way that this has been set up these days, I mean, it’s just, it’s an institutional position, it’s, I think, a huge time commitment on his part, and it’s the kinds of face-to-face interactions that he used to have with people of color on campus. I don’t think they’re really possible. So, I don’t know. Is this a program that’s changed for the better or is this a program that’s left people feeling more isolated? I don’t know, flip a coin. I think in some ways you’d have to say that is, in fact, a good idea to have all these programs consolidated and working closely with their president and having set objectives that they can all focus on and move forward, but at the same time, I don’t personally feel as connected as I did before when things were organized institutionally in a more chaotic or, I really kind of prefer to say organic fashion. Because that’s really how diversity program, programing has worked on the OSU campus when it’s worked at its best, it hasn’t been top down. Things that are still kind of functioning pretty well,
like the cultural centers, those weren’t an idea that came out of the OSU administration, they were student initiatives and people who cared about those particular things got together and put the energy and time necessary into making the programing work. And that’s, that has always, I think, been a more successful model for OSU when it comes to diversity inclusion that institutional approaches.

BT: So would you say that OSU’s diversity, future of a diverse, more diverse campus lies within its students and their power?

JT: I think it, partly it does. And I would maybe just say it a little bit more broadly, I’d say that it kind of, it lies with communities of color. Being able to come together and being empowered to create what works for them without excessive, yeah, without excessive manipulation by the institution into the channeling into the directions that the institution thinks things need to go.

BT: What do you see as OSU’s role of supporting staff and faculty of color?

JT: Yeah, I mean, I think I’ve mostly answered that. I think what they have done is set up some offices that we can all call, check the websites, and because I really haven’t had any issues that have required me to interact with the university in that way, I don’t have any affirmative action complaints that I need to make this week. I suspect that that sort of thing is being dealt with very efficiently. But, at the same time, yeah, I don’t know. It’s just, like I said before, I think I’m still feeling a little bit disconnected from a lot of what’s going on here, and I suspect that that’s going to continue that way.

BT: What do you see as your role in supporting faculty and staff of color?

JT: Well, I mean, what I can do is describe the role of that I’ve played up to this point and that is that I have been an active participant in organizations and groups of people who have been getting together to try and make things happen, and when something needed to happen. I would like to see the Association of Faculty for the Advancement of People of Color get active again on campus. I was in the leadership of that organization for a while and would be more than willing to do that again if we would, kind of, get our act together and keep moving ahead. Um, other than that--the thing is you kind of get a little bit tired after a while.

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And, I guess, one thing that I have to say is probably working well in the changes that have been made in the institution, that students never really even see, is the way that hiring is handled here. All of the major hires on campus require the presence on a committee of a diversity advocate, and those people are trained over by the folks in equity and inclusion office. That sort of job of having somebody to be a, just kind of, someone to keep an eye on how the hiring process is working out, especially when there are people of color being considered for a position or a position that needs to have people of color considered. That was all us, that was all on us. And so, people of color on campus were on every committee imaginable. And it was, it’s tricky. You come into a position like this, if you identify as coming from a community of color, you come into the position with an appreciation for the work that people have done ahead of time to make it possible to get into this kind of institution in the first place. And for that reason, you want to give back, you want to say “yes” when opportunities come up to serve on a committee or to help the institution develop its diversity goals. You look around and see students of color on campus and you want things to be better for them moving forward and that’s another motivating factor to keep involved in all these administrative tasks that people keep throwing at you. And, you know, I guess, the third thing that I would say is we also have a little bit of self-preservation as a motivation too. Because if policies are going to be made and they’re made without the input of people of color, then it’s, you know, it’s far more likely that decisions are going to made that impact us in a negative way. So, I mean, there are your, kind of, three main motivators for staying involved in diversity stuff here. But at the same time, its tiring because if you are one of those people who has identified as an active member of a community of color on campus, the, you just end up getting called on for service responsibilities constantly. That’s sort of what I was alluding to when I was talking about the service percentage. They really, you know, administrators don’t like to see percentage of service higher than about 10 percent on a position description. But, if you come from a community of color or other marginalized, underrepresented communities on campus, it’s really tricky to keep 10 percent as the limit of the amount of time of your work day that you commit to diversity or diversity related or other kind of service because there just really aren’t enough people of color on campus to spread all of that work around and not have it become at least a little bit burdensome to keep you from doing other things that you would like to be doing, so.

