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Oral History Interview with Sonnet Takahisa
Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.015
Interview conducted by Elizabeth Pozzi-Thanner on January 31st, 2012 in Manhattan, New York.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: But it is recording. I gave these to a colleague who came from Europe. And this one... One, two, three. One, two, three. (pause) OK, we'll try. This is January 31, 2012. My name is Elizabeth Pozzi-Thanner. I am going to speak with Sonnet Takahisa. We are in New York City, on Eldridge Street, and ready to go. Um, I love your name. (laughter)

SONNET TAKAHISA: Thank you. I can't take any credit. (laughter)

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Eh, can you tell me about your first name?

SONNET TAKAHISA: Sure. Um, my father was, um, passionate about Shakespeare and was actually a frustrated actor, um, and, uh, so Sonnet was his choosing and his idea. Um, the truth actually is -- um, and not that many people know this -- on my birth certificate -- um, my father had wanted to name me Sonnet because of Shakespeare's sonnets; my mother -- this is the way the story is told -- thought this -- that my -- me, this baby, was going to have enough problems having a last name of Takahisa and being interracial, that she thought that it was way too much to saddle me with also a strange and unusual first name. So on my birth certificate it's actually Carol Sonnet Takahisa. And when I was in first grade, my -- there were I think four other Carols in my class, in Brooklyn, in Canarsie, and my parents just said, "Would you want to be called Sonnet?" So I said, "Sure." I mean, what did I know; what did I care? And so at that point, if anybody called me Carol, they had to pay me a penny, and my name was switched to Sonnet. So, um. And I was Sonnet ever since. Every year -- I never changed it officially in my school records -- so this is a longer story than you asked, but, um -- my father would write a very eloquent letter to my teacher for the first day of school explaining why I should be called Sonnet. And that was always fine, and every year the teacher would read it, no problem, until just as I was about to graduate from high school and the secretary of the high school called me into -- and I was in one of the large, big,

big Brooklyn High Schools -- and she said, "You know, on your diploma, we have to write Carol." And by then, nobody had called me Carol in years. And I said, "That's ridiculous; everybody knows me as Sonnet." She said, "I'm sorry, the way the Board of Education -- this was the Board of Education -- is, if I say that Sonnet graduated, it will show that Carol never graduated, so we have to put on your diploma Sonnet" -- I mean, "We have to put Carol on your diploma." So I'm like, "That's ridiculous. Can't you at least do C. Sonnet?" I mean, by then all my college applications were in as Sonnet; everything said Sonnet. Everybody called me Sonnet, you know. And at that point the principal walked in and he said, "Hey, Sonnet, what's up?" He said, "What's the problem?" When I explained, he said, "That's ridiculous. You know, this is Sonnet. We know her as Sonnet." So from then on it was never any problem. On the, you know, plaque, you know, the honorary plaque in the -- for, you know, vale-- not -- for high standards in the school, it says Sonnet; on my diploma, it says Sonnet. Everything now says Sonnet Carol. So that's my name.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: And what about, uh, nowadays, immigration and other, uh, laws, when you, when you travel? That what do your papers show?

SONNET TAKAHISA: My, my passport [00:05:00] says Sonnet Carol.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Ah.

SONNET TAKAHISA: So it never has been a problem. I think probably when I got even my Social Security, my mom just put it in as Sonnet Carol. So. I have more problems with people not knowing if Sonnet is a first name or a last name. Sometimes they mix it up; Takahisa is my first name. And then just unknowingly -- I mean, actually, in Japan, Takahisa is more commonly a first name and not a last name, and my father -- um, my father's father came to the States to avoid a draft, and I don't know if it was the Russo–Japanese War or the Sino–Japanese War, but that's about when he came to the States -- and Takahisa was a made-up name. So we don't actually know what his original surname was. So there's my name. (laughs)

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: So, so your, your Japanese roots are somehow -- go -- end with your, with your grand-- your knowledge about your Japanese roots end with your grandfather, is that what you're saying?

SONNET TAKAHISA: Um, so I have on my father's side, his father, uh, his, you know, his legal father, was -- I know he came to this country from Japan, and I know he was samurai. Um, his mother, um, had two sisters, um, and they -- I actually know them and I know parts of that family. I just don't -- and so I know more about that fam-- you know, my m-- my father's mother's side I do know. So.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: So now I think I'll start with doing the interview as I usually do.

SONNET TAKAHISA: OK.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: I was just -- I had to start with asking (Takahisa laughs) your name. Um, will you -- will you tell me your life story, please?

SONNET TAKAHISA: OK. Um, so actually, I mean, starting with my name is actually probably, you know, a good way to start it. Um, my parents, um, met in New York City. Um, my dad was a frustrated actor and frustrated writer, Japanese–American, and in the '40s and '50s didn't get too far, um, being Japanese–American. Um, met my mom, who was of Russian and Polish Jewish background, and I -- all I know is they met somewhere in the Village through like Socialist Workers Party kind of stuff, um, and they decided to get married. Um, my father's mother by then had -- I guess was still living in California but traveled back and forth quite a bit. I don't know very much about her. And she -- and my father had a first wife, so I think my grandmother, my father's mother, liked the first wife better. Um, and my mother's parents, um, were quite dismayed that my father wasn't Jewish. So it was not sort of happy, um, I take it, when they got married on that level of my family. Um, I think when I was born, there was more rapprochement and some reconciliation, um, and so, you know, I, I have pictures of my, both of my grandparents being together with me and with my parents.

Um, they -- my parents lived in the Village, on Horatio Street. They were sort of original bohemians, you know, lived with artists. Um, my mom was a mathematician, statistician, worked for advertising companies. Um, sort of interesting, sort of history, some of which I know about. She had a twin sister and an older sister, um, so -- who we were close with the family, their families. Um, and my father had no siblings. Um, and I do know my dad tried to write; my mom sort of was the breadwinner for some time. Um,

and ultimately my parents started their own company. They -- uh, my father worked as a salesman, and they decided to go into business for themselves. So, um, I was raised, you know, to be part of the business. They were importers and wholesalers. My dad would go selling -- on selling trips, selling trips around, uh, the country, mostly to museum, um, shops, and Chinese gift shops around from the East Coast to the Midwest, and my mom ran the warehouse and did the shipping. And if there was a selling, you know, a sales show, an expo, I would go and help [00:10:00] set up the displays, I would help take orders. I helped in the shipping business; I did a lot of the bookkeeping. So that was, um, how I was raised. And when we went on trips abroad it was always because we were going on a buying trip, and so I went to some amazing sort of backroads places, particularly in Mexico and Taiwan and other places that my parents decided they wanted to travel and buy from.

Um, we moved from the Village. Um, my father says, you know, he decided we had to be legitimate, and so they moved to a place in Brooklyn, um, which ironically is exactly two blocks from where I live now. Completely random, um, but they moved in there. So in the -- in -- sometime in 1956, as best I know. I think I know what house it is. I know it's one of two houses. Um, I have very vague memories of it. I do have vague memories of my sister coming home -- my sister's about three years younger than me -- from the hospital. Um, and from -- so we lived in Prospect Lefferts Gardens on Hawthorne Street. I do know -- again, never saw anything of it -- but that there was a petition signed to keep my parents out of the neighborhood at that point because they were an interracial couple. Um, and my parents just plowed through and, you know, as they did in so many, um, instances in their life, um, just doggedly plowed through. And we stayed there -- they lived there, um -- I don't know what prompted them, but at a certain point, uh, we moved to Canarsie.

We lived in projects, the Bayview Projects, in Canarsie. And, um, you know, I, I never thought much about sort of being mixed. It was always -- you know, I could go to -- if there was a Jewish holiday, you know, if I decided I liked the teacher and I wanted to be there and hang out with the teacher and be the only one in class, I would go to school on the Jewish holidays. Otherwise I could be Jewish and not go to school on the Jewish

holidays. Um. I, you know, had a bunch of different friends; we were all mixed. I remember that; I remember the projects very well. I remember my elementary school quite well; it was PS 272. Um, there's a, you know, group of people that I've reconnected with on Facebook now from that building. And we always had sort of -- you know, I guess there was always something exotic. My father could come in and teach us to sing "*Frère Jacques*" in Japanese in my elementary school. And on the Facebook page, a lot of the kids say, "I can still sing..." -- you know, "kids." I mean, we're all in our fifties now. "I can still sing "*Frère Jacques*" in Japanese!" Um, and he would travel abroad and go places and send postcards, and he would come in and sing folk songs. And, you know, so it was a -- you know, he was -- and both my parents were very involved in that way and very proud of sort of our backgrounds. And when my dad went to Japan for the first time in his life, um, I must have been about eight or nine, and he came back with kimono, and so we got to get dressed up in kimono for the Japanese festivals. And we had -- you know, we were strange in our neighborhood because we had a Christmas tree and we had a menorah. Um, so that was sort of growing up in Canarsie. All along my parents had this business; they had a warehouse there. Um, I was pretty good in school and smart in school. I mean, the kids remember me and my sister as the smart kids.

Um, we moved to Brighton Beach, um, and, uh, so I was in fourth grade when we moved to [Waternew]. It was a cooperative, [water bass] cooperative, um, in Brighton Beach. Um, and my mom must have done -- I know my mom did some -- a lot of behind-the-scenes sort of negotiating, and so for about a month or two weeks I was in fourth grade, and then I was skipped to the fifth grade. So I was put into the fifth-grade class, uh, because the students were not as advanced as I had been. So, um, somehow I -- you know, my mom did lots of finagling. I only sort of now in hindsight realize how much she must have done. Um, and, you know, I had a -- again, you know, I was the only Asian kid. In sixth grade, uh, we did a, um, a folk -- we did -- it was the arts and cultural -- the district arts and cultural fair, and I remember we did a Japanese dance. My father must have taught us the folk dance. And every year we would go to this Japanese folk festival, so I knew all the Japanese folk dances. [00:15:00] And we performed that,

and I -- my parents must have supplied the *happi* coats that we all wore for the show. And I had to get up in front of, you know, this huge auditorium and greet the superintendent -- I mean, in those days, it was like, Oh, my God -- and introduce everyone. So, um, but that dance, sort of throughout my life has continued to be something that I've used or taught or, you know, used as a way to bring people together. *Tanko Bushi*, the Coal Miner's Dance.

