I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Garrett Hongo

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Garrett Hongo conducted by Robin Coste Lewis on June 12, 2023. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders 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 Number: 1

Narrator: Garrett Hongo | Location: Paris, FR; New York, NY

Interviewer: Robin Coste Lewis | Date: June 12, 2023

Q: Yes, it's recording. Hi, dear.

Hongo: How are you doing?

Q: Thank you so much for doing this. I'm so jealous I'm not in Paris with you.

Hongo: Oh, well, are we going to overlap at all?

Q: I don't know, when do you leave?

Hongo: I leave the thirtieth or thirty-first. My daughter—

Q: Not at all. God damn it.

Hongo: Oh. Yes.

Q: Yes. I don't get there until the ninth or eighth. What are you doing? You said your daughter something?

Hongo: Oh, she comes in about a week and spends a week with me. We'll tourist, and then she goes back to her mom. They're going to go to Barcelona. And then she comes back to me on the evening of the thirtieth, and then the thirty-first we go to Amsterdam for [*unclear*].

Q: And then what?

Hongo: Then back to Eugene for the rest of the summer.

Q: Wow, that's amazing. And before she gets there, what are you doing in Paris?

Hongo: Well, I'm going to do a couple of things. One, I'm going to try to start an essay about Franklin Odo, who was vice provost at the Smithsonian. A collection, collecting Asian American-Pacific Islander stuff. He's been a mentor, elder of mine since I was in college. He taught Asian American studies, he was the first one to do it, at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] and then at Long Beach State [California State University, Long Beach]. And then at University of Hawai‘i. He's from Hawai‘i. And we kept kind of getting together. And he passed away last fall, suddenly. He didn't let anybody know, and so he died without us knowing—I mean, without us expecting—and then, apparently, the Smithsonian did very little to memorialize him. And some of the staff were dissatisfied with that, so they got an idea that we could do it at an Asian American literary festival this summer, and they asked me to write the memorial, which is a nice honor. So I'm going to do that, I'm going to write an essay about him and what he was like with us, and his scholarship. He was a scholar, PhD from Princeton [University] in History. But he taught largely Asian American studies. And he was a kind,

sponsoring guy. Not passive, but kind. And it's going to be a chance for me to put down what I think of Franklin. I have a lot of vivid memories and pictures in my head, and so I'm going to just go with that and try to conjure up something that would do his memory justice. So that's the essay, and then they want me to write a poem, too. So, shit, they're very demanding, really.

Q: [*Laughs*]

Hongo: They don't know what it takes, you know?

Q: I know, people think it's easy to write three lines, huh, Garrett? [*Laughs*]

Hongo: Yes. So, then, I have to write a poem, and then, after the essay, I'll see if I've got anything left that might be poetic.

Q: Wow. Wow.

Hongo: So that'll be my writing. You know, the weather's cooperating because it's very cool and I have a small little apartment that's set up well. And I've got a grocery store around the corner, I've got a little restaurant down the street. So that's what I'm going to be doing.

Q: So you've ensconced yourself in Paris before your daughter gets there to do a quick project, or a little project that sounds like it requires some quiet and protection.

Hongo: Yes, I mean, I could have done it back home, but I don't know. I like to get away from school as soon as I can, because, you know, you teach, you know what it's like. It's just so demanding, and it just takes over your mind and your heart. And your mind and your heart aren't your own. You're sort of responding to everybody all the time.

Q: Yes. I think it's a factor about teaching that people don't realize, is how much the material is actually your psyche, your mind, your histories, and that you're using it all, the toolbox, to help people learn. And it's psychically and physically exhausting.

Hongo: Yes. Especially, it must be, for you, with your recovery and everything.

Q: Yes, it is. But even if I didn't have these so-called disabilities, I think I'd still be just wasted. But David St. John, who was just texting me this morning and saying that you guys were talking, and I just feel so lucky that I know both of you. Just so lucky. David told me that he just likes to get up and get on PCH [Pacific Coast Highway] and get up the coast as quickly as he can. To Big Sur, just to have a transition, to break away once his grades are in. And I think that's really smart. I never think of it that way, but talking to you today makes me think of it—

Hongo: [*Unclear*]. It's not just getting away from people who are still tugging at your apron strings, but just to clear the consciousness and the mind. And, in a way, you guys have each other in LA, plus you have LA. Eugene, there isn't nothing there, if I must say. I mean, I'm arrogant that way.

Q: No, Garrett, I don't know if you've read my new book, and if you haven't, I want to send it to you.

Hongo: Yes.

Q: Hold on, I'm getting a pen right now. Oh, yes, that's right, we did that interview. Hold on, I just realized I don't have a pen, and because of my memory, if I don't have a pen and write things down, then I will forget, while we're talking, things I want to revisit. Wow, where are all my pens? Hold on, Garrett, I have you in my ear, I'm just walking around. There's a line in my book that my dad says when I call him, upset, because I want to come home. [*Laughs*] This is when I'm in college, like, in the 1970s or 1980s. And—

Hongo: You went to Hampshire [College]?

Q: I went to Hampshire in Amherst. And my father said, plain as day, and I put in the book, he said, "Shit." [*Laughs*] I'm sobbing on the phone, crying to my father—hold on, the battery—the battery's fine, why does it say it's trying to die? Anyway, I'm crying on the phone, in my early twenties, decades ago, "I want to come home, I'm homesick." And my father said, "Shit. Ain't shit here." Garrett, I think about it all the time. Like, whenever I get a little nostalgia or, you know, whatever, I just remember that.

Hongo: Yes, well, I felt a desert, intellectually, whenever I'd go back for the summer, that's for sure. Yes. But, you know, wow. So, that was way before Elizabeth was teaching there, right?

Q: What?

Hongo: Didn't she teach there for a little while?

Q: Where? In LA?

Hongo: At Hampshire. At Hampshire.

Q: At Hampshire. No. I think she taught at Smith [College]. But that was decades before. Elizabeth and I are the same age. Yes, it was decades before. I was a professor at Hampshire right at the same time, but we didn't know each other then. For one year, we overlapped, but we didn't know each other then. Isn't that funny?

Hongo: Oh, wow. Yes, well—

Q: I know. Funny how things work out.

Hongo: It happens. Kind of weird, yes. It happens. There was a race scholar—yes.

Q: So—no, go ahead? No, go ahead.

Hongo: There was a race scholar teaching in history or something at [University of] Oregon, and we were only introduced as she was leaving town, because a mutual friend of ours in Canada knew us. And she was already going to the University of Toronto by the time I made contact, and we'd been [*unclear*] each other in the same building for three years. And it's just how separate things are at Oregon. And, you know, it's just not great. I mean, it's not a world of adults. I guess it's not.

Q: Garrett, you are the OG. So, Garrett, let me introduce the interview just for the people who will be transcribing it at Columbia. And so—there's something wrong with my computer and I don't know what it is. But, anyway, and then we can go on with the interview, because I am so excited. So, to the Columbia University Elders project and Oral History Project, this is sir Garrett Hongo, one of the most extraordinary writers living today. Of whom I am a great fan, and everybody I know is, too, so it's a coup for us to have you, Garrett, thank you. And the reason why I asked him to, and he graciously agreed to be a part of this project, is he spent many, many years in the South Bay of Los Angeles. And, as you all know at Columbia, part of my mission for this project is to, when you guys asked me to basically do the LA part of the project, my whole reason I said yes was so that I could kind of offer a corrective of what Los Angeles might be in terms of oral history projects. And, in that, I am primarily ignoring the West Side and from Venice Beach through West Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Hollywood, all of that, although sometimes I do go over there and I am also in Pasadena and the East Side and East LA. My primary focus is from the south of downtown LA all the way down to the border, and I'm really trying to focus on those histories and communities that have made a profound impact on American and Pacific Rim histories and border histories. [*Coughs*] Excuse me, Garrett. And so it

would be completely remiss of me, completely remiss of us as a project, not to have Mr. Garrett Hongo, Professor Garrett Hongo, as a part of this project. So, Garrett, thank you so, so much for agreeing to talk to us today about your life. And your family's life, too.

Hongo: Well, Robin, you know, I jump at the chance. Anything to talk to Robin Coste Lewis, you know?

Q: [*Laughs*]

Hongo: We always have so much fun, and you make me remember things that I forgot. You know what I mean? We saw some of the same things growing up. At different times in the South Bay.

Q: Isn't it amazing?

Hongo: [*Crosstalk*]

Q: Oh, I should say also, for the editors, that Garrett and I went to the same high school, but about a decade and a half apart. I graduated in—well, I didn't graduate, I dropped out, [*Laughs*] 1980. I was supposed to graduate in 1980 or 1981, and I dropped out between 1979 and 1980. And when did you graduate, Garrett?

Hongo: I graduated in January 1969. If you recall—

Q: Yes, so we're about a decade apart exactly.

Hongo: —we had split years, you know, because LA was such a big place. And Gardena [Senior High School] was such a big high school, they split classes.

Q: Yes. We're going to get to Gardena High, I can't wait until we do. But before we do, Garrett, will you tell us your full name, your date of birth, and the place of your birth?

Hongo: My name is Garrett Kaoru Hongo. Kaoru is my Japanese name. They tell me my grandfather gave it to me, my maternal grandfather. And nowadays it's a name that's given a lot to women, you dig? But it was such an androgynous name for centuries, and, actually, it started as a man's name from the 12th century. Which I discovered when I read *The Tale of Genji*, there's a character—

Q: Garrett, how are you spelling that?

Hongo: K-A-O-R-U.

Q: K-A-O-R-U. And can you pronounce it again for me so I don't mispronounce it?

Hongo: It's Ka-o-ru.

Q: Kaoru. Okay.

Hongo: And there's a character in *The Tale of Genji* named Kaoru, so I thought it was a great fulfillment when I started studying Japanese, because everyone, even my cousins, thought my Japanese name was weird, you know?

Q: [*Laughs*]

Hongo: Well, you know, cousins are like that. Everything you do is going to be [*crosstalk*].

Q: Totally. Everything is going to be jacked. So, that's good, you found some validation in literature for your name, huh?

Hongo: Yes, I did. Yes, yes. And Hongo is also an old name. They think it comes from a district, actually—there's a Hongocho in Tokyo, but they think it comes from a district in Kobe, where my ancestors jumped off from Japan to go to Hawai‘i from.

Q: From Kobe?

Hongo: What?

Q: From Kobe?

Hongo: Yes. It may not have been, actually, a family name. They may have taken it at the moment of immigration in order to [*unclear*]. My father's family is from Southern Japan, from Kagoshima, Satsuma. And there's, not so much evidence, but there's, let's call it plausibility, that my grandfather and his older brother had to sneak away as descendants of the samurai who rebelled against the shogun and had to get out of town, essentially. They were like disenfranchised samurai. And they had education, so they could be intelligentsia in Hawai‘i, which is what they did.

Q: Okay, we are so going to get into that.

Hongo: My mother's side is all plantation people from Southern Japan, from Hiroshima and Fukuoka. And they were—

Q: What kind of plantations?

Hongo: In Hawai‘i, sugar plantation. My family worked as plantation laborers on the North Shore of O‘ahu from the minute they landed, and they were there for two and a half generations.

Q: Yes. This is primarily why—there are so many reasons why I wanted to include you in this project. One is just how important, how I think it's impossible to talk about California and not talk about the Pacific Rim. I don't understand how people continue to do that, and more specifically, about all the different Asian migrations, in and out and around.

Hongo: Right, well—

Q: So, but, wait, wait. So, one. But two is the profound colonial project that took place in Hawai‘i. A lot of people don't know about—that's why I'm asking you questions, forgive me, I hope I'm not insulting you. I do know about the plantations, but I know that a lot of our readers or listeners will not know about them. So, for example, I was just in Maui last summer for work and I took a tour of all the sugar plantations, right? People aren't aware. So if you can just elucidate and maybe just go back a little bit and slow down and tell us exactly what you meant by—so, your family migrated or emigrated from, or fled, Japan, to Hawai‘i. Why? And then became plantation workers how?

Hongo: Partly because of the colonization of the islands by the United States. The landowners, the people who became landowners, who were known as the planters, needed cheap labor, sources of labor. And they identified Asian peoples—particularly China, Korea, Philippines, and Japan—as potential sources. And also Portuguese, from the Azores, in particular, as sources. I suppose other sources were considered. African Americans. But, by then, slavery was illegal, as you know, and it was cheaper to bring labor from the Pacific. It ended up that—they first thought of native Hawaiians, who didn't want to do that because they lived on the land, they were independent, they were hunter-gatherers. And they culturally resisted being conscripted into the industrial project, industrial agricultural project of those growers, even though the King of Hawai‘i wanted it to happen. So they transferred their attention, the growers did, to the Pacific Rim, importing laborers from all these East Asian countries, including the Philippines. It didn't work out so well with Chinese, who quickly figured out, “This is shit. We're going to split the

plantation right away." But the Japanese and Portuguese and Filipino stayed to work. My family, my great-grandfather, great-grandmother, emigrated back in the 1890s. Well, actually, my great-grandfather came first from Fukuoka and then brought his wife and two children with him later. And they worked in Wailuku, which is on the North Shore of Oʻahu, near Haleʻiwa, for a few years before they had problems with the management, I suppose. And the story is that they fled in the night to escape their labor contract to another plantation. It was Dillingham plantation, I think, Wailuku was. And they went to the Castle and Cooke Plantation in Kahuku, where all the relatives were, and they fled in the night, walking across the North Shore, under moonlight. This is a legend that was in the family that was told to me by my grandmother and my grandmother's sisters. And she was ten or twelve at the time, carrying her younger brother on her back, who was a baby. And then they settled in Kahuku, and there they stayed for two and a half generations. So my grandmother grew up on the plantation; my grandfather, who grew up in Wailuku, worked on the plantation store and then married my grandmother; and then they raised their kids in Lāʻie on the other part of the sugar plantation in Kahuku. It's a neighboring town that now, of course, is home of the Mormon Temple. So they were there until the mid-late 1950s, when things kind of ran out in terms of sugar production. And, like the Second Migration from the South, which brought African Americans to LA after World War II, or during World War II, the Japanese from Hawaiʻi emigrated to LA. Largely the South Bay, particularly Gardena, because that's where all the Japanese were, and set up there. So we grew up among Mainland Japanese, largely, but also many, many, many children of immigrant Japanese from Hawaiʻi, as well. It turned out, after we finished high school, all our friends were, like, from Hawaiʻi. They were kids from Hawaiʻi. Their parents were from Hawaiʻi, too. It may have something to do with how boisterous we are compared to—yes, I mean, my brother and I were considered boisterous,

outspoken, loud. Neither of us was considered flashy, but my father was, you know. Because he dressed like the Nisei. His nickname in high school was Flash.

Q: Oh, come on. Can you please send me the picture? I forgot to say that if you want to share any pictures, Columbia is looking for ephemera, too, at some point. But they'll contact you later about that. That's amazing that his nickname was Flash. So, Gordon, generationally, I don't know all the names in Japanese. You just mentioned Nisei. There's Nisei, Issei, Sansei, what are the names?

Hongo: Issei is first generation. Issei.

Q: First generation's Issei, yes. Most of my friends were Issei. So, for the listeners, listen on, Issei meaning first-generation born in the United States.

Hongo: Oh, no, no. That's the generation that was born in Japan. Issei means born in Japan, but first generation in the States. Then Nisei would be native-born, second-generation people in the States. Sansei would be third. Most of the kids you knew were Sansei.

Q: That's right. I was about to say, all my friends were Sansei. In Rotary Club. [*Laughs*]

Hongo: Yes, right, right. Yonsei, fourth—

Q: In Key Club and Rotary Club, most of my friends were Sansei.

Hongo: I hated that, I hated that shit. I was in it. I hated it.

Q: I was in it, too. I was one of the few Black kids in rotary club.

Hongo: Oh, man. I can't tell you how square that was. I just—

Q: It was so square. [*Laughs*]

Hongo: It fills me with revulsion, [*unclear*].

Q: You are hilarious. Okay, wait, I want you to slow up, though. Because I want to go back to what you were saying. I'm so grateful for this interview, I'm so excited. Thank you, thank you, thank you. So my aunt, as you know, is Chinese and Hawaiian, and I interviewed her last year about her life and how she got to Cal State LA [California State University, Los Angeles]. And similar track but different community, but same labor, right? Plantation work. And how she's about your age, Gordon [*Sic*], maybe, and about how she and all her friends who are at this high school, same way, right? One person went to Cal State LA, they came and stayed with her, slept on her floor. All these Hawaiian girls, right? And I was like, “Well, how the hell did you meet my uncle?” And she said it was this tiki lounge in Crenshaw owned by a Japanese man that was the hangout for Japanese and Black kids in their—

Hongo: Well, you know who knows about that tiki lounge. He's gone now, sadly. [*Unclear*] was Michael Harper.

Q: Come on.

Hongo: Michael went to Crenshaw, where he went to Dorsey High [School]. He's from the West Side. He's part of that group that emigrated from Brooklyn to the West Side in LA. His mother and father were from Brooklyn. They moved when he was still in high school, to Crenshaw, and he hung out, in those days, at places like that. And then started to go to jazz clubs in Central and things like that.

Q: Oh, my god, I should ask his daughter to see. Maybe I'll interview her.

Hongo: Rachel probably could talk a story about all this.

Q: That's great, because, for some interviews, we're interviewing people's kids if the people have passed on, so that might be really a great thing to do for her.

Hongo: But also, the thing about Rachel, she probably—well, you know, Michael would embellish, as we all do.

Q: Wait, what did you just say?

Hongo: Michael would embellish.

Q: Yes. [*Laughs*]

Hongo: As we all do. So Rachel might take things as gospel that were more legend.

Q: Exactly.

