I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Christine Kim

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Christine Y. Kim conducted by Robin Coste Lewis on June 16, 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.

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Narrator: Christine Kim

Location: Los Angeles, CA; New York, NY

Interviewer: Robin Coste Lewis

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Q: So my focus is really on Southern California and—oh my god, I'm gurgling—and I really wanted to kind of trouble the idea of migration and immigration, and Pacific Rim, La Frontera, border, *la línea* [the line], and how, in the South Bay at least, or especially in the southern part of Los Angeles, not the East Side or the West Side, there was so much more just what you and I have talked about many, many times, there was just so much more going on than is in the kind of discourse about what L.A. means. Even with regard to migration studies, right? It just feels like the moment you start moving south, and by south I mean south of the 10, the history gets very muddied. So I'm going to ask you a few questions.

Okay, my darling. Let me try to switch gears. So I will mostly just ask you questions about your family's life and your life, and what my hope is to show the viewers—I mean listeners—is just how normative the complexity of Southern California can be. And the reason why we don't notice is because of all the ways in which we—all the very flat, in my opinion, cultural production stuff that happens around Southern California. So when you started telling me about your family and you, and my reading your work, I just really wanted to have you be a part of this because I'm arguing now to while my focus originally was on, and I think the reason they hired me to do this, was on Black elders from the Great Migration in Southern California, I contend that it's impossible not to interview Asians from all over the Asian diaspora because it's on the Pacific Rim, as well as people all under the border, and not just separate and apart, but also to

discuss the ways that these communities have been coming together, working together, loving together, hating each other at times, whatever, but that that's something that's very much alive and present in Los Angeles, and to not do so would be to miss something really—I don't want to say special in that sweet saccharine way, but just it's unique, I think, what's going on in Southern California in a lot of ways. At least it used to be.

So that's where I'm coming from. So this interview is for you. I will try to ask questions if there's something that I think—I might interject to say please explain that for our listeners because a lot of times we know what each other are talking about because we're both of that context, but a lot of times people don't. For example in our interview I just did people didn't know that the majority of the California shoreline was public, you know? Just things that people can't imagine. I want to begin with you telling us your name, your full name, and your date of birth.

Kim: My name is Christine Y. Kim. I was born August 27, 1971 in Hoag Memorial Hospital in Newport Beach, California.

Q: [*Laughs*] I didn't you were born in Newport Beach, that's perfect. [*Laughter*] I'm mapping peoples' birth and it's so great, I can see it. You said 1970?

Kim: 1971.

Q: 1971 in August. Leo baby. Are you a Leo?

Kim: Virgo.

Q: Virgo, okay.

Kim: Ain't no Leo.

Q: Ain't no Leo. And how many siblings do you have? I know you have your sister.

Kim: Yes, I have a younger sister who is less than two years younger than me and an older brother who's about two years older than me. My sister is here and my brother is in Singapore currently.

Q: By here you mean in the States?

Kim: Here in Los Angeles.

Q: In Los Angeles. And what's your sister's name?

Kim: My sister's name is Laura Kim.

Q: And what's your brother's name?

Kim: Aaron Kim.

Q: Aaron Kim. So to Madeline and Kimberly listening in, if you guys haven't realized one of my strategies is to also use a map for all of Christine's descendants forever, and ever, and ever, to be able to find their family. I ask every person I interview to go back with names and dates of their family members because this project is going to be so well-preserved digitally that who knows what will happen to everything, but my hope is that there will be a map for your children, and for all of our children to say, hey, that's my great-great-great grandmother Christine Y Kim doing that thing a century ago for Columbia University, and this is what she said about her family. It's really important to me. I don't if other interviews are doing it, but it is very important to me.

Kim: I think it's really important also because as immigrants, as people of color, as women, you can grow up with some sort of version of imposter syndrome where you believe that your story is less important. It gets ingrained in you growing up in this country with parents who didn't speak great English, and really learning to keep your head down, don't make trouble, don't get deported, all these messages circulating in the community. But by contrast, and I pulled this out just to show you in this interview, it's called—for the recording I'll give you the official name. It's called Kyungsa Riubang and it is a record of my father's family from other 2000 years. Quite a stark difference from feeling like our existence is unimportant. Look at this, these are all family trees. So, I mean, just pages and pages of family trees. You can see the script.

Q: This is an amazing thing.

Kim: He researched and wrote this book a few years ago. The records go far back, to the Silla [*phonetic*] Dynasty. I bring this up because of that contrast between what in present terms you've kind of been made to feel like, or learned to feel, or whatnot, that your existence, the recording of your existence, is a low priority. But then where I come from, once I learned things, you know, like this history and see them, it takes on a whole new meaning, but like you said in the beginning, these are not the stories that people are asking about. So I'm very honored that you're asking—

Q: That even such a practice exists, right? But it's also, I think, both your children are biracial, right? Biraciality, however people want to talk about it, think about it, whatever, one of the places where biraciality has a high demographic is in California, and so you have immigrants marrying migrants, or hooking up with, falling in love with, having children with migrants, and how do we think about these families. And to think that it's not a part of the same history. You know, like the Chinese Exclusion Act with the railroads, things like that happening, or there were more Asian men lynched in California than African Americans, these kinds of things. And then, you know, I interview my aunt, I can't remember if you met my aunt Nali [*phonetic*] who's Chinese and Hawaiian, who married into our family, and her telling me—it was a great interview—and her telling me about what was it like in the Crenshaw District when there was this one Japanese Tiki bar where all the Asians and Black kids hang out who were taking classes at Cal State LA [California State University, Los Angeles] and that's how there were so many Black/Asian families that came out of there. So I just think it's really, really important to—the ways in which these histories are never told and yet we're going to get to your mom and all that, but it's just I feel like a lot of these terms, immigrant, migrant, all of these things are important,

and also they're filled with holes. And the ways in which they get filled with holes is human beings go ahead about their business anyway.