Um, so that was sixth grade. Went to junior high school in, um, Coney Island. I went into the two-year [SP]. In those days it meant that you could go either two years, do seventh and eighth grade -- seventh, eighth grade, and ninth grade in two years, or have an enriched program and did it in three years. So I did it in two years. So in essence I skipped two years. So by the time I went to high school, um, I was young. I went to one -- Lincoln High School, one of the large high schools. There were I think 5,200 kids or something in this school; it was huge. Um, and I did really well. I was in the top -- you know, there were 1,200 kids in my graduating class -- I was in the top ten kids of the graduating class. I went to Harvard. I got into Harvard and went to Harvard with a scholarship. Um, I was -- and in those days -- so that was in 19-- I graduated high school in '72 -- there was I think like one other Asian kid in the high school with me. He was the son of the Chinese laundry, you know, around the corner. Um, but there were no other Asian -- there were hard-- I mean, it was, you know, sort of the wave of the -- the change in immigration hadn't happened. So there were very few Asians and no Russians at all. Um, it was fairly segregated, both in high school and the middle school, in terms of there was tracking. Um, but I think because I was mixed, because people didn't know what I was, I often had friends who were not just the white kids, or, you know, hung out with other kids.

Um, we went to Ethical Culture, ethical humanism, so, um, it was, you know, a community. When we first started, we were going to a, a, a Ethical Culture society in Long Island, and then when we moved to Brighton Beach from Canarsie, it was a little bit far, so we started going to the society in Brooklyn. Um, so that became sort of a network and a community that we would go to. You know, we'd go away for weekends with people from Ethical Culture. We'd -- you know, my father would still direct plays over

the weekends. Um, my mom always folk danced, so we got involved in folk dancing through my mom. Um, and I ran the folk dance club in high school, and it was everything. I mean, we certainly did *Tanko Bushi*, but we did Israeli folk dancing and Russian folk -- all kinds of folk dancing. Um, I danced all through high school, um, [modern dance], with Marjorie Mazia, who was Woody Guthrie's wife, and studied with, um, their daughter, uh, Nora, um, and with a lot of dancers from, um, Martha Graham's troupe. But I was short and stumpy, so that's never really -- dance was never something that I *really* thought I would do, but I always loved dancing.

Um, so '72, I don't know, went to Harvard. Um, actually, the summer before, so the summer I graduated from high school, I think, um, '72, we went to Japan as a family for the first time. Um, and I remember being on the plane, and there were all these white people who could speak Japanese, and I was really jealous. So I decided when I went to Harvard to major in East Asian Studies and major in Japanese Studies. Um, my mom was really, you know, adamant at a certain point that my sister do, you know, the Jewish side, give it fairness, so she was trying to get my sister to study Hebrew, which she didn't do; she ended up studying Serbo–Croatian, but... (Pozzi-Thanner laughs) Um, so I studied East Asian Studies and Japanese Studies at Harvard. Um, I, um, went to Japan in my -- the summer between my junior and senior year to do research for a senior honors thesis. And I ended up -- I was going to interview kids who were the children of, you know, mixed marriages, but my Japanese wasn't good enough, so I ended up doing a study of women who were foreign-born women who had married Japanese men [00:20:00] and were living in Japan. So, um, I did that, which was pretty amazing. And three or four years later I happened to be at an academic conference and there was a woman who had did her PhD on the same exact topic, and as she's talking about her subjects, I'm like, "I know who that is! I know who that is!" So that was pretty cool.

Um, I also, um, when I was at school, um, worked in the gift shop of the Harvard, um, Museum, and because, again, that was through a contact of my dad's. And somehow made the decision to decide to do an internship at the Harvard Museums. And -- this is so long and boring. I have so much -- it's like so far back! There's -- oh my God! Anyway, um --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: It's good. (laughs)

SONNET TAKAHISA: -- I, um -- so I went to the director of the museum and said I wanted to do an independent study, internship. I don't know where I got the chutzpah to do all this stuff, but... So I worked at the Museum of Comparative Zoology in Peabody Museum for a semester, and I worked with the registrar, I worked a bit with the educator, I worked with all the different departments. And I do remember -- this is, you know, prescient in terms of my museum career -- but, um, I remember sitting with the director one day in his office and him saying, "I have the answer. I have the answer." And he took out -- this was sort of in the very early days of sort of plastic replicas where things looked very real, and he had, you know, an Oreo or a Hydrox cookie that was made out of plastic that looked very real, and some other foods. Um, and he said, "This is the answer. All these people who want to touch objects in museum, you know, here, we'll just give them these replicas." And I said, "You know, there's something not right about that."

So, um, anyway, I had a great experience doing that, and so when I was graduating, um, decided I didn't -- wasn't quite ready to go to graduate school. Everybody who was in East Asian studies looked really pale, and I just didn't want to do it. So, um, I looked around for a museum opportunity. Um, the Children's Museum of Boston had a Japanese home exhibit, so I applied to be an intern, and they said, "Well, we can't guarantee -- we can't guarantee you'll get the Japanese house, um, and if you wait a little while longer, we're going to have funding for a minority internship." And in those days, it was a difference of $25 a week to $84 a week. So, um, that's how old I am. So, um, I said, OK, I'll wait for that, and I'll volunteer at the Japanese house until, um, until, you know, the internship, the minority internship comes up. And at the same time I got a teaching job at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology, so went out with educators to schools and taught about animals in human culture in Africa and in Native American cultures, and we used the Peabody Museum. The teachers who were my mentors would get stoned in the car every time, and I'm like, This is how you teach? You know. So that was my training.

But I also then got to work very intimately while at the Children's Museum with the Japanese home and the collections. And had always had an interest in objects because of my parents' business, and I always repaired things when they were broken. And, um, my birthday is March third, which is Girls' Day in Japan, so had always read books about the traditions of Girls' Day and the objects that you put on -- you have a whole set of dolls that get put on display for the event. And so all the sudden I'm in the Japanese home and I'm overseeing the collections, and there were all these Girls' Day dolls. So I proposed to the museum -- I mean, a small Japanese house -- I proposed an exhibition of these Girls' Day dolls. And it was approved, and we ended up writing and I got funding to do a whole series of Japanese festivals in the Japanese home. And in order to do it, the idea for the proposal was to work with members of the sort of expatriate Japanese community. So there were many families who were in the Boston area either for school or for business where the husbands were working and the wives and children were either in school or... So the moms, these Japanese moms, became the training for what do you do with these objects, how do you care for them, what's the traditional way of packaging them, and we did a comparison with the Western ways of conservation. So it was an amazing, amazing opportunity. Um, and I got to meet amazing people, and we did these big events at Faneuil [00:25:00] Hall Market, and we did a -- I recreated the Japanese festival that I had gone to every year here in New York City, I recreated in Boston at the Children's Museum. I got a drummer; I got a drum from Wesleyan; I got a jazz drummer from Berklee School of Music, a Japanese guy; I got lanterns donated; I had the teachers from the Buddhist church here in New York City teach me the dances; I taught the dances to lots of people. So it was -- it was really -- and, I mean, I was a kid. It was an amazing opportunity. Um, so that was pretty, you know, like -- that was great. It was great. And then, um, at a certain point the Jap-- the Children's Museum moved downtown, and they, uh, were bringing in a 150-year-old -- at that time -- 150-year-old house from Kyoto, and so I worked with the carpenters and I worked with the woman who was directing the project, um, and I worked with the carpenters to do the appropriate ceremonies, and... So anyway. That -- it was amazing.

And then decided after a certain point that having been teaching so much about Japan that I actually wanted to do more studying and do more graduate work, um, on Japan. And I was teaching everything from little kids to graduate students from MIT and Harvard and bringing in art history students from -- it was great. But so decided to go back and do graduate work. I had been dating a man from -- since my freshman year, and his two roommates were out in Seattle, and University of Washington had a great program, so we decided to go out there together. I mean, his -- I knew his fam-- I mean, I had grown up with him and -- from age 16 when I went to college, 17. Um, so we went out to Seattle. I went to -- did graduate work at the University of Washington. Um, I got a call -- I did East Asian Studies. I got a job teaching in Asian–American studies, which again was a clash. I mean, usually people didn't talk to each other from those departments. Um, my former boss from the Children's Museum called me and said, you know, "Your old boss is leaving. We want you to come back." And I said, "That's amazing," I said, "but I feel like if I came back now you'd always think of me as the kid, and I'm just not ready to come back." She said, "I knew you'd say that. My best friend is moving to the Seattle Art Museum; she's going to be head of education. She wants to talk to you." So lots of back and forth in between -- that boyfriend and I decided to get married, you know; I got a job offer at the art museum; I had no art history. I had an amazing four years of being at the art museum, had an amazing art history training, got married. Um, so we stayed there; it was fabulous, always with one foot in New York City. My family was here. My mom had a radical mastectomy the week before my college graduation. So, um, she was in remission and went through all kinds of therapy, but she, um, you know, five years later, had different recurrences, and I was in Seattle, and it was really far to come back every time, so the idea was really to come back. And my husband at the time was an artist, and his whole connections were here in New York. So the goal was to get back to -- and his family was here too -- the goal was to get back to New York.

Um, so I ended up getting a job at the Brooklyn Museum -- another saga, but got the job -- and, um moved back to New York, leaving that husband in Seattle with the idea that he would come really soon. And he got more and more engaged in Seattle art

politics and Seattle art. He got a Guggenheim and still didn't come. I was sort of like the family representative at every event, and he had a large Catholic family, so every event, every funeral, every wake, I was always -- I mean, his -- he had eight siblings, and I was close to all of them, and, you know, and then I had my family. So I was just sort of doing family stuff and keeping up, and he was in Seattle. And at a certain point we realized, This is it; it's over. So we, um, we decided to split up. Um, he was already -- he was planning to come back to New York, but by the time he did it was totally over.