Hongo: But even the legend is great. What is true about Michael is, when he was at Cal State LA, he studied with Christopher Isherwood.

Q: Oh my god.

Hongo: And W. H. Auden.

Q: Oh my god. [*Laughs*]

Hongo: Yes, that's true. That is for true.

Q: Wow. Okay, I don't want to get you sidetracked, but I did just want to say about my aunt telling me about—and it just blew my mind, because I was like, where would you—

Hongo: I hadn't heard about that since Michael told me about it.

Q: I was like, “Where would you and my uncle hang out? Where would you guys go out on dates when you guys were—” listen to this. “—Courting. Where would you guys go?” And she goes, “Oh, there was this tiki lounge in Crenshaw. It was so hot.” You know? And she said that they had such a blast. But she couldn't remember the name. I'm trying to remember the name. But I just want to enter that into the discourse as a part of my agenda for this project, which is to offer a corrective to how we think about Los Angeles. So, please continue, I want you to slow down.

Hongo: So we came to Gardena, you know.

Q: Wait, Garrett, no, no, no. I want you to slow down. So you were born, what was your birthday?

Hongo: In May, 1951.

Q: Nineteen fifty-one. Wow. And you were born in which town?

Hongo: I was born in Volcano, on the Big Island.

Q: On the Big Island. Right, that's right. For listeners, Gordon has an amazing book called *Volcano* about it. And then, how old were you when you came to California?

Hongo: I was six. We moved in 1957, July 1957.

Q: And what exactly were the reasons why you all moved?

Hongo: Well, my father had finished his training at LA Trade-Tech [Los Angeles Trade-Technical College]. He did the GI bill and studied electronics at LA Trade-Tech. And, in his naive mind, he thought he'd bring all those skills and get a job back in Honolulu. But my mother, all the while had plans, that we'd emigrate from the islands, go to LA, like a lot of her cousins and relatives. Many of us from the plantation. Even Kahuku Plantation. My Uncle Tom and his family moved to Central LA, Alvarado Street. And the Doi family, which was the Yoshikawa [*phonetic*], they were the Pūpūkea plantation people. They moved to Gardena. And so she just wanted to do that same kind of thing because she thought the islands, A, were too small for her, and she thought Honolulu people were uppity. She didn't get along with them. [*Laughs*] Country, you know. So she thought she'd get a better shake in LA. And she persuaded my father to get a job in LA. Got a job, he brought us over. And we started out on some house near Alvarado Street, near our cousins, my mother's uncle. And then to Kingsley Drive, near Midtown, which is called Koreatown now. And then, when they could afford it in, I think it was 1961 or '62, '61 or '62, they bought a tract home in the valley. And then me and my brother weren't getting along in school with the—you know, we were the only kids of color in the school. I was fighting every day. I mean, I literally was fighting every day.

Q: Which school was this, Garrett?

Hongo: It was junior high school. In elementary school, it was okay, but as soon as I got to junior high school, there were a lot of kids who didn't know me, and they thought I was uppity. I didn't act like a Jap should act, you know. I'd never taken second chair. I didn't know how to defer. It wasn't in my upbringing. Because I was always, I mean, I was always in the middle. But I didn't take to being not in the middle. They beat me down. No, I beat them back. And then two or three guys would beat me down. So my mother said, "This is fucked up, we're going to move." And so they moved to Gardena in 1963.

Q: Okay, hold that thought just for a minute. I just want to pause for a minute to reflect that there were, the same way there were Great Migrations coming from the south of America, there were other Great Migrations coming from the East, through the Pacific Rim, around the Pacific Rim, into the West of the United States. And so, while this is a very interesting, charming story that I want to hear more of, it is also history and motion.

Hongo: People also think—many more Asians now are what we call 1.5s. They came after the Civil Rights or the Immigration Act of 1965. There are more intelligentsia and professionals, you know. And they tend to be, like, cooler than the rest of us. I grew up fighting and it's always been sort of my stance, for better or for worse.

Q: Yes, there was a lot of intellectual and racial violence occurring, and it's really easy, particularly with the stereotype of the model minority, which is so insulting in so many ways. Because it erases this history. Or, for example, the Chinese Immigration Act of the nineteenth

century. It's so easy to erase it all away, and that was partly why I wanted to ask you to be a part of this project. Because your lived life and your family's lived life speaks a different story.

Hongo: Yes. So we moved from the Valley, West Valley, to Gardena, because of the Japanese American community there. I mean, I don't remember—

Q: So let's talk about that. Nineteen sixty-three. So, what was the relationship between Gardena and the release of people from internment camps? Any at all?

Hongo: Yes. After World War II, there was still redlining going on, not just for African American people, but for, particularly, Japanese. So there's still a lot of anti-Japanese feelings going on, on the West Coast. And there are a few areas of LA where Japanese were sort of tolerated and they could buy homes. They could actually buy property. And one was on the West Side: Dorsey, Crenshaw, and I forget the name of the little area where all the nurses were, just north of Santa Monica. I never went there, so it's not in my head, but it's another—

Q: Not Culver City.

Hongo: No, no, no. It's a special area called—there used to be a lot of good restaurants over there. And Gardena was where there was a lot of land. It was strawberry and flower fields. And so it was available, and some of the Japanese American realtors who got everything started—Ken Nakaoka, Don Nakajima [*phonetic*], and Paul Bannai—they basically created this idea of

building tract homes in the—Japanese people would buy it. And that's [*crosstalk*]. That's what happened.

Q: And that's why all our homes had Japanese-influenced architectural elements to them.

Hongo: Yes, elements. Touches, right?

Q: Touches. Just little touches. When people would come over to my house, they'd be like, "Your house is Japanese." And I was like, I know it seems that way, and I think I know why.

Hongo: I didn't know this. Tell me what it was, how it was there.

Q: I'll send you pictures. We just sold it, unfortunately. It broke my heart to sell it. But, yes, no, the roofing, everything. Just like, eventually, my neighborhood, because of redlining, became Carson, but when we first moved into the house from Compton, it was Gardena. It was right on Avalon and Alondra. Like, literally, that's my stomping grounds.

Hongo: Avalon and Alondra, man, wait a minute.

Q: So if you go up Gardena Boulevard to Alondra and turn right and walk six blocks, that's my neighborhood.

Hongo: Oh.

Q: And that's where a lot of the other farms were. Right, and I love that you talked about—

Hongo: Yes, yes. That's why you know the koi pond, because it's near the koi pond.

Q: That's why I know the koi pond. It's between the koi pond and Gardena Boulevard. That's where my neighborhood was. I mean, it still is, but we don't have the house anymore. But I think it's amazing, because you talk about the farms, right? Which is something that people don't talk a lot about. And that's why I have, in my first book, this question, we never knew what we were. Were we rural, industrial, or suburban? Right? Because there was so much happening and so much change, and our bodies were those changes, Gordon. Our families, our families' histories, coming from the Pacific, coming from the South. And that's why I wanted to do this project, because it was such a fascinating moment, historically, and particularly with regard to, I love that you brought up these developers.

Hongo: [*Crosstalk*]

Q: You go to Gardena and the architecture is making a very elegant, subtle, but not super over-the-top bow to Japanese architectural history. Just in the homes.

Hongo: Yes, you know, even the Buddhist churches. I mean, even the Baptist Church looks Japanese. You go to Gardena Baptist Church, it looks—

Q: Totally. Totally.

Hongo: You know? It, of course, looks very Japanese.

Q: But as a child, Gordon, I didn't realize that that was history. I thought, Wow, half of our town is Japanese, that makes sense. And I didn't know at the time about the internment camps. I didn't know at the time about Hawai‘i and the plantations. I didn't know any of this. And so, I guess, now I'm—

Hongo: Well, [*crosstalk*] didn't like talking about any of that. I mean, I learned not to bring up the internment when I was in eighth grade and I got marched back to the back of the room and told to be quiet by the teachers.

Q: Oh my god. Tell me this story. What happened?

Hongo: I was in eighth grade history class at Peary Junior High and they were studying World War II and the Marshall Plan and all that shit. So, “Well, what about the internment? What about moving all the Japanese into concentration camps?” I said. I was one of the stars of the class because I would always have all the answers and all that kind of shit. I would ask questions. So I asked that question. Whoa. Teacher, Jewish dude, marched me to the back of the room and told me not to bring it up because it hurts people's feelings. And at recess, I asked my classmates, “What did he mean?” They said, “Don't talk about it.” I said, “Why not?” And they said, “We don't talk about that. You know, our parents are—it's a bad memory. They don't like us to bring

it up." And it had to do with the pain that Nisei went through. So the Sansei, my generation, out of respect, didn't bring it up. And so it was just silence in my time. Also, the fact that we were different—like, Hawaiians instead of Mainland—that wasn't brought up either, even though we had different ways of behaving. Like I said, we were louder, us children from Hawai‘i. And, I don't know, we were just less refined, I suppose. I mean, it goes back to, even in World War II, when the Japanese American soldiers were made up of guys from Hawai‘i and the Mainland, the Mainland guys came from the internment camps and that trauma, and the Hawai‘i boys didn't know anything about it. And so they thought the Nisei were all stuck up. This is what Senator Dan Inouye told me. They didn't know. And then their commanding officer, they were having fights all the time. In boot camp. They were in Camp Lejeune and they bussed them over to Arkansas just to look at Rohwer, which is one of the internment camps. And then the Buddhaheads from Hawai‘i were ashamed of themselves. They had no idea. You know, it changed them. It changed them. Dan said, "It changed our blood." And because all these histories were all kept bottled up, and that was the strategy of the, let's say, the major political system, in order to, they say, "Help everybody get along." It was the repression of these different histories. But as what Fredric Jameson calls these "microhistories" become apparent, revolution becomes potentiated. You get, certainly, a different kind of consciousness. And, ultimately, as someone like Frederick Jameson might think, solidarities that were prohibited by belief then start being potential. This happened to you and me, growing up together in Gardena.

Q: Absolutely. That's what I'm thinking. Absolutely.

Hongo: Where Japanese and Americans, we interacted, because we underwent at least parallel kinds of oppression. Not similar, but parallel.

Q: [*Laughs*] So, I know what you just said was, like, it's not the same but it's interrelated. There's a part of me that, sometimes, I don't know what the difference is between those two words, sometimes, but I do feel like that whole divide and conquer strategy, that it makes us generationally unwilling and sometimes unclear. I think what I find to be the absolute same is that all these communities of color were put to great abusive use by the state. And as a child of the 1960s, I didn't have the words for that then, but I could look around and see that all these different peoples from all these different places and cultures were being fucked over and used toward the state's kind of potentiality. With complete disregard for what that might have done to our own histories and families, of course. And cultures.

Hongo: But we were also inculcated with prejudice, as well.

Q: Without doubt. Absolutely. Like, you just said the term Buddhahead, which is a term we grew up with, as a completely affectionate term. As is, I know we're not supposed to say it out loud but I refuse, as is nigger. Like, those terms went from—and so many other terms we grew up with for all the different kinds of communities of people of color. Filipinos, Samoans, Mexicans, Indigenous, I mean, that we all used for each other. And about ourselves as well. And it's just a fascinating history.

Hongo: In Gardena, we used to say we were the three Bs and we ruled. Bloods, Buddhas, and beaners. You know? We were the three Bs and we ruled.

Q: I love you so much right now. For the listeners, bloods are Black kids and beaners are Mexican—primarily, at the time it was mostly just Mexican, not Salvadorean, not Puerto Ricans, not the way it was. I mean, that's also what's so interesting about our time is that, you know, most of the Black people were from Louisiana or Mississippi or the Gulf, right? It was just—I didn't know it then, but I know it now because of how much things have changed. Is that it was a window in time and that window was historical.

Hongo: That's how the blues came to LA, you know? That's why my brother plays the blues. It came from his Black friends and from Louisiana and Mississippi, you know?

Q: Do you know about Joan Kee's new book called Afro Asian Geometries [*The Geometries of Afro Asia*]?

Hongo: No.

Q: Okay, wait. You keep talking, it's right over here, I'm going to grab it just to show to you. Wait, is it right here on the stack of books? No, hold on, I'm getting it. It's downstairs, Garrett. I'll get it for you on our next break. But it's really fascinating to go through it because it's like, pictures at jazz clubs in Watts, where there's, like, one Asian woman and these ten Black cats on a break in a jazz band or discotheque. It's fantastic.

Hongo: You know who's my age and from Compton is Keb' Mo'.

Q: Oh, shut up.

Hongo: Yes, Kevin Moore. He's friends with my friend Bill Taylor from Compton.

Q: Oh my god.

Hongo: Yes. And Kevin talks about being too cool for the blues when he was young. I did an interview with him. And then, in his late twenties, that's when he fell into it. Because, he said, "The stuff that I was doing had no meaning. I was just a pop boy," he said.

Q: He was just a what boy?

Hongo: A pop boy. P-O-P. Pop music. And he discovered the blues because he got cast in a role as a Black blues musician and he had to play blues licks onstage. He was terrified. He needed the money so he took the job knowing he had two months to get ready. But he never—

Q: And he got turned on by the blues?

Hongo: He got turned on by the blues. But he remembered his cousin had all these blues records, and after church, they would go over and listen to that music. He thought of it as old people

music, because to people like us, that was the immigrant generation, right? From Louisiana and Mississippi. But I think his people are from Texas and Louisiana. That's where his people are from.

Q: Nothing to do with the interview, Garrett, but I have a dear friend in Paris, she's not there right now because she's an ambassador, her name is Véronique Roger-Lacan. And she is ethnic South Asian, born in Ethiopia—wait, no, born in Vietnam, then moved to Ethiopia, and then from Ethiopia to France, which is this whole triangle I knew nothing about until we met. And I met her through Julie Mehretu, and she met Julie because she had once lived in Ethiopia. And, talking to her about the diaspora of South Asians from Pondicherry, right? That went from Pondicherry to Vietnam to Ethiopia to France. So she's this ambassador, and the only reason, I think, one of the main reasons why she and I became friends is, Julie and I were over at her house for dinner last year when we had that exhibition, and her playlist was so fierce. Her playlists were so fierce, Garrett. Black American music. And we were like, who is this woman? Like, how is this ambassador to UNESCO, who is, like, a Republican politician, right? And so I just started asking her. I was like, I don't—and it wasn't just pop Black. It was like, real Black. The stuff we grew up on. And I was like, how do you know these songs? And she goes, “Oh, you knew, we grew up at my uncle's. This music saved the world.” Because there's so many communities around the world that was listening to, you know, The Isley Brothers or—but, like, even a little bit further back than that.

Hongo: “This Old Heart of Mine.” “This Old Heart of Mine.”

Q: Right? And she said that, without that music, so many colonial communities would not have survived or found pleasure or release.

Hongo: This is what was cool with all the Black kids in high school. They knew much more music than we did.

Q: Oh, yes. For sure.

Hongo: We just listened to Black music. Because that was authorized. But the Black kids knew a lot about all kinds of music. I remember Harold Gibson [*phonetic*], who taught us gospel singing and doo-wop singing when we were in junior high. He would start singing Cream songs in, like, ninth, tenth grade when it was forbidden to do white music. And he wasn't [*unclear*]. He goes, "It's a good song." You know, [*crosstalk*], "Sunshine Of Your Love." That's the first time I ever heard of Cream. I never heard of Cream until Harold Gibson started singing that song.

Q: Cream! So that's also something that I think is very—

Hongo: Because his band—I still remember the guys in his band—was Gary Liebsack [*phonetic*] on drums, Harold Gibson was the singer, Glen Nishida [*phonetic*] played rhythm guitar, and Gary Maeda [*phonetic*] played lead guitar.

Q: Damn, Garrett, check you out.

Hongo: There was a Polish kid, two Japanese Americans, and a Black kid. And that's normal. That was normal. And, to me, that's still the default America that I gravitate to in my heart. I just feel it, and I always sort of try to cut across the segregations because, in a way, we were not fully integrated, but we were trying and we were young. And it felt good. It felt good. And that's still what I try to go back to, as I say, in my heart. And there's been a lot of resistance to that. Both from, let's say—I don't know how to put it. Where I was [*crosstalk*]—

Q: Well, I just think that it was more normative, the level of racial pluralism that we lived in. It wasn't a thing, there wasn't an agenda.

Hongo: Well, dig this. You needed somebody to sing lead. Harold Gibson. You needed someone to play drums. Gary Liebsack. You needed somebody who could keep the rhythm and play bass. Glen Nishida. Okay. Okay, so who's going to play lead, you know? Gary Maeda. You know?

Q: Exactly. Like, nobody was tripping the way that we trip now. Nobody was tripping. And it's such a fascinating thing, to go from completely unconscious or self-conscious or nobody gives a fuck, to, "Well, now we have to have a—" And then this kind of really strained postcolonial tokenism that I don't quite understand.

Hongo: Well, where we—

Q: But it wasn't just the music, Garrett. I mean, that's what I'm trying to say. Like, I remember just going to the playground and there being some of everybody there, except not a lot of white

people. And the white people, at least at my elementary school, the white people were bust in from the turnip courts because they were so poor and they had no school. And that's such a flip, and when I try to explain to people how we grew up—and it's ruined me forever, and I'm glad to be ruined that way, but it's ruined me forever.

Hongo: Well, you and I are ruined alike. Maybe that's why we get along. I mean, it's so easy to talk to you, like we're related, you know?

Q: Absolutely. Well, I told a friend, “I've got to go call Uncle Garrett.” I was like, I hope he doesn't mind. He's ten years older.

Hongo: It's an honor, it's an honor.

Q: You know? It's just this fascinating place. Okay. So let's talk more about your life. So we were talking about—sorry, I can talk to you for twelve hours a day, so it's hard to stay on track.

Hongo: That's okay.