Kim: Absolutely. And also that, you know, this book that contains 2000 years of family trees, then we get to my generation, which has all this mixing. My older child is mixed Black American and the younger one is Ashkenazi Jewish American. You and I lost our mothers at about the same time, and you had an encounter with your grandmother's photographs working on your book, *An Intimacy*, but what's interesting is after my mom passed away, my father gave me a bunch of old photo albums and I started look through them, in those clear sheets with the gummy stuff that gets all nasty. I'm going through them, and I was reminded that there are like Mexican people in our family, Black people in our family, and it's all the one generation, you know what I mean? It's basically 1965 to the 1990s. They're old photographs, but they are not romantic black and white photograph of the Asian people in tradition dress getting off a plane with a suitcase. The reality is hundreds and hundreds of photographs from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, of kids—you know, the products of these relationships. From a kind of purity back in Korea so much that we can—my 23&Me indicated I am ninety eight percent Korean, but then you get to this point in this period where it's like oh, everything opens up, all these people from other places mix and everything changes.

Q: Yeah, one of the things I like to laugh about is we used to have Black luaus on the beach, right? The Hawaiian side of my family would roast a big ass pig, and that was back in the day when you could roast a pig on the beach and not get arrested, and the Black side of my family would be doing the hula with my Aunt Sissy, who was a famous hula teacher from Hawaii. It's

not about a fetishization of race mixing, but that's not at all where I'm coming from. I could give a shit less about that, I don't even necessarily believe in race in that way, but it's more about wanting to show Los Angeles for what I think it really is, which is you have a lot of people of color coming from all over the world, and not only figuring out how to live together for the most part, but also falling in love and creating families, or just doing the craziest things.

Kim: Totally.

Q: And allyship and showing up for each other. I just feel like the stereotypes of Los Angeles are so limited and boring. And then being born here, I get to bump into some woman named Christine Kim who turns out to have the most fascinating story. So with that in mind, Christine, would you mind telling us the names of your parents, and where they were born, and what year?

Kim: Yes, my mother's name is, was, or is, Kim Myung Soon, that's the last name first. Her maiden name is Lee. She was born in Seoul, Korea May 17, 1944. My father's birth is much murkier because he spent the first, I think, 40 years of his thinking his birthday was August 30, 1945. He was born in a very small village named Chirye in Korea, which is in the south, a beautiful part of the countryside, a farming area, that has been industrialized now. So you would have a few kids and then you walk to the equivalent of the town hall in a nearby town and register all these births at once, so you might go every four or five years because it's an official document that's necessary and the dates were often off. They wanted boys because boys could work on the farm and my father is the middle of seven kids, originally seven kids, one or two died. Actually eight kids and I think one or two died. Many years after his birth he found out that

his birthday was actually November 19, 1946 maybe. His passport is still wrong. But yeah, so two birthdays, the official Western registered, and then the actual. So astrology, it's really going to fuck some astrologers up.

Q: Yeah. [*Laughs*] And did they meet in Korea?

Kim: They met in an English as second language [ESL] class in Inglewood, in L.A.

Q: Oh my god.

Kim: My dad was at El Camino College and studied engineering. This would have been 1965 to 1968, and then he transferred to UCLA but had problems affording the books, or the paperwork, or the documentation, or something, so he wasn't able to continue at UCLA. My mother was at Compton College at the same time. Yeah, they met in English as a second language class. I think the story goes that one of their first dates was my father was a gardener. He wasn't even the gardener, he was like the helper gardener, for this friend of his at El Camino, he still talks about him, his name was Jose Bracho. And so he would kind of tag along, and he grew up on a farm, he knew how to deal with plants and crops, but of course he didn't know how to prune rose bushes in Beverly Hills. But he goes along anyway, totally butchers some of the gardens, takes off the jacaranda branches wrong, prunes whatever, and his friend is like no, no, no.

Anyway, one of their first dates was a Thanksgiving dinner in Beverly Hills at a wealthy white couples' home and that was their kind of outing into the white world of L.A. And my mother said

that she was so embarrassed when they carved the turkey, she had never had Thanksgiving turkey before, and the patriarch or the matriarch offered her, ladies first, what piece she would like, and she was so taken aback and embarrassed because she was so used to going last as the youngest child and daughter in her family, that she kind of froze and said, "I'll take the wing." They asked, “you don’t want the breast” or whatever, and she said, "No, I like the wing."

Q: Wow, amazing. Okay, I want you to slow way down because you just said so many things that I want to ask questions about. So your dad, when did he come to California and landed in Inglewood and went to El Camino College, which is where I went for junior college.

Kim: Woohoo. And your mom went to Compton, right?

Q: My mom went to Compton College, which is where your mom went to Compton College. So when you see, or think, or hear, listeners here, think about Compton they think about the movie *Straight Outta Compton*, which had so little to do with Compton and more to do with a particular culture of gangbanging at a very small closed window of time, but before and after there's just so much history and beauty here.

Kim: [*Crosstalk*] —like Reggie Burrows Hudges' painting *Swimming in Compton* [*unclear*] where all those houses had pools.

Q: Exactly. So many houses in Compton had swimming pools. But I want you to take us quickly to the path that your parents took from Korea to Compton and Inglewood.

Kim: Okay. So my father, I had to look this up, he left Korea in 1964.