BT: What recommendations do you have for OSU to become a more inclusive campus?
JT: Well I think I’ve mentioned a couple things that are going the right direction: the hiring initiatives, having people who are helping hiring committees carry out equitable searches I think is going to, at least incrementally, lead to having more people on campus to share the work of building community and diversifying the faculty and student body. I don’t know, it’s just slow going. I really think that what I, what I hope that it will do, as I mentioned before, is not rely too heavily on internal, structural reorganizations and think that that’s going to be a solution, it’s not because this is really about people. And so, whatever the university can do to encourage the building of community that actually gets people to interact with each other face-to-face as opposed to being in the appropriate spot on our organizational chart. I mean, this is really what you need I think, for us, you know, forward.

BT: Um, please reflect on the season of change the university is currently in, and where you think its heading.

JT: When has OSU not been in a season of change?

BT: Right.

JT: I guess it’s the nature of a university. Big picture, I think OSU is doing what every other major research institution is doing, which is—there’s a good book that people ought to check out, University in Chains. It describes, kind of at the beginning of the book—there’s a famous speech that you’ve probably heard about where this notion of the military-industrial complex comes up, years and years ago. As it turns out, original drafts of that speech actually referred to the military-industrial-academic complex. And I think that we are moving into this period where universities, major research universities, are pretty overtly taking on this role of being part of this large, imperialistic, capitalistic, neoconservative, hegemonic—got to throw that word in there—entity.

So, I don’t know how you slow that, I really don’t. But that’s, you know, honestly that’s where I see OSU heading. And I think I’ve got evidence for that too; I mean, the consolidation of programs I described before where the World Language Department ended up being merged with these other disciplines under a single director, we all lost our chairs. So, all of the hiring decisions, decisions about promotion, about class
assignments, evaluation of our teaching, research, scholarship, all that that stuff, it’s being handled by somebody who doesn’t know our discipline. And, I think there are people up to this point who’ve been, who have had good intentions, but really, it is turning us into a commodity and that’s something that I really dislike about higher ed. these days, but I don’t know how to stop it, so.

BT: You think it’s something that’s just going to keep growing?

JT: Oh absolutely. Yeah, I really do. It’s happening with all of — you know, I could call up any number of colleagues right now and they’d give you the same story about what’s happening. There’s been this conflict at University of Illinois, at Urbana Champaign, where they’ve had their board of trustees override a hiring decision based, as far as we can tell, on memos from a donor. You know, the donor was unhappy with the hiring of this particular person, and then the administration at that institution was all too happy to pull the plug on the department, hiring department’s decision because it didn’t - you know - it made them look bad, it didn’t. And that sort of thing is happening all over the country, so I’m not making it up.

BT: What are some issues of importance with respect to people of color that the community is facing?

JT: Well, I think you’re probably referring to the community meaning the campus, community.

BT: Yes.

JT: But I think that one of the challenges faced by communities of color at OSU is Corvallis and the fact that Corvallis is a small town, and we are isolated from larger populations that allow us to have access to the kinds of things we need, both socially and otherwise. And I’ve had to find my own solution to this. And so, one of the things that I’ve had to do because Corvallis really isn’t offering me socially what I need, I keep an apartment in Portland, and I’m there half the week. I have to be someplace else. I would like OSU to acknowledge the limitations of the physical space here, of the community itself, the community in which the university is situated. Anyway, yeah.

BT: What do you think OSU needs?
JT: OSU needs—I can think of all sorts of solutions that would work better than me having to have an apartment in Portland. And that would be the university having, I don’t know, Van Pools, maybe that allow people to be where they need to be, physically. I mean, because you can’t make Corvallis be what, anything other than what it is. And I don’t think OSU realistically can make up for the deficiencies of Corvallis on campus. So, trying to make it easier for people to live the kind of lifestyle that they need to, I think this is kind of where I’m headed with this. Things like having faculty residences on campus, maybe, where you could live in Portland if you need to live in Portland, and have it not be such a financial hit, but have some place to be here so that you can participate in community, campus life as well, something like that. To facilitate transportation as well, between larger urban centers that offer the social environment that you need in campus. I don’t know, I mean, this is something I could, if I sat and thought about it and brainstormed for a half hour, I could maybe come up with more ideas. But off the top of my head, I mean—that’s one of the things that OSU’s gonna have to deal with—the fact that they can’t do what we need, they can’t. Yeah.