Q: So we were talking about the school of violence that you were—the racial violence that you were experiencing in school, both in middle school, elementary school, but especially middle school. And then in middle school, so, then, you guys decided—is that when you decided to go to Gardena?

Hongo: Yes. Seventh grade, my mother and father—I was quite distraught. I think I asked my mom if we could move and she took it seriously. One of the few times she ever did. [*Laughs*] We moved to Gardena. They got real busy and they found a place, and we moved to Dalton Avenue in the LA Strip.

Q: I know Dalton Avenue.

Hongo: So we lived between 182nd and 184th street on Dalton Avenue in Gardena.

Q: Oh, you could walk to school, Garrett.

Hongo: I walked to Gardena High. I used to walk behind Elaine Oda [*phonetic*]. And my other good friend, Rena Bender [*phonetic*], was on the way too. Rena and I are still in touch. She and I are still in touch. And it was very integrated, except they didn't like it that me and Rena dated.

Q: Garrett, wait, slow down. Tell me about your parents. What were they like?

Hongo: My folks were from Hawai‘i. My father was from [President William] McKinley High [School] in Honolulu. He grew up in an area called McCulley, which is a sort of multiethnic Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Native Hawaiian area of Honolulu. It's a kind of working class town. Back in the day, it was in the shadow of the old Aloha Stadium. Back in the day. It got torn down. And it was at the foot of Nu‘uanu, which is a more high-end Japanese ghetto in Honolulu.

Q: What do you mean by a high-end Japanese ghetto?

Hongo: Well, Nu‘uanu is where they have the consulate, the Japanese consulate, and so it's got a lot of water, it's got pretty trees. And up the road of Nu‘uanu, some very fancy houses are up there. And then Nu‘uanu Onsen, which is a Japanese tea house, which my grandfather, my Hongo grandfather, owned at one time, was very prestigious entertainment for the Japanese American male community back when.

Q: Oh. I see.

Hongo: My father grew up down where the servant's quarters are, you know what I mean? In McCulley. He was a shoeshine boy and all that kind of thing. You know, gambling and all kind of stuff kids like that—boxing, you know.

Q: Yes. I love that being a shoeshine boy was one way—was an economy for young kids, and older men, too, to make money. That's no longer around, but at the time, it was a way to make some cash.

Hongo: Yes, yes. He'd do that so he could buy tickets to jazz concerts and football games. I guess to, also, augment—to buy clothes or whatever. Because they were poor. And then my mother grew up in Lā‘ie, on the sugar plantation, and she went to Kahuku High School from there. And she was a country girl. They met after the war while she was in secretarial school, and

my father had just come back from Europe, and they never told me how they met but I assume they met at a USO.

Q: I'm just going to get something while you're talking. Can you tell the listeners what a USO is, please?

Hongo: Well, USO were those clubs for servicemen. They used to exist, I don't know if they still do, but they were clubs where GIs and service people could go for cheap entertainment and drinks. And it was made famous during Vietnam when Bob Hope would go over on a USO tour and bring stars to Vietnam and play for the troops. But USOs, I think, sprang up during World War II as safe areas for GI entertainment all over Europe and the States. And there were USOs in New York. I think my father went and heard live music. And there was a USO in Honolulu. There were also jazz clubs like the Black Cat. And a couple of others I can't remember the names of, but my father probably went to those, too. But he left that life and he started courting my mom, and that's how they got together.

Q: What was courting like then? Do you know?

Hongo: I don't know, man.

Q: Were there any rules around courting? Like, my dad used to always tell me that I had to court somebody for a year. Did your family have courting rules—I never did. We would laugh at him. But that was some old school stuff we weren't going to do.

Hongo: My mother and father dated like that, but they used to go on double dates with a guy who eventually became the police chief of Honolulu and her classmate in secretarial school. And she said they always had to go on double dates. That's the only fact that I have.

Q: Kind of built-in chaperoning. Co-chaperoning.

Hongo: I guess, I guess. They say my father was a good dancer, so I imagine they went to dance clubs, which had to be the USO.

Q: Yes. What other things do you remember about them? Like, if you just let yourself think back, what kind of images come up about your mom or memories that come up about your mom?

Hongo: Well, my mom—

Q: And also, can you tell us her name?

Hongo: My mother, Louise Hongo, she was Louise Kubota [*phonetic*] as she grew up. And in the islands, we're part of the Shigemitsu [*phonetic*] clan, which is a big clan in Kahuku. There were, like, great-grandparents had ten children. And one was adopted—well, he would be eleventh or twelfth—Native Hawaiian guy. So we're all over the North Shore, you know? I mean, at one

point, all of the gas stations of the North Shore, between Haleʻiwa and Hauʻula—in fact, Lāʻie—were all owned by the Shigemitsu clan. But they were not smart enough to fix prices.

Q: [*Laughs*]

Hongo: They just were not—they didn't collude, you know? They didn't take [*crosstalk*] business practices. So all the gas prices were different. You had to go to the 76 in Haleʻiwa, the Pūpūkea Shell, the Union 76 in Kahuku, and the Chevron in Lāʻie. And they're all owned by my mother's family. And I keep thinking, How come you guys never colluded?

Q: [*Laughs*]

Hongo: You know? You'd have to be stupid [*crosstalk*].

Q: Oh, bemoaning the lack of capitalist upbringing, I know. I know.

Hongo: So my mom grew up in Lāʻie with her two brothers and two sisters. She went to Kahuku elementary, Kahuku High. She was a cheerleader. She spoke good English because her first-grade teacher insisted that she learn to speak Standard English, and so she could speak Pidgin and Standard English. It was a big emphasis of hers that I not speak Pidgin when I was a child, even though I did, so I got roughed up a lot in kindergarten and first grade so I would learn to speak Standard English.

Q: This is amazing that you're saying this. Can you tell our listeners what Pidgin is and why you couldn't speak it?

Hongo: Pidgin is a creole language with its own grammar that arose during the plantation period among the field bosses and ethnic groups, which were Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Portuguese, so they had to come up with a kind of common language. And it's a sort of abbreviated grammar and vocabulary. Mostly centered around work. And there would be a lot of Hawaiian loanwords, and also Chinese and a few words like that. But the vocabulary was mixed. The grammar was essentially, from what I understand, English grammar, but there's a tone of it, there's a melody to it, that comes from Portuguese. There's a lilt in speaking Pidgin. So it's a language like creole, English creole in the Caribbean, because I remember when the movie *The Harder They Come* came out—not the Budd Schulberg script, but the one about reggae, you know, Jimmy Cliff and all—I could understand it. I didn't need to have subtitles. Same thing as when I went to *Dream on Monkey Mountain* by Derek Walcott. I could understand the Caribbean. It didn't [*unclear*] a thing, you know. Because it was an abbreviation in the same way that Pidgin was. So we spoke like that as kids in Hawai‘i. And also, in the house, my grandfather and father spoke Pidgin, and we did in the house, too. My father didn't understand you unless you spoke Pidgin.

Q: Yes. So, as you know, I have this Hawaiian, Chinese branch of my family, and whenever our families would get together, I would go, Oh my god, we're so Black. Like, just listening to them talk, they're speaking Pidgin. And I was like, Oh my god. When we were really little—I'm talking three, four, you know. So I think Pidgins are—I'm sure there are linguists, historians all

over the world who study them in English. But I just think they're a magnificent historical archive, living archive.

Hongo: Well, it's much treasured now in the islands. There's been a big revival for the last twenty-five years about Pidgin English. So I don't know that it's taught as an academic subject, but there's literatures taught that way now. When it was sort of—

Q: And, Garrett, same with Australia, right? Australian English Pidgins, I'm like, I can understand most of it.

Hongo: Really?

Q: Except for the ones that have, like, Māori—just like you were saying, Hawaiian references. But when it's not, I'm like, oh, yes, most of that I can get. Yes.

Hongo: Yes. Well, something in the heart, too, responds to those cultures and their languages. Like when I saw that Māori film*, Once Were Warriors*, you know, they're just like Native Hawaiians, man! It felt like—

Q: Totally. Totally. And also, for us, in our neighborhood, there were so many Samoans, and Samoans are so huge. The men. The whole—they're all big. And, for us, I come from a very large—the rest of our family. The women are six feet tall, they're 250 pounds, and they're not

overweight, because—you know what I mean? Or they're a bit overweight, but that's gorgeous. And for us, Samoans is like, people look right. [*Laughs*]

Hongo: They didn't feel right when you had to play football against them.

Q: No, that's absolutely right.

Hongo: I hated having to play [*crosstalk*], I didn't like that. I didn't like that.

Q: Oh, totally. Any sport, any contact sport. But very interesting to grow up in neighborhoods where Samoans, Filipinos, Japanese, Hawaiians, Chinese, right? Korean. Right? I mean, just remarkable. And then Mexicans. Black people who were from the Gulf, specifically, which is so different from Black people from the East Coast. The North. Just fascinating, fascinating moment. Okay, so, thank you for that. And will you tell us your dad's name?

Hongo: His name was Albert Hongo. Albert. And he, like I said, grew up in McCully. He was in the Army during World War II. He had his hearing damaged as a child and damaged worse during the war, and then even worse after he came back. And he worked construction on the Kaneohe Marine Base. He used to brag he didn't need to wear ear protection. It was not good that he didn't, because whatever hearing he did have left was ruined. But he would work on the jetway, pounding rock and using jackhammers, but also the jets landing and all that, you know.

Q: Yes. No ear protection.

Hongo: Right, right. So he steadily lost more and more of his hearing as he aged, and that was the sort of hard thing about his life. But that was also my entry into music, because when I was a kid in Gardena at ten, eleven, twelve years old—I guess I was eleven and twelve, not ten—he would be building his stereo kits, his electronic equipment, and I would help him at night. I mean, I didn't help him, he just let me be near him, I guess. And he'd play all this big band music.

Q: Oh my god, Garrett.

Hongo: Which goes back to his war during World War II. And I think he did it—I tell myself he did it so he could hear his music for the last time before his hearing totally disappeared. And I think that's what happened. But he was a very sweet fellow. Even in the family, he was known as a very taciturn person. And when I went back to the village of Volcano where I was born but did not grow up, where he ran his father's general store up near the volcano, all the villagers welcomed me, of course, because I was a returning son and all that. But they all liked my father. They found him a very sweet but quiet man, and the word "quiet" was always coming up. Which was unusual, for a Japanese, I guess. Particularly a storeowner, storekeeper. But everyone liked him. One of his best friends was the postmaster in Volcano. He was the postmaster when I came back. In fact, the day that I went to pick up all this mail that I'd forwarded myself—it wasn't just regular mail, it was parcel post. I actually mailed myself diapers because I had a three-month-old. So I mailed all these cheap Pampers because, in Hawai‘i, Pampers were marked up sixty percent, so I figured if I mailed it—blanket, you know. Stuff like that I mailed to myself. Books.

I go to the Volcano post office and I go in there and I'm standing in line, I'm second in line, and then, before I get to the counter, the postmaster goes, "Wait, please, Mr. Hongo" and he disappears. And he comes back, it's all my mail. I go, "How did you know that—you didn't even ask my name. How did you know that I was Garrett Hongo?" He goes, "Your face is the same as your father's, that's why."

Q: [*Laughs*]

Hongo: I go, "Did you know my father?" "Yes." I go, "How did you know my father?" "I worked with him, you know." I said, "You worked with my father?" "Yes." "What did you do?" "I was postmaster, just like now. In those days, the post office was inside Hongo Store. So every day, I see your father. And we have lunch together, we talk story together. Afterwards, we drink beer together, like that. I was there the day you were born." I said, "What?" He goes, "Yes. You know, in those days, there's lots of truck farms, and the time you was born, we had too much rain. Rain, rain, rain, rain, rain. Every day, for, like, one whole week, two whole weeks. So in the two weeks, we get rotten cucumbers, the lettuce rotten, the radish rotten, everything come stink like hell. Then you were born." You know, that's my first encounter when I go back to Volcano.

Q: How incredible!

Hongo: You can tell why I love the place.

Q: How incredible.

Hongo: This is the postmaster, Kazu [*phonetic*].

Q: Oh my god, I love this story so much.

Hongo: He was one of my informants so I could write the book.

Q: Yes. Yes. Garrett—for the Columbia staff, this is not for the interview. I had a similar experience the first time I went to New Orleans alone in my twenties for research. My father had told me about this man nicknamed Dookie Chase, and that there was a restaurant.

Hongo: [*Laughs*]

Q: I know.

Hongo: His name was Dookie Chase?

Q: I know. And there was a restaurant called Dookie Chase on the corner of my grandmother's street in Louisiana, in New Orleans, and so he said, “Just go in there and you'll have the best food you ever had in your life.” And so I went in there, and there was a front-facing restaurant and a bar behind back for the locals. And I went to the bar behind the back, and I sat down, and this man came up to me and he said, “You must be Lucian's [*phonetic*] daughter.”

Hongo: Oh my god.

Q: I had never been—like, I'm not—Lucian's my uncle. I said, “Lucian Lewis, you mean?” And he said, “Yes.” I said, “Lucian's my uncle.” He goes, “Brother? You're Brother's daughter?” And I was like, “Yes, I'm Brother's daughter.” I said, “You must be Dookie Chase.” And he said, “No, I'm Dookie Chase, Jr. But I grew up with your father.” Now, Garrett, it's just like you. I'm like, how he could see my father in my face, or my uncle, even, I don't know. My father was born in 1923, I'm born 1964, my uncle was born 1919. How? But then he said to me, he goes, “Why are you here?” I said, “I'm trying to write.” I was undergrad. “I'm trying to write about Louisiana.” And he said—listen to this, this is why I'm telling you this story. Nothing to do with the interview. He said, “You know James Baldwin used to sit in that chair, right? That very chair you're sitting in.” And I was like, “What?” And he goes, “Baldwin used to go down to New Orleans to write all the time and just sit at the bar and write at the bar.” Isn't that incredible?

Hongo: Yes.

Q: But so fascinating, the way that there are people—and those are the people we're trying to interview, too. In fact, Garrett, if there's anybody in your family that you want to recommend for me to interview, I would be so honored to interview them. I'm very serious.

Hongo: There's a very good member of the family, he's on Biden's advisory committee on drug abuse and Asian Americans. He is the most full of shit cousin I've got. He also is incredibly generous-spirited, but full of Gardena bluster like you would not believe.

Q: Oh, I would love to talk to him if he wants to be interviewed in the next few weeks.

Hongo: Such a sweetheart. He was so kind to my daughter. We visited them last month in Gardena, we had dinner together, and, you know, he, like, interviewed my daughter. She's seventeen and interested in colleges. And he held her in conversation for a half an hour, just interviewing her, he was so sweet. Man, but when we were little, he gave me so much shit. He's a year older than me. He was such an asshole, you know? I go, "How dare you be nice like that to my daughter! I'm going to beat you up just because of that."

Q: Wait, you said he was so what?

Hongo: He was such an asshole when we were kids. I had to instruct his sister to tell him not to give me shit at my mother's memorial.

Q: Oh my god.

Hongo: He was so used to just, like, running me down like that.

Q: How would he run you down? What kind of things would he do?

Hongo: [*Laughs*] Man, I'd rather not talk about it. That was just his thing.

Q: Okay, that's fine.

Hongo: But he's a charming man. Civic-minded. He founded a drug abuse rehabilitation center in LA called PACE for Asian Americans. And he's a combination of take no prisoners, take no shit, but also being extremely compassionate. You have to be both to run a drug abuse center. He would be somebody to talk to. But he would be interesting. Tell you more lies than I do, right?

Q: [*Laughs*] Okay, I'll text you about that later.

Hongo: He's part of the Yoshikawa [*phonetic*] family, and the Yoshikawas are sort of the higher-class of our family in a way. They were independent before any other branch of the family. Independent, the plantation. And they owned a Shell station in Pūpūkea where Shark's Cove is. I don't know if you know Oʻahu, but it's a very—

Q: I don't know Oʻahu that well, but that's amazing.

Hongo: It's a very popular dive spot.

Q: And you know if it's called Shark's Cove my Black ass is not getting in it.

Hongo: No, man, it's fine.

Q: Period. Dude. Dude, come on, don't even try it. There's so many sharks in Oʻahu.

Hongo: [*Unclear*], man.

Q: That's bullshit. I don't even get in the water. I don't even get in the water.

Hongo: They only go for the *haoles* [White people], anyway.

Q: [*Laughs*]

Hongo: [*Laughs*] They don't go for us. They only go for the *haoles* anyway. They can tell. [*Laughs*]

Q: Do you know how many times I've heard that from my Hawaiian cousins? Because I was like, "I am not getting in that water." And they're like, "You're crazy."

Hongo: Well, you know, there's water you should not get into, but not because of sharks.

Q: Yes, exactly. But because of what?

Hongo: Oh, rip, you know?

Q: Exactly.

Hongo: Also, backwash, the churn. Before I knew, when I was twenty, I went back to Hawai‘i, I started surfing shore break on what's called Pounder's Beach now. Well, it's actually got a Hawaiian name, but I forget what it is. And then I didn't know to pull out like the Hawaiian kids, so I rode it all into the shore like you do in [*crosstalk*]. Big mistake.

Q: Why is it a big mistake, for our listeners?

Hongo: Because it was like a washing machine. It almost killed me, man. Literally, the pressure I had kept almost killed me. I was lucky I didn't get my neck broken. I made it out, and then I started watching what the Hawaiian kids were doing and went, Oh, okay. That's what you're supposed to do.

Q: I'm just thinking I wish my aunt were here because very, very now common thing is to have Black Hawaiian Japanese kids—so, one of my first cousins is named David Kawika, and then Léonce, because we have to get the Afro-Creole in there, right? So David Kawika Léonce Brooks [*phonetic*]. And his sister has, really long indigenous Hawaiian name, then Lonking [*phonetic*], then Malia [*phonetic*], then Coste, then Brooks. It's the way in which our histories are mapped out and played out in their names. It's really interesting.