Um, in the meantime, um, I had been very busy at the Brooklyn Museum, had lots of great opportunities. It was a moment in time where there was lots of funding for arts education, and took full advantage of that and really got to create some just pushing out of the box types of programs at the Brooklyn Museum. There were a few other bumps. I got -- I had an EEO suit, [00:30:00] um, a discrimination suit, um, charges against me, um, which was awful. Um, and, um, I mean, it ended up being unfounded, and it had to do with union and stuff like that that, but it was really yucky. Um, and Debbie Schwartz, who was at Brooklyn Historical, was a close friend and wh-- so I was sort of separating from my husband, dealing with, you know, people at this place, um, and -- but at the same time there was all of this opportunity to do really great and innovative programming. And I had gotten connected with the people in the arts and education world, including the director and assistant or deputy of the arts education program at the New York State Council on the Arts. And we became really friend-- good friends, and when Hollis, you know, was sort of looking for a girlfriend, knew I was married, so I was sort of safe, if he needed someone to go to an event with, so we became friends. You know, other mutual friends, it turned out. And then over time, we just ended up becoming a couple. Um, and, um, he's a drummer and he's an arts administrator and has been really incredible and sort of -- so I moved in with him really quickly after I knew things had ended with my first husband. And we -- my first husband and I got divorced. Um, my parents by then had a place in Florida, which again, coincidentally, was just really close to Hollis's parents, so we would go down and see our parents together, um, and we decided to get married pretty quickly. Um, and so we got married in 1989. Eighty-nine we got married. Um, and I was working at the Brooklyn Museum and just

having an amazing time of it. He was at the New York State Council in the Arts and ultimately became director of the Arts in Ed program. Um, and, uh, we had a son. So our son was born in 1990. Um, his name is Tylor, T-Y-L-O-R, uh, which is an anagram, um, of all of his grandparents and other parents, um -- not his parents, his grandparents and great-grandparents.

Um, and the -- there was an opportunity sort of to, to create small schools, and I was real involved in education and bringing museums and schools together, so we put in two proposals from the Brooklyn Museum, and both were funded, to create small high schools. Uh, and then I sort of had to make a choice and in the end ended up for ten years being the co-director of the New York City Museum School. Uh, so sort of have gone from, you know, museum education and public programming and community-based organizing to running a school that was in museums. And, um, I had a day partner on the school for ten years who was very, very close, um, and it -- the decision to run the school was traumatic. My son was three; it was -- you know, I knew it was a lot of work. But ended up doing that, and did that for ten years. Um, had amazing adventures. Learned a lot about myself, a lot about the museums, a lot about teaching and learning. Um, and with all the changes in the system, I actually never had the paperwork, the proper paperwork. So, um, at a certain point it was like, OK, I got to get out of this.

And I went to an organization that was creating more small schools, and I did that for a few years, and then got wooed by the 9/11 Memorial Museum to be the director of education, and I did that for three and a half years, um, with lots of my mentors saying, This is going to be tough, and emotions, it's really hard. And in the end it was less the emotions that were hard and more just the politics, and realizing that, you know, what the place will be, you know, after a decade or so, or two decades, it was not going to be that now. And I didn't feel that my educational sort of leanings were really being used well. So I quit, which was really scary, sort of leapt out into the unknown. By that point, my husband had gone from State Council in the Arts to running an arts and education-- city-wide arts and education organization, again, sort of [top at the list]. Um, and then had been wooed to Carnegie Hall. When I go the job at 9/11 Museum, he ended up quitting his job at Carnegie Hall because I had this secure job. [00:35:00] And then was -- has

been working as a consultant since 2006. And then in 2010, I quit, so we're both working as consultants at that point. Um, and, you know, have had a number of different big projects and have never really sort of looked back. I'm still a little nervous but have gotten to do some really exciting things. In the meantime, our son has gone through, um, college, and has just about finished college, and is doing really well out in California. And...I don't know. I guess -- sorry, I didn't mean to. I don't know why I got -- ew, embarrassing. This is so narcissistic. Sorry. (laughs) So that's where I am now.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: It's not narcissistic. (laughter)

SONNET TAKAHISA: So I'm working as a consultant.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Yeah.

SONNET TAKAHISA: Um, trying to figure out if I want to go back to -- and to be reinstitutionalized or to institutionalizing myself again, but wanting to make sure I'm in the right institution with the right people. Um, it's harder at this age, and it's harder to sort of find the right mix, um, in what I really want to do, and at the same time, things keep popping up and I keep having projects, and so, um, trying to dec-- I mean, I think I'm too young to retire, um, but I'm, I'm -- you know, some days I'm having a great time and some days I have major anxiety. But I have opportunities to work on different projects like this, so it's good. OK, I'm done. (laughter)

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Well it was quick. (laughs)

SONNET TAKAHISA: That wasn't quick!

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Yes.

SONNET TAKAHISA: Actually, there's (inaudible) through the last part of my life. Sorry. It suddenly got too long.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: No, it didn't get too long. Um, do you want to make a break, or can we continue?

SONNET TAKAHISA: No, keep going.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Yeah. Um, let's maybe go back a little bit --

SONNET TAKAHISA: Mm-hmm.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: -- and can you, can you tell me a little bit more about both sides of your grandparents, just to frame that --

SONNET TAKAHISA: Sure, sure.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: -- a little bit more? Who they were, what you knew about them, how you related to them --

SONNET TAKAHISA: Sure.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: -- and how they related to each other. As you said, there was this one photograph --

SONNET TAKAHISA: Yeah.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Yeah.

SONNET TAKAHISA: Of me in the middle.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Yeah, yeah.

SONNET TAKAHISA: Um, so my -- I don't know much about my father's parents. Um, his mom died probably when I was -- I don't know, I must have been two or three. I don't know exactly how old I was. Um, and he had been estranged from her. The most I know -- I do know, as I said, that my dad -- I have a picture of my grandfather as a samurai with his brother. So my dad had a very faded photograph that, because my ex-husband and my brother-in-law are both photographers, they were able to sort of doctor the photograph, and we have something that's a decent photograph. Um, but, but, as I said, he came to -- left Japan to evade the draft. My father does remember that he first came to Vancouver and then ended up in Seattle. And I think he was kind of a gambler and sort of a rough guy. Um, and he died when my dad was about 11 or 12, so my dad was raised by his mom, predominantly. And they had a very rough relationship. She -- again, we have a picture of my dad's, I think a half-brother, who died in the swine flu epidemic, um, in 1919, and, um, so -- and my dad always felt that, you know, he -- his mother was closer to the brother. I sort of think -- and actually, I -- the brother was another man's son, so a half-brother to my dad, and that -- and my father always, you know, said that his father was this incredibly noble man for marrying his mom, you know, and... So that's, that's about all I have of that.

My grandmother, um, worked hard, I think, was a cleaning lady. I remember one story where she -- um, she cleaned homes like for people like Lon Chaney, Jr., so again, I have this story of my dad telling me that when he was ten, or when he was a kid, um, he

got a Christmas card or some gift card where there was a cutout of an ice skate or a skate, and Lon Chaney, Jr., I think, had put a $10 bill behind it, and it was a gift for my dad. So that's, you know, as much as I really know. He worked really h-- she worked really hard. She made sure that he got into good schools. He [00:40:00] ended up going to high school not near where he grew up, but in east LA with sort of more middle-class Jewish kids and mixed kids. So he was really friendly with -- I don't know if you ever know the name Archie Green. He was a folklorist. So Archie and my dad were actually great high school buddies.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Oh...

SONNET TAKAHISA: And there was a third one; his name was Al. So we -- so Archie was my dad's close friend. And they had some falling-out, and I don't know what it was, when I was a young child. And when Archie passed away -- and, um, my dad was already passed away -- but I tried to reach out to Archie's son, Derek. And so we knew Derek and Louanne's names; we just didn't know them. Um, so my dad, um, was in-- got interested in the theatre and went to Pasadena Playhouse as a high school intern, and his mom, you know, really helped to support him. And, um, but she died on the West Coast, and so my dad -- there was this triumvirate, Archie, Al, and my dad -- and Al kind of took care of my grandmother, from what I understood, and made sure that she was buried in the plot next to her husband, my grandfather. Um, my dad had all the information but had never really been there or been to the funeral. And, and Al actually -- years later we went to visit him --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: What year did she die? (inaudible) approximate?

SONNET TAKAHISA: She must have died in '57, '58, somewhere around there, '59.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: And how, how old was she, probably, when she died?

SONNET TAKAHISA: I don't know. I don't know. I have no idea. She must have been in her seventies or eighties. I don't know.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Was she -- was she born in the U.S., or was she --

SONNET TAKAHISA: No, she was born in Japan.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: OK.

SONNET TAKAHISA: She was born in Japan. Her -- she was the eldest, I think, of three sisters. Her father had brought them to this country, so it's her -- she had two younger sisters, one who was -- and they were both a lot younger -- who were very -- my dad was closer to. One went back to Japan and raised her family in Japan, but Aunt [Kimi], that -- my dad called her Aunt Kimi -- lived to a quite elderly age, and we actually got to meet her, and we still are in touch with her grandchildren and her son and his wife. Um, and [Chio], who married Frank and was in California, they -- like, my father remembers being a kid and a, um, a, you know, a teenager and sort of hanging out with them and, you know, sort of... So -- and we have pictures of sort of them being sort of bon vivants. Um, but he was interested in theatre, he was interested in the Merchant Marines, and he joined the Merchant Marines -- my dad did --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: When was your father born?

SONNET TAKAHISA: My dad was born in 1917.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: OK.

SONNET TAKAHISA: So.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: And --

SONNET TAKAHISA: And he was in southern California. His, um, grandparents -- so his mother's sister and I guess father had a -- his father had a tailor shop somewhere in either Stockton or maybe also in San Francisco. Um, so there was some family there that he was connected to and that he would visit I guess summers or hang out with them. Um, so he knew them growing up. Um, his -- but his aunt, two aunts, were a lot younger than his mother had been, so his cousins were much, much younger than him. So he knew them but wasn't that close to them in terms of relationship with first cousin. Only when he got older. And he has two cousins now that are -- actually, he probably has three -- four -- he has four cousins who are still alive, two of whom, you know, we are sort of -- my sister and I are in touch with. Um, you know, one who is in her late eighties and lives in the same building that her parents bought in San Francisco, in the Panhandle. And her brother, who I haven't seen in -- I don't know that I've ever seen him. Her, her -- no, her -- [Toshi], Toshi's brother and his wife, right, and then the family -- there are two siblings in Japan. So. Anyway, um.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Are there any stories that you know of, what happened to, to your extended Japanese family during World War II?

SONNET TAKAHISA: Aunt Kimi --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Because that was --

SONNET TAKAHISA: Aunt Kimi lived in Japan then, so she --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Yeah.

