

I SEE MY LIGHT SHINING: Oral Histories of Our Elders

The Reminiscences of

Kitty Tsui

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

2022

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Kitty Tsui conducted by Carolina De Robertis on November 29, 2022. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Transcriptionist: Audio Transcription Center Session #1

Interviewee: Kitty Tsui Location: Oakland, CA

Interviewer: Carolina De Robertis Date: November 29, 2022

Q: Thank you so much, Kitty Tsui, for welcoming me into your home here in Oakland, California.

Tsui: You're welcome. I'm so glad you came. I was excited to meet you and hear about his project.

Q: Yes, fantastic. So can you please tell us your name and who you are?

Tsui: [00:00:25] My name is Kitty Tsui. I am an author. And I have to tell you that one day, I went on Wikipedia and saw my—whatever it's called. And it said "Kitty Tsui, American Poet." See, I'm not just a lesbian poet, I'm not just a feminist poet, I'm not an Asian American poet. It was so wonderful for me to see that.

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [00:01:00] I'm an American Poet.

Q: Yes. Yes, absolutely. That's so important. Yes.

Tsui: [00:01:09] And my name is pronounced Tsui. It's "Tuh-sway," "sway." You run it together.

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [00:01:17] My father pronounced it "Choy," because in Chinese, Tsui is "Choy." Choy. But I pronounce it "Tsway," because it's more of the Mandarin pronunciation.

Q: Ah.

Tsui: [00:01:33] And actually, when I used to tell people my name, I would say, "Kitty Tsui." Oh, Tsui – it's like "sway" with an S. With a T. So it's "Ts"—one day, I thought, why am I telling people—my name is not "Tsway", T, it's Tsui. So, anyway, that's a long story.

Q: Yes. Right. [*Unclear*] the journey of centering the way that you want your name to be held or seen, when your name is perceived as marginalized in the culture where you are, right?

Tsui: Yes.

Q: Yes. And when and where were you born?

Tsui: [00:02:15] I was born in Hong Kong in 1952. So I was born in the Year of the Dragon, and I was—I was born in the Year of the Dragon in the City of Nine Dragons, Kowloon. And “Kowloon” is Nine Dragons.

Q: Oh, amazing. Could you say a little about what your childhood was like?

Tsui: [00:02:44] I grew up with my grandmother until I was five, because my dad was a seaman, and he and my mother went to England and left me with my grandmother. Now, dad was the first Chinese—he was the first captain of Chinese descent to command a liner in the English Blue Funnel Line. So that’s, you know, in 1950, that was pretty amazing. I mean, he’s a diminutive Chinese man, and on those ships, eight hundred men? I mean, a large number of men—they had to call him “Captain.” I don’t even know what he might have had to go through.

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [00:03:39] Okay, my background. Okay, I was born in Hong Kong. I grew up in England, because I went to England to join them when they established a home, Liverpool. I returned to Hong Kong for high school, so I had four years of high school in Hong Kong. We immigrated here in 1968. I had already matriculated—I have trouble with words now—I matriculated in Hong Kong, but they thought I was too young to go to college. So they put me at Lowell for my senior year. And I learned about drugs, sex and rock and roll.

Q: This is Lowell High School in San Francisco?

Tsui: That's right. Yes.

Q: Yes. So you migrated to the United States at sixteen, and started going to Lowell High School in San Francisco. Can you—

Tsui: Just one year.

Q: Just one year. And can you say a little more about that, the drugs, sex and rock and roll, what it was like, high school in the United States for that year?

Tsui: Oh, what it was like?

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [00:04:50] It was fantastic. I had an English education. I had a British education. We had to do, you know—I mean, math wasn't math, it was arithmetic, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, physics, chemistry, Latin for two years. You know, so when I got here and it was, like, multiple choice, true-false? I mean, my kindergarten now, we had to write essays. We had to draw maps, you know, we—anyway, so, yes. So I remember going to Stern Grove a lot with my hippie friends, who my parents were totally—I don't want to say “disgusted,” but had very negative feelings towards my friends. So that's really all I remember about high school, except I ran away

from home when I was seventeen. So it was—I think I still had two or three months—oh no, I had just finished high school. I ran away from home.

Q: What made you decide to run away from home?

Tsui: [00:06:10] I come from a very conservative Chinese family. And I think I was very much a rebel from when I was, I don't know, ten, eleven. *[Laughs]* And, you know, my friends were, maybe they had long hair, maybe they had a beard, maybe they had beads—my parents would have none of it. They bought a home in Walnut Creek so that they could get me away from the horrible influences of San Francisco. Well, I ran away from home just before they moved. And I told them I was—I left a note, said I was going to LA [Los Angeles], so they had LA—you know, they had LA looking for me.

Anyway, I ran away from home. I lived with a friend in high school whose parents had an apartment above their place. So I lived with her. And then the next thing I remember in high school, I was in my physics class, it was the last period. I was falling asleep, so I looked out the window, and I saw a line of mounted police in full riot gear galloping towards State [San Francisco State University], and we knew what was happening at State. It was the beginning of the student strike. And it was at that moment that I knew I was going to go to State, and not UC [University of California] Berkeley where my parents were getting ready to send me to.

Q: And when you say “State,” you mean San Francisco State University?

Tsui: San Francisco State University.

Q: You wanted to go there in part because you saw that there was the student strike?

Tsui: [00:08:11] I had empathy. I wanted to be there. I wanted to be part of the protesters. But I was a year late, but, you know, I decided to go to State.

Q: And you did go to State?

Tsui: Yes.

Q: And what was it like for you to be there?