Hongo: The guy who does my glasses in Eugene is Soloman Kawika Grant. He's half-Hawaiian. He's half-Hawaiian. And we talk about the Lakers and the Rams, you know? He grew up in Carson. He grew up in Carson.

Q: Oh my god, that's great. Okay, so, what was Gardena High like for you? We got you to high school.

Hongo: Except for all the Black kids, I've got to say, it was goddamn boring. I mean, it was so regimented and the Japanese kids were so policing. I was in the so-called AP classes, college-bound.

Q: Yes, me, too.

Hongo: It was fucking boring. Nobody said or did anything, you know what I mean? It was just really repressive. So I started breaking out right away and I took non-AP courses just because everybody was so boring. I took civics with Mr. Springer where all the Black kids were in, and we started talking about the Olympics and Tommie Smith and John Carlos. Talked about that kind of stuff. And the Panthers and US at UCLA.

Q: Yes. What was the US, Garrett, for—just remember that nobody knows any of this stuff. Well, nobody on the East Coast.

Hongo: US was a group founded by a guy named Ron Karenga who was essentially a gangster. And it was kind of like Afrocentrism. You know, back in those days, there were all these kinds of groups. There were the Muslims, of course. Elijah Muhammad stuff. And there was Ron Karenga's group, called US. There were the Panthers. This is all in Watts. And I was teaching photography at the Frederick Douglass center, I think, one day. And then the Panther Center at

UCLA got blown up by a bomb, it turned out, was planted by some members of US, Ron Karenga's group. And that's why my heart kind of broke in half and I stopped teaching. Because I was scared, number one, but I also was heartbroken that that kind of thing happened amongst Black people. But that's how it was in those days. It was like gangs before there were gangs, if you know what I mean.

Q: Yes. Yes, exactly. I used to go to the Ron Karenga Center in high school, which is really terrifying, because we thought we were going to get our politics on, and we were. But it was also—he turned out to be, I don't know if he was at the time, but he turned out to be a CIA informant. He made a deal with the CIA. But also, he was notorious for abusing women. I mean, really, deeply, physical abuse. And then went on to found or create Kwanzaa, which didn't exist.

Hongo: Oh, man, listen—

Q: Wait, wait, wait. Didn't exist, wait, and does not exist anywhere on the continent, but has convinced a whole country of Black Americans that this is actually an interesting holiday, based on Hanukkah, of course. And, on top of that, sold the rights to it to Hallmark and has now retired from Cal State Long Beach as a professor. But for us it was known as a criminal period.

Hongo: Criminal. Definitely criminal. My kid, my oldest son and my younger son were in preschool at this place up at the end of Fox Hollow in Eugene, in the South Hills. And I go there in December one morning to drop them off and I see this sort of carboard box all colored up and paper and there's lettering, in weird lettering, says "Kwanzaa." And I say, "What the fuck is

that?" To the woman at the desk. And she goes, "Well, aside from your language, what's your question?" I said, "What the fuck is that?" And then she said, "That's our Kwanzaa box, that's to celebrate Black American solstice." I said, "That's no Black American solstice shit. That's a goddamn piece of bullshit that's started by Ron Karenga, who's basically a criminal." She thought that I was weird. This is—

Q: A lot of people do, and it's really hard to speak up about. The people our age, we all know that. Who are in LA, we all know that. But the people who don't, I mean, it's just, it's a profound thing to watch the embrace of this made-up capitalist [*laughs*] endeavor that worked.

Hongo: You know, and then [*unclear*] started [*unclear*].

Q: That worked, that worked, right? But also, this man used to burn cigarette butts onto women's skin, and nobody talks about that. And said—I was there in the audience with my first girlfriend—said, "We do this to discipline the women because this is how they do it in mother Africa."

Hongo: Oh, man.

Q: That's a direct quote. And showed, did it in front of us. And so it's very hard for people who were there to take this holiday, so-called holiday, seriously. So I really appreciate you bringing this up, because there was a moment, and I think that's true of all political movements, where there's so much infighting, and between factions and groups and branches of trees, that, in LA at

least, they were gangs before there were gangs. And the gangs were between political activist parties. So that's sad, I didn't know about the bomb, though, at UCLA that he had planted. But I'm not surprised.

Hongo: That might have been the summer of 1968 or 1969. I can't remember. But it shook me to the core.

Q: I'm so sorry. I can't imagine, because everybody—I mean, I can imagine, because everybody was really, in terms of civil rights, trying to make a change. And then, when you find out that people are CIA informants or on the CIA payroll—

Hongo: They didn't know that, then, though. But we didn't know that.

Q: No, of course not, but I'm just saying, once it starts to unravel and you begin to understand what's happening, it's devastating. And now I'm thinking about something you told me earlier. Do you want to talk about when you were at Gardena and RFK [Robert F. Kennedy] was killed? And that you were chief justice? Or no?

Hongo: Yes, I think it was my senior year, and a lot of it is kind of—I don't know how to put it. I got very upset. I'm still upset. I remember people talking about the prom, and we were supposed to have a band called The 5th Dimension be our prom band, and people—

Q: You mean the literal 5th Dimension band? The real one?

Hongo: Yes, yes.

Q: Wow.

Hongo: We'd engaged [*crosstalk*] the prom band, which I thought was, like, lame. I [*unclear*]. I appreciate them more now than I did then, but I thought they were—

Q: Yes, yes. Easy listening, easy listening.

Hongo: Well, you know, they were not like Stax/Volt or Atlantic. [*Unclear*] crossover artist. I thought that was a little, I don't know, suspect. Anyway, that was just me. But that's what everybody wanted to talk about. And formalize their election—this is what I was supposed to preside over—as our prom. And I thought, This is so fucking lame and so fucking callous. So checked-out. Bobby Kennedy just got killed last night, and this is what you all want to talk about? But I had to remember that the hopes and dreams for our country and for our culture was just in me. It wasn't in my classmates. They were into, like, dances and Friday and Saturday nights at Roger Young's. They were into trying to be happy when they're fighting off all that woe they inherited from their parents. And they were inside a bubble that I wasn't in. I was in some other thing. I was reading *The Nation*. I'd been going to SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] meetings at Long Beach State. And I was thinking about liberation, and I had hopes about Gene [Eugene] McCarthy, I had hopes about RFK. And then all the assassinations. I mean, Martin Luther King [Jr.] had been assassinated. Malcolm X had been assassinated. And it just seemed

like the end. And I just remember, I was shaking with grief. I had to walk away. I just walked out, I walked away from school that day. I don't remember. I just remember sort of looking at people and feeling enraged that they were so happy. I couldn't handle it. I couldn't handle it. It just broke my heart. And, in a way, it was not—I was scared when the bomb went off at UCLA, but when RFK was assassinated, it just tore me in half. And it's still a hurt that I feel today. Not even because of him, though, yes, we had lost a great life, but because of the hope for the country that he decided to sponsor and articulate, because everybody else had dropped the banner of freedom by then.

Q: Yes. Which is why they killed him.

Hongo: I don't know, you know, I'm not a conspiracy theorist. But it just seems odd. All those kinds of people were killed.

Q: I'm not a conspiracy theorist, either, but it sounds really goddamn strategic. And it feels like it had a very interesting strategic effect on movements.

Hongo: They killed Fred Hampton, we know that now.

Q: Exactly. Exactly.

Hongo: And I knew that when I was a kid. Gardena High. Because I knew kids from Watts and Compton. So, yes, it broke my heart. Gardena was, in some ways, fine to me. My teachers were

in many ways. I had very good teachers who tried to tell me I could go where I wanted in terms of school. I didn't have to go to UCLA or USC [University of Southern California], I could think differently. And they encouraged me to do it and think differently. I had some wonderful classmates, like the novelist Karen Yamashita. My friend Jerry Kuriyama, who's a retired architect now. And, well, Bill Taylor, but he went to Compton High. I guess we didn't meet until freshman year in college. But Harriet Jacobs was a classmate of mine. She's the daughter of Jake Jacobs, who was a CBS broadcaster back then—at KNXT. And it was good that way, but I needed to get away, because it was so stultifying. It was so regimented. I mean, I remember—and this I've written about—I got a lot of shit for listening to Buffalo Springfield. It's no Isley Brothers, you know. I like the Isley Brothers, too, but listening to white music, particularly hippie music, was uncool.

Q: Absolutely. Saying I was there too, yes.

Hongo: I didn't get into fights over it, I don't think, but I wanted to.

Q: I used to get shit for listening to Joni Mitchell and the Carpenters and all that shit. Still listen to it, too.

Hongo: Yes. Well, I got introduced to Joni Mitchell by my first white girlfriend. My [*unclear*]. Because I listened to it, I said, “What is this white girl shit?” You know? Come on.

Q: [*Laughs*] Oh my god, Garrett.

Hongo: But it did get to me, finally.

Q: It does get to you, finally. She's talented.

Hongo: Well, you know, I just listened, I think it was this morning, to her concert in the Gorge. You know, she gave that concert in The Gorge.

Q: What, you mean Shadows in Light?

Hongo: No, no, the new concert she just gave over the weekend near Portland.

Q: Who did?

Hongo: Joni Mitchell.

Q: You are such a liar.

Hongo: No! It's on the *New York Times*. It's on the front page of the *New York Times* today.

Q: Oh, I've got to go. I've got to go, Garrett, forget this interview. No, I'm teasing you. [*Laughs*] Wait a minute. Joni concert.

Hongo: Yes. Yes, she did a concert in the gorge with Annie Lennox, Brandi Carlile—

Q: Oh, they're so lucky to sing next to her.

Hongo: Who's the big Black woman who played guitar like Jimi Hendrix?

Q: Oh, I don't know.

Hongo: She's [*crosstalk*].

Q:I'm old, I don't know anything about contemporary music.

Hongo: And some young white girl singers, I can't remember their names. But, yes, she did that concert. She sang “Both Sides Now” and—

Q: Oh, just stop. Okay, wait. Garrett, I'm old and I took my blood pressure medicine so I have to go to the bathroom again, so we're going to take a five-minute break, okay?

Hongo: All right.

Q: Then we're going to talk about transitioning from Gardena into the rest of your life, okay?

Hongo: Okay.

Q: All right.

[INTERRUPTION]

Hongo: You're muted.

[*Pause*]

Q: Can you hear me now? Can you hear me?

Hongo: Yes.

Q: Okay, great. I was saying thank you for your patience. Garrett, I was just thinking about what you were saying about you being politicized in high school and, I mean, there were so many people who were at that time, but not necessarily where you were. And so how did that make a difference in—you said you went to college—in where you decided to go and what you decided to do after high school?

Hongo: Well, there's a key event in my life. I wanted to go away. I wanted to go to UC [University of California] Santa Cruz [UCSC], because I'd been reading about it and studying the catalog and thinking that's where I wanted to be because it's got a cultural trip and its bucolic surroundings. I wanted to get out of Gardena. I wanted to get out of LA, because it was so

concrete, you know? And I thought another college was Reed College, which one of my teachers thought would be great for me. I got into Reed, but they had no money to give me. I didn't get into Santa Cruz. They offered me Irvine, which was still being built in those days. It was a mudhole. I went and visited. In those days, you just applied through the University of California system and then you'd rank which schools you wanted to go to. So UCSC was one, and I put Irvine two because I didn't know anything, and I put UCLA third because I certainly didn't want to go there. And then I applied to Pomona [College], because one of my teachers also insisted that I apply. Or, actually, two of them insisted I apply. One was a Pomona grad, and one who, his daughter went there, they thought I'd really like it. You know, and I didn't really know that much about it. And I applied back East and I applied to Stanford. I got into Stanford. I went and visited and I hated it. It was all so preppy and white and people were just, like—I don't know how to put it. They were just as checked-out as Japanese kids were [*laughs*] about what's happening. I didn't like it. And so I didn't know about Pomona, even though it was the closest school. I went and talked to Dale Minami. I looked up, in the counseling office, how many kids from Gardena went to Pomona, and only one had even gotten in and it was Dale Minami, whom I knew, he was the son of the guy Sam's Sporting Goods. Sam Minami owned Sam's Sporting Goods on Gardena Boulevard. So I went over there and I talked to Dale, who was fixing fishing reels, I remember, that afternoon. And I talked to him for, like, over an hour about Pomona. And why he didn't go, because he decided to go to USC and I wanted to know why. He said, because he wanted to be a lawyer and he thought that if he went to USC it would better his chances of getting into law school, because SC had a law school. And he wanted to get a law degree. And little did I know what his motivations were. You know, Dale was a big star. He was a star basketball player, he

was president of the student body, he was three years older than me. But he became the dude that retried the [Fred] Korematsu [United States v Korematsu] case, right? You know?

Q: Totally. Totally.

Hongo: And he and I, to this day, are still very good friends, you know. I mean, he's still my lawyer. If I get in some shit, I call Dale. Or I call my other friend from Pomona. And they'd bail me out, or bail my kids out. So he said he thought it would be a good school for me because it's kind of unconventional, he said. And he said this very quietly, "And you're kind of unconventional." [*Laughs*] I wasn't really Gardena, you know? I was different. And I went to Pomona and I loved it immediately. There were my generation of kids all over the country. I just went to my fiftieth and I've never been in a group that had extended me so much goodwill always. First of all, there were extraordinary people in my class. Ray Young Bear, the Native American poet. Brenda Hillman, she was my classmate. She and I used to give poetry readings together.

Q: Oh my god, are you serious?

Hongo: Yes. We just had dinner together at the reunion. Louis Menand, the writer for *The New Yorker*. He was in my class and a friend. And Christopher [T.] Leland, who's first editor at Random House with Toni Morrison. Richard Cross, who didn't get known as a poet, but who was a great poet in those days. Mark Lundsten [*phonetic*]. Sandra Ott, who's an anthropologist and scholar of Basque culture. I had a great crew. And then Pete Shelton, the sculptor. David Murray

was there two years after us, David Murray. When I got to Pomona, fucking Stanley Crouch was there.

Q: Oh my god.

Hongo: I hadn't seen Stanley since I was fourteen years old in Watts. There he was as a professor. I said, “What the fuck are you doing here, Stanley?” He says, “I'm a professor, god damn it.” You are shitting me. I said, “How did you fake that?” He says, “Ain't no lie, man, I've got an actual faculty card. Let me show you.” And he showed me his faculty card. And I said, “What are you doing?” He goes, “I'm replacing Angela Davis.” She was just too hot for Claremont.

Q: I can't imagine Angela Davis in Claremont. Well, I can't imagine Claremont understanding how to receive the gift of Angela Davis is what I'm saying.

Hongo: Well, they got freaked out because she got accused of co-conspiracy with the Soledad brothers and all that.

Q: Remember that? Oh my god.

Hongo: In those days, Black people were guilty of everything. So she had done her PhD at [University of California,] San Diego, where she'd gotten it under Herbert Marcuse. And so Claremont, being hip, hired Angela Davis in African American studies, because they didn't have

any. And when the whole Soledad stuff hit, they fired her. And the committee was interesting because it was made up of two of my eventual sponsors, the writers Bert Meyers and Darcy O'Brien. Darcy, an Irishman who was the son of George O'Brien, the Hollywood film star and an iconoclast himself, and Bert Meyers, the great poet from LA. And they were on the committee that hired Stanley.

Q: Oh my god.

Hongo: And Stanley was there being Stanley. He had revised himself somewhat after having started out as a Black nationalist. I think things changed him too, all the bombings and—I think he reconsidered and he was becoming the Stanley that we know, and love or hate, but he was becoming the Stanley that later became quite well-known. Pupil to Albert Murray and all that. But he hadn't run into Albert yet, he did that later when he went to New York. But Stanley was very stimulating, interesting, and sponsoring. Provocative as always. And it made me feel better because there was a little bit of home there, you know?

Q: Yes.

Hongo: Yes. And at least—

Q: Garrett, what an amazing situation to walk into.

Hongo: Plus I wasn't the meanest guy anymore, know what I mean? [*Laughs*]

Q: [*Laughs*]

Hongo: It was Stanley. So that was the spectrum. I mean, he was off-the-charts for that.

Q: Garrett, it doesn't sound like you were mean. It sounds like you were engaged.

Hongo: I think my classmates in Gardena would say that I was obnoxious and I was mean. I don't know. I wasn't happy.

Q: Yes. That's what I mean.

Hongo: At Pomona I was intellectually happy, quite happy.

Q: What attributed to that intellectual happiness, which is such an important thing to have?

Hongo: Like I said, it was more my classmates than the faculty, although I had sponsors. It was a remarkable time. People were open. Most of my classmates were white, but they were not into being white, if you know what I mean.

Q: Absolutely.

Hongo: They tried to be hip, they tried to be awake. And they were exploring, they were taking jazz classes from Stanley Crouch and theater classes from Stanley. And we put on Stanley's plays and all that kind of thing. I had Bill Taylor downstairs with me playing jazz all day and all night, and I would go and borrow his records. I asked Bill to school me, because I was too afraid to take Stanley's class. And Bill would take Stanley's class and tell me what the lectures were like.

Q: [*Laughs*] Why were you afraid to take Stanley's class?

Hongo: I was a loudmouth. I would pop off. And I knew that I might pop off and Stanley might punch me. But I already lost half a tooth already, I didn't want to lose another one.

Q: These were back in the days when professors used to just bring their pack of cigarettes to class, light up, lecture, walk around smoking a cigarette, thinking aloud. It was the most beautiful time, in my humble opinion. I would kill to have a faculty member who was allowed to light a cigarette and just think aloud and not be interrupted by students who think that they are smarter than their teachers.