SONNET TAKAHISA: -- because she spoke English, um, and there was -- I do know there was some horrible story with a husband that either died or left her and left her with two kids, um, but she ended up being able to somehow support the two kids through the war years, partly because she spoke English and could do some translating. [00:45:00] Um, so they ended up, you know, surviving quite well and -- not well. They weren't wealthy, but did well. Um, my dad, there was one story that my dad told, which this is -- I wonder -- it's like I've never really had to verbalize it. Um, when he went to Japan in '64, that was the first time he'd ever been to Japan. He spoke Japanese. He spoke [*frue bento*], Old Japanese, because that was what he -- you know, so it was old-fashioned Japanese. Um, he came back and told this story about -- in Japan there are lots of restaurants on the roof, roof gardens, and on the roof gar-- on the roofs of Japanese department stores. And he came back and he told this story of this man sitting, sort of coming over and sitting next to him, and either somehow humming or playing a song. I think it was "*La Poloma*." And, you know, my dad realized much later that somehow this man may have been somehow related to him, but by the time he realized that the man was probably playing this song because it was a song that he -- the guy was gone, and he never found him. And my dad often asked his Aunt Kimi to try and figure out of there was any way she could find anything about my dad's father's side of the family. And Kimi wasn't able to ever -- you know, with the war and with all the records that were destroyed. So there wasn't any information. We have images of my grandfather, but again, we don't know hi-- my dad never knew his real name. Um, he called himself [Yoshitaro] Takahisa, and that's what's on his gravestone. And [Ikoko] is my grandmother's name, and that's what's on their, you know, their headstone together. But we don't know -- I mean, my dad knew very little. And I think also because he was estranged from his

mother for so long and there was a real anger whether it was because his mother didn't like my mother or she didn't approve of my father, or my dad often felt -- that was the other thing my dad often felt -- that his mother was too hard on his father. I think his father was somewhat of either a drinker or liked his vices, and she was a hard worker. So it was a very hard marriage, and I know there were moments when my dad sort of -- you know, sort of -- if he and my mom fought, that's what would kind of come up, was that kind of stuff.

So he -- you know, it wasn't until we went to California sometime -- must have been late '80s or even more in the '90s. I think we went back with my son, so Tylor was still -- already alive. We went to a meeting, and -- my husband had a meeting in California, so Hollis and Tylor and I went, and we took my dad, and he hadn't been to California in years. My mom's twin sister lived there, so we had family, and he'd been back for that, but he'd never really dealt with his own past and his own... So, um, we went to the Episcopal church where he had gone as a kid, which is now in Koreatown, and you'd watch him. He'd just -- he was I think probably close to 80 at that point, and Mom had already passed away. And we walked into the church, and he just started crying, and he was remembering everything. And the young acolyte -- it was an Episcopal church -- said, "You know" -- this is in the middle of everything Korean now, said, "You know, a lot of the old Japanese families come back on Sunday for the mass, you know, for the mass," so my dad -- we went -- my dad and I went. In the meantime we'd gone to his junior high school, and my son, who was -- I guess he was probably about s-- eight or nine, you know, walks into this junior high, and my dad recognizes his junior high, everybody is speaking Spanish, and he starts singing the school song, you know. I mean, it was just mindboggling, and in Spanish, these ladies are asking me, like, "What's going on?" And I said, "My dad went to this school 70 or 80 years ago," and they were like, "Did you say *70* or *80* years ago?" You know, so this whole sort of trip was this flashback for him.

So we go to the service on Sunday, and there's like a kiss of peace or something like that, and this woman turned around and said, "Are you from the neighborhood?" to my dad. And he says, "My name is [Shiro] Takahisa," and this boom-- guy booms from

[the bench] and says, "Shiro Takahisa? I haven't heard that name for 80 years! Where you been?" So it turned out that was like his best friend, and she had married his -- you know, the woman in front of us [00:50:00] had married my dad's best friend from when he was six, and -- so it was amazing. You know, they went through and -- so it was this amazing reconnecting. And at the same time we went to the cemetery and my dad basically forgave or asked forgiveness of his mother --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Mm-hmm.

SONNET TAKAHISA: -- so it was a way of him settling with his mom. So, um, there are a few things that we have that are from my grandparents. This -- my -- um, at some point, my dad got my -- his mom's ring, wedding ring, and her engagement ring, and, um, I guess gave it to my mom, (sniffs) and when she died -- sorry (laughs) -- when she died, um, my sister took the wedding ring and I took the engagement ring. Um, so that's, uh -- you know, that's part of the... You know, and we have a, a *koto*, a Japanese instrument, that, um, his parents had had shipped over from Japan. It's now on display; we don't use it or play it. And a couple of other -- and a silver box that had been my grandparents'. And then this photograph. And really, that's it. And we have tons of photos from my dad growing up, but I don't know who any of the people are, you know. So, um, I often wonder, What do you do with that? I mean, I don't know who they are. I can't get rid of them, but I don't want to leave them for my son to deal with. So anyway. So that's that side of the family.

As I said, we have cousins, and every once in a while -- and I -- when I go back to California, I always -- when I'm in LA, I always go to the cemetery and place flowers at my grandparents' grave. My dad had said, "You can always find the grave." It's, it's -- it was, um, in the Evergreen Cemetery, which has lots of Japanese families, but what was Brooklyn Avenue is now Cesar Chavez Boulevard, and the landmarks have all changed, except Dad always said, you know, the grave is between -- there's a palm tree and a pine tree. And that's -- those are still there, and that's how I find the headstone every time I, I go. So, um. And the headstone was actually ordered and organized by my dad's friend in California. And when we went to see him, he had some bowls, um, that he said,

"These were your grandmother's, and I want you to have those." So. So that's my father's side.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Are you -- are you aware of any of your family, of your Japanese side of the family, being affected by the persecution during World War II?

SONNET TAKAHISA: The internment in this coun-- country?

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Yeah, yeah.

SONNET TAKAHISA: My, my dad's cousins, um, were interned. So his -- he was on this coast, and he brought his mom to, to, to the East Coast, so she was here during much of that. And he -- they must -- she must have had an apartment. I don't know enough about that. Um, but his aunt and uncle and their children were in camp -- um, in camp, in the internment camps. Um, and they don't -- I don't talk about it with them. I mean, the one person I'm closest with is this 80-year-old woman who every year send-- used to send us See's Candies, and now when I'm in San Francisco, you know, we always go out to have, um, dinner with her, and -- or brunch. Actually, we -- you know, she's given up her car, so we go out to have brunch. Um, but so that's -- it -- we haven't talked --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: But it's not part, somehow, of your family stories that they're --

SONNET TAKAHISA: No, but interestingly -- or not interestingly. So when I was in high school, when I was a sophomore or junior in high school, I did a term paper on the internment camps. So this would have been in like 1970. And there were no books written on the subject. I went to the Grand Army Plaza public library. I had to scour through magazines and, you know, periodicals because there were no -- nobody had written about this. So I wrote a long -- the two big term papers I remember writing in high school, one was about, um, the Rosenbergs, because my parents were passionate about the Rosenbergs, and, you know, the fact of the injustice that had been done in them being killed. And that was part of the circle that they were in. Um, and then I wrote about the internment camps. And both my, my teacher and then his colleague both said, "We never even heard about this stuff." This was in 1970 or something like that. So that was part of what I studied.

And when I went to Harvard, again, there was -- it was just the very, very beginning of sort of the Black Power movement and v-- like, not even black studies. Um, and certainly no Asian-American studies. But I guess when I was a junior, um, there was -- I had -- somehow I got connected with -- I don't know how this man [00:55:00] found me, but I got connected to this man who, um, was from Seattle and was interested in interracial kids and Asian-American... So he worked with three other people and created a seminar on Asian-American studies. It was the very sort of first, um, academic sort of look at this. And, uh, so I said, "Yes, I'd love to go to the course." And for me it was great. So the first half of the course was like, Oh, wow, here are all these other Asian-Americans. And remember, I had -- there had been nobody else growing up, and all these other people who had -- who were called "chink" or called "Jap" or, you know, all of that kind of stuff, and it was like, Wow. Like, they -- I know their story. And then about halfway through the course they all started then getting angry at white people, and then I was like, Whoa, wait a minute. But now I'm white! You know, I mean, I'm part white. So I got very, very quiet. And this man, who's actually one of the advisors now, um, on the project -- I reconnected him -- he's, um, a professor at UC Santa Barbara, um, he just came to me and he said, "You know, you're so quiet in class," and I said, "Because, like, what am I?" you know. And he said, "Well, do you want to start a Eurasian club?" I'm like, "No," you know. And I actually thought about this as I came over today. I wrote -- I sat down -- you know, we had to do a paper. I -- so this is the other paper I really remember, is this, like, 20-page paper where I just, you know, stream-of-conscious wrote about being of mixed background and being of mixed race and saying people always say, Oh, you're this way because of your mom, you're that way 'cause of your dad, or you get this from your... And I'm like, No, I'm just who I am, and I -- you know, it was like this "I am me!", you know, sort of one of these identity moments. Um, but I -- you know, I would remember, you know, having, um, battles with my boyfriend, you know, who would sort of make fun of me or say, Oh, Chinee, or they would use the term Jap, and I would have to explain why it was doubly offensive to be called a Jap, because Jap for -- Jap, you know, Japanese, but also Jap for Japanese-Amer-- Jewish-American Princess, it was like double, you know, (Pozzi-

Thanner laughs) insult. You know, and everybody thought that was hysterical, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, but... So that was, um -- you know, so I -- so, I mean, this was an, a, obviously a detour.

But so I, I did a lot more study on the internment and got really involved in studying that and then really got involved in sort of studying the, the evolution of the Asian-American sort of identity movement and was involved with a lot of people who were, you know, the writers and the authors and the people who were actually beginning to, to, um, articulate the Asian-American identity in this country. And, and yet always on the outside of that, too, because I wasn't, you know, quite -- it wasn't -- I wasn't -- I couldn't always be mad at the white people because I was white too. So, um. And I think, you know, in that period of time when there wasn't -- there weren't as many Asian-Americans who were in the sort of academic world or who were known, because of my last name, I was seen as more of an Asian-American. Um, and now people don't really know what I, what I am. And, and people, you know, will look at me and think I'm Spanish or think I'm something else and not necessarily think I'm Asian. I think as I got chubbier and heavier or whatever, I looked less Asian, maybe, or something. I don't know. Um, but anyway, so --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: So, so what, what do you -- I mean, how do you --

SONNET TAKAHISA: Define myself?

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: -- define yourself? I mean, do you -- also, are you proactive in telling people how you define yourself, or do you just...?