Tsui: [00:08:32] I first went into Chinese studies, because I knew how to speak Chinese, because my parents wanted me to speak Chinese—us siblings—to speak Chinese at home. So I knew how to speak, but I didn't know the written language. So I was learning Mandarin, I was learning the written language. And I'm not sure what happened, but, I mean, maybe it came from the book, working on the book and the poetry I was already writing, I decided to go into the Creative Writing department. I also took communications, and it was in that department that we took a class that Sally Miller Gearhart was teaching. And it was in that class—I mean, Sally Gearhart was just a force of nature. Do you know—do you know her? Did you—I mean, do you know who she is? Was? She was an open lesbian, and she's the first who got tenure, ever. I mean, the first.

But I think it was in—it was. It was in her class that I came out. I was bisexual for about one minute, [*laughs*] and yes, then my career in lesbianism began.

Q: So you came out while you were taking her class?

Tsui: [00:10:23] I'm not sure if it was while—I mean, I don't really remember.

Q: Yes?

Tsui: [00:10:31] But I do remember that Sally—she changed my life. She made me—she allowed me to look at different things in different ways. In fact, I remember an essay I wrote, which I just found, called “Dragons Cannot be Contained in Closets.” [*Laughs*] I didn't read it, but I have it.

Okay—

Q: I would love to ask you more about what it was like for you when you came out. And I'm wondering if, before I do that, I could ask you another question though, just take us back a little bit.

Tsui: [00:11:18] Well, let me tell you one more thing about State.

Q: Please do. Please do. Please do.

Tsui: [00:11:23] Are you familiar with Kay Boyle? She's a novelist who kind of—I don't want to say "ran with," but she and Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir, anyway, she was another person who—she really influenced my writing.

Q: It sounds like you sort of became a writer and came out as bisexual and then lesbian at around the same time in your life.

Tsui: Came out as a writer? Is that what you're saying?

Q: No, I'm saying you came out as bisexual and lesbian and also became a writer at around the same moment in your life.

Tsui: [00:12:15] But when does one become a writer, right?

Q: Right.

Tsui: [00:12:19] Because I edited *Third World Women* when it was published in '72, so I imagine we worked on it, you know, 1970.

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [*Whispers*] Oh God, what were we talking about?

Q: Yes. Yes.

Tsui: [*Whispers*] What were we talking about?

Q: All of this. [*Laughs*] Coming out, this is wonderful.

Tsui: No, but I should have a thread.

Q: Now this is great. So I'm wondering if I could ask you about, do you have any memories from when you were a child or a teenager of thinking that you were attracted to women? Or—no?

Tsui: No.

Q: You don't remember any—yes, of that—in that time. Yes.

Tsui: [00:13:08] I want to say there was none, because I think I would have remembered.

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [00:13:14] In fact, I know I would have remembered.

Q: Yes. Yes. So you became conscious of being attracted to women, really, when you were at San Francisco State.

Tsui: [00:13:27] Yes.

Q: Yes. And what was that like for you? Do you have any memories of how it felt when you first came out as bisexual? Anybody you told, conversations?

Tsui: [00:13:42] I never said I came out as bisexual.

Q: Okay.

Tsui: [00:13:47] Because I really didn't come out as bisexual.

Q: Ah, I see.

Tsui: [00:13:49] You know, in my mind—no, really, I was bisexual for about one minute, so I actually shouldn't say I was bisexual, because I wasn't really attracted to men and women.

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [00:14:12] Because at the point where I thought, oh, it was women. So I think it was only in my thoughts that I was bisexual, but it really was for one minute.

Q: And then you quickly knew that you were a lesbian, or gay, if you're used to that word.

Tsui: [00:14:30] No, I didn't ever use "gay."

Q: Never used the word "gay"? So, lesbian?

Tsui: [00:14:34] Well, I can't say never, but I'm a lesbian.

Q: Yes. Yes. So it sounds like—so when you came out first to yourself, I'm a lesbian, you know, do you have any memories of how that felt for you, what it was like to realize that?

Tsui: [00:14:51] Well, I remember, it was like waking up one day and it was, like, oh, I'm a lesbian. But what it was for me was, one day I woke up and realized I was attracted to women. Not one woman, but just women. I don't know, it was kind of strange. It was like when I was straight, did I say I was attracted to all men? No. [*Laughs*] I was attracted to men but, you know, I was heterosexual for two minutes. I was bisexual for one. [*Laughs*]

Q: So what—you were how old when you realized you were a lesbian?

Tsui: Twenty-one.

Q: You were twenty-one.

Tsui: I came out when I was twenty-one.

Q: And what did you do with that information? Did you tell anyone in your life? Did you seek out women? What happened next?

Tsui: [00:16:02] I was with that group of women, Third World Women. And my best friend in that group was a Chinese woman named Diana Lynn [*phonetic*], and she went to the Art Institute. So we were friends for a couple of years, and then—she was bisexual. See, she was bisexual, I wasn't. She was bisexual, and she married a bisex—she married a gay man. And she would always say, “Well, come to this club with us,” and, “Come to this club.” I remember going—when they took me to Bojangles—do you remember Bojangles on Polk Street? It was a very old gay bar.

So I would go to clubs, I would, you know, see women. And, you know, the first two or three kind of one night stands I had, I began to think, do I want to do this because there was, like, you know, it's almost like we tried to do sex, but we didn't, or we didn't know what to do. It's, like, I'm new, aren't you kind of [*laughs*]*—*but anyway, it was Halloween. And Diana called me and said, “Let's go to Peg's [*phonetic*].” I said, “No, I can't. It's a school night. It's a school night. I'm studying,” or something. She said, “Come on, it's Halloween, we'll go to Peg's, get dressed up.” “Okay, I'll go for a minute.”