Q: Wow, did he come straight to L.A.?

Kim: Straight to L.A.

Q: He landed in L.A. in 1964?

Kim: Yeah. [*Crosstalk*]

Q: —it was just about to blow up.

Kim: Yeah, it was about to blow up. He remembers like the 10 being completed, the 10 that runs west, it's our kind of main drag. I live right off the 10. He came and the story goes that his high school friends—my dad is pretty extroverted, articulate, and curious, and among his high school friends he had this dream that he wanted to go to America. Where he was living in Korea and how he was living was a postwar state with just extreme poverty. And so the friends got together, this is probably like four or five high school friends that he's still friends with, got money together to buy him a one-way ticket, and said, "You go, you get set up, and then we'll come. But you're going to be the most likely to learn English," and all of that. So they all buy him this one-way ticket. His brother was already here in L.A. proper. I don't know exactly where. I could find that out for you. And he came, because you do need a family member to sponsor you, right? So

when he came he did not know—I mean, he knew probably “hello,” “goodbye,” “how are you?” that was it. He gets to LAX, and he's sitting there at LAX, and he had seen some John Wayne movies, and some westerns, and he goes to the bar. I think he was like eighteen or nineteen years old. He goes to the bar and he like orders a whiskey. He wants to be all like American, so he's like. "Whiskey, please." He goes up and then he realizes he only has $5 or $10 and it's in his sock, because he was so nervous about losing his money. He rode the whole flight, it's fourteen hours, I don’t know how long it was back then, but he gets the bill and he's like oh shit, I can't give this bartender my foot sweat $5 bill. So he says, I have to go to the bathroom, and he points to the bathroom. And the woman, the bartender is thinking “you're going to take off,” they're kind of doing this like “no English” exchange, “I give you the whiskey and you’re leaving,” and all he's thinking is “oh my gosh the sweaty $5 bill.” He goes to the bathroom, he comes back, he dries the $5 bill off at the air blower in the bathroom, and then he comes back, he has this whiskey, and he has no money left. But he got his whiskey.

Q: And then what did he do?

Kim: And so he comes, he lives with his brother, his older brother, who was very much like, “sleep on the sofa, you have to pay—earn your keep, get to work right away.” So he started taking whatever jobs he could and trying to figure out how he could get into school. One of his jobs was at an umbrella factory, and I think I'm piecing together it might have been in Vernon, not quite sure, could find that out for you. But his part of the assembly line was to take the post, the stand, and dip it in paint, and then pass it along, and grab the next one, and dip it in paint, and pass it along.

Q: Total assembly line.

Kim: Menial, factory, assembly line work, computers and machines do all this now. So that's kind of his start.

Q: Okay, wait, slow down. Because your—this is what's so amazing to me during these interviews like there's so much history in them because during that time there were so many factories, not only in South Central, Inglewood, all that area, but City of Industry certainly, and so many people I've interviewed have talked about my job was to stand on an assembly line and do—right. And everybody had some crazy like—and it was always very Marxist, always just this little thing like I was supposed—if I worked at a fish cannery, I wasn't supposed to put the fish in the can, I was supposed to open the can and put the fish so that it would move along and the next person would put the fish, and the next person would close the can. Like it's just fascinating to hear how much—how physical and embodied assembly line work used to be. I just want to point that out. And that the reason why I think California had so many factories is that there was so much real estate that hadn't been developed yet.

Kim: In fact my dad got into importing and the shipping at Long Beach, all of that afterwards. But another job he had in that same vein was like at some sort of distribution warehouse and his supervisor/manager he said was this really nice Black guy, and he couldn't say my dad's name, which is Kim See Wong [*phonetic*], so they would call him Seaweed.

Q: Did you say—did you just say D Weed?

Kim: Seaweed because he couldn't like See Wong, and they guy's like, what's your name, what's your name, he's like okay—

Q: Wait, Seaweed like seaweed the sea vegetable?

Kim: Like eating from the ocean— [*crosstalk*]

Q: That's so Black. That is so Black. It's also like so Black and Asian, that's the thing too.

Kim: My dad's like I'm cool with that.

Q: And both ways, I mean, so many things. That's beautiful, that's beautiful. Wow, okay. So he worked at this warehouse.

Kim: There are other stories—the gardening, the gardener's assistant job, these are some of the stories that we grew up hearing. And I think that there was—my parents, both of them, were part of kind of an earlier wave of Korean immigration. I think the late 1970s and 1980s were really when you start seeing spikes, increases. I think in some ways my mother and father meeting, it was like two Korean kids in the ESL class. It wasn't like there was a sea of people who spoke the same language getting together. Yeah, there were family members, and people that they met, but it was still pretty limited in the mid-1960s.

Q: So they met in the ESL class at El Camino, you said?

Kim: I'm not sure, I think in Inglewood.

Q: In Inglewood.

Kim: Now by contrast my mother grew up before the Korean War quite privileged. Her father had money in Seoul, all the daughters went to college, which was not the norm. She started at Ewha Women's College before she emigrated to L.A., she came straight to L.A. She was a young child in Seoul during the war, she has a lot of trauma that's related to avoidance and shame. She was not very open. She passed away a little over two years ago. She was not really open to talking about a lot of things around her past. There were things that we heard about about like the nuns at her Catholic high school, and these things that her grandmother would do for her, and I think in telling stories that were positive memories from a long time ago, right, was a way to keep her psychologically able to cope. Her immigrant stories, I remember war stories about her little four or five year old cousin getting blown to bits by a bomb. So I can only imagine that just barely scrapes the surface of the things that she had seen and been traumatized by.