RQ: Another question, so, like, by when you say, like, social things, do you mean, like just cultural things that aren’t in Corvallis that are in big places like Portland, too? Just, you know what I mean? I don’t mean, like, things that the university can do to, like making cultural institutions, I mean like things in Corvallis or—there are things in Portland and bigger cities that aren’t here in Corvallis which makes it not as livable. ‘Cuz there’s a guy in my multicultural issues in education class and he says he can’t find a place to get his hair cut here, he has to go to Portland. So, stuff like that.

JT: Obviously I do not have that issue, but you know.

RQ: Yeah, yeah, yeah but just those like general cultural openness.

JT: But yeah, but I did get my hair cut in Portland last time. And it’s—in this, they’ve got these little, like, hipster barber shops where they hand you a Miller Light when you walk in the door. They ask you at the end if you want to get your eyebrows trimmed, and it’s just like, it’s not Corvallis, it’s different. Um, yeah. I mean, Corvallis is not ever going to make up for those, those situations. But you’re right; I do know people who have difficulty with things like getting the grooming products that they need or getting
their hair cut. I have difficulty getting access to the kind of food that I’d like to have for certain kinds of celebrations. It’s really not easy to get, for example, like the corn to make Pozole, which is something that, that I would make for something like Thanksgiving or Christmas ‘cuz that’s something that we do in my family. Um. But, Portland, not so hard. I mean, there are restaurants that serve it without me having to make it by myself kind of thing. And it’s not just that, it’s not just access to goods and services, but different kinds of cultural experiences too. I’m taking my students, for example, to the Miracle Theatre, Teatro Milagro, this Sunday. And, Natalia knows about this because they’ve got boxes and boxes of their stuff. That is a Latino theatre organization that has been in operation for 30 years now, and we have nothing like it here, nothing like it. And, my ability to interact with them for, in the last few years, has been fantastic both for my social life—to be able to see different aspects of my culture represented openly, publicly, on-stage, I mean, that’s a good thing. But, in addition to that, they’re the fiscal sponsors for a poetry group, writing group that I work with in Portland. And we’re having a reading there on Sunday before the play that my students are seeing. So, it’s not just my social life, I should be clear about that. It’s my professional life is enhanced by access to someplace other than Corvallis too because there’s just, there is no Latino writers group in Corvallis that lets me do public readings in venues that are recognized as important state-wide, like literary arts in Portland. And I’ve been able to do readings there because I’ve had this connection with people in Portland. Corvallis, and yeah—I mean, the campus people just—I’ve actually, this isn’t supposed to happen, and if you’ve got you’re diversity advocate doing what he or she is supposed to do, this doesn’t happen. But, I have been on hiring committees where people have said, “Well, you know, I don’t think this person’s going to contribute to the community because they’re not going to want to live in Corvallis.” That can’t be a reason for not hiring somebody. And, furthermore, the university should recognize the value of having people like that on campus and make it as easy as possible for them to live where they need to live to be able to do the job for the university that the university needs. But…

BT: Looking at the, kind of, the bigger picture. What—again with respect to people of color—what issues of importance do you think they’re facing in regards of state and nationwide?

JT: Statewide and nationwide, woo.
BT: This is a big question.

JT: Yeah, I mean it really is. I mean the macro level we still see from census data, that sort of thing, that there is not wage parity. We see that there isn’t in fact—you know, we’ve got higher rate of poverty, higher rates of incarceration for people of color, all that kind of thing. And I don’t know exactly how it is that we, here, address those national trends. But those are certainly things that affect all of the communities of color. Um, and this kind of—one of the interesting things that I think people might be talking about when you have these conversations with them on campus is we seem to have this mistaken impression in the U.S. these days that we’re in this post-racial environment, that people really have gotten to the point where they don’t see race and so we don’t have problems with discrimination, overt discrimination. Any person of color on campus will tell you that in fact it’s something that happens. It may not be the case that people have, I don’t know, nooses hung on their doors the way we would have in situations like that in the past, past racial incidence on campus. But, there’s just, kind of, this grinding micro-aggression thing that keeps going. There’s not a single person of color on campus, I think, that wouldn’t tell you that yeah there’ve been some times in any given month there will be a number of occasions in which they’d have to, kind of, catch themselves thinking, “Do I really belong here? Was I an affirmative action hire? Am I being asked to do twice as much work because everybody assumes that people of my background are this way or that way?”