So we were at Peg's, and it was packed. You know, these women were all dressed up, both in their suits and dresses, but also dressed up as charac—you know, it's Halloween. So a couple comes in, an Asian couple. And Diana and I looked at them, we looked at each other, we said, "They came to the wrong place." And then the man walks over to me. And I realized it wasn't a man. It was a woman. So that's how I met Jenny [*phonetic*], who was my first relationship.

Q: Jenny is the woman who was dressed in male clothing?

Tsui: [00:19:02] Well, she looked androgynous, so across the room in the dark, you know, we said, "Oh, they came to the wrong place," thinking they were heterosexual.

Q: Yes. And did you have a masculine or butch presentation at the time?

Tsui: [00:19:13] No. At that time, it was androgyny, you know? I was androgynous. So, no. I mean, there were butch fems [feminines], but I wasn't one of them.

Q: Did you want to be one of them, deep down, at the time, or not?

Tsui: Butchy fem? No.

Q: Not necessarily?

Tsui: [00:19:38] No. I just felt like, okay, I'm an androgynous lesbian. All lesbians are like—that's what I felt. All lesbians are like this. They're all androgynous.

Q: That's how it was at the time?

Tsui: Yes.

Q: In the environment?

Tsui: [00:19:48] And the people who dressed up were an anomaly, I guess. Because it was my first, you know, I was just stepping in to the gay and lesbian community.

Q: Yes. And then you, you know, became very involved with the gay and lesbian community, with the API [Asian Pacific Islander] lesbian community in the Bay Area, right?

Tsui: Yes.

Q: I mean, many people, rightfully, call you a foremother or a fore-parent of today's API lesbian community.

Tsui: [00:20:33] It was probably, I don't know, mid to late 1970s that a few of us, I don't even—you know, it was probably a handful of friends, API friends. Maybe—wait a minute, it was not API friends. Maybe it was, like, a small handful, like, three [*laughs*]. And you know, we were

thinking about forming a women's group, an Asian women's group, and, oh, there weren't enough people. And then Unbound Feet happened. It was the first Chinese American women's performance group in the Bay Area. We started in 1979. And, you know, we drew large crowds. And I think that three of us were out lesbians; myself, Merle Wu [*phonetic*], Canyon Sam [*phonetic*]. So women were kind of—I think API women were drawn to it because of who we were. But fairly soon, they realized that there were a lot of APIs there. So it began to be a place where we could find friends, and also date. I mean, that, you know. So Unbound Feet, we were together from 1979 to 1981.

Q: What were some of your favorite things about your experiences with Unbound Feet?

Tsui: [00:22:47] To be with a group of Asian lesbians—Asian women, to be able to read our own stuff, to work on our own stuff, to do some things together, and then to be on stage, to be—you know. And we'd do completely different things. We had dialogues, we had monologues, we had poetry. Canyon Sam did commercials, parodies. So then kind of—the group of APIs, then, started growing. And we started a group called Asian Sisters. And there were a few other groups, our group with different names and different people. We started having these wonderful meetings in the park. [*Doorbell rings*] Can we stop for a minute? I know who it is.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So yes, we were talking about how after Unbound Feet, the community, the API gay and lesbian community kept growing. There were sort of more people. What was that like in the '80s? Do you have memories of community weaving among API lesbians in the 1980s?

Tsui: [00:24:32] Well, we were building a community. It was slow. We were trying. But actually, when I first came out, I thought I was the only one, I thought I was the only Asian lesbian in the world. This was before Peg's Place and meeting Jenny. So it was very lonely. You know, I was able to find books, you know, I heard people, like Del Martin, Phyllis Ryan — Lyon?

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [00:25:28] You know, there were a handful of books.

Q: But these were books by lesbians, but not necessarily Asian lesbians?

Tsui: Oh, there were—

Q: Right. Right. So you found, like, Del and Phyllis, these books by lesbians who know that that exists, and you feel like not the only one. But even then, you were feeling like the only one in terms of being an Asian lesbian, at the beginning?

Tsui: [00:26:00] Oh, yes. I mean, I can't remember when some of those groundbreaking books, like *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, I can't remember, was that the early '80s? Or was it the late '70s? I don't remember. Anyway, I remember around that time of Unbound Feet first performing, that some of us were getting together with woman lesbians from Hinte [*phonetic*]. And we were having a lot of picnics, potlucks. [*Laughs*] Yes.

Q: What were they like, those picnics and potlucks?

Tsui: [00:27:01] They were fantastic. We, you know, there would be all this food, and it was all fabulous food. It was all ethnic food, it was our food.

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [00:27:14] Yes, it was—I have pictures from then. Yes, we were all laughing and smiling.

Q: And then were you part of organizing some gatherings for API lesbians?

Tsui: [00:27:32] Well, I was one of the people who founded some of these groups. I also started editing a newsletter called *Phoenix Rising*, and it was six pages stapled together. So that was a vehicle—not necessarily—it wasn't a vehicle for my creative work. That's not what it was, no. Why do I even say that?

Q: Well, what did happen in the pages of *Phoenix Rising*?

Tsui: [00:28:18] Some articles of interest. That's all I remember.

Q: Yes. That's wonderful. That's wonderful. And then you were doing your own writing also in this time, right?

Tsui: Yes.

Q: You were writing poetry—you've written stories, I don't know if you were writing stories in the '70s and '80s. But what memories do you have of writing and publishing your work?

Tsui: [00:29:00] Well, the first memory I have is of two books that I wrote, when I was fourteen. There was empty notebooks that are the size of paperbacks, so I would write, you know, Chapter One, Chapter Two, but the cover, I would—I would, like, bind it with white paper, and I'd put the name of the book on the front, and my name, and on the side. So I had two books; one of poetry, full of poetry, and one full of essays, well not essays, stories. So that was my own book that I self-published.