I think coming to the U.S., speaking no English, having no money, all of these—I don’t know, it might have like reignited, triggered her trauma, because she really—she didn't tell me much about it. She's told me a lot about the hardship of family and being separated from her family, or losing her mom.

But my father was from the countryside although they were really poor, they were rich in like history and scholarship. The home where he was born in, which is documented in this book, is now a scholar's residence for poets, and writers, and artists, and that they also teach WOOF, World Organization for Organic Farming. It's also very, very traditional, very sexist, very patriarchal, very Confucian. They still practice. You have to go to the grave and shrine and pray, and bring food, and fruit, and gifts, and incense annually. My mother's family being more cosmopolitan in many ways they weren't a good match. If they had met in Korea their families probably would not have wanted them to be together. It was really by kind of the grace of being away from it all, even though they had some family here, a sibling or two in L.A., that they were able to cultivate their own sense of themselves and of family. Because even though they were both from Korea, and the same age, and came at the same time, their own cultural and class milieus within Korea were so starkly different that then coupling here was both full of possibility and potential, but also awkwardly distanced from being able to process how they were going to proceed. You know?

Q: Yeah. And I feel like I've heard this in different versions in doing these interviews, most of in terms of—but it's similar—interracial couples meeting. Like my friend Mira's parents, one was German-American, the other was South Asian, met at Cal. Just all these accidental histories rubbing up together that necessarily could never have taken place. I'm fascinated by it. And I mean it also for—I'm not talking about interracial anything right now, like my parents met accidentally. My dad was on vacation, my mother just happened to be here, your parents were in this ESL class, there are all these accidents. And yet history seems to require some kind of

accidental contribution in order to keep going. As my father would probably say, some kind of like educated fool he said yes to their lives being taken in a certain direction.

Kim: Yeah, there's a word for that in Korean, it's called *inyun*, and it's actually it comes up in that movie *Past Lives*. I just did a talk with the director, Celine Song, and actors Teo Yoo and Greta Lee last week. It's this idea, which does not translate to English, maybe destiny or fate, but that's too general. It's more that if two people end up together, they have 8000 layers of *inyun* and that 8000 number is very specific. It's a Buddhist belief. In reincarnation we might have been two birds that flew past each other, or I used the nest that you abandoned, or whatever like 8000 layers of somehow this kind of passing by so that finally you're together and these forces have pulled you together. Versus one layer of *inyun* might be you brush up against someone at a book store, and you don't ever speak, but that can be a layer. So this idea that coupling can happen through these sort of accidental inadvertent instances and moments, but that there is something, this belief that there's actually nothing accidental about that at all, it kind of presented itself as an accident, but that this was sort of because you had all this built up in your kind of psychic karmic Buddhist energy.

Q: Yeah, that Tibetan's say, first of all the luckiest birth you can have is a human birth because it's a way you can change, but also that to get that human birth you have to go through tens of thousands of lifetimes to get it again, and why we should not waste time therefore. Also because of the *inyun* you're talking about, you have so much karma to work out. Don't waste time.

Kim: And I think it really makes you realize, actually my husband Kevin was talking about this with your book, he can't wait to talk to you about it when we're together this summer, is he was so reminded of so many of the teachings when he was living on an ashram in Nova Scotia and India as a monk. Stretching something out to either be infinite or at least in terms of geologic time, where if you can even suspend this kind of notion and it hovers over you in some capacity, not in any kind of like heavy or debilitating capacity, but that it actually leads to humility. Because we're living these lives and maybe we've even lived these lives before, or we were two pieces of algae on a rock, that like at the end it's just—it's about to imagine that is to give yourself the gift of humility.

Q: Absolutely. And with regard to this project, what I'm thinking about is, you know, Black people, we don't talk about it in these terms, but we very much believe in transmigration, reincarnation. I'm sure you have thousands of Black friends, you have a Black daughter who's biracial and Korean, and you have a family of in-laws, like it is impossible to have a baby and not have someone say, oh, that's Uncle So and So come back, oh look who came back this time. And it's something I wish we talked about more because I do think it's a part of history and the ways in which theologies and philosophies migrate, but we call them like the old folks are just talking, but it's actually a great deal more going on in those kinds of conversations. And as such when in the Pacific Rim families started to meet or individuals started to meet, to me when I hear stories like this about your parents, or my parents, or anyone's parents, it doesn't have to be anything, it was just history having its way. It's also like this beautiful term that I don't want to even try to pronounce because I'll mess it up.

Kim: *Inyun*.

Q: *Inyun*. But it's also the ways history feels like it's having its way with our bodies and making our bodies do things that it needs us to do in order for us to evolve into different histories. And in this regard I'm talking about what took place in the Pacific Rim and most specifically Southern California at this time. There was just so much change. And sure there was lots of activism, there were lots of assassinations, there was lots of violence taking place, there was lots of commerce, there was lots of commerce being ripped up, there were lots of white supremacists. California had the third largest, at that time, third largest population of white supremacists in the state. I remember Tom Metzger running for the mayor of San Diego fully hooded in a grand dragon uniform and stumped the campaign trail fully hooded in his Klan great. There was so much happening. That's what I'm interested in and you're giving a gift to us beautifully, you know, about the ways in which so many people arrived in this land, and instead of—there wasn't any really fixed kind of segregational practices besides redlining. [*Laughs*] Redlining in Beverly Hills and West L.A., but the rest of the folk who had come from all over, and brought all these thousands of years of history with them, found each other, and said yes. And that's just what boggles my mind. It's like no, I don’t know nothing about no Korea, but you're name's going to be Seaweed because how cute is that, and it's also so much love and affection, and we all have to get through this together, and it was a lot of that. I saw so much of that growing up. People who would in a million years not know each other, talk to each other, not to mention marry each other and have children, did just that.

