

**OH 18 OMA Oral History Collection**  
**OSU Multiracial Beavers Oral History Project 2016-2017**

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**Interviewee:** Kali Furman

**Interviewer:** Eric Pitcher

**Transcriber:** Jalen Todd

KF: Kali Furman

EP: Eric Pitcher

[00:00:00]

EP: My name is Erich Pitcher and I work for Diversity and Culture Engagement as an Associate Director for Research and Communication and I'm here with...

KF: Kali Furman. I am a PhD student in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.

EP: Wonderful. Kali, my understanding is that you are working on a project that looked at the experiences of moving multiraciality forward. Is that right?

KF: That is correct. In Fall term of 2016 I was taking a Women, Gender, and Sexualities class focused on social justice theory and practice and as part of the course we needed to work on a social justice project for the term. Rather than try and do some sort of programming or something individually on my own I really wanted to engage in ongoing work that I thought was really important and beneficial and something I could lend my energies towards. So I got in contact with Charlene Martinez in Diversity and Cultural Engagement, who I've worked with before, about if she had any projects or things going on that she would need help with. And she talked about wanting to do this Multiracial Beavers Oral History project as part of a workshop and larger project of sort of capturing the stories of how this group got started on campus. It seemed like a really awesome project so I volunteered my time and energy towards that.

EP: What got you excited about – because you just mentioned working with an ongoing project – and what made you excited to do that work instead of potentially starting something new or bringing a speaker yourself or something like that?

KF: Yeah, that's a great question. I think for me there are so many different areas or people working on social justice issues on campus, particularly in terms of programming, right? Like bringing a speaker and offering event and doing some sort of

workshop, there are always going on, right? A lot of times they're also conflicting and overlapping. So one of the things that I was really thinking about is that there are plenty of projects that just need support and that need people to engage with them. And so for me I think participating in an ongoing project felt much more valuable to me personally and sort of how I sort of think about social justice work because I think it's about collaboration and communication and working with other people. So rather than try to do something independently that might be a blip in the sea of the term and all of the other things that are going on. Instead, working meaningfully on a project that I think is really important with people who I have relationships that I care about and working on issues that would enable me to learn new things and to also just support important work felt like the most appropriate avenue for me to take in thinking about doing a social justice project on campus.

EP: So you wanted to relate into some existing work.

KF: Yes.

EP: I think that makes really good sense. So I'm wondering, how did you initially get engaged in racial justice work more broadly, which I presume prepared you to do this particular project? Can you share a bit about that?

KF: Yeah, I feel like it's hard to answer that question without the context of one's life, right? So, I grew up in a really rural community in Northern Idaho that is very white. Very, very white. Very, very, very white. I grew up somewhat as an outsider in the community based on some of the dynamics of my family that were different than the other families I grew up with. And so, I think that I grew up always knowing that there were things that marked you as different and feeling that. Then once I graduated from high school and I had the opportunity to move away and go to college, that's when my inklings of like, 'oh, there are things that mark you as different and people will treat you poorly for some of those things.' So this low key level understanding that I had when I was a high school student, when I was in junior high and high school – 'cos I've always been a history nerd, that's what my bachelors degree's in – that there are reasons why there are inequalities in our society and I grew up hearing the people I grew up with say really, really racists, homophobic, sexist, ablest, xenophobic things, and always being aware that those were out there and having some interest in history and how those things came to be. When I went to college as an undergraduate student, I was a history major and about half way through I started taking Gender Studies classes - at my undergrad institution it was just Gender Studies and it's a minor program – so that was an additional layer to what I was interested in. I participated in a service-learning project in the first Gender Studies class I took with the Women's Center on my campus, participating as an interviewer and an author in a women making history

publication that was published – well it's not anymore – but back then it was published annually. It was an award for community members to nominate women in their community making a difference and making history in their local work.