Q: Yes, self-published, from a very young age, a self-published writer, yes.

Tsui: [00:29:58] And I'm not sure how my first book came about. It was published in '83 by Spinsters Ink in New York. I don't even know how that happened. But it happened. And the first—the first copy of the book, I got it in the mail, and I couldn't even make it from the

mailbox to my house. I sat down, and I just looked at it. I mean, it was, like, this is my book? I just couldn't make it—it was just right there, by the mailbox. So that was my first book.

And then I would just send stuff out to journals. But, you know, I never felt that it was a profession, it was something that I could do as a profession. It was a hobby, you know? It's like my stuff I wrote in Hong Kong, you know, it was a hobby. And that little thing that I wrote, that I, you know, re-papered the—

Q: It wasn't what you were doing as a profession, or for a living. What were you doing for a living?

Tsui: [00:31:33] I started with day jobs.

Q: Yes?

Tsui: [00:31:39] I remember, one of my—the first job I got was Meals on Wheels, when I first immigrated. And then I was, you know, I was, what, seventeen years old. I made salads at a hospital. [*Laughs*] I was the salad girl. So, I mean, throughout my life, I've been—you know, I've had various jobs. I've been a professional fundraiser for nonprofit arts organizations. But I have to say, I look back on my life, and I've always had an income. I played, I did. Well, no, you know, we talked about stories where we just follow the road, and we don't know where it goes. I don't know—I don't know how this began. But I walked a path, and I don't know if I would say,

well, I was in the right place at the right time, or whether it was a path that I was supposed to follow.

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [00:33:19] Because after Unbound Feet, then we had the Asian women, it's that whole—everything started happening. My book came out. What am I talking about?

Q: Yes. Yes, then your book came out. And then you wrote more books. Like, I mean, you've been so prolific as a writer. One of the things that you've published is poetry, as you said, you're an American poet.

Tsui: Yes.

Q: And another thing that you've published is BDSM [bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism] Erotica, which was really groundbreaking at the time. I mean, you're one of the few, or maybe even the first, lesbian of color to be writing BDSM Erotica, or certainly an Asian lesbian writer of BDSM Erotica.

Tsui: Yes.

Q: I'm wondering if you have any memories of what it was like to publish that, to be open about, you know, kink and BDSM in that period of feminism?

Tsui: [00:34:31] I'm trying to remember what year it was, 19—

Q: I read that you came out as a “proud leather woman” in 1988, and that this was met with resistance in some spaces. Does that sound right?

Tsui: Yes.

Q: Do you have any memories of that? Of your coming out of this—about this part of yourself, and some of the reactions people had?

Tsui: [00:34:59] Well, let me talk about *Breathless*.

Q: Your book, *Breathless*, yes.

Tsui: [00:35:06] My book, *Breathless*, which was published by Firebrand, which is a very progressive, strongly lesbian publishing house. And Nancy Bereano, the publisher, spoke with me when she first got the manuscript. And there was a story in there called “The Cutting”, and it's about—I don't want to say the practice, the erotic—erotic—well, it's one of the—what do I want to call it? It's one of the activities that some BDSM people might participate in, you know, whether it's with a knife, a scalpel. It's cutting into the bo—cutting into the skin, usually with a design. And I remember—and BDSM, as you may know, is that community, it's very concerned

with safe sex and anonymity, you know, among many other things. But I remember when—oh, there's not public sex but... not group sex—

Q: Like play parties?

Tsui: [00:37:18] Thank you [*laughs*].

Q: Like that? Yes?

Tsui: [00:37:18] There were play parties, yes. And I remember watching a cutting. And I couldn't—I mean, I thought, oh, blood, this is—you know, I just couldn't. But I remember one day, it was a friend of mine who was doing the cutting, you know, a very experienced-level woman. And I found it fascinating. Anyway, so I wrote a story called “The Cutting”. And Nancy Bereano said to me that—I don't know what words she used, exactly, but the paraphrasing is, could I make “The Cutting” less graphic? Something like that. And I looked at the paragraph and I thought, okay, I could change a couple of words. But that's it. [*Laughs*] Those weren't even the words she was talking about, but so basically, yes, I kept the whole story. What was it like? There was a butch in the leather community who I knew had been attracted to me, and chasing me for probably a couple of years. And, you know, I wasn't interested, because I thought, oh, I don't do that. What is that?

Q: You were also living as butch at this point, right? Or would you—

Tsui: [00:38:58] No. I mean, I wasn't androgynous, but I wasn't butch or fem.

Q: Okay. Got you.

Tsui: [00:39:07] I didn't identify.

Q: Yes. And so this butch was interested in you, but you were not interested?

Tsui: [00:39:15] Correct. But she was—she chased me. And then I—I had these—I had a curiosity, so I had this curiosity, and it was kind of growing. And I knew that she'd see. We were both—we were both body builders at that time.

So I began a relationship with her, and that's where I—I'll say learned. That's when I got involved with the leather community. And oh, *On Our Backs*. *On Our Backs*. I was approached by Jill Posener, a very well-known English photographer. She said that she was working on a book about women bodybuilders, and would I be interested in being the subject, a subject. And I said, "Well, you know, you can call me." She said, "Oh, by the way, I'm the photo editor of *On Our Backs*. And I'm really interested in photographing you for the magazine." I said, "Oh, no. No. I don't read lesbian porn, I think it's—I just don't read—I'm not interested, because I don't read the magazine, I'm not interested." And then I thought about it, and I said, that's an opportunity for me to make a statement, or is it an opportunity for me to say something about this whole—about anything, I guess. Not about anything.