Hongo: No, none of us thought that, ever.

Q: Oh my god, never. And never would you even go to office hours. I'm like, “I'm not going to talk to them!”

Hongo: I did go to office hours to talk to Darcy O'Brien.

Q: Nice. Smart.

Hongo: We'd talk about LA and LA literature because, you know, in those days, there wasn't much. But I hadn't even discovered Raymond Chandler yet. And he knew a lot about it and a lot about Hollywood, but he also knew African American literature, and he did not think it absurd that I wanted to write poetry. Most of my faculty actually thought it was absurd.

Q: Wow. And why? I can surmise why, but you tell us why.

Hongo: An Asian American poet?

Q: As if there aren't millennia-old traditions of Asian American poetry—I mean, Asian poetry, all over the world.

Hongo: They didn't even know that.

Q: Okay. Of course they didn't.

Hongo: They didn't even know that. And then, of course, I never tried to fake being to-the-manner-born, you know what I mean.

Q: Yes. I do know what you mean, but can you say more about what you mean for our listeners who might not?

Hongo: Oh, you know, I mean, I had professors who went to Princeton and Harvard, and that's all they did. And they were textual scholars, they edited the letters of Clough and Macauley and shit like that. They were basically the dead end of imperialism, you know, literary imperialism. And they didn't even know it. I was not even an upstart in their minds, I was an absurdist. I was absurd, to think about—a Japanese American kid from South LA trying to be a poet in America. That was just the most absurd thing. I mean, a poet, in those days, was Robert Lowell. You know, they designed to bring Gwendolyn Brooks to campus. That was how it was. But I got the luck of studying with Bert Meyers my sophomore year, who was over at Pitzer [College], and he kind of liberated me. He had grown up with Japanese American kids. He remembers the day all the Japanese American kids disappeared from his high school classroom, the day the internment happened. And the first thing he said to me was, "I know why you're so pissed off." I think, in those days, I exuded a lot of fury. Not like now, where I'm sweetness and light. And he says, "Your parents were in those camps. If you want to write about that, I'm going to help you."

Q: He said that to you?

Hongo: That's the first thing he said to me.

Q: And how did that make you feel, Garrett?

Hongo: What do they say now, even in TV commercials? I felt seen, you know? He understood that I came from something, and the something that I came from was not too long ago and it wasn't fun. And that I was not there to please whiteness. Neither was he, I mean, he was like that, too.

Q: Right. I mean, that's why I also make a distinction between white people from the West Coast and white people from the East Coast. I used to joke that white people from the West Coast are normal, white people from the East Coast are just another—I don't even understand it. Like, white people from the West Coast who we all grew up with or were taught with or studied with were just normal, white people like normal-ass people like the rest of us, who were as much aware and engaged with—except for the Klan, important to say. Except for the California white supremacist contingency. But the other white people in California, there wasn't this kind of—I didn't experience, even growing up in Compton and then Gardena and then Carson, I didn't experience the kind of heavy blanket of a frame that whiteness can be on the northeast corridor. I didn't grow up that way.

Hongo: Well, the northwest area of LA, like Beverly Hills, Pacific Palisades, Hollywood was a little like that. I used to take Karen [Yamashita] on dates, and then after a movie at the Wilshire or the Wiltern or whatever the fuck theater, we'd go see *Dutchman*, we'd go see *Ulysses*, we'd go see *Iphigenia*. And then I said, “Let's go to Canter's so we can hear the Jewish kids' talk.”

Q: [*Laughs*] Canter's, for our listener—wait, hold on one sec. Canter's, for our listeners, is kind of like the equivalent of Junior's in Brooklyn. At the time.

Hongo: Yes. Well, there used to be a Junior's in Culver City. Junior's had a branch in Culver City, it just closed, like, five years ago. When I took Philip Levine and his wife Franny for dinner, I said, “Let's go to a sushi place.” Phil says, “No, we're going to go to Junior's.” So we went to Junior's Deli for dinner that night. But on the West Side they had a little bit of, kind of looking down at you a little bit. I remember they would banter with me about Star Trek and Shakespeare and the SDS and all that kind of thing. And they were all in high school. I mean, when I got to college, some of them were in college with me. Kate Kennedy, the producer of Spielberg, was in classes with us. Lynda Obst was at Pomona. Marianne Williamson, who dated Stanley, was in my classes.

Q: And Marianne Williamson dated Stanley?

Hongo: Oh, yes. It was infamous, man.

Q: Wow.

Hongo: Yes.

Q: What a time, Garrett. Damn.

Hongo: Yes. So we were all in. But I didn't talk that much my first couple of years because I was trying to catch up. I was just listening and watching. And I spent a lot of time trying to catch up.

Read all the books at Pomona, because all the kids I went to school with had read everything already. They had read [Marcel] Proust, man. Not only had they gone to Woodstock, but they had read all of Proust. And I thought, Man, what the fuck?

Q: This is so important, what you're saying. And why hadn't you?

Hongo: Because I went to Gardena High School, man.

Q: Thank you. Because, well, not only did you go to Gardena High School, but you were a student matriculated in the Los Angeles Unified School District, which is what I keep trying to—

Hongo: Hey, dig this.

Q: —talk about, I try to talk about what it meant to be a student in LAUSD so often, because for me, what it basically meant is I was undereducated. What were you going to say?

Hongo: There were books in a lockbox in the Gardena library, and they were *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, Kafka's *The Trial*, what do you call—*Catcher in the Rye*. They were all in this lockbox. You couldn't read them. They were in the library, but they were locked. You had to have parental permission to check them out. Of course, my mother would never give me permission to check them out. So I discovered, when I was at South Bay, in high school, the Either/Or Bookstore in Hermosa Beach. I needed get an op-ed—

Q: You're going to make me cry, don't say the Either/Or Bookstore.

Hongo: I was looking for an art poster to use as a background for a far-out photograph I had conceived in my head. And I went to the May Company and went through all their posters, and I found one I sort of liked, but it had run out. They just had the big board with the poster on it, but you couldn't buy it. And I said, "Gee, I really would like to buy this one." They said, "Well, you know, it comes from the Either/Or Bookstore in Hermosa Beach. You can just go there and get it." "The Either/Or Bookstore, give me their address." "123 Pier Avenue here in Hermosa Beach." I'm there and it was like, What the fuck? I had been shot [*unclear*]. I had been shot into the transcendental universe. Not only were there all these posters of all the hippie stuff and the Grateful Dead or whatever you want, but there was, like, *Evergreen Magazine*. There was *Creem Magazine*, *Crawdaddy*, *Rolling Stone*. This stuff never gets to Gardena. And then the books. Not only *Catcher in the Rye*, but *On The Road* by Jack Kerouac. [Rainer Maria] Rilke's poems.

Q: Totally. That might be where I first bought all my Henry Miller. Either it might be where I bought all my first Henry Miller and started reading Henry Miller.

Hongo: They had rooms of it. Rooms of it. They had three levels. And that became my real education at Gardena High. I was going there.

Q: Agreed. Agreed. Agreed.

Hongo: Yes. So I was buying [*unclear*] and Dylan Thomas and Richard Brautigan and Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. All that shit. And then the guy at the counter would say, "Well, you know, maybe you should try reading this one." [*Laughs*]

Q: Absolutely. Or, "Have you read so-and-so?" I mean, the bookstore—I mean, the thing is, for our listeners, the South Bay, on the one hand, is a place of remarkable—and was and still is, but at this time, very special, remarkable cultural pluralism. Remarkable. I still don't know how to conceive of it. Simultaneously, because so many of these families were coming in through different routes of migration, immigration, what have you, there weren't any bookstores. There weren't any of these things that had already taken root in other parts of town. And so, on the one hand, I would say we experienced a freedom that, other parts of Los Angeles, kids did not. I mean, we just roamed wild. We did. I mean, there were fields everywhere, there were orchards everywhere, we just did whatever the fuck we wanted.

Hongo: [*Unclear*], remember Artesia Boulevard, with the swamp?

Q: Of course. So I grew up, so, where the ninety-one freeway and the Artesia freeway first began, my neighborhood is that neighborhood right there. Literally. People could spit on our neighborhood from the Artesia Freeway, okay?

Hongo: They had pheasants in there. We used to go try to chase them on our bikes.

Q: Absolutely. And crawdads. [*Laughs*]

Hongo: Well, let me get back to the bookstore.

Q: And, eventually, the Hawaiian bakery. But okay.

Hongo: That was way late.

Q: That was way late.

Hongo: I was in high school, I had two bookstores. The Either/Or Bookstore in Hermosa Beach and Value Village on Vermont Avenue.

Q: Absolutely. Lord have mercy.

Hongo: I would go into the penny or the five and dime [*unclear*], I remember used to be a Value Village there, a barrel of books for five cents a pound. That's where I discovered *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*. Swear to god.

Q: Okay, we can laugh about it, and it is funny in this very dark way, but as writers, or just as students, as citizens, right? There was a book desert in the South Bay that was very real. And so that's why I wanted to ask you. So, when you said you were trying to catch up, I just wanted us to talk for a bit about why you needed to catch up to begin with.

Hongo: Right, well—

Q: And also, my teachers in high school, I'm sorry, my AP English teacher at Gardena High, and psychology—I've talked to you about this before, maybe—for our final exam, he asked us to bring the yellow pages, and I was like, What the hell? And this was one of the many times I got suspended for bucking up against my teachers, because I was like, "What are you talking about?" And we'd get the yellow pages, and then you'd have to pick a piece of paper, and it says the type of business, and I picked dry cleaners, and then I had to count how many dry cleaners were in the yellow pages. I had to count how many dry cleaners were in the yellow pages in the South Bay. That was my AP psychology final. And I lost it. [*Laughs*] I went off. I was like, "When I go to college—" which, of course, nobody even thought I was going to college, nobody talked to me about college, I didn't even know there was a college application. And I said, "When I go to college they're going to see that I took AP psychology, and I won't be able to tell them what an id or an ego is but I'll tell them where to take their fucking pants to be dry-cleaned."

Hongo: [*Laughs*]

Q: And then I got suspended. [*Laughs*] But that was normal! That was normal! That was normal.

Hongo: I'm really sorry about that. I didn't have teachers as ignorant as that. I was lucky. I actually had, for Gardena, I had pretty enlightened teachers, I've got to say.

Q: Was Lois Pador [*phonetic*] there?

Hongo: No. There was a woman who got drummed out for being a lesbian, but they did it on the idea that she was a communist. And she was my great English teacher, Ms. Virginia Buchanan [*phonetic*], and she was instrumental in many of us reaching higher. Like Dale Minami, like Glen Fukushima, and all these cats that ended up in different parts of life that are in, I would say, leadership positions. Liberated by Ms. Buchanan. She got me to read *The Atlantic* and *The Nation*.

Q: Beautiful. So that's where that started, I wanted to ask you about that.

Hongo: Yes. And then Mrs. Krache, who taught world lit. Who thought I was going to burn down the world. She taught Greek tragedies. That's when I first started reading those translations on the University of Chicago series. And there was a guy named Mr. Pederson, I believe he was. He was a weird oddball dude who actually went to Pomona. He would wear a trench coat even in hot weather. He must have been a dope addict, I don't know. He was very encouraging in my creative writing. And Mr. Martin I had, and he was the one who told me I should go to Pomona. He was my creative writing teacher, I think, sophomore, junior year. And just let us run wild. We could bring books to read on our own. That's when I sat behind Rena Bender and she would bring in [John] Steinbeck and Ken Kesey. First time she turned around and talked to me was, she said, “You should read this book.” It was *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. I said, “Why?” She says, “You're like both of the guys in here.” I said, “What do you mean, 'both of the guys in there?'“ Goes, “One guy is this white guy, one guy is this Indian guy.” I said, “How could I be

like both of them?" She goes, "Read it, you'll find out. One day you're full of shit and the next day you're silent." [*Laughs*] And, [*laughs*] I mean, it's this white girl talking.

Q: Amazing. Amazing. Well, right, because there also used to be a culture of talking about books. That was just normative, that I really deeply miss. Just the very quotidian question, "What are you reading lately?" The way that that has fallen out of my life, which is deeply ironic considering our careers.

Hongo: That was way [*unclear*].

Q: Deeply ironic. The way that has fallen out of my life has been kind of strange.

Hongo: Well, she got her books because her mother worked at a beauty parlor. And then there were all of these paperbacks, like, you know, what are they called? Bodice-rippers and stuff like that?

Q: Yes, sure.

Hongo: She gravitated to all the rejects that were in, like, pocket paperbacks. So Hermann Hesse, you know?

Q: Oh my god, Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*. [*Laughs*]

Hongo: She had *Siddhartha* and *Steppenwolf*.

Q: *Steppenwolf*.

Hongo: She tried to get me to read *Catch-22*. I couldn't read it. I didn't understand it.

Q: Now it might be interesting. So this was your awakening into literature, Garrett, then.

Hongo: Yes, yes.

Q: But did you know when you were in high school that you wanted to be a writer, or were you just loving literature? I mean, when did this—I'd like to now switch our interview into more talking about your work as an adult and how you came to it.

Hongo: Well, I had been writing poems since I was in elementary school.

Q: About what? Just the way that children write poems and play with language?

Hongo: Three things. I had a teacher, Mrs. Yamamoto, in fifth grade at Waimalu Elementary [School] in Waimalu, Hawai‘i, who had us write poems in imitation of Robert Frost. So I wrote poems about snow when I was a kid in Hawai‘i. And Emily Dickinson. You know, I didn't know. I was just—I could see what they were doing and I could imitate not only the rhyme scheme but the meter. And I didn't know I was [*unclear*]. And then there was a contest statewide that said

they wanted fifth graders to write about John Glenn getting shot up in the atmosphere. So we were all assigned one day to write a poem about John Glenn. I wrote one. She submitted it to the state contest and I won. Statewide, and it was on the front page of the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*.

Q: About the moon?

Hongo: Yes, about the thing. And I thought, I've still been trying to get back to the front pages of the Hawaiian papers.

Q: [*Laughs*] Because, then, you will have truly arrived.

Hongo: Yes. But I wrote in junior high school in Gardena, too, and a classmate of mine from junior high, I wrote in Mrs. Pipkin's [*phonetic*] class. He sent it to me, he said, “What do you think of these poems?” Through Facebook, he sent it to me. And I thought, You know, they're actually not bad. I figured it was a niece of his or something like that. He goes, “Would you believe that this was written by Garrett Hongo in eighth grade?” I went, “Oh, shit, you're kidding me.”

Q: Are you serious, Garrett?

Hongo: And then I wanted to impress my high school—Rena, so I would write poems in imitation of Dylan Thomas and Rilke, although I didn't understand Rilke. I would write and try

and show them to her to get her to pay attention to me. So I've been writing like that, unseriously but for fun, since I was little. And also for girls, I guess. And [*unclear*].

Q: [*Laughs*] I've got to try that one, Garrett. I've got to try that one.

Hongo: And then I think in tenth grade I got inspired by reading *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck. [*Unclear*]

Q: What inspired you about it?

Hongo: It was about feeling. And it was about history. The people were not two-dimensional, they had an emotional life, and the way they felt had to do with something they had experienced before they were in the moment that was being talked about. So Steinbeck would portray people as being people, and not just characters. That they were motivated by some encounter with beauty when they were children, that they wanted to somehow recapture it when they got older as adolescents. They had this love of an animal, like in *The Red Pony*. And that it endured through years. That there was this old man who pretended he was a pioneer and led the wagons across the West, although he could not have, given the time. And I thought of my grandfather as a person quite like that, a man of dignity and storytelling, if not of lies, if not of fables or legends. But also a man who was devalued in his own culture and society. I would be his only audience when I was a child, and the love the child had for the grandfather, and that's what inspired me about Steinbeck, reading that collection. I think it was called *The Long Valley*, which I actually did not get until I went to Either/Or Bookstore, because they were just one story in a

textbook. So I'd get the whole book when I'd go to the Either/Or Bookstore. That's what motivated me deeply to see if I could do that about the people on the plantations in Hawai‘i.

Q: What do you mean? Are you saying that when you were reading these books, you thought about your own lives and your own family's lives and wondered about what language could offer—I don't want to put words in your mouth, so could you say a little bit more?

Hongo: I didn't think in terms of language so much, but I thought in terms of stories and about the emotional lives of the people. How they had what we would call history, but unwritten history. They did not come from mainstream history, they were not considered historical. They were just people, like my people were. Today you might call them oral history.

Q: So when you started writing seriously, and I mean even as a student, was the context always Hawai‘i or Japan or South LA?

Hongo: Always. It still is. I mean, in my mind I'm still in Gardena, I'm still in Hawai‘i. A lot of it comes from all that. I mean, there's a poem that came out in a magazine today that's all about a long view from when I was a kid in Hawai‘i to where I am now, and it's all still connected. The thing that motivated me was my—

Q: Wait, hold on one sec, Garrett. What's the title of the poem and where did it come out today?

Hongo: It's called “Litter for the Taking,” and it's out in *The New Yorker* today.

Q: Great.

Hongo: I didn't even know it. A friend of mine just sent me a Facebook message. I knew it was going to be out this week sometime, but I didn't know when. So, when I was in college, I'd gotten all this great instruction from my literature professors. Despite their fussiness, they knew a lot. And I took a suitcase full of books with me on vacation, winter vacation, to Oʻahu, when I lived on the beach with my cousin and aunt and uncle. And it was Joyce and [Samuel] Beckett, [Yasunari] Kawabata and [Yukio] Mishima. I can't remember what else. I read *Finnegan's Wake* at Kawela Bay, as I remember. But that's when I decided, I'm just going to give it a try. I was going to try to be a poet. That's the first time I thought, Okay, I'm actually going to try to make this thing.