[00:05:07]

So I interviewed three women who won that award about the work that they do and about their lives and I was like, 'oh, you can get paid to be a feminist. That's a thing people do!' Which was a pretty mind-blowing thing, right? Then I started getting really, really involved in the Women's Center on my campus and the Women's Center was part of – my gosh I don't remember the name of the overarching office is now – but they worked in partnership with international student services and multicultural student services, they were like the diversity area on campus. I started working more closely in learning more about some of the issues that the Multicultural Student Center dealt with. I had a supervisor – my boss at the time – the director of our center who was really centered, anti-racist understandings of feminism, of how our center should function and the services and the education that student staff needed to have. So I think that was really the first time that I started thinking about myself in terms of needing to do anti-racist work and not just being aware that there were discriminations and issues that racism still existed. I think for me that was a really big shift in my understanding that set me off on the ultimate path that I've gone down in my career and in my life and all that jazz. Really working with my mentor who was also a white woman, but who emphasized the importance of anti-racist activism, of understanding the ways in which racism works in concert with gender, class, sexuality, ability, to shape the outcomes of peoples' lives and their and their experiences. I think that really was a monumental sort of experience for me, so then once I graduated from undergrad I worked professionally in that same center for a few years and then decided I wanted to go to grad school. And in my process of picking a grad school I was really drawn to Oregon State University for a number of reasons, but the intentional framework of our program is really focused on queer, multiracial, transnational, women of color feminism. Knowing that that's the kind of education that I would get in this program was certainly one of the factors that drove me here, along with a great assistantship [laughs]. Once I got here to Oregon State, I got to work for Diversity and Cultural Engagement as a graduate teaching assistant at the Pride Center on campus. So I think that entire process of just being here at Oregon State now has been learning more and more about racism and the ways in which it intersects with other systems of oppression and really trying to understand about my own anti-racist practices and knowledges and wanting to get involved in that work and knowing how important it is.

EP: Well thanks so much, wow.

KF: [laughs] Yeah that was a long answer.

EP: Yeah, you actually covered a lot of ground. Very early on in your comments just now, you said something about having grown up in a community, in a very white community, as a bit of an outsider. What was it exactly that was setting you outside of the other folks who you were in the community with?

KF: I'm from a very rural community, as I said. It's an area where the families that live there have lived there for a really long time. It's very insular, people don't tend to leave and my family – my parents are not, neither of them are from there, so they both moved in in the 70s for work and decided to stay there and met and had my sister and I. There's a component of being from there but not being from there, my family doesn't have roots there, we don't have any other relatives there - so that was one component of it. Another component that I think really shaped me when I was in elementary school in particular is my parents aren't married and they're both atheists. It's a very very conservative Christian community. In a town of a few thousand people there are like ten churches of different denominations. It's a very, very religious place. There were people that I grew up with who were not comfortable with their children coming to my house to play after school because my parents were unmarried atheists and they were more liberal than most of the people I grew up around. When I was little, that really shaped me early on in elementary school, like this understanding that there were things about my family that people thought were bad, that didn't make any sense to me. It was just my mom and dad, right? Not understanding why a marriage or a belief in a particular faith would make my family different from someone else's. But it's something that I think that I was really acutely aware of from a young age once I started elementary school because of that. One of my earliest memories is my very well meaning friend in elementary school being really horrified that I wasn't praying over my lunch and explaining to me that if I didn't pray and accept Jesus as my lord and savior in my heart that I would go to hell and being really confused because I didn't know what hell was. And I had to go home and ask my mom 'what does it mean when someone tells me I'm going to hell?'

[00:10:17]

EP: That's powerful

KF: Yeah [laughs]. I think that shaped a heightened awareness of difference and how that can impact people from even from a very young age.

EP: Yeah, you described that as marking and I think that's especially relevant, important point. That sort of brings us back to what's been going on at Oregon State and supporting this small Multiracial Oral History project and I wonder, in the process

of supporting that project, especially in your desire to support the good works of folks who are already leading initiatives, what did you notice about the oral history project?

KF: A few things. I think it was a really exciting project to be a part of because people were really excited about it. So talking with the professional faculty members that have helped organize and helped start this group, they were so excited to capture these stories and to tell these stories. For the students as well that have been involved in it, they were excited to find connection and to do the reciprocal interview style with folks to capture these stories. I think, just seeing how important this was to the people who I was working with was really notable and the experience then – as someone who was supporting the logistics component of the majority of the interviews – I wasn't doing the actual, the interviewing except for a focus group, but just being able to take the stress of logistics away from folks that handled all of the time coordination, and figuring out scheduling, and getting rooms and equipment, and all of that, and really just enabling the folks that were doing those interviews to just be together, to just show up and do it, I think was also really powerful. It speaks to the variety of roles that people can play supporting work that are all valuable and important. I was glad to be able to participate in that way. Being able to help facilitate that focus group at the end between all the folks involved with the project was really, really powerful to see the connections and community that they felt and how important this group and their relationships with each other have been. I think it's just a really powerful thing to get to bear witness to and to be in some way a part of.