Q: Not about anything, but about some of these truths that you embodied, right, and that weren't always visible.

Tsui: [00:41:48] Right. And I said that they had to publish one of my poems. I said, "I'm not a body".

Q: Wow.

Tsui: "And the reason I'm doing this is to change what the patriarchy labels us, as face, tits and ass." And I said, "I want the poem because I want people to know that I'm not just a face, that I'm a poet, I'm a writer." And I'm doing this because I want—I said this to myself—because I want to change the perception to say that beauty is in the whole body, you know? It's in the glutes, it's in the bi—you know, it's in all these parts of us. All these parts of us are beautiful.

So I did it. It came out, I think, right by Gay Pride. And they had a booth—because the magazine had just come out. So they had me signing the magazines, and gay men thought that it was a man on the cover. Why they thought that—I mean, anyway—

Q: How did you feel about that, about gay men looking at it and saying, "That's a"—you know, reading it as a gay man? How did you feel about being perceived that way?

Tsui: [00:43:28] It was not humorous, it was, like, not “aha” and not laughter. It was—I have been—I have been approached—what’s the word when you’re in a bar, and somebody’s, you know—

Q: Propositioning you?

Tsui: [00:44:06] No, it’s flirt.

Q: Flirted with? Yes?

Tsui: [00:44:11] Gay men flirted with me all the time and wanted to pick me up, because they thought I was an Asian man. And in leather, oh my God, I would go to The Eagle.

Q: Yes, The Eagle. The bar, The Eagle in San Francisco—

Tsui: The Eagle—

Q: —the lot of leather gay men culture, the gay male culture, right? You would go there, and the gay men—

Tsui: [00:44:32] In leather, and it was, like, they’d flirt, they’d proposition me. But then I became Kitty Tsui, so they knew it’s Kitty Tsui.

Q: It's Kitty Tsui. But you—I mean, I'm curious about—I hear you saying you didn't necessarily identify as butch for yourself, within, but people read you as masculine. Whether they were reading you as a butch dyke, or whether gay men were reading you as male, like, did you feel masculine? Did you like people seeing you as masculine?

Tsui: No—

Q: Or were you, like, no, I'm not even about those labels.

Tsui: [00:45:12] That, and no, I did not feel masculine.

Q: You did not feel that.

Tsui: [00:45:19] You know, I have a certain persona, a certain walk, I—you know, I didn't feel masculine. I didn't feel feminine, either [*laughs*], come to think of it.

Q: Did you feel both or neither?

Tsui: Neither.

Q: You felt neither masculine or feminine?

Tsui: [00:45:46] In my look. I mean, I knew I was a woman.

Q: Okay.

Tsui: I never had any—

Q: Okay.

Tsui: —thoughts or—no, I never—no.

Q: Inside you were a woman, for sure, but it was in terms of the look. I'm asking these questions, and I think one of the things that, to me, is one of the many things that has been very powerful about your career is the way you have really broken ground around, you know, gender variance, of being a gender nonconforming person, just by being yourself, right? I mean, you've modeled that in a time when there was so little visibility of that, of just being your full gender self, whatever that looks like, and even if it sort of breaks the norms of the culture you come from, right?

Tsui: Yes.

Q: And now we're living in a time when more people are breaking gender norms and stretching that. But you, you know, you broke the ground, you blazed trails. And with your writing, you did it on the page. I mean, *Breathless* is incredibly gender revolutionary as a book, to me.

Tsui: Yes.

Q: And—and with the way that you looked in the *On Our Back* pictures, and the way you looked at The Eagle bar. So with your look, with your words, with your thoughts, so I'm curious about how it felt for you. And it sounds like you knew you were a woman, and you also, your look was neither masculine or feminine, you were just being you.

Tsui: Well, I know my look was more masculine.

Q: You do?

Tsui: Especially when I was in leather.

Q: Yes.

Tsui: But I never felt—no, I never felt masculine. I just felt powerful.

Q: And was some of this connected also to being a bodybuilder?

Tsui: [00:48:04] I suppose. I'm not quite sure—

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [00:48:22] Could you say it in a different way?

Q: Yes, absolutely I could say it in a different way. Just, you were also sort of a groundbreaking bodybuilder when you were thirty-eight. You won a gold medal at the Gay Games, right, which is phenomenal.

Tsui: Yes.

Q: And maybe you could tell us some memories you could have of becoming a bodybuilder, or how it felt to be a bodybuilder, what it was like in your body.

Tsui: [00:48:56] Well, before I became a bodybuilder, I was always interested in fitness. So when I started going to the gym, I wasn't—I wasn't—my goal wasn't to become anything, except stronger.

Q: Yes?

Tsui: [00:49:36] So I was going to the gym long before I decided to bodybuild. And that goes back to Gay Games I. San Francisco Gay Games I, 1986. No, '82, 1982. Gay Games I in San Francisco. I went, was, like, Rita Mae Brown was the keynote, Tina Turner was the entertainment. I mean, it was just—I mean there were hundreds and hundreds of gays and lesbians doing these sports, you know? It was just—I can't even tell you what it was like.

So I went to the Castro Theater where the bodybuilding finals were going to be at. And the gay men came out, [*makes sound*]. And there were four women, I mean, there must have been fifty gay men. Well, okay, maybe however many gay male contestants. And the women came out, there were two of them, and they brought the house down. They brought the house down. And I said to myself, I'm going to do that. Now I didn't know anything about it, I didn't know what it entailed, I just thought, oh, I can do that. So I started training for Gay Games II.

Q: Wow.