Q: And did you know how to go about that?

Hongo: Not really. I just wanted to write poems and live in those feelings and write from those histories, write from those stories and people. As I turned twenty, the relatives started telling me all these stories about the family. You know, they don't tell you this shit when you're growing up, but all of the sudden, they think, "Okay, now you can have a glass of liquor, we can tell you these stories." So they would tell me about—

Q: Isn't it amazing how, when adults finally start to talk?

Hongo: Yes, it was my grandmother's sisters who did. They opened up. And my Auntie Ritsu [*phonetic*] and my Auntie Sawako [*phonetic*]. My grandmother's two younger sisters. They would drink bourbon in the afternoons at the beach house and talk story, and laugh and then look around and quietly tell me these shocking stories. They would be like, remember Ernest [J.] Gaines talking about Aunt Kizzie [*phonetic*] on the porch in Mississippi? And I finally was hearing stuff like that.

Q: Garrett, what kind of stories did they think it was finally appropriate to tell you about?

Hongo: Oh, shocking stories. Like in Gaines and like in [William] Faulkner. A grand aunt who was murdered in the cane fields. A Native Hawaiian relative or ancestor who had murdered a *luna*, a field boss, who then ran into the cane fire and killed himself. My great-grandmother adopting children, finding babies on the pine road. She was like the orphanage for the village. And then stuff even more shocking than that. About how long people worked in the cane fields. Uncle Ken would start with mules and ended up with locomotives and trucks. And he was a field boss. He became a *luna* himself. And Uncle Tom worked as a stevedore inside the mill. “This is how you catch shrimp for bait.” You know, everything. No one's done an ethnography of those generations, and that's what, I guess, I think I wanted to do. Because there were so many intricacies, so many specificities, and such incredibly complex stories about actions and behaviors that you might see as shocking, disgraceful, or atrocious, which had deep roots in, essentially, exploitation and slavery. That's how I understood them, that's how I received them. Although they were never told from that point of view. They were told, I won't say impassively, simply as fact. There was a story my Auntie Sawako told me. She took me to the graveyard—in

those days, there were separate graveyards for Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos, because that's how the camps were organized: by race. So the Chinese had their own graveyard, the Filipinos had their Catholic graveyard, and the Japanese had a graveyard on a sand spit, on the ocean. And they, we, didn't know that that wasn't a good place to bury people, because the ocean's going to come and take it away, and that's what happened. She took me out to that graveyard. I must have been twenty. With the temple moss, Japanese temple moss, and over the sand dunes. It's at the end of the Kahuku golf course, and it's on this promontory. And she said, 1946, tidal wave came, took away half the people. Half the graves. All gone. One whole generation, got washed to sea. And then, some years later, I'm talking to my cousin, David Kubota, Native Hawaiian. And David says to me, he was working on the crew that went to get all the bones they could find on the beach and pile them up. They had hired a crew, the plantation had hired a crew, to come retrieve, whatever, the bones. He goes, "The coffins, the gravestones, bones, the wood markers, whatever we could find, we could pile them up on the beach." And these things hit you. They just, they're shocking but they're also incredibly lovely and extravagant. There's a kind of, so much heart in it that these stories really overwhelmed me when I first heard them. So I wanted to try and become a writer that would be equal to that. I don't think I—no, I'm not being modest, I don't think I got there. They had the grandeur of [Dieterich] Buxtehude in my heart when I first heard them, if you know what I mean. And it was honoring when those stories came to me. And I'm still trying to be good enough.

Q: I mean, Garrett, you are honored as a master of your craft and this history. And it's humbling for me, even though I understand it, to hear you say, "I don't know if I'll ever get there." And I guess the question I want to ask you, both selfishly as a younger writer that delves in products of

reclamation and hopefully corrections to history, is, can we ever get there? Can we ever capture the sound of the lilt of an aunt's voice who is holding a cup of bourbon and telling you about atrocity?

Hongo: Well, you know, I was—

Q: Who's laughing at the same time? I mean, how can you possibly?

Hongo: We have writers who've done a lot. Like Ernest Gaines. [*Unclear*] inspiration. They sort of pioneer the way, and you try to take advantage of their sponsorship. That's pretty much all I do. And there's the people, and the quality of their *aji* [*phonetic*], their feeling. Their *kimochi* [feeling], their—trying to capture that quality somehow. Because you're right, there's a character to all those things that emerges and that we're chasing. I think that we're chroniclers, right? Writers. And that's what I'm trying to do. My shame is I haven't done enough. Like we said before we started taping, a lot of our time is eaten up by teaching. Trying to indoctrinate or introduce the younger people into really caring and really knowing about things. And they just rent space in the heart and the mind that you don't get to conduct your seances on your own. And that's why time as a writer, like now, is very precious. And I try to, when I have this kind of time, think of somebody I feel humbled by. So that I approach it with respect. And I always start with that so that I feel I'm at a service, or I'm at service. And it makes me better. Because as a teacher, I'm quite arrogant. [*Laughs*] So when I'm writing it's a fully different approach. And that's really what I most prefer. I feel that way when I'm back home in the islands. Certainly, many people

feel that way in nature. You might feel that way with a lover or lovers. But I happen to have it when I think of ghosts.

Q: A quieting.

Hongo: Yes, exactly. Exactly, exactly. You've done this—

Q: Where suddenly my job is, suddenly I'm six again or eight again, and there are twelve adults in the room, and there's a card table, and they're playing three different games and talking *beaucoup* [much] the most elegant shit you could ever talk.

Hongo: That was exactly—

Q: Never, right? And just listening, just listening. And then somebody walks by in the most gorgeously handmade taffeta fucking dress with a martini and will pepper in three words that, again, you can't imagine and you can't remember. Like, just trying to be there again and then to transfer that experience. Not necessarily the language only, but that experience, to the page.

Hongo: Well, you do this in your own poetry. I mean, this is why—

Q: Shit. As my father would say, “Shit.” [*Laughs*] No, I don't. No, I don't,

Hongo: The first pages. Man, I didn't even know you were a sister from Gardena, but I could feel it. I could feel it.

Q: Yes, Virginia Woolf talks about how atmosphere is a very important thing. And, for me, Garrett—you're going to kill me, I have to go back to the bathroom because I took my blood pressure pills right before I got on. But, for me, and I want you to think about this while I go because I want to talk about each of your books, for me, the point is to have the atmosphere engulf the reader rather than tell them about it.

Hongo: My first book was called *Yellow Light*. It was a book of poetry published by Wesleyan University Press. That was 1982. The second book is *The River of Heaven*, published in 1988, I think, by Alfred A. Knopf. And the third book is *Volcano: A Memoir of Hawai'i*, also published by Knopf. I think that was 1993. And then I was quiet for a long time. I finally came out with a book called *Coral Road: Poems*. That was 2011, I believe. And then I wrote *The Perfect Sound: A Memoir in Stereo*, that came out in 2022, another nonfiction book. And then I have a new manuscript that Knopf just took, we're calling *Ocean of Clouds*, that's coming out in, oh, 2025, now, I guess. Our editor, yours and mine, didn't want it to come out during the presidential election in 2024, which was the first spot she had open. I think she just didn't want any books to come out then. So we're going to shove it to 2025. I said, "Well, why not shove it up to early 2024?" But, you know, probably you and I don't know who else, Edward Hirsch, has a book that's ahead of—

Q: Not at all. In fact, I have a book that she has now, too. Poems, very small. And we both decided after the election. She told me the same thing. I think that's smart because I think, A, the unpredictability—is that even how you say that word right now? Of our culture is so very strange, and then you add the election to it, I do think it will get smothered. And I'm happy to wait. I'm happy to wait, because most of all, I'll be running for a border. I just—[*laughs*] I don't have time to think about a book. I'm going to be trying to get out of this country. No, I'm teasing.

Hongo: Yes, I—

Q: I can't wait to have your new book. I have the manuscript that you sent me and I can't wait to read it, I haven't read it yet because I've been moving and traveling, but I'm so excited.

Hongo: Maybe you could [*unclear*] now, [*unclear*] Paris.

Q: Oh, mine is a pamphlet compared to yours. So, Garrett, let's talk about your early works. What were you feeling when you were writing this? And what were you hoping, what were your hopes for this?

Hongo: I was breaking through to my thing. I had not been a serious poet, really, that I knew of or understood or felt. I had been kind of a magpie in that I was able to imitate almost anybody. I could imitate a poem by Simon Ortiz or a poem by Robert Bly or Philip Levine or—it had nothing of my own, and I knew it. I knew it, I knew it. And the poets I admired, just like rock and roll bands, they had a sound. They had a feeling. They had a culture that they [*unclear*]. I

always liked the rock and roll band The Band, because they had this—I didn't know they were Canadian, I thought they were Appalachian. They had this country farm folk that felt a lot like I came from. And I loved them and how consistent they were, how storytelling they were. And I love folk music because of the storytelling. Joni Mitchell, but I don't remember all the writers. Paul Siebel. They just had [*unclear*] ethos, and I wanted to be a poet like that. But I didn't have a thing. I was all over the map, because I didn't have my stories. The plantation stories were not coming to me until after I was a certain age. So when I got to UC Irvine, all of a sudden I had to write a poem a week in a C. K. Williams workshop, and I went, Whoa.

Q: Okay, wait, let's slow down. So you went to UC Irvine for—

Hongo: MFA. MFA. I had written poetry in college, I had written poetry in Japan, I won prizes. I mean, I won all this, you know, whatever. But it was like fucking around, you know? And then I got to Irvine and C. K. was not having my fucking around. He went, Mm-mm. Mm-mm. No, sir. He was like Dikembe Mutombo, you know? Slapped [*unclear*]

Q: [*Laughs*] What kind of feedback did he give you?

Hongo: Oh, I brought in this poem about Macbeth as a samurai warrior, a daimyo. And I hadn't seen the movie *Throne of Blood*, but I wrote a poem based on it just from still pictures I saw in a book. It was a dramatic monologue. And it was basically the story of Macbeth told by a samurai. It was like a *chambara* movie, you know. The genre in Japanese is called *chambara*. Samurai movies. Because that's the clang of the swords. As a kid in Hawai‘i, we loved the *chambara*

movies. So I wrote a *chambara* movie poem, and C. K. looked at me, and he said, "What next, Garrett? Two Gentlemen of Osaka?" You know?

Q: Oh, shit.

Hongo: Cut me in half, man. Totally cut me in half.

Q: He did not say that to you.

Hongo: Oh yes. I mean, you know. But the first poem I brought in was about—

Q: How smart, though, how smart.

Hongo: The first poem I brought in was totally off the wall. I brought in a poem about Wilson Pickett as a surf instructor in Waikīkī. I was not going to bring in my real thing because it was all this—it was a very white atmosphere in the workshop. Except for Yusef Komunyakaa, who, the first thing Yusef and I talked about was the poetry of Melvin Tolson and Robert Hayden and the conflict. Oh, you know, Afrocentrism versus a broader perspective, let's say.

Q: Wait, I want to back up a little bit, because I think the criticism that you received was such a gift.

Hongo: Yes.

Q: Because you can spin book—a whole lifetime spinning your wills, recreating stories that have already been done by putting a cultural mask on it and telling the same story, and not that that might not be remotely interesting, let's put it at that, give it a little generosity. And it might be entertaining, and people might love it. But the thing about that is, as the creator, it's not pushing you to grow in any way, shape, or form. And that's what worried me so much about all the prequels and sequels and reduxes that are happening in literature, film, art, visual art. We're going to take, you know, a Leonardo and put a Black face on it and it's brilliant. And it's like, no, it's not. It's not. Or it might be brilliant, it might even be brilliant. But is that really, really the work—underneath all of this reaction, all of this defensive aesthetics—is that really the work that your psyche would do if it did not have to respond to these narratives?

Hongo: Well, what I got at Irvine was three teachers who wanted only poetry from me. And that meant I had to impress them with emotion and craft and, in some ways, story. And, for some reason, they all knew I had it. I didn't know I had it. I certainly did not. I didn't think that was what was real about me. But C. K. was not having my bullshit, so about four weeks in, I ran out of BS. So I sat down and I said, Okay, I'm going to just write something. And I'm going to write something that's only about one thing from start to finish. That's what I said. Meaning, I'm going to stay on one thing and I wrote a poem about a woman crying on the bus. I used to take the bus from Gardena bus station to Watts, 103rd Street to go to the kid workshop I was in, in Watts. And then I saw this white woman crying on the bus one time, and then a Black teenager came over to comfort her, so I wrote about that. And the workshop all went off. They all said, “Oh, give me a break. This is so sentimental, this is horseshit. This is like a Twilight Zone show. This

is like a *Naked City*." And then C. K. shut everybody up. He goes, "You're all wrong." He said, "This is the real thing. This is the real thing." Then he looked at me. I mean, he was looking around the room, then looked at me, and he just—he has these big eyes, you know. He's like, "You know, Garrett, if you can write like this, I don't see why you waste your time writing all that othershit. What's more, I don't see why you're wasting mine."

Q: Wow.

Hongo: And I went—I got it. I got it. Okay, I got it. "I got it, coach. All right." And then I wrote the opening sequence of *Yellow Light* in the next five weeks. I wrote—

Q: Say that again?

Hongo: Huh?

Q: Say that again? You did what after that?

Hongo: I wrote the whole opening sequence of the first book right after that. I wrote a poem about my mom coming home from work in Central LA when we lived in Midtown, getting off the bus. I wrote a poem about my father coming home from work when we lived in Gardena, when he worked a swing shift. I wrote a poem about my brother trying to play the blues when we were kids. And I wrote that poem about the Black guy—

Q: Yes.

Hongo: And then I wrote a poem I called, “What For?” And it was about, what do I do it for? And I just remembered all these things about being a kid in Hawai‘i that stayed with me all these years. How my grandmother baked bread, how my grandfather chanted a sutra, how my father would come home from working at Kaneohe Marine Base all covered with cement and dirt. And I just fell into myself, you know what I mean? I fell into my thing. And I knew that I had it, I knew that this was it. Because it was all out of a deep love, a deep wellspring. And this was real. It wasn’t like anything else I had written before. It wasn't chasing someone else's style. I had my own, and it was like the dharma moment. It's presumptuous to say, I suppose, but it's when you have a kenshō experience in meditation and the *roshi* confirms it. You don't know what the fuck that is until you go through it, and he's not having any of the bullshit before that. And then he says, “You're not bullshit,” and it's like, okay, I know. And you just focus and you just tune the body to that. And that's what happened at Irvine with Charlie Williams. And then I had Charles Wright, and he was extraordinarily encouraging. I remember him being very patient with me because I didn't turn anything in for four weeks. He goes, “I'd like to see a poem.” I brought in all these other poems about the sugarcane [*unclear*], about Value Village on Vermont Avenue, waiting for my father to come back from their poker clubs. I wrote this long poem about the internment. And not using it as a reason to hate whitey, but as a legacy of and a trajectory of dignity and empowerment. I was trying to write about responding to travail and injustice with the dignity I saw in the first generation of Japanese Americans. And that's what the poem—and Charles, you know, he was just incredibly sponsoring, receptive. That was so with Edward Said too, you know? Said dug it out of the files. I was supposed to be studying critical theory with

him, but he wasn't having my bullshit essays, either. He just found a poem and he told me, this is profound, this is what I should be doing. Meaning that I wasn't shit as a theorist but I might be a good poet.

Q: Or the best theory is poetry if it's done well.

Hongo: Yes.

Q: I mean, I don't think it's a coincidence that so many theorists are poetry readers. Absolutely.

Hongo: How could I believe those cats? They were real poets in my mind, because I knew their poetry and I admired it deeply, and they said encouraging things—well, more than encouraging things—to me. Howard Moss was the same way. Poetry editor at The *New Yorker*. Came to teach, I thought I was going to hate this white dude, Mr. *New Yorker* and all this kind of shit. He takes me to lunch, he goes over all my poems, and at the end, he says, "Will you send this to me?" And he writes an address on top of the mimeograph sheet. And I said, "What the fuck are you talking about? The poem's right there in front of you, dude." He goes, "I mean, at the magazine." And I go, "What magazine?" [*Laughs*] That's the thing, I mean, I was, like, out of it.

Q: [*Laughs*] Totally. Me too, me too.

Hongo: He goes, "At the *New Yorker*, my dear." And I thought, Did I hear that right? Did I hear that right? Did he say that? I thought all summer, like, he goes, "I'm not going to be back in the

office until the fall, but please send it to me then." All summer long, I go, Did I remember that right or was I hallucinating? Because I was a graduate student, and it was the poem "Yellow Light" for my mom. And so I had a great experience, and I was encouraged—Ishmael published "Stepchild," I think, *in Yardbird*. And then I heard from my friend Alan Lau who was living in Kyōto during those days—he was one of the Buddha Bandits with me, and Lawson Inada—and this is our first book, our anthology of, you know.

Q: Yes.

Hongo: And then Alan said, "You know, Maxine [Hong] Kingston was just here in Kyoto reading from *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, and she started reading one of your poems in the middle of her reading."

Q: Oh my god, did you die?

Hongo: And it was "Stepchild," it was that internment poem I was talking about. I had this amazingly—this blessing of a kiss from the parental universe when I was starting out. And so that was *Yellow Light*. Came out in '82. I met my best friend Ed Hirsch because of it. I was in a booth signing copies of my book with Charles Wright, just won the American Book Award. About thirty people come through the booth at MLA, at the book fair, buy his book and not buy mine. Not even look at me. And I looked at my girlfriend and I told her, "The next motherfucker that comes here, I'm going to get in their face. [*Unclear*]. If he talks to Charles, I'm going to get in his face." So this tall dude comes in—

Q: Oh my god. [*Laughs*]

Hongo: This arrogant UCLA professor, hip, intellectual. Just a little louche, you know, with running shoes, jeans, and a very, very nice sport coat, right? He buys Charles's book, he's talking to Charles, and I go, I'm going to get in his face. I tap him on the shoulder, he spins around, and he goes, "What is it?" I go, "You know, you come to this booth, you buy Charles's book and you don't buy my book and it hurts my feelings."