That’s something that is so covert, I think, in most cases, it continues to be a huge problem, and it’s not one that’s easily recognized or pointed to or proven. I think at the national level, that’s sort of what we’re fighting, this concept of racism not being a factor anymore in American public life when the lived experience is otherwise.

BT: Coming back to OSU, who do you think it’s on, who do you think can really cause change here?

JT: Well, like I said, I think the only people who have been able to make effective change at OSU have been people of color themselves getting together and making change happen. I don’t think that it should be our responsibility, that said. I don’t know how to make that dynamic change. And I almost hate saying this because I know that Ed Ray,
for example, at the top of the organizational chart, I do believe that he does have a commitment to enhancing diversity on campus. And I think that off and on he’s made some good steps too and gotten some of the right people close to him that can help advise him about how that should best happen. But, at the same time, it still seems to me that the institutional mindset is what’s prevailing here and not, as I was saying before, the needs of individuals. I mean, I think that the grass-roots level type stuff is sort of getting lost right now in all of the institutional change.

BT: And then, so, kind of a transition here. The next questions are just the topics mainly pertain to your work. What made you pursue your masters and your Ph.D. that you currently possess?

JT: Well, I think that I had already decided by the end of my B.A. program that I wanted to go into university-level teaching. And, this is really the only way to do it, if you don’t get a Ph.D. in higher ed., you’re pretty much relegated to adjunct status, which means you never get a full-time position; you end up, at best, getting maybe an annual contract. And so, it’s— you know, once you make the commitment to be in higher ed. as your profession, the decision whether to get a Ph.D. is made for you, you gotta do it. Which was fine, because I think that I have always enjoyed being a student. I don’t know how it looks from the student’s perspective, but, to me, being a grad student and being a professor doesn’t feel that different. When you’re an advanced graduate student, they’ve already got you teaching classes, and so that’s something that I was already doing, interacting with students. And I was already being expected to do an awful lot of research and writing and that’s what I’m doing now. So, it doesn’t end up feeling like a very abrupt transition from graduate school into professional life.

BT: Did you know starting college what you wanted to do?

JT: I think, like most students, I made a couple of changes in major early on. But it had sort of settled in by the time I was in my junior year. Well, a junior in credits, let’s say, because at BYU things are a little bit different. The normal path for a student at BYU at the undergraduate level, and this may be changing a little bit due to some changes in Mormon Church policies, but the normal path was to go to college for maybe a year and then take two years off to go on a mission for the church someplace and then come back. But since I started college so young, I was only 17, I was a junior in credits before the mission time came around, and I needed to have committed to a program before
that happened. So I was already a Spanish linguistics major before I went to Mexico on a mission. And, I think that the reason I chose that field was--I think it was something that felt to me like it was helping fill in some gaps in my understanding about who I was as a Latino. Growing up in Tacoma, you know, it really wasn’t, at that time, any more accommodating than Corvallis when, you know, it comes to access to some kind of cultural presence.

Tacoma has changed an awful lot, if any of you have been there recently, you’re probably wondering, it’s like, “What the hell is he talking about, there’s plenty of diversity in South Puget Sound region.” But, when I was growing up, you know, the only other Latinos that were around were, maybe, the children of Puerto Ricans who were serving in the military who were stationed at either McChord or Fort Lewis—and that’s all there was. But, you know, actual Latinos staying in the community and building businesses and community centers or chambers of commerce, all that kind of thing, that wasn’t happening back then. And so, having a chance to be in these classes where we were talking about literature connected to my family and my ancestry, that’s, you know, that was very appealing to me. And once you get committed to a particular track that far, then you’ll just kind of keep going. So…

BT: Can you tell us what your doctoral dissertation was and why you chose that?