Tsui: [00:51:22] Actually, it wasn't then, but I—well, I thought I was going to do it, you know, I was, like, oh, yes, I'm going to do it. I think I'm going to do it. And then my best friend died. And, you know, I said to myself, I have to do something, because it was not good. And I thought, I'm going to go to the gym. I'm going to, you know, I don't know, maybe.

Well, I met this woman. Her body was, like—I went to a boxing gym. I met her at the boxing gym. You know, boxing gym, all men. There were no changing rooms for women. I mean, there were weights. I mean, that's why I went there, for the weights. There was no changing room for women, there were no women there, except for Kris Brooks [*phonetic*]. And she was a bodybuilder. And I asked her to be my coach. Three months, I trained for three months, and I won the bronze medal at Gay Games II. And so that—that really turned my life around, because I thought, this is a fabulous sport. And I'm meeting all these great gays and lesbians, lesbians and gays. But, of course, then I veered off and did nothing, until I decided to do Gay Games III. I met BC [*phonetic*] at the very beginning of that. I hope you can edit this.

Q: Well, Gay Games III is where you won the gold medal, right?

Tsui: [00:53:52] Yes. Gay Games III in Vancouver.

Q: Oh, in Vancouver?

Tsui: [00:53:55] That was an incredible time. The whole city was gay. The whole city. There were flags, there were—everywhere you looked, with gays and lesbians. You'd think it was just a gay and lesbian city. I met so many athletes from different countries.

Q: That sounds amazing.

Tsui: [00:54:23] People who were activists, South Africa, England—I mean, South Africa.

Q: Yes.

Tsui: Simon. Simon Nkoli, I think.

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [00:54:46] He was one of the organizers in—I don't know what part of South Africa, but anyway, I won the gold medal in pairs. BC and I did pairs, pairs—pairs. I was in a threesome—

BC and I were lovers, she was my first SM lover. And Kitty was, you know, just playing around.

I went—I did a keynote speech at Horizons Conference in Chicago, and I met this woman in Chicago.

So anyway, we were doing a, you know, what is it called, when you go from city to city?

Q: A tour?

Tsui: [00:55:52] No.

Q: No?

Tsui: [00:55:54] You see me in Oakland, and I see Trinity in Seattle.

Q: A long distance—something?

Tsui: [00:56:04] Okay, well, whatever it was—

Q: [Laughs] There were long distance relationships, and—

Tsui: [00:56:10] Were long distance relationships—

Q: Open relationships.

Tsui: [00:56:14] —and she came to San Francisco.

Q: I see.

Tsui: [00:56:18] We would have a threesome, so there'd be three of us. So three of us went to Vancouver.

Q: Oh, and you went together as a three-way—

Tsui: Yes.

Q: What people now call a “throuple.” It's just like a three-way couple, right? [Laughter] New language for things that have been happening.

Tsui: [*Laughs*] Yes.

Q: So the three of you went together as a romantic trio.

Tsui: [00:56:43] So we stayed in this hotel. And Kitty—one day it was, like, “Okay, I have to get away from you guys.” So I went out by myself, and I came back to the hotel. It was past midnight, and I was just crossing the street. And I heard a car—I heard a car coming pretty fast. And someone threw something at me from the car. And it hit me right in the crotch. And, you

know, maybe it was an apple or something, but it could have really hurt someone. And I think that's one of the only incidents of violence I've felt. Anyway—

Q: Yes, sort of a violent homophobic incident in public, yes.

Tsui: Yes.

Q: Yes. Do you—did you think of it at the time as something groundbreaking, that you were seeing both of these people, and that there was a sort of a three-way relationship happening in those days? Was that acknowledged as the groundbreaking thing it was? Or was it just sort of normal, this is how we're doing things?

Tsui: [00:58:27] When I entered the leather community, there was a lot of—there were many different sexual coupling.

Q: Yes? So it was really in the leather community that you really saw and experienced this kind of variety of ways of connecting sexually?

Tsui: [00:59:17] Yes.

Q: Yes. There's a story in *Breathless* where a group of people who are erotically involved go to Michigan Women's Music Festival and do a scene in front of an audience, in Michigan's Women's Music Festival.

Tsui: Yes.

Q: And I was curious about that in terms of history. Like, were lesbians at Michigan Women's Music Festival really accepting of the BDSM presence? Or was there a little bit of friction there? Do you have any memories of that?

Tsui: I only went once.

Q: Yes?

Tsui: And I believe it was 1983, something—

Q: Somewhere around there.

Tsui: [01:00:24] I—there was an encampment of leather, leather women. I think it had always been there, you know, every time Michigan happened. There was probably always a group of leather women. Whether they were out as leather women, you know, is another thing. But when I went, you know, I can't really answer the question about was there friction, or—none that I saw—

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [01:01:03] —at that time. But I basically went to the leather encampment and never left.

Q: I see.

Tsui: [01:01:16] I mean, it was just wild! I remember one night, they had organized stations of the cross, but it was different. It was, like, cutting, you know, X, Y—well, they had asked me to do the flogging section. [*Laughs*] I played with, you know, probably ten women, maybe a few more, and my friends told me, “Well, these women lined up”—and I just said, “I can’t. You step in and do this”.

Q: You had to turn women away?

Tsui: [01:02:15] Well, they turned women—

Q: You had to put a limit?

Tsui: [01:02:20] Yes, I think so.

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [01:02:20] So, no, it was a fabulous time.

Q: That’s great.

Tsui: [01:02:23] I did go listen to a couple of music sounds.

Q: You did listen to a little bit of music, beyond being at the leather women at the festival.

[*Laughs*]

Tsui: [01:02:35] To go back—

Q: Yes? Yes?

Tsui: [01:02:38] —when you asked me if there was any friction from the API community regarding leather.

Q: From feminist communities, but certainly within the API community, like, what was that like?