SONNET TAKAHISA: I think I, I, when I define myself, I define myself as in-between. I think I -- you know, if, if you read any of the sort of -- any recent job applications or things that I've put in, it's really -- I really do think of myself as in-between, whether it's been in between cultures or in between museum and school world, or -- but I, I feel that, um, I've had this amazing, um, sort of perspective to always be able to see things from two different sides at least, if not more. And so I -- that's how I define myself, as in-between. I was -- I went to, um, one of the Historical Society's programs at the -- at Museum of Chinese in America, and there were a lot of people talking about the Loving Day and the Loving -- the *Loving vs. Virginia* day, and I was like -- and they were talking

about all these groups of Eurasians and mixed kids and Kip Fulbeck, the, um, photographer whose work I knew was there, and it -- it was -- but I thought, I don't -- it's not -- I didn't -- I don't -- maybe I'm not a joiner. Maybe, you know, I just... But I do -- because I think it's the flexibility [01:00:00] that it gives me to move in and out and, and, you know, to, to understand and wear different shoes and different hats at different times. So. Um, I've always liked being everything and both. Um, and it's not just -- you know, we've not been religious. You know, it's the ethnic background, but it's also that I've lived on the East Coast and West Coast, that I've worked in museums and worked in schools, that, um, you know, I like -- I like -- I like having both sides of the perspective.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Uh-huh.

SONNET TAKAHISA: So. Anyway, so yes. It -- you asked me -- that all came from the, the internment camps. So, um.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Do you know where in your father's life, where there may be the roots of his political awareness? Because when he met your mother, it sounds, he was already, or he was in the group that was politically active or, or, or at least, uh...

SONNET TAKAHISA: He -- I think it was, um, in a funny way, although not always -- you know, some of it was union stuff, some of it was -- I mean, he was a Merchant Marine. Some of it was he was involved in folk music and folk song and union songs. Um, we found, um, uh, in his papers, there was a -- during the war, he sang under a pseudonym, you know, under a Chinese pseudonym, and he acted under a Chinese pseudonym. But he was always real involved in all this sort of folk music world, so, um, you know, played poker with Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston and Pete Seeger and... I mean, more -- the people he talked about more familiarly were Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston. So he was part of that sort of world. I don't know exactly how. Certainly not later in life, but at a certain point in his life.

And I think it was just -- it had to do with, you know, issues of fairness and justice. I mean, that was, I think, a really basic tenet of my dad's, that -- I mean, he had -- and a -- although it's interesting. At times I think, you know -- I remem-- you know, they didn't always maintain that when they were older, my parents, but that -- the sense of unfairness and injustice. Um, you know, it, it -- whether, you know, some of that was

he felt his mother had been unfair to him because he wasn't his brother and because his brother had died, um, and because his brother had been her firstborn, you know, whether it stemmed from that, whether it stemmed from being -- excuse me -- Japanese-Amer-- you know, I, I couldn't -- I don't know what it came from. But he always had this sense of justice being -- and fairness being really something that he was resolute, um, about. So I would say that's probably where his political, um, leanings came from. I don't -- I mean, I know -- he, he, um, he directed a version of *The Deputy*, so, you know, he was...

And he always was, um -- he was very anti-violence, um, and it -- when we were -- when we were part of the Ethical Culture Society, and at a certain point there was a great deal of sort of support from the liberal left towards Black Panthers and towards violence that made my father crazy. Um, you know, and he felt that it was so unfair that the -- you know, these people could, could support the Black Panthers and would at the same time denounce the JDL. And my dad didn't believe in the JDL and didn't -- but, but he just thought -- fairness was his, was one of his absolutes.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Mm-hmm. Mmm.

SONNET TAKAHISA: And, and, and, and he was really gentle, and he was really -- he was really a caring man. So, he, he actually, um, went -- was in the Second -- this is what he tells us, is he was in the Second Avenue Deli with a friend, and he looked over and he saw this couple, you know, sitting, you know, at another table, and he said, "That's my in-laws," because he recogniz-- he had never met them. I mean, he was married, but he had never met them, and he had -- you know, he knew them from photographs. So he went up to them and he said, "Hi, I'm Rosie's wife [*sic*]" and introduced himself. So, again, I don't know what happened or if that's an apocryphal story, but in the end of the three sons-in-laws that my grandparents have, he certainly was the, you know, the most caring of them and turned out to be the best of the three in terms of [01:05:00] just hands down he was just a caring man.

Um, so, um, and, you know, his, his -- he -- but he -- but when injustice happened, he was furious. So when my mom's twin sister announced she was getting married in California and my grandparents not only bought a ticket for my mom but bought her a dress and did not buy a ticket for my dad, the story was my dad ripped the dress, ripped

up the dress. So, again, that's the part of the story that I heard. Years later, when my sister got married, um, and I was in Seattle and she was here and I was -- I guess I wasn't married to my then-boyfriend, but my parents never liked him, never trusted him -- this was my first marriage. He was Catholic. It was lots of different problems. Um, they thought he just -- you know, they just didn't like him. Um, and I was with that guy for 15 years, so it was a lot of years of not liking him. But they didn't send him a ticket to come, and Joe was equally furious. And, you know, "How -- They railed against your par-- their parents doing it, and then they did the same thing." So. But then again, you know, in my dad's mind there was some sense of not justice to do it to Joe but justice in not having Joe because Joe and I weren't married, or Joe wasn't going to marry me. Since Joe hadn't married me, then he didn't have -- I, I don't know what the -- but that was my dad's way of thinking.

My mom's side of the family, her mom was, um, Austrian and Polish, from a part of the world -- and I still want to find out more -- but that sort of went back and forth, and she was born there. [Tillie] was her name. And, um, her husband was Harry, um, Harry [Cummins], and Harry was born in this country, of Russian descent. Um --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Do you know your grandmother's maiden name?

SONNET TAKAHISA: I do, but I don't remember it all the sudden. I do, but I don't know it, remember it all the sudden.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: OK, it's OK.

SONNET TAKAHISA: Of a fabulous -- so my, my mom's older sis-- my mom had a twin sister, an identical twin sister, and an older sister, um, and they were raised in Brooklyn. Um, we knew that they had a house somewhere in -- we didn't know where, but we think it was Myrtle Avenue or something like that. And my first cousins, the children of the oldest, of my Aunt Phyllis, the older daughter -- um, the other family's on the E-- West Coast, so we, we know them, but, um, we're very close to Phyllis's kids. Um, we kept saying, Oh, we have to find out where it is. Well, my sister just came back from, um, the Mormon -- she was in Utah, and she went to the Mormon church, and so she brought back the statis-- the census data. So we know they lived at 153 Myrtle, which is now a projects, but anyway. But they owned a house. They had three kids. My grandfather

was a porter for the railroad, um, and, um, he had a number of brothers. So we know something about the family, and I never keep it straight, but there were lots of siblings on both sides. And Phyllis, the oldest of the three -- the oldest of the daughters -- really became the caretaker for, um, her -- for the parents. Um, and they lived -- she lived next door to them for a while and then she lived in the same building. So she sort of inherited much of the stuff that had been in the house, and so her daughter Janet, who's my first cousin, sort of has a lot of that stuff and has some of those original photos and, you know, when she moved into her house, put them up, and I'm like, "You have those photos!" And so she's actually made copies. So we have this great picture of my grandparents at a wedding with my grandmother in this beautiful I don't know what kind of garb, you know, but beautiful, and she's got twin-- twins. They've got the twins in their arms, my mom and my mom's sister, and then my Aunt Phyllis sitting on the ground as a -- as a young girl. So, um, so we do have some of, you know, some of that background and more of that history. Um.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Where do I place your grandparents in terms of their age, approximately?

SONNET TAKAHISA: So, um --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Was that same --

SONNET TAKAHISA: They --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: -- like your, your Japanese family?

SONNET TAKAHISA: Yeah. Um, I want to say, uh -- [01:10:00] I actually, I do know, I do know their ages, but I don't know it. So -- but they, they, they -- let's see. My grandfather died when I was in seventh grade, so that was when I was like 11 or 12. That was '68. And he was in his eighties. My grandmother had been in a nursing home, again, probably very close to where I live. She was in a nursing home on Rogers Avenue. I live between Rogers and Bedford. I mean, one way or the other, Grandpa used to take the bus to see her every day. Um, my mom would go once a week, her sister Phyllis probably more often. My grandfather was mugged. I mean, the whole -- it was awful. My mom never wanted me to go to the nursing home, I think, because the conditions were so horrible. And we were young, and, you know --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: What kind of nursing home was that, do you remember? Or you were not going there. Your mother probably --

SONNET TAKAHISA: I mean, we didn't -- we never went. Um, and she died when I was -- so my, my grandfather died when I was 11 or 12, so she would have died probably five years before that, so I was quite young. Um, my grandfather was in the hospital, we knew he was sick. My aunt came. And I only found out -- my mom must have found out at the beginning of the day, but my Uncle Al, who we didn't know very well but we sort of knew, Al happened to, like, call, and he said, "You know, your grandpa's dead," and that's how I found out that Grandpa had died. And Grandpa used to come over every week to see us, kind of like my father did, you know, in his later years. Um, but he, he -- they were -- I mean, I was young, so I don't remember much about them except I remember him being very just upright and quiet and, you know, always just... So I don't -- I don't remember much about them. I remember my, my aunts and uncles and, you know, lots more family stuff in that generation.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Was, was the language in your, your --

SONNET TAKAHISA: Um --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Did they, they always speak English?

SONNET TAKAHISA: They spoke English.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Yeah, yeah.

SONNET TAKAHISA: They spoke English, although there was some Yiddish, probably. And my mom could s-- and my mom -- I know my mom spoke Yiddish, and I don't even know who she spoke Yiddish to, but she spoke Yiddish. Um, but Grandpa would speak English to us all the time, and I don't remember enough of my grandmother.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: And where within the big world of the Jewish communities, where would you place your grandparents? Were they somehow secular Jews, were they --

SONNET TAKAHISA: Um --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: -- did they belong to some congregation? How did they identify themselves here?

SONNET TAKAHISA: Definitely -- I think my -- what I sort of remember is that my grandmother was more religious than my grandfather, and my grandfather was less religious. Um, my aunt, Phyllis, the older daughter, kept a kosher home, and her, her daughter still keeps a kosher home. Um, you know, so no pork and no shrimp, um... My -- we would do Thanksgiving -- this is terrible -- we would do Thanksgiving at our house, always. It was just -- you know, my grandparents would come, my aunt and my cousins would come, and my dad made the stuffing, and he would always put in sausage. And Phyllis would always say, "This is so delicious. Grandpa -- I mean, Uncle Shiro makes the best stuffing!" And he never told. And so that's part of the -- and we -- and I haven't ever told my cousins either.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: But they were not so strict kosher that they would not -- I mean, just the sheer notion that they came to eat with you --

SONNET TAKAHISA: Right, they were never that --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: That they --

SONNET TAKAHISA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Nobody was that --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Yeah, not that strict.