JT: Oh, okay sure. My doctoral dissertation was about changes in the Spanish of New Mexico over a 300-year period, roughly. So my training is in Spanish linguistics, and specifically in philology, it’s sort of where you, kind of, look at language change over a period of time. Now, the University of Texas, even though its located in the U.S. Southwest, at least at the time, that was a department where looking at Spanish of the U.S. Southwest was not really, it wasn’t really welcome. It’s not--it wasn’t really considered serious enough. My classmates were doing things like, oh let’s see, one was studying the letters written by Christopher Columbus in Spanish. So, that’s the sort of text that they kind of expected us to be looking at, working with. And so, I went off in this other direction. And again, it’s really the same reason, I wanted to have a better understanding, using my own disciplinary tools, a better understanding of where my own family comes from. And there’s all sorts of mythology that’s built up in New Mexico about us all being really Spanish, not Mexican, not indigenous, we’re Spanish,
we all speak a language, a variety of Spanish that’s taken directly from a time of the conquistadores and Cervantes, and it’s more pure and more wonderful. And so that’s really what I was questioning with my doctoral dissertation, looking at what specific forms existed at the beginning of the existence of documents in New Mexico through the American period when actually the U.S. government was in charge of the territory, the territorial government was running things. And yeah, I mean, sure enough it did play out the way I expected, which is that the mythology was mostly that; people in New Mexico do not, in fact, speak a variety of Spanish, it descended directly from the conquistadores, it’s subject to the same kinds of forces that other kinds of language are. But, that’s what I was looking at and that’s why I was looking at it.

BT: And you said you recently produced a short film, a documentary. What was your — what was that process like? What was your inspiration for this?

JT: I did. Okay, well, I’ve been thinking about doing this for a while, but I got a chance to use some of my development money from my department to take a class in documentary filmmaking; and it’s the Northwest documentaries’ DIY documentary workshop. What they have you do is pull together a short film in ten weeks. So what I decided to do was work with a topic that I had worked with before in other media, a topic that I’d written short stories about, a topic that I’d written poetry about just to see how close I could get in film to keeping the same kind of tone that my writing has because, I think, my writing, if you were to look at it, has this, kind of, interesting mix of emotions — there are parts of it that are really kind of funny, there are parts of it that are tragic and poignant, and it’s just like, you know, can I pull this off with visual imagery? So that’s the reason that I picked the topic that I picked, which was experiences of gay Mormon missionaries and their reflection on their mission experiences as adults later in life. And, yeah, I think it worked out pretty well, actually. I do think that the short films, ten minute short, I think it does hit some of the same sorts of emotional notes that my writing hits. But that’s why I picked that one. I just wanted to work with something that I didn’t have to develop the storyline so much; I could concentrate on the tone and see if I could replicate.

[00:50:10]

BT: And then, kind of the same question with what’s your process been like for your Queer Chicano spiritualties work?
JT: So, let’s see, what you’re referring to is an article that’s going to be coming out in a book. And, I haven’t been out all that long, actually; I came out at work just over four years ago. And before that, you know, I just kind of — this is interesting because we’re talking about community needs, and my community needs have shifted over the years because there was the identity as a person of color, as a Chicano male. You know, that’s one set of needs, one kind of community that you need; but then, when it’s like, “okay well, maybe I need to come out now,” that added a whole different dimension. And it was really then when I was like, “Portland, I must be in Portland, I can’t do this.” So that all changed, and when I came out I started trying to figure out different ways to just kind of get up to speed because coming out at 46 is, it’s a bit of a shock. These days, I think people are used to people coming out as queer, you know, as early as high school or maybe even before that. One of the things, and I don’t know if you’ve read Dan Savage, I mean he’s a controversial figure, but one of things that he has said about people coming out is that no matter what age you are when it happens, you become, you become 15 in gay years. You become 15, and you end up in this weird adolescence spot. And so, I started doing a lot of writing and exploration just to kind of, as I said, kind of get up to speed. I think in gay years, I am still not yet quite at my actual age, which is 50. But, it really helped doing all that writing. And, it was within, gee, I think it was within six months of coming out to my colleagues at work that I taught my first Latino-queer studies course, and that’s where I started doing a lot of the creative writing — just kind of working along with the students. I do kind of like to do that, when I assign students a poem or a paper or something, I try to do it along with them. Not so much because I think I can give them a model of how it ought to be when they write, but just, you know, I just like learning to be more of a collaborative process. I mean, I don’t think I’ve really, in a long time, gone into the classroom with this assumption that I am the expert and everybody else needs to just kind of listen to what I have to say. So I, so I try to engage in the process of learning along with the students in the class — and that’s where the writing started. And over the, maybe, next three years, I wrote a lot of different pieces that helped me work through different aspects of my upbringing — kind of, sort of reimagining, reinterpreting events in my life now that I was free to do that through a queer lens that I wasn’t allowing myself to look through before. So, when this opportunity came up to write this journal, this article for this book, I just kind of went through all over the stories that I had been working on for these last few years and decided to just, kind of, put them all into one, big narrative. So this is pretty much my manifesto; this is me describing my relationship with myself and coming to terms with who I am and the decisions that I had to make. And, I mean, there’s a very specific shift
in identity that we have happening here, and that’s a shift in identifying primarily as someone who comes from a Mormon background to someone who has, I don’t know—I mean, I guess I’d have to read it again to kind of let you know how it ends. I mean, it really ends with my walking away from the Mormon Church, and the last line, I think, is—I can’t remember it to quote it for you here—but, it really is meant to convey to the reader that I’m at a starting point. It’s not so much like I have shifted from this and now I am this; it’s more like I have left this, and now the world is finally open to me, and I can find out what’s next—that’s kind of where that piece of writing goes.