Tsui: [01:02:46] Yes. Feminist—feminist—

Q: We know feminism, you know, in the '80s, '90s, there was a very uncomfortable relationship with BDSM, right?

Tsui: [01:02:56] Yes. Yes.

Q: In some parts of feminism.

Tsui: [01:03:00] Absolutely. I did a reading at Women and Children First in Chicago. Women picketed. Picketed!

Q: Picketed your reading?

Tsui: [01:03:10] Me.

Q: Picketed you?

Tsui: [01:03:13] They were protesting me as an out leather woman. I'm a feminist—I couldn't be—there's a book still called *Women Children First*, I'm—

Q: You're a feminist, fore-parent, foremother, of API lesbian community. Do you think some of these people questioned your feminism?

Tsui: [01:03:40] Of course. At that time.

Q: And what's your opinion on that?

Tsui: [01:03:48] My opinion on what?

Q: Being a proud leather woman and being a feminist at the same time? Like, what's your response to these people who say, you know, "This is anti-feminist, this is anti-woman. It's not good to be into leather," you know, "Picket Kitty Tsui!" Like, if you could talk—if you could say something to those people who were picketing, what would you say?

Tsui: [01:04:15] "It's my body, it's my sexuality. It's my sexual preference. It's my sexual play. It has nothing to do with you. It's none of your damned business." And to go back to the Unbound Feet, I think I was already experiencing some of those things, when I appeared on the cover, you know? I'm a role model, I shouldn't be doing that, you know, I'm supposed to be a nice Asian. I'm a writer, I write about things that aren't controversial. That's their voice telling me.

Q: Yes, there's a short documentary made about you now that has the title, *Nice Chinese Girls Don't*. You know, there's pressure on lesbian feminists in general in the '80s, about BDSM being bad or wrong, somehow. But was there an extra pressure you felt as an Asian woman, as a Chinese woman that, you know, it's really not nice, it's really not what you're supposed to do?

Tsui: Okay, so to go to the extra pressure—

Q: The extra pressure of being Chinese and/or Asian, in terms of coming out, with leather.

Tsui: [01:06:01] Well, I felt it first from the API community, because I have a lot of friends in that community. But I did feel it from the lesbian feminist community.

Q: Yes? And it's okay if no particular stories or memories want to come up around that.

Tsui: [01:06:31] Well, it was just very—it was very hurtful, because, of course, no one said that to me. But I must have heard it or something, because I wouldn't have made that up. So I was already feeling very hurt and, you know, I guess it goes back to, I'm the only one. I'm the only one in the world. Now what?

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [01:07:18] I don't want to say I found solace in the leather community. I certainly wasn't feeling it from the API community, or from the feminist community. So it felt very lonely, and as I was saying, I didn't find solace in the leather community. I found a lot of other things. I think that pushed me back to my comfort zone, which is solitary. I'm solitary. I'm an introvert, like, you know, okay, I won't talk to anyone. Okay, I won't return anyone's phone calls. Maybe they're not the ones that criticized me, but I didn't know. So I just kind of backed away from everything, and I left the community. I left town. I didn't just leave the API community, I didn't just leave the leather community. I fucking left town.

Q: Where did you go?

Tsui: [01:08:47] I immigrated to San Francisco when I was sixteen years old, in 19—whatever it was. And I loved San Francisco. I escaped. I wanted to get away from—not so much getting

away from rumors or gossip about me, but I just wanted to get away from everything. I went to Chicago. And I was gone—I've been gone for thirty years. I was in Chicago four years, Indianapolis four and a half. Then I went to Southern Cal—I moved back to California, but I went to Southern California. I lived in LA, I lived in Ojai, and then I moved to Long Beach. And I was in Long Beach for ten years. So I left. I just left everybody.

Q: And what did that give you, to leave and to be in other places?

Tsui: [01:09:55] What did it—

Q: What did it give you?

Tsui: [01:10:03] It gave me what I wanted, which was solitude, not having to hear criticism or think about it, whether it was *On Our Backs*, whether it was *Breathless*, because I got shit for *Breathless*. Being loud, being a rebel, being—speaking out. [*Whispers*] Shut up, Kitty!

Q: [Laughs] Yes. It gave you all that? I mean, so much speaking out. There's also one more piece of *Breathless* that I'll maybe bring up, is the—there's a story with two Chinese women, that they take comfort in the fact that they share culture, they even share some food. You know, it's this wonderful erotic story in a collection of erotica, but there was, like, slowing down and paying attention to the food that they enjoy together, or like together, that is cultural for them. It just makes me think about what you were saying, about the really difficult feeling of feeling like the only one, right? Yes. There isn't really a question in there, unless you want—

Tsui: [*Laughs*] I was looking at you, like—

Q: I know, unless it makes you think of something, like—

Tsui: —like, what's the question?

Q: Because I've heard you say, you often, often felt like the only one. And in thinking about that story, was there ever a time when you had that feeling of meeting—you know, having someone be a mirror for you, or a solace for you? Or did you mostly take solace in your truth and in your solitude?

Tsui: [01:11:56] Well, the first woman I was in a relationship with, who was the woman I met on Halloween—

Q: Right?

Tsui: [01:12:06] —she was Chinese. So it was a very comforting—it was very comforting, it was like a coming home [*sic*]. It was like a coming home.

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [01:12:31] Because we had the same experiences, you know, the same food. And she didn't identify as butch or fem, except her group of rich girls from Hong Kong—are we talking about butch?

Q: We were talking about feeling a sense of connection with this first girlfriend—

Tsui: Oh, yes.

Q: —culturally, that you had a lot of similar experiences. Then you were just mentioning that she didn't identify as butch or fem.