Q: Oh my god.

Hongo: He goes, "What book is that?" I show him the book. He goes, "I already have a copy." He spin moves away and turns his back on me again. Instantly tries to reinitiate conversation. I tapped his shoulder again and I said, "Do you have the hardcover?"

Q: Oh my god. [*Laughs*]

Hongo: And his face breaks because he's in this scowl, you know? He goes, "I don't." And I go, "Today, you get a free author's signature with the copy." So he buys the book, he actually takes his wallet out, pays the clerk, buys the book, and I go, "Whom shall I sign this to?"

Q: Oh my god, you didn't know who Ed Hirsch was. That's amazing.

Hongo: He goes, “My name is Edward Hirsch.” And I go, “Edward Hirsch? You're Edward Hirsch? You're the guy who wrote 'Dance You Monster To My Soft Song?' You're the guy who wrote 'For the Sleepwalkers?' You're the guy who wrote 'A Walk with Lorca on the Upper West Side?'“ I said, “You're a motherfucker! You're a motherfucker, man! You've got the most shit going on of anybody I've ever read.”

Q: Oh my god.

Hongo: I said, “You are so good, you fucking piss me off.”

Q: [*Laughs*]

Hongo:[*Laughs*] I mean, I recited one of his poems to him right there. I loved his book. I stood up in the bookstore at Irvine reading it every day for a week, it was so amazing. It was like one of these hardcover Knopf books I couldn't afford. And I was still a graduate student. And then the guy who managed the bookstore, we're still friends—he's married to Ruthie Gilmore [*phonetic*], by the way, you know, Craig Gilmore?

Q: Yes, of course. Jesus Christ.

Hongo: Craig and Ruthie. He goes, “You going to wear that out or you going to fucking buy it?” So I bought the book, and I knew the book, and I knew the book like a bible. So we became instant friends.

Q: What a story, Garrett.

Hongo: So that was *Yellow Light*. And then I did *The River of Heaven* when I was trying to connect— *Yellow Light* was mostly on the Mainland. It was mostly about LA. *River of Heaven* was divided in half. Half was about LA, half was about Hawai‘i. And I was writing and chasing all of those stories, all that lore of the islands and my family. Mostly my mom's family, but also my father's grieving for having lost our place in the islands. And the fact that he never fit in LA because he was such an island boy. And I was writing it towards his heart and chasing an ancestor, the Hongo ancestor who sort of abandoned him as a child and then brought him back when he'd been grown up. Kind of an adventitious fellow. And I was chasing that, and the book got picked up by Alice Quinn, poetry editor at Knopf, real fast, it was fucking unheard of, and it got a lot of attention. Maxine Hong Kingston wrote some very nice things about it. And it won prizes and got me around. And then it got known as a book about Hawai‘i even though half the book is about LA. So I guess nobody had really broken through about the islands except Max, Maxine Kingston, and me. And so it got picked up, it got me around some more, and got me a new job, and then it got me a way to go into this big project I had in mind, write about Volcano and the rainforest and the village and my family history over there. So I spent years, like six years, hibernating and trying to write *Volcano*, which, even though it's called a memoir of Hawai‘i, I remember editing it with Sonny Mehta, who was my editor, and him looking at me—we spent two days at the Bonaventure Hotel editing the manuscript. He'd go like this. First thing he said to me over his pistachios and Irish whiskey—I mean, I'm talking about 8:30 in the

morning, pistachios and Irish whiskey, that was breakfast. He goes, “Garrett. Now I know why it took you so long to write this book. It's not *prose*, is it?” And I went, “My man. My man.”

Q: So, for those of you listening who aren't aware who Sonny Mehta is, and Mehta is spelled M-E-H-T-A, he was one of the greatest editors on the planet, greatest publishers on the planet. We just lost him a couple of years ago. He was also, he was the editor's editor, so of course he was Garrett Hongo's editor. He was Toni Morrison's editor. He was many editors.

Hongo: Michael Ondaatje.

Q: Yes, Michael Ondaatje.

Hongo: Edward Said.

Q: Edward Said. So I just want to point out—

Hongo: [*Unclear*]

Q: And before he came to Knopf in the states, he was an incredibly powerful editor in the UK, and really was one of the people who helped to usher in what we now call postcolonial literature. But just so many works that really helped to change the world through literature. So I just want to be clear that we're talking about the Garrett Hongo and the Sonny Mehta sitting down to talk about Garrett's remarkable book, *Volcano*.

Hongo: First conversation I ever had with Sonny, we were walking around Manhattan—this was after I signed with Knopf. And we talked about V.S. Naipaul, who he called "Vidia." Particularly the Caribbean books, you know, *The Mimic Men*. And Edward Said and Michael Ondaatje. That's what we talked about. It felt like home. And that's the literary conversation that I have in my head, you know what I mean?

Q: Absolutely. I mean, for me, Garrett, your work—Michael Ondaatje's *Handwriting* is still, for me, a book—and *Yellow Light*, for me, that I go, Quiet down, shut up, get it right. Stop writing about bullshit up here that's very, very noisy. Like, just, there's a poem in Ondaatje's *Handwriting* where it's just talking about a widow twisting her hair around and putting hairpins in the bun, right?

Hongo: He's a poet.

Q: He's a brilliant poet. I like his poems maybe more than his novels, I don't know [*unclear*].

Hongo: He broke through—he'd done a couple different kinds of books, like *Coming Through Slaughter* about Buddy Bolden, which is pretty good work.

Q: Sure. Exactly, yes, sure.

Hongo: *Billy the Kid*, a kind of epic poem western. But he was in Hawai‘i, he was teaching at University of Hawaii, when he wrote *Running in the Family*. He found his shit. He found his shit. He was friends with Max and Earl Kingston in Hawai‘i.

Q: Wow. These are the kinds of stories that I think—and I think it's a macro version of the conversation we're having now about your family, where, when I was an undergrad I said I wanted to study the kind of crossroads and/or mixing between Asian and African diasporans. And I was told, in the 1980s, there was nowhere I could go to study that. And SOAS, the School of African and Oriental Studies in London was around, but still very conservative as far as I hear.

Hongo: Oh, yes.

Q: Still very conservative now. And so I'd have to find writers like you, like Ondaatje, to kind of just go, “How do I find—” because I knew what I was after was what you're talking about.

Hongo: You know Florry Anthony.

Q: Yes.

Hongo: The poet Ai—a penname she had changed to her legal name. She studied Japanese literature at London, University of London. She has a bachelor’s or Master‘s in Japanese lit at London. Similar reasons, similar reasons.

Q: So the point I was trying to make, Garrett, and will always make, is that people from all over the world have been talking to each other for millennia. And, yes, the only time in America, it seems, and even in the UK in English, that people are interested in people like you and me talking together is if we're referencing their culture. But the fact of the matter is that we've been inspired by, in conversation with, each other's cultures so much that our cultures are often, now, in the same dish, in the same bed, in the same place. And that's all I want to really say on that.

Hongo: Well, you and I both have a shared culture in our bodies from our upbringing in South Bay.

Q: Absolutely.

Hongo: But we also have an intellectual culture that we participate in. And it was also global. And then we share that thing as well. So much of the time the interpretation wants to reduce us to one or the other. The culture [*unclear*] like South Bay, which is sort of my social culture, you dig? And the culture of my body. But there's this, also, intellectual culture that we also belong to and participate in.

Q: Right.

Hongo: So they never want to accept both things.

Q: Well, for me, I don't think people even imagine I have an [*laughs*] intellectual culture.

Hongo: No. No, no, no, no, no.

Q: No, I'm talking about—no, or any of us do. I mean, I still, just like you say you're haunted by certain things, when people don't ask me about my interior life, I'm just reminded of the fact that they thought we were all savages. And that I have to then disabuse them of this notion, that I actually do have an interior reality and an aesthetic, and I am a reader and I'm a scholar and I have three graduate degrees, and I did that so I could study exactly what you're talking about so eloquently.

Hongo: But you're talking about people who don't read your book, right? You're talking about them. You're not talking about—

Q: No, I'm not. But that, too. But I don't want to make this about me, I'm just saying there's a way in which it's very difficult for people to get two people like you and me onstage together and say, “Just talk about what you want to talk about,” as opposed to, “Talk about our literature. Talk about Macbeth. Talk about this. Talk about—” And it's okay, I'm a big Shakespeare fan, don't get me wrong. I'm not that person, right? I read everything and I love a great deal that I'm not supposed to like. So it's not even that. It's more about, it's just such an incredibly high moment to sit here and talk to you and listen to you talk about your interior life and the development of your aesthetic without it having to be interpreted by—so, for example, people always say that I am a daughter of the New York School. And I'm always like, “What the fuck are—” exactly. I'm always like, “What the fuck are you talking about?” I've never even read the *New York School*.

Still, even today, I just refuse to find out. It's so out of left field, I just refuse to find out. I mean, I know what the New York School is as a professor, theoretically.

Hongo: No way, no way, no way, no way.

Q: Exactly. But, aesthetically, I won't study it. And my whole point is, if you really want to know what I'm interested in, let's talk about the fact that Betty Carter couldn't get a label and decided to start her own label so she could do exactly what the hell she wanted. And I was thinking about—

Hongo: You are a little like Betty Carter, I've got to say.

Q: I love Betty Carter.

Hongo: Especially your last book. The way you glide, and the way you glissando. I would say that the texts that you write are like her glides and glissandi.

Q: Oh, that would be a great honor. I don't know if that's true. But one thing I was thinking—

Hongo: I mean, she smacked that shit out, you know what I mean?

Q: She's so badass. She takes her time. And to decolonize your mind enough to take your time is a whole other thing. But the reason why I'm bringing her up, Garrett—I'm digressing because I want to stay focused on you. But the reason why I brought her up, and I wanted to bring her up

earlier, is because she said something with regard to your teacher who said, “What's next? Two Gentlemen of Osaka?” I remember Betty Carter talking about, once, I studied her obsessively. Her, Shirley Horne, Carmen McRae, all of them. And I remember Betty Carter in an interview saying, somewhere in the 1980s or maybe early 1990s, that it was important for her—and it's going to sound like it's egotism, but it wasn't. And that's not how she made it sound. That it was important for her to develop a style that was only Betty Carter, so that when you drop the needle, you could only say, “That's Betty Carter.” Right? That really meant something to me. And it wasn't about ego. Sure, it could be.

Hongo: Especially back then—

Q: Wait, wait, wait. But you could flip that and go, it's more an encouragement to find out what your real project is. And I always took it that way.

Hongo: And the project is the bundle of all that's come before you in terms of your heart. When we were at Pomona College together, Stanley Crouch used to say, “You've got a woodshed, you've got to find your own sound, you've got to find your own way of playing.” And he would talk about Charlie Parker woodshedding in Kansas City, being a disgrace when he would hit the bandstand and being booed off the stage. And then, two years later, he became a monster, He had found himself. Stanley would say, “But you know what you've got to do, you've got to study everything from marches and the blues, New Orleans jazz, swing, and bebop, before you can do anything with the *avant garde*.” He used to say it like that. He said, “You just can't start off trying to play like you're Cecil Taylor, because you know what Cecil Taylor has come from.” So

Stanley said, “You've got to go back to what you come from.” And then that, for the longest time, was my idea of poetic apprenticeship too. And all this time, all this later adult life, I go around thinking this is my idea. And then I read *Kansas City Lightning*, you know, Stanley‘s biography of Charlie Parker. I go, “That's where these ideas came from. They came from Stanley.” And then it's Stanley and Albert Murray, and it's Charlie Parker, and all those guys who came before. And I'm lucky that way. I'm lucky that way.

Q: Yes. Yes. And for me, you know, these critics who talk about me in the New York school, my whole thing just laughs, like, Well, if you would like to know, I really dig epics from all over the world, and I'm not talking about Homer and *The Iliad*. Even though those epics are beautiful, don't get me wrong, but that's not what I'm talking about. Or I really, really did descend from New Orleans, so jazz is in my blood. And what you can do with jazz. I mean, just all this stuff. So there's just ways in which I feel like we can get lost in casual conversations.

Hongo: *Voyage of the Sable Venus* is like Charlie Parker doing “How High the Moon.” If it's not “How High the Moon” anymore, it's “Ornithology.”

Q: Hopefully not, right?

Hongo: It's “Ornithology.”

Q: Julie Marich [*phonetic*] and I talk all the time about the abstract, the colored abstract artist, and how we don't get to have conversations about it because people are so obsessed with the

figurative. And there's nothing wrong with the figurative, I just think, for me, what's much more interesting in terms—I think I do figurative work, I just think I'm interested in what's going on inside the figure as opposed to the representation of the figure. I could give a shit less if it's a Black body standing on a canvas, I want to know what the Black body is thinking about late at night when it can't sleep. That's much more interesting to me.

Hongo: Well, you definitely do. In my memoir *Volcano*, what I was trying to do was I was trying to bring the sound and the feeling of Japanese classical language, Bunka, fourteenth century Japanese, into English. I was admiring of how Yoshida Kenkō wrote *Tsurezuregusa*, what's translated as *Essays in Idleness*. But I also admire what Kawabata and Mishima did with the Japanese tradition. Mishima gravitating more toward the Bunka and the male writing, and then Kawabata gravitating more towards the female writing like Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon. And I wanted to try to bring that into English, and there were glints of it I read, to me, in [Herman] Melville and [Ralph Waldo] Emerson. Maybe only a little bit in [Henry David] Thoreau, but there's a kind of weight, but also a kind of shiftiness under all that weight that I heard and felt in the language. Ueda Akinari had it in *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*. *Ūgetsu Monogatari*. And one of the first chapters of *Volcano* is *ūgetsu*, and it would have to do with wringing that feeling of that kind of tradition that was, in a way, my roots, I suppose, but my aspirational roots about Japanese literature, and moving that into English prose. So it would not be a normal kind of prose. That's why I think, in terms of selling, it was a disappointment. That's why Sonny realized it was poetry. And I was trying to be myself in another way than I was in *Yellow Light* or *The River of Heaven*. I was trying to bring my intellectual identity onto the page. And it was not simply the South Bay jazz body I grew up in, but it was my head body. My head

note, my head voice. My study of Japanese literature and English literature, and I was trying to bring them together. And that's what I was trying to do with *Volcano*. But also family stories mixed in with all the botanizing and the volcanology and that thing too. I don't know that I reached people. I remember Philip Levine reading the manuscript and saying, "All that stuff about your family is great, but what's all this about the rocks and the trees?" [*Laughs*]

Q: Yes, but, see, if *Volcano* came out today, I don't know if it would have the same question, those kinds of questions, because we know now, in an even deeper way, that the rocks and the trees are as much a part of our biographies as anything else. I actually wrote a poem for the first time this morning where I was just sitting out in my garden, just talking about the birds that were out there. And why the fuck not? And when can we do that? I feel like critiques of pastoral gestures in our work misses the point that we are as much [*laughs*] a part of our landscape and histories as anyone else. If Thoreau can write *Walden*, why can't you write *Volcano*? I mean, for real, I just don't understand the contradictions in those critiques.

Hongo: Well, you know, it's like another kind of narrowness, I suppose. You know, Phil is a part of Detroit, right?

Q: Sure. But I'm not critiquing him, I'm just saying, there's a way in which to bring it full circle where poets and writers and people of the West, it's almost like our landscape is ahistorical and has no significance to the histories from which we spring. And I'm just simply trying to suggest that—you said something earlier, I didn't want to intervene because it's not my oral history—but about the tidal waves wiping out the Japanese cemeteries, right? If you grew up anywhere on the

Pacific Northwest—I don't know, anybody I know—I had recurring nightmares my whole life about tidal waves. Tidal waves. Washing up over Hermosa Beach and wiping out the entire South Bay. I had those tidal waves at least once a month for years. And that's history, Garrett. That's not just the unconscious fluttering around, cleaning out my mind for the next day. That's also history. And that's what I'm trying to say about why thinking about, writing about, talking about the landscapes, the koi ponds, the places you can catch crawdads, whatever. Those things are as historical and important as anything else, that's all I'm trying to say.

Hongo: The question to ask is, why does ethnicity demand restrictions?

Q: Wait, can you say that again? Because I'm talking over it. Can you say that again?

Hongo: Why does ethnicity, or any identity, demand restrictions? Why can't an African American write with bucolic references or revelry? In a way, why can't a white person write about Black history? Or a Japanese person about Black history?

Q: And why can't a person who grows up in a town called Volcano write about rock? I mean [*laughs*] come on.

Hongo: Yes. You know, I don't know what to do about that, I just have to do what I do. I've never [*unclear*]. One of the things, I guess, I got from Stanley and also from Charles Wright and C. K. Williams and Howard Moss is, I'm writing for people of sensitivity, of extraordinary sensitivity, and I've always felt that was my standard arrangement. And it's not commercial. It's

not about selling or appeal or writing a book that flies off the rack. Of course, none of my books have, consequently. But it's about chasing something, and that something is pretty literary. The book *Coral Road*, which is the last book of poems I published, had to do with pursuing the mother side of my history on Oʻahu and the plantation life as I could represent it being a fourth-generation descendant of that. And I was trying to put as much of the stories into the book as I could. And even stories I made up, like the story of a fresco painter in Hauʻula who comes back with post-traumatic shock and decides to paint a fresco on a bathhouse on the North Shore of Oʻahu. Because he was trained to paint frescos in Florence. Which actually happened to some Japanese American soldiers. This has actually happened. And I wrote this sequence of letters I imagined my maternal grandfather writing while he was in prison during World War II to all these poets who have been in prison. So he writes to Nâzım Hikmet and Miguel Hernandez. He writes to the Chinese poets imprisoned on Angel Island. He writes to, even, Pablo Neruda. Asking for solace and advice to endure his own imprisonment. He writes to Tadeusz Różewicz to ask him to teach him how to come back from war. You know, Różewicz was a partisan freedom fighter during World War II, fighting the Nazis in Poland, and after World War II he decided to become a poet of pure humanity. He would only write to praise the important things of humanity. Bread, kitchen table, the knife, the human heart, the need to eat bread, the making of bread, the leg of a man, the arm of a woman. These kinds of things. And so Kubota asks Różewicz to teach him that kind of purity. And that's what that book was sort of chasing, was not just—I guess that was when I started to fictionalize, in a way. From what I knew.