Kim: Yeah. It's really incredible and it's really beautiful. And it's why it's just so maddening and gut wrenching all these ongoing strategies and measures of pitting people of color and immigrants against each other. In Florida in mandatory to teach Asian-American studies, but banned to teach—Black studies or just the Critical Race Theory? They don't even understand what it is. [*Crosstalk*] So I think that these histories are totally intertwined all the way from the first ship from the Philippines I think was in 1587, or if you go back further in time people from Central Asia crossing the Bering Strait. [*Ringing*] Indigenous global peoples.

Q: Which is what my book is about. Absolutely, it's like— [*crosstalk*] That's a myth too, exactly.

[INTERRUPTION]

Kim: Okay, so what I was saying was that's the much, much longer arc of humanity and migration. But then fast forward to the latter half of the twentieth century and to today and I think that it's always been in this place. I can't remember my train of thought there.

Q: Well I can maybe just add something to this just to keep us on track. Within this incredible arc of history that predates the United States by a lot, you and I were having a conversation while we were becoming friends, and I think you said something like well, you know, my mom went to Compton College, and I was like, what are you talking about, right? Like tell me of that. And now that you tell me a little bit more about Mrs. Kim being born in 1944 in Korea and that she came from a middle class, upper middle class privileged background, and ended up at Compton College, then you really have my attention. And then I remember you telling me that she was a

survivor of the war, and some of her stories, and her memory of being a girl at war, and my heart just breaks, and your mother is one of the reasons why I definitely wanted to interview you. So perhaps that's one way we can take the conversation we were having before about these expanses of time and how all these histories met in the form of bodies, and migrants, and immigrants in Los Angeles and talk to us—so your parents met in this English as a second language class in Inglewood of all places. I wish people knew Los Angeles. It would be meeting like in Queens, you guys, those of you guys who know New York, for the listeners listening in. But the suburbs of Queens, not even like the busy part of Queens. And you said that they were probably the only two Koreans in the class and that's probably what attracted them to each other.

Like my whole thing as a native Angelino was like how did they even find those classes considering that there were other venues for helping Korean immigrants out. They were like on the outskirts of that support and I'm just trying to figure out kind of like your dad asking for the whiskey at the airport, like how did they get there, and how did your mom get to Compton College?

Kim: I don’t know. I wish I did know. But again, I think she left a lot of things blank not because she was consciously trying to hide anything. I think it was more like the parts of her story that she wanted to tell because she wanted to remember them that way. It was certainly a difficult time and I think even within her family, I mean, who's going to pay for English as a second language class, and how—you're there and you're sleeping on your older brother's sofa, and you need to go out and get a job, I think they were just—it was a lot of pressure and a lot of figuring

out these foreign systems, and ways to operate. And even just—even if it means paying the rent and having one meal just to survive.

Q: That's right. Do you remember the things she told you about the war? I remember you telling me that she spoke about hunger.

Kim: Yeah. She spoke about hunger. They would go weeks and weeks not bathing, full of lice, and parasites, and all kinds of things. There was one period during the war in which they had to live in a ditch, like they dug a ditch and slept in there. The grandmother kind of ran the household. Just to give you a little matriarchal history, my grandmother, who lived in MacArthur Park here in L.A. in the 1980s, was a badass. She would not take shit from anyone. Almost every week she'd get mugged, she didn't speak English, but she would have her thrift store plastic beaded purse and then put her dried snot tissue in the purse, but carry her cash and her ID in the inside pocket that she would sew in her cardigan, and so someone would—and I've been there, come by and grab her purse and take off, but she'd go, "Ha, ha, they get just my snotty tissues, that's what they get!"

Anyway, my grandmother was kind of a badass. She taught me how to smoke when I was 11 or 12. I think as a result my mom, in her rebellion, was kind of goody-too-shoes, and she was like her grandmother, her grandmother raised all five kids because my grandmother—oh this is a funny story, you'll like this. She would get bored, this would have been the late 1930s, 1940s before the war. The license plates in Korea were numbered by how important you were. So the president was one and my grandfather had a construction company, so he was given number 11.

My grandmother would get so bored, and she would have her mother watch the kids, and she would have people cleaning the house. She would get bored, and so she would get in the car, she had a driver, and smoked those long skinny cigarettes blowing smoke out the window, and then just toss coins to the people living in the street. [*Laughs*] She comes to L.A., lives in MacArthur Park, you know, she teaches me how to smoke, she was a trip.

Q: A culture shock a little, that's the other thing I think about a lot about all of our ancestors.

Kim: I would visit her at MacArthur Park. In fact I went by the building recently for the *LA Times* photoshoot, and I remember her opening her cabinet, and it was full of cans with the white paper, government-provided like peanut butter, and all these things she didn't eat. She's eating her Korean food from like down the street. She didn't want to throw it away so she's collecting the cans—there must have been 50 cans of peanut—in a can, not a jar—of peanut butter.

Q: In case a war returns and we need food. I'm serious.

Kim: Just in case another war might happen, it was all there.

Q: And the way that it looks is that it probably will. I just think that there are skills that these people learned as kids that they then brought and landed in Los Angeles with them. I mean, all kinds of people. And like farming, like you're talking about your dad like knowing how to grow a garden, knowing how to grow your own food, you know?