SONNET TAKAHISA: -- religious at all.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Yeah, yeah.

SONNET TAKAHISA: My parents raised us pretty much as devout atheists. I mean, we were just -- you know. They -- my f-- they had been so -- they felt they had been so screwed by religion that they just felt completely anti-religious.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Why did your -- do you think that your mother feels screwed by religion? Can, can you say something about that?

SONNET TAKAHISA: Um, she was very involved in the Young Zionists movement and the Hashomer, and, um -- but I think just because sort of institutionalized religion had never done anything that really helped her or that -- and was so against my father, you know, m-- her marrying my father, that it made her angry. Um. And she was never religious. The spiritual stuff [was] important. And they were supporters of Israel, [01:15:00] um, and for years wouldn't go to France because of the anti-Semitism. And not because they felt like they would be discriminated against, but because they didn't

want to support France. Um, they were appalled when my mom's sister and her husband supported Reagan. And they -- and they in California supported Reagan because they felt he was so pro-Israel, which was completely, you know... So that, that -- there was always some battles there.

Um, but I think -- y-- the most -- like Phyllis -- not even Phyllis, but Phyllis's daughter, actually, my cousin Janet, probably is the one who keeps most of the traditions. In a -- in a funny -- and all three of her girls had been bat mitzvahed, and when we've gone to the bat mitzvah, each time, um, we've -- my sister and I have been asked to participate in the ceremony, and were always asked to say something that's not religious. And, um, you know, from my mom it was like she just didn't want to say the word God; she just... And when, um, my husband Hollis and I got married -- the first marriage, we got married Ethical Culture, it was outside, it was OK. I mean, it was sort of a blur, and my in-laws were so Catholic, and they couldn't understand what this was, and this was a place where they -- it was just... But with Hollis, I mean, my mom adored -- my mom and my dad both adored Hollis, they were so happy, he was so loving, he was so wonderful to me, as opposed to my first husband. You know, they were really, really thrilled. But, um, we decided to get married and we wanted to get married at Ethical Culture again. So the first time I got married in Long Island; this time we were getting married in Brooklyn, which was around the corner from where Hollis and I lived. And Hollis's close friend is a minister. He's a jazz musician and he's a minister. I think he's technically a Lutheran minister. And so we told my parents that Mark was going to marry us, and my mom was like, "OK, but just so long as he doesn't use the word *God*, you know, in the ceremony." Which he didn't. It was all fine. Best part was at a certain point, Mark hands me the book he's holding and he picks up his cornet and played, you know, as a part of our wedding ceremony, music. So, but that -- so my parents felt very anti-religion. On the other hand, I would say my dad was spiritual. My dad, you know, saw music as spiritual. He would sing gospel; he would sing hymns that he remembered from his childhood. Um, you know, my mom --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Pardon me for interrupt-- so your father's family --

SONNET TAKAHISA: Episcopalian and Buddhist.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Episcopalian -- yeah, OK.

SONNET TAKAHISA: And probably his father was areligious, but he was raised in the Episcopalian church and so knew all the hymns --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: OK.

SONNET TAKAHISA: -- but also had Buddhist, Buddhism. And on my grandparents' headstone, my grandmother's side has a cross and my grandfather's side doesn't. They -- and they both have Buddhist -- like when you die in Buddhism, you have a different name in death, so they both have Buddhist names --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Oh.

SONNET TAKAHISA: -- in death. But it also says their Westernized names, too -- all in Japanese.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Yeah.

SONNET TAKAHISA: Um. So. And so th-- so we were basically raised, you know, really anti-religious, and like I said, devout atheist. And my dad would travel all the time, and I remember going to sleep at night and saying, "Say goodnight to my dad." And I'm like, Oh my -- you know, like it was almost like, Who am I talking to? And if my parents knew, they would really be angry at me. (Pozzi-Thanner laughs) So. Um, anyway, so that's sort of our religion story. And it was all -- you know, we had -- my mom also, (laughs) she could not stand that everybody said Merry Christmas all the time. She didn't mind us having a Christmas tree, but her cards always had to say Happy Hanukkah, and we couldn't say Merry Christmas. And it was more the principle of the thing. You know, "Not everybody is Christian, and..." And she didn't mind us having a Christmas tree, and sort of liked the fact that it meant something to my dad. And she like-- but, you know, that was -- and I'm the one who keeps the traditions. You know, my sister sort of likes it, but I'm the one who made sure that we kept all of the ornaments and have all the ornaments and do that every year, and...

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: So what kind of traditions do you keep, and in what way? Can you talk a little bit about that, from which of your different...

SONNET TAKAHISA: Um -- right, right. So, um -- hm, that's a good question. Having a Christmas tree is important, and, and the tradition of putting up the ornaments. Um, we

had an electric menorah every year, and I couldn't find that. When my dad died [01:20:00] I finally found it in his closet, but by then we had bought a candle menorah. So I wanted my son to light -- and for him it was the joy of, you know, getting to light the match and doing that. Um, and then I gave my sister the electric menorah, so she was really happy to have that. Um, what traditions do I keep? Um, I, I -- because -- over the years I've started a collection of Girls' Day dolls, so I put up my Girls' Day dolls every year. Um, that's a tradition. Um...

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: March three, right?

SONNET TAKAHISA: March third.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Right, yeah.

SONNET TAKAHISA: Yeah. Um...

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: And you keep them up just for that day, or...?

SONNET TAKAHISA: Two weeks.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Ah.

SONNET TAKAHISA: Two weeks. And anything longer than that, then the girl of the house won't get married.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Ah.

SONNET TAKAHISA: That's what I was told by the --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: OK, perfect. (laughs)

SONNET TAKAHISA: -- Japanese moms, so. And they always told me stories about how they would put *mochi*, you know, away with the dolls, and then, you know, sometimes mice would eat the dolls and the *mochi*, and... But (inaudible) --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: What's *mochi*?

SONNET TAKAHISA: *Mochi* is, uh, pounded rice. Rice cake, rice cake. What traditions do I keep? Wow, it's interesting. I guess it's, it's, it's, it's the stuff. I keep the stuff. So, I mean, I love going to *Bon Odori*, but I haven't been to *Bon Odori* in years. Um, I -- you know, I -- it's, it's, it's the stuff. So every year -- it doesn't matter that I don't look at it -- I take out the, all of the, um, Christmas books that I had as a child and that we had a child for my son. So they're always out on our coffee table. We were -- I was -- my husband was saying to me the last -- I was saying, "Oh, I know, this is so dusty." He

says, "Well, you know, because you have so much stuff." And I was like, "They're not stuff. They're -- like they're something either that my parents have given me or they're from my parents or they're from a certain part of my life." So it -- I think for me it's the -- it's the seeing of things that have this, um, history imbued in it. You know, I mean, this ring that was my grandmother's, I probably should have it resized, but I'm afraid to have them cut it because I just don't want -- you know, so it's, it's too big, and I've tried to figure it out, you know, but I won't do that. Um, when my husband proposed to me, he had diamonds from his mom's wedding ring set into this ring. So that has diamonds from my --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Beautiful.

SONNET TAKAHISA: -- mother-in-law's ring. So I think for me that's what it is. It's the -- it's the having of the little *netsuke*, the little, uh, Japanese figurine that was my grandfather's, and it's in the shape of a tiger, and it's [Tora], which is the name of his tailor shop, you know. And again, it's sort of figuring out, How do I pass these on, and is it going to mean that much for my son? You know, but for me, those are the things that it's important to have those and keep those, or the, the silver box with the dragon embossed on it, or... So maybe it's more than traditions, it's just -- it's stuff. Um, I like having the -- we do Thank-- we've done Thanksgiving at our house, but only for expediency, because my cousin would like to do it at his house, but first he had cats and now he doesn't have a dining room table. So he brings the turkey to our house. So it's -- you know, it's a -- it's nice to do it at our house. I like to do it at our house. We're the only one left in Brooklyn of the whole family, and so that means something to me, and try and get people -- but it's hard to get people to come to Brooklyn. Um, you know, we started a tradition on Christmas morning where my sister and her family come to our house for Christmas at our house. That's harder with the kids growing up, but that's a tradition. Um.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: And what about the influence of your husband into this dynamic? I mean, does he come with his own? Do you merge things, or does he adapt to what you...?

SONNET TAKAHISA: I --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: I mean, are you the person who sets the tone, or how does it work?

SONNET TAKAHISA: Um, I think because the stuff is m-- but, like, we have his m-- a lot of his mom's stuff. So his mom, when she, you know, she was -- when she moved from their house, from their trailer, to an apartment, she was always upset that we had never gotten dishes for our wedding. So she had over the years accumulated, you know, like through the grocery store, [01:25:00] [desert peach] dishes, so she made sure we packed up and have her desert peach dishes. So it's that. You know, as part of the Christmas decorations, we have ornaments from my family and we have, you know, the Santa candles and, and salt and pepper shakers from, from her. You know, that -- it's those things that have that history that are in it.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Is she still alive, your mother-in-law?

SONNET TAKAHISA: No, both of -- all of my -- all -- both my in-- my -- both my parents have passed, and my husband's parents have passed away too. Um, I think in terms of -- so we have some of -- they didn't have as much stuff. I mean, you know, my husband's toy truck, we've kept, and, you know, we have that, and Tylor played with it, and we kept it. Um. And I think it's -- like, for my husband and me, it's the furnishings that we've bought together. So our -- the set that we got one piece at a time, you know, from this wood furniture maker that we've had, and that's important to us. Sort of the Stickley furniture. And we, we've built a house and we've designed a house -- I mean, we didn't design it, but we've got a house that's very much about who we are. And so it's an old, um -- it's a -- it was a sort of -- it could have been an arts-and-crafts-style house, but everything is blown out, no walls. So there's, you know, inlaid floors but no walls, and there's exposed brick, and there's the original oak staircase, and that's about it. So it, it's an old and new, and so we've furnished it to our taste. So it's sort of a mixture of the, um, Southwest pottery that he and I have bought together over the years when we've gone to the Southwest, and the African beaded pieces that we've bought when we've gone shopping together. So I -- it's more what we've created together. Um, I think his, his -- like, the -- there weren't as many -- there probably were, but they were sort of homogenized traditions by the time it got to him. His background is sort of English,

German, Methodist, Lutheran. They went to whatever church had a good choir. So it wasn't -- for him, his, his roots are his relationship with his siblings, each of whom are five years apart, and music. So he's a musician, um, and so it's about playing music and listening to music, and so our house -- we always have music on. So, you know, first thing he'll turn on the stereo and put on music. And he's the DJ. And so sometimes it's jazz, sometimes it's pop, sometimes it's Afropop. Um, so that's, I think, how the house, um -- the house is ours --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

SONNET TAKAHISA: -- and the sound of the house is his, his sounds, you know, which have become our sounds. Um.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Which makes me think somehow, as I'm envisioning when you grew up in your parents' house, I mean, my stereotype of Japanese would be rather empty spaces, or scarcely furnished, whereas again, my stereotype, envisioning of Jewish homes is much --

SONNET TAKAHISA: The tchotchkes.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Exactly. Uh, your father was this -- had this fascination about objects from all over the world. So how did that translate -- how did your, your home look like when you grew up?