Q: What did fictionalization allow you to do?

Hongo: Because of *Volcano*, I think, and bringing that Japanese literary language into English—I mean, this is what I flatter myself I think I did—what I wanted next was to reach out to the world from the little place that is the North Shore of O‘ahu. So I could have Kubota reach all the way to Poland, to Tadeusz Różewicz, to Zbigniew Herbert, to Czesław Miłosz. You could have a conversation, my grandfather could have a conversation with Czesław Miłosz. He could have a conversation with Miguel Hernandez, the great poet of the Spanish Republic. The poet of “*Nanas de la Cebolla*,” “Lullaby to an Onion.” And so that my family roots and oral history would connect to this great global literary world, that I didn't think of the Spanish Civil War and its poets as different from my grandfather's ambitions of heart. That I didn’t think of my father coming back from World War II as different from Brunelleschi creating the *Duomo* in *Firenze*.

Q: Absolutely. *Exacto* [exactly].

Hongo: And I wanted to have these people seen as belonging to world and global culture in a way that had to do with the heart, in a way that had to do with their earnestness and sincerity and their appreciation of that in other people. And that's what fictionalizing allowed me to do. And I pushed that again in *The Perfect Sound*, which is ostensibly a book about stereo equipment and trying to listen to opera, but it becomes a book about music and sound. So I write a chapter about Keb' Mo' and the blues. I write a chapter about Son House. I write—I almost said “a poem” about the Japanese plantation songs. And I was able to write about my upbringing in Gardena. The stuff about Joni Mitchell and Rilke at the time, and my high school girlfriend, and also there's this dumb chapter about Billy Joel and being a student at Irvine. But it allows me to reach

out. So it ends with an aria from *La Bohème*. But it starts with "Earth Angel" by the Penguins. You know what I mean?

Q: Yes. I would like to argue—we only have a few minutes, we're actually over time, but that's okay. I would like to suggest, Garrett, so, say, with *The Perfect Sound*, that you were able to take all of these seemingly disparate subjects and put them all together on the table precisely because of who you are and who your people are and where you grew up in the South Bay of Los Angeles. And what you saw and did and what was happening historically at the time and where your family came from. That, I don't have a name for this kind of aesthetic. I don't. But I know that it is not easy and I know that it is profound and I know that it takes a kind of quiet surrender to allow the individual and the psyche to be of complete and total service while also being utterly obliterated by history. And I know that you do it in every single book. And so it's just so profound to just sit here and listen to you talk about the ways in which the history of your body and the history of your family inform the work that you did and have done and will continue to do, I imagine, for a long time to come. And I'm just wondering, in closing—well, go ahead, and then we can go ahead. What were you going to say?

Hongo: Well, it's a cliche, now, to say it, but each of us is a crossroads, right? And it's not a question of being omnified, as Albert Murray would critique, but it's a question of accepting all the influences that have liberated your imagination and your emotions. Rather than rejecting them for social or cultural reasons that are preached to you by non-elemental forces, like government, like enclave cultures or separatisms and things like that. This is why I liked working with Stanley Crouch, because he understood that. He preached that. He didn't expect me to be

anything but that. And he also didn't think of it as silly that I thought that my subjects were global subjects. An Americanist would look at it and think it was impertinent to pretend that I might reach out and belong to the same culture as [Kazuo] Ishiguro or [Salman] Rushdie. You know, this plantation boy from Oʻahu. But they don't understand that they themselves are creatures of imperialism. That they are the articulation of imperial oppression. And we can forgive them their own ignorance because we understand that that's what they are. I didn't have this vocabulary until I started reading Edward Said.

Q: Exactly. Exactly. Me either.

Hongo: Edward Said was a diaspora-descended fellow himself, a Palestinian Christian. Well, so it has to do with accepting all of it. Ishmael Reed, I remember, long, long ago would preach gumbo culture. That we live in gumbo, we live in voodoo. New Orleans, you know, that it's just a blend of all these things. I mean, it's not the self-conscious multiculturalism, but it is a conscious appreciation of all that has come to be what we live in.

Q: Or, for me, what I mean by that is, besides the fact that I reject in every way that I'm an Americanist and I try to do it every single step of the day and recontextualize our histories, our shared histories, Garrett, within a global context. I also think it matters if you grow up on the water. Because any ship can sail into the harbor from any place, and it's a very interesting way to think about history and aesthetics.

Hongo: Part of the incipience of Hawaiian music of the twentieth century was Delta blues. Where the deckhands came through the canal on the ships that got to Hawai‘i and they brought music to the local people. The Native Hawaiians picked up on that guitar, man.

Q: Garrett, the last time I was in Hawai‘i, which was two summers ago, and I was at a dinner party, [*laughs*] some two guys on ukuleles started playing “Straight Outta Compton” on the ukulele, without knowing that the people at the dinner party were all from Compton.

Hongo: What were they playing?

Q: “Straight Outta Compton!” The song. The hip-hop song, “Straight Outta Compton.” On ukulele. And we all kind of just turned slowly, and it was the most—it was a lovefest between everybody there. The band, the people. It was like, of course. And all I thought was, and this might be a good place to end, or you have to hold on again while I go back to the bathroom, but all I thought was, Only in Hawai‘i or on the coast of California could this have taken place. Only

Hongo: Well, it could have happened in New Orleans, too.

Q: Well, sure, sure. But you know what I mean.

Hongo: You know, one of the first records—

Q: Okay, hold on, I have to—

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: Garrett, say what you were saying about one of the first records.

Hongo: Well, one of the first records Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five recorded was “Hilo March,” written by Joseph Kapeau Ae`a. From Hilo, you know? Native Hawaiian composer of a march, which he learned from deckhands who came through the Panama Canal on the ships that came to the islands. So it's New Orleans music sent back to New Orleans. Louis Armstrong, look it up. [*Laughs*]

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: That's profound, what you just said, and I didn't know that story, I don't think. But I think it is indicative of what we've been talking about, about why the South Bay and these cultures around the South Bay, or the South Bay diasporas, or the Pacific Rim diaspora, as I say, is so important.

Hongo: What, socially and culturally, that you and I may have rejected was the imperatives towards nationalism.

Q: Oh, without doubt.

Hongo: Because our own bodily experience, social and cultural experience, [*pause*] we're against that. There's this way of mixing. Like you saw in Crenshaw at the tiki lounge, you know?

Q: [*Laughs*] Well, I just can't understand for the life of me why people of color in America embrace Americanism so fanatically. And from this kind of nationalist pride kind of place. And it's fine except that, first and foremost, America, like all countries, is a manufactured nation. So before we even go to whether we agree or disagree with these fantasies of democracy or not isn't even important. It's just the ways in which we have entrenched ourselves into a particular narrative that I think prevents us from looking at other possibilities.

Hongo: Well, one of the things that I got from being a kid in Gardena is that you cannot deny the peoples.

Q: No. At all.

Hongo: You get your ass kicked if you try doing that. You're not just one thing. So being African Americans and Mexican Americans, even white Americans, and Asian Americans, you just had to pay a tacit respect to everybody.

Q: Absolutely, because—

Hongo: Not that you knew—

Q: I'm sorry, go ahead. What?

Hongo: Not that you knew all their histories, but they were a people. And that—

Q: Garrett, totally. If your mother says, “Go borrow a cup of sugar from Mrs. Mukogawa,” and you go and knock on the door and you're eight and you knock and go, “Hi, Mrs. Mukogawa, my mom would like—” and wait. And take off your shoes, because you now know that anybody who's Asian, you better take off your fucking shoes before you go through the door. “Hi, Mrs. Mukogawa, my mom would like a cup of sugar.” “Come on in, honey, of course. Let me get you the cup of sugar.” And then there are all these markers of a different culture and a different place that look nothing like America. And if you and Mrs. Mukogawa's daughter become best friends, say, and you suddenly start hearing about the Japanese internment camps or whatever, samurai, anything, Sansei, Nisei, whatever, right? Suddenly the world is larger than just LA. And that happened on the playground.

Hongo: Exactly.

Q: It happened during double Dutch. It happened when you're playing with Samoan kids, when you're playing with Chinese kids, when you're playing with kids from Mississippi or kids from Louisiana. Kids from Mississippi and kids from Louisiana fighting because Louisiana's better. You know?

Hongo: One of the most profound experiences of my early life was lining up waiting for boys' glee club to start at eight in the morning. Your bus gets there at 7:50, so there's a while to hang out. Harold Gibson from Compton, who was a baritone soprano, who could sing all the parts, teaching us “Sweet Chariot.” He and this other Japanese kid and a white kid, we became his quartet. And then he would teach us to sing doo-wop, like, “Tonight, Tonight,” “Earth Angel,” and all the stuff that was going around at the time. And to think that we were just singing. But Harold knew how to sing, so we followed—he would sing all the parts for us and teach us, and then we all got busted for not being proper because we were hurting our voices before choir. Because choir was all only Western Anglo music. Madrigals and pop tunes. That was what was authorized by the school system. But here we are singing Black gospel and doo-wop, even messing around, doing our own kind of scatting. And that was the joy and that was the lesson. I still remember Harold teaching us. I don't remember boys' glee at all. But what I remember is Harold teaching us.

Q: Right. That's so beautiful, thank you, Garrett. And I think that those are the ways that history entered our mouths. In these private, super-secular, supposedly completely quotidian moments of waiting for our bus stop. And while we were taught in these classrooms that these other ways, these other epistemologies, these other ways of organizing knowledge, was important, it's like, no, no, no. But when you were just describing your aunts telling you stories and pouring a good drink, a good dark drink, and telling you these stories about, half the graveyard was taken by a tidal wave, for me, that is profoundly more alive history that is equally if not more important than the stories of war and victors and all those other things. And that's what is happening, for me, in the South Bay. That there are all these people walking around. The great writer,

Vietnamese writer Thúy Lê, who wrote the novel *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* that came out in the '90s, she told me she was once interviewing a Cambodian woman in Long Beach about, there's a whole population—this was back a decade or two. There's a whole population of Cambodian women who are war survivors who are exhibiting this disease, I can't remember the name of it, but it's sun blindness. The moment they start talking about the war, they go completely blind. All of that's taking place in a place like Long Beach where nobody visits except for, now, gay pride and, you know, whatever. But I'm just saying. So it's just, I think, one of the reasons why I wanted—go ahead?

Hongo: People don't know there's a Hawaiian community in Long Beach, too. A Samoan community. There's a hula halau in Long Beach. One of the most, going to be most, celebrated indigenous Kānaka Maoli writers is Kristiana Kahakawila, and she doesn't come from Oʻahu or the islands at all. She comes from Long Beach, man. She's from Long Beach. And her novel's going to hit soon and it's going to be big.

Q: Oh, I cannot wait to read it.

Hongo: Biracial—her mother's Norwegian, her father's Kānaka Maoli.

Q: Oh, I can't wait to read it. That's fantastic.

Hongo: She comes from the same place as Snoop Dogg. [*Laughs*]

Q: [*Laughs*] Another brilliant South Bay person who I just adore.

Hongo: I do, too.

Q: Garrett, we've come to an end, but I don't want don't want to stop talking.

Hongo: Well it's like a party to me, I always feel like I've been at a rave.

Q: I know, me, too. That just means we have to see each other more. But I want to know if there's anything you want to say. Where do you see yourself going now with your work and your life? What's ahead of you, what are you thinking about?

Hongo: Hey, man. For most of my life I thought that I had a long life to look forward to and I could do whatever projects and all that. I mean, my friend Edward Hirsch said, "Not another nonfiction book that takes nine years." Because I don't know if I'll have nine years left, so I'm going to try to work on three books that I have in mind. One of them is a kind of *walpurgisnacht* about an evening of Japanese American entertainers and artists congregating around a bar or diner in J-Town, LA. But I'm going to make it over three different generations. I don't know how I'm going to bring it out yet. But one of the inspirations, believe it or not, is Melvin Tolson's *Harlem Gallery*. Even though Tolson was the fiercest critic of my former teacher Robert Hayden, I still admire the book *Harlem Gallery* quite a bit. And then I have a little prose book I want to do that expands something about my grandfather, my Kubota grandfather, maternal grandfather, as a shopkeeper in Kahuku. That was sort of unfinished. There are pieces of it in

The Mirror Diary, that was a book of essays I did, and there's an adaptation of that essay in *The Perfect Sound*. But, in each case, the story is truncated. Kristiana, actually, is an inspiration, that she thinks I can write it into a novella, and I want to give it a try. And then there are some, oh, something else I want to do that's kind of a book of woe of my middle age and later life that I haven't been able to focus on, but it's more about, in a style of confession that I want to try to explore. Self-incrimination, if you will, but confession and the tradition of confessions. Like Saint Augustine or Malcolm X or Thomas Merton. Hopefully it won't be that long of a book, but I want to explore that. So those are the three books I have in mind. My students want me to write two academic books. One about poetic meter and form and traditional poetic genres. But I might be, like, I'm going to let you guys compile that book after I'm—

Q: [*Laughs*]

Hongo: Those are my academic things, you know what I mean? I don't think I have time to write those.

Q: I don't know, Garrett. You're going to probably be here long after we're gone.

Hongo: Well, I want to. You know, I've got great things to live for. You have a son, I have this daughter, I have two grown sons. Hopefully my friends will live as long as me. Yes, right now, in some ways, it's a time of riches.

Q: That's beautiful.

Hongo: That storehouse of narrative investment come back. And I'm hoping to be able to live in them, that's all.

Q: Oh, so beautiful. Well, Garrett—

Hongo: You're a lovely person. It's great talking to you.

Q: As always, it is just a profound honor, and I'll just sit around for the next few weeks going, How do I get to where he is? How do I get there? It's beautiful. And thank you for honoring this project by agreeing to it. Thank you so much.

Hongo: Your work is a gift to all of us. I teach it every year.

Q: No, it's not.

Hongo: Knocks my student's socks off all the time.

Q: Oh, thank you, Garrett. Garrett, and we have to make time to sit down in person soon, okay? I'll be in California all of fall semester, I'll be in LA, and you should fly to—

Hongo: Are you in New York now?

Q: I am in New York now. It's a short flight up to Oregon, as you know, from LA. I'll be there all of fall.

Hongo: I'll have a light load in the fall. I've got to go down to Northern Cal, I'm supposed to do an interview of Maxine Hong Kingston.

Q: Nice. Wow. Lucky her. Lucky her.

Hongo: Again. So, we'll see. But I'm going to be traveling to interview her, and either we can meet halfway or I can go all the way to LA. I always like going back to Gardena.

Q: [*Laughs*] Sure.

Hongo: We stay in Torrance, my daughter and I, when we fly down.

Q: Nice. Let's talk more. you're telling me—

Hongo: We'll show her USC, she might apply. We'll see.

Q: Tell me more. Let's talk more about all of this and make some plans, okay?

Hongo: All right, Robin. I wish you well, wish you good health, and—

Q: Thank you, darling. Thank you so much for doing this for us.

Hongo: I can't wait to read your pamphlet, I'd love to see it.

Q: It's about Cavafy!

Hongo: No shit!

Q: It is. It's called *Archive of Desire*.

Hongo: Oh, that's interesting. You know, I joke with my friend Ed Hirsch, I said, “We're the hetero Cavafys, man. Thinking about all our loves and shit.”

Q: That's beautiful. I'll send it to you.

Hongo: That's what we do, [*unclear*].

Q: I'll remember, I'll send it to you. I'll send it to you, I'll remember. Because, since our books aren't coming out for another year and a half at least—but I think Deb's right about the waiting until 2025. I do. I just think the country's a shitshow, and even if it weren't a shitshow, everybody else is a shitshow from COVID and all the horrible political ugliness.

Hongo: It's going to suck all the air out.

Q: Yes, it is, I agree. I'm like, yes, I'm fine with it.

Hongo: I said, “Even to spring?” She goes, “You know it, honey.”

Q: [*Laughs*] Yes, I'm fine. I would like to sleep for a year, so I don't really care. Anyway, Garrett, okay, I have another interview to do soon so I want to go, but I just—

Hongo: Remind me of your title again, please? Remind me of your title?

Q: Which one, the new one?

Hongo: Yes.

Q: *Archive of Desire*.

Hongo: I love that. I love that.

Q: It's because we went to Athens and I spent a lot of time in Cavafy's archive, and it's just exuding, it's exuding. It's available online. If you remind me, I'll send you the manuscript and the link to—the Onassis foundation has done a remarkable job. You're just going to die. You'll get lost in—tell me once you're done working on what you're working on, because you will get lost in a hole, you won't come out for a long time. They digitized his entire archive.

Hongo: Wow.

Q: And they did it so well. Yes. Anyway, okay, I've got to run. But more soon, okay? Thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you, thank you. Such an honor. I'll talk to you soon, okay?

Hongo: Okay, you can hang up now. You're cool.

Q: [*Laughs*] Bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]