Kim: The resourcefulness of it is amazing. I think back to my mom, she talked about being in high school and loving—her favorite subjects were philosophy, and chemistry, and writing, and I don't think she—I can't say for sure, and I certainly wish I could ask her now, but I don't think she could answer that question then or later of what are your hopes and dreams for being in America. I think for my father it was very clear, but for her I think there was so much compromise and so much constant "no, you can't, no, that's not going to work, you don't have the money, you don't have the language, you don't have the—"

Q: Well her whole life had changed.

Q: Her whole life had been—

Kim: Her whole life had changed, so I think her going into nursing at Compton College, I can't—

Q: [*Laughs*] It's just crazy to me, every time you tell me this I just like what are you talking about.

Kim: I can't say if it was like okay, this is a practical thing because they needed nurses and was it the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, the US wanted all these people who were technically skilled from Asian countries. Did she think that that would be useful, or was more as a result of a having been in these dire situations where people are dying, coming from an impulse to want to know what to do and to help. And my guess is that it's probably a combination of the two, practical survival: the periodic table is the same in different languages so I can figure it out versus writing literature

in English, that's not going to do anything. I think the practicality of it as well as having been in so many situations whether it's appendicitis, or being shot, or just kids dying of the flu, which was very common. I think that also when she died of lung cancer two years ago, researchers, and I don't think a lot of money is going into researching this, but twenty-seven percent of the people who have this kind of lung cancer are East Asian women, which is kind of a strange—in the U.S. But the other thing is that the doctors felt that this could have been environmental or at least environmental conditions contributed to the lung cancer. She did talk about with the lice, and the ticks, and the parasites that all these kids had, that the American soldiers would come out and make these DDT showers out of these hoses, and the kids would go and bathe in these—they would spray DDT and the kids would just go and wash in it to get the bugs out of their hair.

Q: When nobody knew how poisonous DDT was.

Kim: Nobody knew and I read something recently, I can't remember where, but it was also about different kinds of warfare and chemical agents that were used in Korea that still are top secret government files somewhere, maybe at Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago. [*Laughter*]

Q: But then, Christine, also the architectural building materials that were used in Los Angeles during the 1960s and 1970s were all asbestos, every last one.

Kim: Yeah, it could have been where she was—

Q: Every last one was asbestos. Everything was asbestos.

Kim: I'm sure all their apartments were full of asbestos.

Q: Yeah, I'm positively sure of it. Like all the houses in my mom's neighborhood, all those buildings are asbestos.

Kim: And is it that those houses in other neighborhoods have been—

Q: Asbestos too? [*Laughs*] They're all hoping that as long as you don't touch it you don't get it. As long as you don't disturb it. But this is something that Florene, I think you met my sister's best friend Florene, she had eighteen siblings and half of them are dead from some kind of cancer, and we know it's environmental. Okay, wow. Your mom goes to Compton College for nursing and at this time your dad was working or he is also—

Kim: Yeah, he's doing the factory jobs and studying engineering at El Camino.

Q: Amazing.

Kim: Yeah, there is a funny story. Well, not funny, but kind of disturbing and odd where he joined a fraternity and they're like oh, we can get this Korean guy to do the stuff that we don't want to do, let's get him in the fraternity. So he had to like clean up their vomit, he walked into people having sex, clean the toilets, clean all the disgusting fraternity house.

Q: I can't, I can't even.

Kim: And they made him a mug that said Genghis Coolie.

Q: Come on, come on.

Kim: I think it was—I don’t know, it was probably predominantly white, I don’t know, mixed?

Q: Do you think?

Kim: I have no idea.

Q: But even so, there was anti everything sentiment too where everybody could just make fun of—I just interviewed Garrett Hongo for my—anyway, and we went to the same high school, I don’t know if you know this, and we were talking about all the ways the slippage occurred. So then okay, so your parents had already met while they're holding these jobs or your mom's in school and your dad's in the factory?

Kim: My mom was in school and my dad was in school, and I think some of the jobs were at the same time because he had to have, he had to [*crosstalk*].

Q: Sure. So when did you come along, my darling, and how? Did they just decide to get married? How did they get to Newport Beach?

Kim: So then they moved to I think Huntington—my brother was born in Inglewood.

Q: Did they get married or no?

Kim: Yeah, they get married in 1968.

Q: And how did the marriage go with your family? They were so far away nobody could really do much of anything?

Kim: Yeah, a couple of siblings here attended the wedding and I think it wasn't until later that the parents came over, or met, I don't think they came over there for a while, it was just really expensive. Then my brother was born in 1969, December of 1969 in Inglewood, and they moved down to Huntington Beach. My dad was doing work that had to deal with importing from the Long Beach, Port of Long Beach. They were down there but I think they were like, I don't know, not getting along with one of the siblings, or there was some family stuff, and they also—my dad started his company I think in 1972 importing men's slacks, clothing from Korea. So he would go to Italy and kind of find someone to draw out and copy the latest men's designs and then translate them for an American consumer, a kind of chinos type of pants and have it manufactured in Korea and brought over for retail in the US.

Q: See, but even that—a few people I've interviewed for this project has talked about like the proximity to Long Beach, and San Pedro, and shipping piers, and all that commerce going in and out, what does it mean to come from, live on, a town where the ocean is the freeway, it is the kinds of ways in which not just—the huge shipping containers, the huge ships that come in, and have been coming in for generations where people start to dream. Even if you didn't grow up on water you start to go well, wait a minute, materials coming from all over. So that's also very fascinating.

Kim: I think about water a lot. I don't know if I have the book here, I just ordered that book *Aqua Feminisms*.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

Kim: Anyway, no, yeah, absolutely. And then he realized that actually it would be the same if not better to move to San Francisco and use the Port of San Francisco and use those distribution mechanisms there.

Q: That's amazing how much he taught himself and in such short time. Without an MBA, right?