SONNET TAKAHISA: We didn't have -- it was pretty clean in terms of, of tchotchkes. Um, so we had -- you know, we had this *koto* on the wall, we had these two, um, paintings of horses that are now in my bedroom. Um, and it was interesting, because, like, my sister didn't battle with me over -- like, when my parents died, my father said, "Take whatever you want, each of you, and if you can't decide, flip for it." And so Wendy wanted the piano, so I got the *koto*. And, you know, I wanted the horses -- that's really all I cared about -- and so, you know, she took something else. Um, and, and they didn't -- and those were really the only things that they had that mattered. And there were other small things, but they were so small that they were not really -- that's not true, they were out on, on, in the living room. There were things that my dad cared about. But again, I think that was the same thing he care-- [01:30:00] there were -- there were -- in a few spaces, there were things that he cared about. And my house now, if you went

in, I think you'd see -- you know, it's pretty wide open. And it drives my husband crazy that we [accrit] stuff. So it's like at a certain point he said, "No more bowls. No more bowls!" You know, we both love bowls, we love pottery, we love wooden bowls, but he's like, "We have enough." You know, so -- and, you know, we have no more wall space. So we've filled our house with stuff, and, you know, I, I still accrit little things. So, you know, there's a little toy figure that my son bought -- I mean, he collects -- and his room, oh my God, my son's room is filled with lots of little toy figurines, because that's what he loves. So, you know, I guess that is -- he has imbibed that collecting sense from me. Um, but it, it's also about displaying stuff cleanly, and things have their place. And, um. So, I mean, growing up, things were wide open, you know, except for the couple of places where we had things on display. And we had -- did have a couple things on display.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: So let's talk a little bit about Tylor. I mean, he isn't here, but he is your son.

SONNET TAKAHISA: Yep.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: So, uh, do you -- can you, can you tell me how you perceive that he, uh, places himself in this diverse world?

SONNET TAKAHISA: Um, I think he, he -- as he was in middle school, things Japanese were really cool -- anime and Pokemon and... So he loved having that Japanese side. And one of his best friends and close friends was a boy whose mom is Japanese and whose father is, um, Jewish and English and...so Caucasian. So Tylor and [Satushi] were always really friendly, and Tylor was always at [Kyoka's] house. I mean, she was feeding him all the time. So the Japanese side of him, that part of -- like, that he has a samurai grand -- great-grandfather, was really cool to him. So that's all important to him. Um, he -- you know, the Jewish stuff, he knew almost no one who was Jewish, and unlike a lot of his friends who went to different middle schools, he went to the school that I started, which had a lot fewer Jewish kids in it. So he hardly went to any bar mitzvahs or bat mitzvahs, except his cousins'. Um, he loves the family stuff of going to seder at his -- at my cousin's house, um, and that's -- you know, like he wants to come home if he can for that even though he's in California. He definitely comes home for

Thanksgiving because it's really important to him to connect with the family. Um, he's sort of more of a little bit of a loner, like in the family. Like he just -- I think we're all too smothering in my family, and he just is like... He just wants to be who he is separately. Um, but his -- you know, he got into -- he's, he's this innate and inbred collector. So whether it was the Pokemon cards when he was little or then the magic, magic cards, and then he got into these figurines. I guess it started with Pokemon, and then it was [Ultramon], and then it was Kill Bill figurines. So his room -- and then it was posters of all this stuff, and it was contemporary Japanese artists, [Morikami] and other people. So his room, we ended up having all these shelves put in, and he wrote on his college essay about his room being like a museum and how he likes bringing in the neighborhood kids. He was always great with kids. He babysat, and, you know, he was like a sort of afternoon helper at a household. And he loved bringing people in and touring them through his stuff, and he loved finding, you know, the missing part of his collection and that kind of stuff. Um, so I don't -- I think in terms of, um, either ethnicity or, um -- certainly not religion. I mean, he -- there was no religion growing up in our house, either ours, and even when we went to visit, you know, my in-laws and my parents, when we went to Florida for Christmas, it was about Christmas dinner, it was about Christmas brunch, it was never -- and it was about being in the pool. It was never about going to church. So I don't [01:35:00] think -- I don't know that he's ever even been to church. I don't think I -- I don't know that I had ever been to church until I started going out with my first boyfriend, who was Catholic. So he -- I don't know that he's ever -- he may have been to church, but I don't know that he's ever been to church.

He's -- um, he decided to go to California, I think, because it's more about the pace than it was about the culture, I mean, the ethnic culture. Um, he went to -- you know, he got into George Washington, he got into BU. He knew that he wanted to do human geography. So and from high school he knew this is what he loved. He did really well, and he was in a big school, and he made lots of friends. He, he -- but he always, like, blended in lots of different places. So his girlfriend in high school was a math whiz, and his best friend was an artist, and they were all involved -- and they were all involved -- they were involved in theatre; he got involved in the constitutional debate club, and

some of them got -- and then his girlfriend got involved in that. And then he out of the blue ran for student council president and won. Again, he went to a large high school, Murrow High School, and there were like 700 or 800 kids, which these days is large, in his house. And we didn't know, but when we got to the awards ceremony, he was the only white kid. Everybody else was black in the student council. And they were the kids who did the party and the school trips and... So, you know, part of it is he likes the culture of the sneakers and the hats and the designer fashions, and there is this real blend of black designers and Japa-- or black, I guess, consumers, and Japanese designers, or whatever. So he sort of is in that sort of culture.

His, um, roommates in Calif-- and so he went to California. Lots -- he didn't -- wasn't interested in studying Japanese at all because he said he's terrible in language, but he liked Japanese film. Um, and his roommates are -- one is Vietnamese, one is Chinese, you know, one is white from Virginia and one is white from Cupertino, and his girlfriend is white but all of his other friends are mixed and Asian. And so he's, he's just the blending of the culture, and I think the Asian part is something that he's comfortable with because of growing up, he was exposed to it so much with us. Um, but by the same token -- and because he was drawn to it and because his best friend was Japanese and his friend's mom was Japanese and we went to Japan a couple of times, I guess. So that part of him is important. And the other cultural stuff is about family more than it's about -- than it's about a particular religion or a particular ethnicity.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: So in terms of if you compare your parents' generation; yourself, maybe including your sister; and your son, what differences do you see in the way how you self-identify and how maybe the world reacts to you.

SONNET TAKAHISA: Ooh, a great question. Um, I think my parents were battling the world, and they had to be defiant. Um, they had to sort of really stand up for who they were and, um, and get the world to not just -- it wasn't about recognizing -- the world saw them as other in lots of different ways -- but getting the world to respect them for being other and for the differences. I think for me, um, uh, like I said earlier, I sort of grew up just being -- it wasn't about being other, it was about just being in between and sort of knowing that that was important and seeing that, the miscommunication that

happens because there aren't some good translators was something that I always felt really interested in, in sort of playing that role. I think for my son, none of that matters. He's just -- you know, it just -- everything goes, anything goes. Um, I haven't met his girlfriend, and he's been going out with her for a year, which is driving me crazy, but she's in California, and every time we're there she's not there, and, you know. But we've met all of his roommates. His roommates just spent a couple weeks of us. Like three of them were here, three boys were here for Christmas. And so I've seen pictures of his girlfriend, and her name is [Hillary Lester]. And at one point I said, "So is she Asian?" because so many of his other friends are Asian. He said, "Mom, does the name Hillary Lester sound Asian to you?" (Pozzi-Thanner laughs) I said, "Does the name Sonnet Takahisa sound Jewish to you?", you know.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Yeah.

SONNET TAKAHISA: So like it doesn't [01:40:00] matter to him. Everybody is everything. Um, he, um -- uh, you know, we had a conversation when he applied to college about using Takahisa or not, because at a certain point, for certain schools, being Asian or Asian-American was a detriment for your -- on your application. So, you know. And Takahisa is his middle name. So, um, you know, we, we talked about that. In the end it didn't really matter. But he uses Tylor Takahisa as his AOL name, although Tylor Hedrick is his official name. So he likes to be able to sort of be able to go back and forth, but I don't think he really thinks that much about -- you know, I think he thinks about what he's interested in, and it's sort of that -- it's not like what's pushing from behind, it's what's pulling him. Um, and, you know, it's funny because he called last night and he's taking this one class, and he said, "I think I'm going to have to drop it. It's just too hard; it's too high a level." So he, he knows he's not a math and physics kid, you know. He said, "That's not me." Um, and, you know, but he -- but he, he's -- you know, and I, you know, I always think, Well, where'd you get this about how you -- I mean, he dresses, he cares about what he wears, he cares about these labels. He buys sneakers that are certain sneakers, and he got ones that are rip-offs, and it makes a big difference to him that they're fakes. And, you know, it's all about -- it's about that kind

of labeling as opposed to caring about who he is or who his friends are or where they come from --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Mm, mm-hmm.

SONNET TAKAHISA: -- or where their backgrounds are. And, um, you know, like I -- he stayed with his girlfriend's parents a couple nights before he came back east, and I was like, "So what are they?" Like, "I think they're teachers." You know, it's like -- but it -- none of it, um -- he doesn't -- it doesn't -- everybody's a blur, and everybody's a mixture, so it doesn't really matter. Um. It's who -- what music you like.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Yeah, yeah.