Tsui: [01:13:14] Well, she was androgynous, we were all androgynous.

Q: Yes.

Tsui: [01:13:19] Her group of friends, who were butch and fem, but, you know, soft butch, but very femmy, they couldn't figure out what I was, because Jenny had always been with fem women, and I, you know, I mean, androgynous from the whatever years, and they just couldn't figure out what I was. I thought that was so humorous. [*Laughter*] Because I really didn't understand the butch/fem thing at that time. Does that answer your question?

Q: Yes. Yes, yes. So you left the Bay Area and for thirty years lived in other places, and then you came back. Now you're in Oakland.

Tsui: Yes. Now I really came home.

Q: Is that how it feels?

Tsui: Because I was in Long Beach.

Q: Yes.

Tsui: So I moved from Long Beach here, so this is home.

Q: And how long ago was that?

Tsui: Five years.

Q: And it's a feeling of really having come home?

Tsui: [01:14:27] Yes.

Q: What are some things happening in your journey today?

Tsui: [01:14:39] My journey is to complete my work on the archives, on my archives, and write. I mean, I just finished one book, *Battle Cry: Poems of Love and Resistance*. And my next book is

called, *On Fire: Poems of Love and Resilience*. So, you know, I finished *Battle Cry* and I'm on to the next book. And I've got five projects, so I'll be very busy.

Q: Wow. Yes, you're writing very prolifically at this time in your life.

Tsui: [01:15:32] I guess it makes up for the years that I spent not writing. I spent a lot of time playing. I've suffered from depression. So I have all my projects now.

Q: And this is a good writing time.

Tsui: [01:15:55] Yes.

Q: And what surprises you most about this current period of your life?

Tsui: [01:16:07] Well, the first thing that comes to mind is my age. I've probably spent the last, I don't know, couple of years moaning about my age. In fact, I spent a few years saying, you know, shaving five years off my age. I mean, not my *[laughs]*—it's not important to anyone, except me. And I finally, you know, I was thinking—I was thinking about all my friends who died. I think about my sister writers who have died. They didn't get to be my age. So I'm, you know, I'm writing all these poems. Kill the old, too old, that old. Old. Well, there's—I have a good bit of poetry about being old.

Q: Those are the titles of some of the poems in the collection *Battle Cry* that you're working on.
Yes.

Tsui: [01:17:28] Yes. So I—so I can say now that I'm seventy, and, you know, I look back on my life, and I think, I did that? I can't believe I did that. I think if I were a young lesbian, and somebody said, "Oh, that Beatrice Wong [*phonetic*], you know, she did this, and she did that. Oh, no, she did that and that? No. No, she did that, that, that, that, and that." You know, I did do that. I'm seventy years old, but I'll always be Kitty Tsui. And I didn't plan to do all these things, it just happened. They were on my path. It's like Gay Games, it was just on my path. Yes, so, you know, I'm writing a lot of things about being old, a lot of poetry about being old. And, you know, I'm just—I guess I'm just overwhelmed, but I'm proud of who I am at seventy. So that's—that's a big thing. You know?

Q: Can you say more about what you're proud of about yourself at seventy?

Tsui: [01:19:28] I'm proud of who I was. I'm proud of the things I did. I'm proud to be Kitty Tsui at seventy. And I have a lot of work ahead, and I'm proud of that.

Q: Yes. And when you look at the work ahead, you say there's plenty of work ahead, what are you looking forward to in the coming months and years?

Tsui: [01:20:03] I'm looking forward to seeing some of my books in print, some of my manuscripts in print. I want to hold my next book when I get it in the mail. And I want to just sit

there on the stoop and read it like I did with my first book. And I'm writing a screenplay, it's called *Unmasked*—but it's got nothing to do with—living with a mask in our time.

Q: Yes. How exciting!

Tsui: [01:20:43] So I'm looking forward to that, and I'm looking for a co-writer.

Q: Fantastic. And when you look around at—at lesbian, gay, queer culture today, what strikes you?

Tsui: [01:21:13] I don't want to say we've come a long way now, because we have come a long way. I sometimes feel that the battles we fought, and the things we had to endure, we went through that, we walked through it, or we ran through it, or we fought back through it. What are you doing? You can comfortably step here because of the work we did. What are you doing? You just had the pandemic. How many young lesbians do you think helped an elder? I don't know, is that a harsh assessment of where we are now? I don't know where we are now.

Q: And what do you wish that younger generations of LGBTQ+ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer] people of color, right, queer people of color, could know or see about your life?

Tsui: Know or see?

Q: Yes. See or understand about your life. If you imagine—maybe another way to think of it is, if you imagine that, you know, two years from now, ten years from now, and maybe even in the future, fifty years from now, someone, a young, queer person of color might listen to this recording, what's something you would like them to understand about you and your life?

Tsui: [01:23:36] That I lived my life my way, whether it was coming out in the face of adversity from a very traditional Chinese family, community, whether it was—how one's body was perceived, whether it was about—this is not the right answer to your question.

Q: You don't think so? What I heard you start with is, "I did things my way." And so many places of adversity, and you didn't use this word, but bravery on your part, you know, that you did things your own way. Is there something else that you would want young people of color to understand about your life?

Tsui: [01:24:56] Never give up. Do your work, whatever it is. Don't waste thirty years, like I did.
[*Whispers*] It's true.

Q: That's very powerful, Kitty. Thank you so much for everything you've shared, all of your stories and insights. And very hard one truths [*sic*]. Is there anything else that you would like to say?

Tsui: [01:25:44] May you see me exactly as I am.

Q: Mmm. Thank you. That's a very powerful note to end on. May it be so. Thank you so much.

Tsui: [01:26:06] You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]