Kim: I don't even think he had a BA or a BS or anything like that. He goes up and I was born, you know, Newport Beach, and then my mother was pregnant with my sister, and by this time she's not working anymore, and they decide to move up to the Bay Area. I think it was kind of

their second chapter in their independence as a couple and as a family for someone who was just coming to L.A. What was I going to say? Yeah.

Q: Do you remember this move?

Kim: I don't, I was one or two. My sister was born in San Mateo, which is in Northern California.

Q: Straight up California babies.

Kim: Totally. All California and then my sister came back to go to USC and she hasn't left the state, she loves it here.

Q: Okay, so let's focus on you now. Your parents stayed up north and then what did you do? You went to middle school and high school in the Bay Area?

Kim: I went to middle school and high school in the Bay Area. I think for them as immigrant parents once they had a certain amount of success and means, tried to figure out what the markers or what the path is to getting your kids the best education. Education was always the thing. Whatever you want to study, just study. I remember in the summers during high school and college, either you have to work in the summer or you can do some kind of program, as long as you're learning or working.

Q: Take more classes, yeah, exactly.

Kim: I ended up taking classes every summer. I was kind of like this is better than working. My friends were like I'd rather make the money.

Q: What kind of things were you interested in studying?

Kim: Oh my gosh. I did a summer in Switzerland to learn French, I did a summer in Seoul, I did a year in Paris in college, I did a summer in Italy. I think that was between high school and college. So yeah, there were just lots of things.

Q: I wish more students were aware of how possible that was or is for them to take time off, and travel, and learn elsewhere. I'm so happy to hear you did that.

Kim: I also wanted to just get away.

Q: Well of course. [*Laughs*] Of course. Why? Why did you want to get away?

Kim: I think I realized at a pretty young age that their expectations or their beliefs, and it's very gendered and birth order is really such a determining factor, did not support me. I had to do that myself. As the oldest daughter you are basically like mother number two. You like are doing everything beside her, the cooking, the cleaning, all of this. Yeah, just a lot of sexist kind of comments and even I remember when I was deciding what to major in at college and I told my

parents I wanted to study art history, I remember my mom saying, "That would be great for like a diplomat's wife, you should do it," she was into it but not because oh, you could really achieve something here.

Q: Wait, slow down. She was into it because it would make you more tantalizing.

Kim: Yeah.

Q: For—yeah. It's true though. It's true though.

Kim: Marry rich. Yeah, she would say these kinds of things. I felt very unseen and told that is your role in the family, so I think studying away and getting out of California helped me find my own way. And I was a year younger than everyone in school, I was still 17, and I went to—I applied to all East Coast schools. I think that the concession was to apply to one California school just in case, which was USC, which I did get into, but I was like I'm not staying in the state. I needed to just get away to figure out myself.

Q: Okay, I want to back up just a little bit. Christine, can you tell us what your job title is now?

Kim: Sure. I am the Britton Family Curator at Large of North American Art for Tate Modern.

Q: And the Tate Modern is what?

Kim: Tate Modern is a modern and contemporary museum in London. There are four Tates around the UK It's a state museum, and Tate Modern, which opened in 2000 focuses on international art from 1900 to the present, so the whole geographical focus of my covering North America kind of fits within this matrix of the mission and the program.

Q: Fantastic. Congratulations.

Kim: Thank you.

Q: And before that?

Kim: I was at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where I spent twelve years in a really interesting time, especially coming right from New York, but even more specifically from the Studio Museum in Harlem and focusing on work by artists of color, modern contemporary, and coming to L.A. I would say at a time when there was kind of like that smile and nod when you're talking about artists of color, and marginalized narratives, and so on, and so forth, so this was 2009 when I started working at LACMA. Certainly the director Michael Govan was very interested in this and wanted an all of-color contemporary curatorial team, which we did have, thinking about it from the West Coast perspective and not an East Coast perspective. And it really kind of opened up a lot of possibilities. I think I have the grace of it not being under a microscope or a megaphone. I just got to show more artists of color, before the commercial frenzy, though it is really great that people are sort of woken up.

At the time it was great to have time and space to really think about what that meant, what that meant in Southern California, a lot of things that we're talking about here relate to this. There's no specific exhibition, but just really being able to kind of marinate in the juice, the local juice of all of this complexity, and integrate ideas, intersectional identities and narrating in a fluid way, or at least that was the attempt.

Q: Yes, it's a very special time.

Kim: It's segregated in this city and some of my experience is social, some of it is academic, some of it is in these different spheres, but I think it took a long time to really—you know I did the James Turrell show and the Diana Thater show, two big major white artists in this time so that by the time I got to *My Barbarian*, or *Julie Mehretu*, or *Black American Portraits*, there was time where I could really be in L.A. and understand a different trajectory, a different ethos, a different care, a different what's seen, what's hidden, yeah, very different like visibilities that are in registers. Not in the way that you're confronted with when you're on the subway in New York or whatever, in Atlanta, in Chicago, or other cities, but, how different that is, and how much time it took to find my footing, and what types of exhibitions and conversations and writing made sense. And not just for the time and place, but for myself, and what I could be capable of at the moment, or expand to.

Q: Yeah. And you mentioned that before LACMA—we're going to come back to all of these positions, I'm just trying to give the listener a trajectory in reverse. Before LACMA you were at

Studio Museum of Harlem. Can you talk a little bit about that? And why? And the work you did there?