SONNET TAKAHISA: You know, he, he hangs out with people because they like this kind of music or that kind of music or 'cause they go to this kind of club. And his high school buddies, who, you know, he wouldn't go out with certain ones because they liked ska and they didn't -- they had stopped liking heavy metal. You know, so it was more about that than it was background.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Uh, thinking about a few sentences you said in the beginning with regards to your, um, professional journey --

SONNET TAKAHISA: Mm-hmm.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: -- and especially the, the September 11, um, work that you did, uh, I keep wondering. Um, people when they see you -- I mean, I'm just saying now how I perceive you, if I would know -- if you hadn't told me yeah --

SONNET TAKAHISA: The name, yeah.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: I mean, I see you as Asian, or at least with some Asian influence.

SONNET TAKAHISA: Mm-hmm.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: So have you -- and I think in terms of my, my looking at the, at the history of, let's say, the last 200 years here in this country, uh, different groups of Asian populations that have come here in waves --

SONNET TAKAHISA: Mm-hmm.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: -- have been discriminated against, but at different times.

SONNET TAKAHISA: Mm-hmm.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: So you happened to come from -- partially from Japanese roots. Have you in your, in your work or in your everyday life, has somebody somehow -- have you, have you experienced that if you were not Japanese, but if you, let's say, happened to have a Chinese father or a father from Korea or whatever, would people be different to you?

SONNET TAKAHISA: OK, so here's that story. When I got to New York City, um, from Seattle -- so this is 1986 -- and I'm running a meeting. It's like the second day that I'm there; it's a project that we've been funded through the New York State Council on the Arts, and it's a program with high-- different high schools in Brooklyn, and it's working through special education. So at the end of the meeting, this woman comes up to me, and she says, "You don't remember me, do you?" And I said, "I'm sorry, I don't." She said -- she told me her name, and it didn't mean anything. She said, "I'm a psychologist, a school psych-- a child psychologist." She said, "I gave you an IQ test at one point." So that would have been when I was -- I mean, I remember getting the results, so I would have been probably 11, 12, something. [01:45:00] It must have been like to go to -- my, my parents were thinking if I wanted to go to some other specialized school or something.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: So it's quite the time to go. (laughs)

SONNET TAKAHISA: Right. And she said to me -- so it would have been probably 20 years earlier. And I -- and I -- and when she told me that, I remembered her, because she had said to me, (laughs) or told my parents I did well on the test, whatever I got -- I have no idea -- but whatever I -- I did well. But she said, "But you know she would have done better if," if my dad had been Chinese, because everyone knew it was the Chinese and the Jews score the highest. Japanese are second, but the Chinese are higher. So there's one answer to your story. Um. You know, I, I don't -- I, I don't know. Um, I -- the, the other funny part of this is like when I was running the school, and I was running the school with a man who's Puerto Rican. His last name is [Chaluisan], which sounds kind of French, but in his youth people called him Chino because he looked Chinese. And we would go to meetings, and people would speak -- like people would say things in Spanish to me, and I would like -- and some of it I could understand because I had enough

Spanish in high school, and some of it I was, I don't know what they just said, and I would have to ask him to translate. You know, and he'd be laughing, right? Or they would say a curse word, and I'm like, "What did they just say?" you know, and he'd explain it to me. So that was another sort of...

And then the third story, which doesn't quite answer your story, but that I remember is when I was in Japan, and being, you know, in a restaurant. And I had a friend from college who I met up with in Japan who was white, who had done Japanese studies for years and was fluent and was living in Japan, and we'd go out, and we would order. And he would order because his Japanese was much better, and they would turn to me and make sure it was correct. So, you know, all of those different stories about, like, who am I, what am I, how do people perceive me, I've had all of these kinds of reactions. So I don't -- you know, it's almost funny. I don't know -- I mean, I feel like I've already had people think of me differently because they don't know who I am or speak to me differently because they don't know who I am. Or I've had high school teachers say -- you know, in my high school -- I remember, um, getting in trouble with a substitute teacher who, um -- we were all acting terrible, and he was horrible, he couldn't control us; we were all acting really badly. And I was looking at the window, and he said, "You, sit down in your seat. You're making a bad name for your race." And I was like, "Excuse me, but I'm probably the same race as you," you know. And he got so mad at me, and he's like, "We're walking to the dean's office. We're going to the dean's office." And I was top student, so everybody knew me, I knew the dean, you know. I was like, "Sure, let's go. I'll tell her what you said," you know. And I remember him walking, and he's walking me to the dean's office, and my friends are all behind, and, you know, we got just outside the dean's office, and he said, "OK, I'll let you go this time." But it was like he had said, "You're making a bad name for your race." (Pozzi-Thanner laughs) And I'm like, Dude -- I mean, I didn't say that, but...

So, you know, I mean, there was all of these kinds of -- again, it's sort of in-between, and what am I, and who am I, and people sort of assuming one thing and being able to say, "No, you're totally wrong." So when you asked, like, would I have -- would it have been different if I was Chinese, or would they -- I mean, they did. They treated

me as if they thought I was Spanish or -- another very religious Jewish teacher, you know, thought I was Sephardic and thought my name somehow was Sephardic, you know. Or my -- the other math teacher who I loved wouldn't let her daughter come to my house because we were having a tree-trimming party and she thought there would be saints all over my house, and so she didn't want her daughter...

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Mm, mm-hmm.

SONNET TAKAHISA: So, I mean, it just -- you know, the -- it's almost like being ambiguous means that sort of people say things or have to voice things that you can actually confront or deal with, or... You know, like because they're saying it from one way, but you ac-- but they don't realize you are actually that way. Or -- so I -- so I don't know if that answers your question, but --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: No, I think it does.

SONNET TAKAHISA: -- I think it's a great question. It's, it's just --

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: It, it, it -- no, it does. And I, I also -- I think it's very interesting that you define yourself with this word "in-between," because that's, that's probably w-- I mean, that's, that's how you define yourself, and it's, it's --

SONNET TAKAHISA: Right, right.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: -- a wonderful, short, uh, explanation for what it is.

SONNET TAKAHISA: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: So in terms of, of, of the mixed heritage project, anything else you would want to, to share?

SONNET TAKAHISA: Hm.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: We covered a lot.

SONNET TAKAHISA: Mm, a lot, yeah. I, I don't [01:50:00] -- you know, I think -- no. You let me talk a lot about myself. It's kind of weird. (laughter) It's kind of weird. But some of these are stories that I guess, you know, when I look out at the world now, whether it's my son's world or, you know, um, you know, the students that I have -- the mixture is pretty amazing, and it's pretty great. And I do remember at one point having a conversation with my parents and saying, "You know what? I wish everybody was just a mixture. Like, everybody was a mixture." And I think -- I don't think I said it that way,

but my dad sort of took it as everybody being the same. And he got really angry. And he said, "No, but the differences are what makes the world wonderful." And -- so I have that in my head, that -- that when I wrote that paper, which at some point I have to go back and find -- I mean, everybody else asked me for copies of it, I must have a copy of it somewhere -- but I remember thinking, "It's about -- it's about me." Which is so corny now, but -- you know, I'm not one way because of my mother and another way because of my father and -- in some ways, the stereotypes are flipped. You know, my mom was the math whiz. My mom helped me with my math homework. And my dad helped me with my writing. And -- you know? So it was all a mixture. Um -- but -- but even saying that, I -- I think the differences within the mixing are what -- what I still hold onto. And it's why these -- these parts of my background remain important to me and -- you know, having the little [nitske] or having the silly Mrs. Santa Claus salt and pepper shaker, or you know -- a department store bought dish which -- which is now our special dishes. Like, all of that is about sort of expressing something. Or the house that my husband and I have designed together. People come in and say, "Oh, this is like, so you, for the two of you." And we -- when we bought the house, our closest friends came over that night -- we hadn't unpacked. We had a table -- we actually had this table. And they just sat down, they said, "This feels -- this house feels like you guys." So it is about creating a space and an environment that acknowledges and recognizes and salutes and celebrates and enjoys all of these different components. And then -- having -- having it be a place that other people can connect to in different ways, too, which is also -- I think it's what I like about museums, you know? That you can come in and connect in so many different ways and on a different day, you can start all over again and connect in different ways with the same things or with different things. So -- you know -- I never thought -- when you asked me that question about traditions, and I realized it's less traditions and it's more stuff -- it's a little scary. I'm not a hoarder. I'm not a hoarder. But -- but it is -- and I do like to throw things away. I love getting rid of stuff and paper. But -- but I -- you know, and I think -- to go back to your question of -- I like having things that are both -- I wanted my aunt to give me -- actually, I guess she gave me a chai -- but I can't remember. I bought a chai for my boyfriend in college, the one who was Catholic. And

why I thought he would wear it, or want it. But I thought -- there's something about -- you know, it's not a Jewish star, it's not religious, but it means life, you know -- and I wanted to find one. And I think he ended up giving it back to me. But -- that was -- it -- there was something about it, but it wasn't quite right. He designed for me -- he had designed for me -- a ring from an oyster shell, and he had a pearl put in it. And -- like, that's -- like, where you're creating a tradition from something and building upon it, I guess that's what I…

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Well, and memories, attached to -- to objects.

SONNET TAKAHISA: And -- and as I get older, I wonder. Like, what do I do with this stuff now? Which of this will be meaningful to my son? And -- and at what point -- should I just get rid of some of this stuff so he doesn't have to deal with it, you know? But I -- I feel very responsible. I have a couple of works of art that have been in my house, have not been put up, that I talked to my ex-husband about, saying, "I got to get it over to you." And -- we've been -- I mean, I've been married to -- [Hollis] and I have been married twenty two -- twenty three years. But I still know that there are these -- in this one place, in the corner of my house, are these paintings that I've got to get over to Joe. So it's -- you know. I -- I don't know that -- I mean, the mixed stuff is obviously important to me, but -- and it hasn't defined me. And I feel like there's -- it's like, the stuff that people are talking about now, I feel like, "God, I talked about that a long time ago."

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Like what?

SONNET TAKAHISA: Oh, just when I went to that loving day. You know -- the guy who -- who -- who facilitated this artists conversation and talked about loving day. It's like -- I know -- oh, that was the other paper I did in college. I did a paper on miscegenation laws -- anti-miscegenation laws. I forgot about that. So -- it's been this theme, it's been -- because nobody else was talking about it then. And now everybody's talking about it, and it's like, "Okay, I've done that. I'm done. I don't really care anymore." So. I don't know. I'm done.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: You're done.

SONNET TAKAHISA: I'm done.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Are we done?

SONNET TAKAHISA: I'm done, I'm done.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Thank you. Thank you very, very much.

SONNET TAKAHISA: Thank you.

ELIZABETH POZZI-THANNER: Okay, then we'll turn this off.

END OF AUDIO FILE