EP: I was also at that focus group and it was a very powerful experience. Particularly the emotional component that at a certain point in the group there was a lot of sadness and a lot of tears about the kind of isolation that many of the participants had had stemming directly from their being multiracial individuals. 'Cos it's not all students, it was some students and some staff. and I wonder, how did that moment where folks were really expressing some of them difficulties of isolation, how did that land for you?

KF: Yeah, I think that was a really powerful moment. I think for me that's a really important moment to be conscious of your own identities, your own experiences, and how you show up in that space. Feeling a deep level of empathy and love for the people that were doing these interviews with and just expressing these really intense feelings of isolation and overwhelmedness and differentness. And being able to feel genuine empathy and love for them in that moment but also recognizing that's not a moment about be or for me to intervene in, that they're sharing with each other. That sort of simultaneous of like, 'I want you to know that I love and empathize with you in this moment but I also recognize that this is not a moment for me to make this in any way about me. I just need to sit here.' Feeling those simultaneous tensions of wanting to show love and support and then also recognizing when it's not a time or place for you

to really do that, right? And not saying anything is a way of doing that if that makes sense.

EP: Yeah, exactly. What I think is, white people, just the sitting and witnessing part can be really challenging for us as white people. Say less and just observe.

KF: And just be.

EP: Exactly. Learning to [unintelligible]

KF: Yeah, exactly.

EP: Thinking about this moment of vulnerability that occurred in that focus group, for me, really catalyzed and solidified the important work that still needs to be done. I wonder, from your perspective as someone who supported this project and got to bear witness to a number of stories, what does moving multiraciality forward look like at Oregon State and maybe other places?

[00:15:17]

KF: Huh... I think that's an important question. I think for me, I think about the areas where I'm most involved and how I'd see my role in that in different areas that I occupy. One area that I think about is in teaching and in classrooms. Teaching in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, talking about the intersections of gender with race and class and ability and all these things are really important but teaching them that race is not monolithic or one or another or binary. When I'm thinking about what I'm having students read, when I think about what videos I'm showing them, when I think about what kind of conversations I'm encouraging, how am I including multiraciality in that. Both in the sense of, if I have multiracial students whether or not I realize that, the fact that they see themselves in my course material. They see their experiences and they're validated in that way and also being conscious of how I put that material forward. I think also, in general, in relationships, in working at the institution, how do we consider multiraciality when we're talking about student experiences, when we're talking about types of services we offer students, when we're talking about designing policies or programs, thinking intentionally how this impacts multiracial students. How do multiracial students, staff, or faculty fit into these policies, expectations, culture norms, etc. is also really important. And I think there's also just this level of personal knowledge and an awareness of having the fortune to learn and read and have access to some of the great research and some of those things about how multiraciality and multiracial experiences on college campuses and being conscious of that in my daily life and my interactions with the people in my life, including multiracial people and not multiracial people.

EP: Wonderful. Is it possible or have you seen any evidence of this, that there might be some resistance to thinking a little bit differently about multiraciality. Anything come to mind?

KF: I'm not sure that anything comes to mind for me at the moment. I think just general – that people tend to think – I think also that in particular people think of race as like black and white and that race is actually much more complicated and constructed than that. So I think that's the first thing that comes to mind. Generally, it's just people's reactions. Like people's paradigms that they walk into a room with and needing to challenge that and people have various reactions to that sort of thing. So I think that's really what comes to mind for me right now in this moment.

EP: It's sort of this larger paradigm that we are sort of up against around trying to get people to think in more nuanced ways.

KF: Yes, that's a much more articulate of saying what I was thinking. [laughs]

EP: [laughs] I don't know about that. It's easier to summarize what someone else suggests than it is to have your own original thoughts. So then, thinking about this paradigm actually leads right into this next question which is: how might we engage white folks in this work, particularly as you and I sit together as two people who have taken a commitment to racial justice quite seriously in our work but doing that for the vantage point of white folks? What do you think we need other white people to be doing in this moment – or not doing in this moment perhaps?