BT: And, some last concluding questions. What were, or are, some of your challenges and how you’ve strived to overcome them—this is kind of a transition question.

JT: Oh my, challenges.

BT: These can be personal; these can be within the university.

JT: Some of the challenges in the university I’ve just kind of walked away from. I mean one of the things that I really haven’t talked about in this is that you’re not going to have other people here who have been at OSU for 18 years who come in and say they’re at the assistant professor rank—‘cuz that’s not normal. Usually what happens is you go through the promotion and tenure process and if you’re granted tenure, then you’re also given a promotion to the rank of Associate. And, for some reason, there’s a group of us who had a different experience, and I don’t know if you’re going to be talking to some of these people too, they might or might not want to discuss it because I think it was very painful for all of us. Yeah, within a two-year period, I can name off the top of my head, like, about five other people who had the same thing happen—who, they went through the normal promotion and tenure process, ended up being granted tenure at the university without being given a promotion. And all of them have, in subsequent years, gone back through the process and had themselves promoted to the rank of Associate. So that’s a challenge that I have chosen to not take on, I just haven’t done it, I haven’t gone back through that process. I found the whole thing just really too dehumanizing. So, and I don’t know—any challenges that I have taken on, just kind of shift in interest academically and personally. I think that I’ve—I’m grateful to my administrators for letting me do this, and I’m proud of myself for taking on this big project of moving away from computational linguistics and broadening the scope of my research scholarly activities to include other aspects of my identity that are important,
just as important to explore as the Spanish language and culture part was when I first started my educational process back at BYU so many, many years ago. I don’t know, I don’t know--do I have a method? I guess not. Sometimes the method is to walk away, and sometimes the method is just to plunge right in knowing full well that there is going to be some difficulty involved, that things aren’t going to come out so smoothly, that maybe some of those writings gonna be crappy, that maybe people are gonna like my movie or maybe they’re not gonna like my movie. And, as you get older, as I get older, I think I’m starting to get to the point that I want to be at where I just do not give a shit about what other people think about the direction that I’m heading, that I can be confident in my own motion, whatever direction I choose to go, so.

BT: What do you see as some of your great accomplishments?

JT: Great accomplishments... The learning community project on campus, I think, has been an important accomplishment. AFAPC, the faculty group I was telling you about before; I’m not going to claim credit to the entire organization, but I think that I was instrumental in getting a lot of good things done along with a lot of other fine colleagues during the, our heyday. I’m proud of that. For many years, people, even though we weren’t really official, administrators were coming to us and saying okay well we’ve got this issue going on, what do you think? People cared about what we thought, and I think that was a huge accomplishments. Um. I mean those were the two that kind of come to mind within OSU, I think. And you know, personally, I think it is a big accomplishment to finally let go of some things that were holding me back. Just, to be able to come out, to be able to leave Mormonism behind, and free myself up to explore other ways of living and being, that’s taken a lot of my energy and attention. And even though things aren’t exactly the way I’d like them to be, I’m pretty comfortable with that. I think it’s something that took a lot of effort and glad I did it.

BT: And finally, is there anything that we have not discussed that you would like to add?

JT: I cannot think of anything. We covered a lot of territory.

BT: We did. Thank you.

JT: Sure. [end of interview 00:59:25]