KP: Well I think not doing, maybe not talking as much, seems like an important moment for that. And more doing, I think more learning and more conscious reflection of how whiteness is solidified and centered and how it focuses, er – blah words – how it functions in very hegemonic ways, right? I think that's such an important component. I think in doing that, it's really easy when talking to other white people to make a very binary, basic argument. Trying to get folks started on a path of learning or unlearning I think often is really more what it is. So to be conscious of how we engage in that and being aware of how multiraciality can be included in that sort of that education and emphasis in trying to get folks to understand their white identities. There's also just a part of me – this is related to sort of a side thought project that I've been having based on some readings this term – but I think also because of the ubiquitous nature of whiteness in the United States that it's really easy to be like 'oh because my parents are white and I'm white that just means that I am white and this is a static thing that is true for my family.' In fact whiteness has been socially constructed in the United States and has changed over time so how do we also get people to think more critically about their own white identity in terms of how it functions in the United States in a white supremacist society. But also, how has that been socially constructed for our families

and at what point – ‘cos for most of us we’re not from really wealthy families. We aren’t descendants of Puritans from the Mayflower. We all came here at some point or another so how do we encourage folks to think much more deeply and critically about history and about our own identity history and our own family history in relation to that I think is really important. And what gets lost in those stories.

[00:20:32]

EP: That’s really powerful, what you just said. It’s not enough to just be accountable for your current, present racial identity, but also what is the historical legacy of that identity. It reminds me of a conversation I had this week with a student about some of the history that my identity has. From when I look at the trajectory of my parents, my dad and my mom, it’s a very complicated kind of history but one that has deeply implicated me in core racial order here in the United States. And I suspect it’s the same for other white folks and that feels really – in keeping with some of the things that I’m thinking about as well. Earlier you talked a little bit about some application of the knowledge you gained. You talked a bit about how to integrate course materials into teaching, how you’d integrate that interpersonally with folks. Are there other ways that you think you might apply some of the learning that you’ve done supporting this project?

KF: I think encouraging other people to seek out this project, whether it’s multiracial folks that I know that I know that I can encourage to find community. Like, ‘hey here’s folks that talk about this if you’re feeling isolated.’ I’ve had some of those conversations with people in my life who are like ‘I didn’t know there was a multiracial group on this campus, where do I find them?’ So being able to support others in finding community I think is one other area that I would name that has been important. And that’s what’s on my brain right at this moment. [laughs]

EP: Great, wonderful, thank you.

KF: Yeah.

EP: Now we talked pretty extensively about your background, about where you came from and some of the experiences that brought you to this moment but I have a question here about that and I wonder are there other – maybe I’ll ask the question in this way: was there ever a moment in your life where your commitment to racial justice work and supporting multiracial individuals very particularly deepened?

KF: Yeah. So I think my – my last year as an undergraduate student my campus brought Jane Elliot to campus to do the brown-eye/blue-eye experiment and I participated in that as a student. And that was a very powerful experience in a number of ways. I think for me that was really a moment where I started to recognize and think

much more deeply about systemic racism and white privilege. So I think that was a moment where that really deepened for me in a way that it hadn't before. Then I think in terms of multiraciality – and I think this might be a very stereotypical answer – but when I started having conversations about race with my – with people in my life who are multiracial and started to rethink folks who I had known my entire life who are multiracial and understand the context that, like our lives and experiences differently because of that. I feel like that's the most accurate I can say without telling another person's story, right? But it made me rethink – it shifted a paradigm in how I remembered a spectrum of events across a lifetime.

EP: Wonderful. So then I wonder, are there other things that you had hoped that we would talk about today that we have not yet had an opportunity to discuss?

KF: I feel like we've covered all the good stuff.

EP: Great. So then let's just close with a one sentence biography from you Kali.

KF: Sure. So I'm Kali Furman I'm originally from Idaho now I'm an Oregonian transplant that is a PhD student focusing on social justice education with a hope to be an instructor or a full professor in higher education that can center social justice, particularly racial and gender justice in my work.

EP: Thanks Kali.

KF: [laughs] Thank you, Eric.

[00:24:39]