Kim: I've been so fortunate and blessed that I have been able to have the trajectory that I've had, and a lot of it I owe to the directors that I've worked for, at the Studio Museum, Thelma Golden, Michael Govan at LACMA, and Maria Balshaw at Tate. And the Studio Museum, it was a type of *inyun* where maybe it's not 8000 layers, maybe it's just 5000, but it was happenstance and fate and neither. It was magic.

Q: [*Laughs*] Because how did you end up there? Before Studio Museum where were you?

Kim: I was at the Whitney. I was in graduate school, I was at the Whitney working on *The Century Show*. So the Whitney is where I met Franklin Sirmans, Lisa Dent, all these great like young curators and writers of color. We were all there together because they realized in 1999 they were doing *The Century Show* and all their object labels and records—not all of them, a lot of them needed help. But of course the ones that needed to be rewritten were the ones that were for artists of color like Jean Michel Basquiat was born to an impoverished mentally ill mother and blah, blah, blah, all of this biography that's like no, no, no, let's start over and let's talk about the work. So they hired a bunch of us, put us in this townhouse next to the museum, which is now Sotheby's, the old Upper East Side museum, and that's where I met a lot of my peers and people I'm in touch with and I really respect today.

Coming out of graduate school where I did an interdisciplinary degree, but really focused on Critical Race Theory, and I didn't do it in art history by choice because I just felt that that was really limiting. In December of 1999, early 2000, the Whitney gig had ended because it was a writing gig for a specific number, amount of time, rewriting biographies and object labels for the show, and there was an article in the *New York Times* announcing the new director and deputy director at the Studio Museum, Lowery Sims and Thelma Golden, respectively, and I was just so excited. I had followed their work, seen *Black Male* and the 1993 Biennial, gone to many lectures that Lowery had given at the Met, and so on, and so forth.

Q: Just one second. Can you tell us who these two people are for readers who know nothing about the art world?

Kim: Lowery Sims is the first Black curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where she was for decades. She's now in Baltimore and she's had an incredible career, not just as an art historian and a curator, she knows everything you need to know about Robert Colescott or Wifredo Lam, I mean, extraordinary. But also an incredible mentor. She is in her seventies now so just thinking about the number of curators of color who have looked up to her, who she's corresponded with, truly an extraordinary person, scholar, human being, all of it. And Thelma Golden, currently director of the Studio Museum in Harlem since January of 2000. Really, I mean, Robin, how do you describe Thelma? A grand dame of humanity, you know? Of operating in a white world with grace, and respect, and integrity, and rigor, and friendship, and love.

Q: And who's like been the director of this museum and shepherded it through so much time and history with such grace and finesse. That's what I'm saying, so many challenges with such grace and finesse, I don't understand who Thelma is. I don't understand how she manages the kind of intellectual rigor that is necessary for her to do what she does. And the kind of professional acumen, I just, I don't understand.

Kim: And I will add to that, we had so much fun. [*Laughter*] So I wrote a letter, I think I even had a word processor, I don't think I had a computer. I had one at the Whitney but it was like a borrowed laptop. I wrote a letter to Lowery and Thelma saying here's my resume, I've done this and that, if you ever need a curatorial assistant, I swear I was ready to be the registrar or sweep the floors, if you need a curatorial assistant or anything, I'm looking for work, I'm coming off of this Whitney thing, blah, blah, blah. About four or five days later I get a call from Thelma, and I go up for an interview, and I was hired, and started that spring of 2000. Being in that milieu, I would ride my bike up through Central Park, up to Harlem when the weather was nice, but it actually reminded me of growing up in an immigrant community because we were just resourceful to the point that there was like a closet, oh you're going out after work, there's some scarves, there's a blouse, take it, use it, bring it back. Thelma is very petite, but like it was like a place where you were just—the first show that we did together was *Freestyle*, which ended up being this—

Q: Brilliant, brilliant show, yes.

Kim: The budget for that catalog was $25,000. The whole—everything, everything. The photography, rights, and reproductions, $25,000, and we did it, and we came under budget, and we were like howling laughing that we came under budget. So much fun.

Q: But it was also—Christine, can you slow down—because it was also a historical period of time, right? I mean, that exhibition did so much to change the world. If you can and if you don't mind, for just the listeners who don't know the art world, can you tell us what that exhibition meant for that time?

Kim: Absolutely. So *Freestyle* opened in 2001, and became the first in the series of what was called the F shows, not the F word you're thinking of, but just it happened to be the succeeding shows were *Flow*, and *Frequency*, and *Fictions*, and *Fore*, so it just kind of became a thing. Anyway, it was the show for with which the term Post-Black was coined by Glenn Ligon and Thelma sitting in that back office in the Studio Museum in Harlem, I think, really as this way to think about, not define, but to think about the possibilities in a very kind of open way, of artists, specifically in an art context, that you're going to have Black artists who are working conceptually, who are working in photography, who are working in performance, who are working in abstraction, figuration, that it was as a way to kind of open up the conversation and not have any sort of essentializing mode around the art that's being created by a certain race, or generation, or gender, or whatnot. Some big names in the exhibition of artists that might be familiar to people today are like Julie Mehretu, Rashid Johnson, Sanford Biggers, and a number of others. I think there were twenty-eight artists in that exhibition. We knew that we needed to do this kind of exhibition in that moment of 1990s multiculturalism into 2005 globalization, right,

and to destabilize this assumption around what young Black artists are making that are of this generation that their parents perhaps were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. They heard they were the inheritors of a lot of this—both in their own DNA as well as the kind of stories, and messages, and growth, who's shoulders to stand on looking at artists like Sam Gilliam, David Hammons, and a number of artists over the years that they had this agency and have the agency to move in all these different directions and to evolve within their practices.

So what I was saying was that it didn't feel like that revolutionary of an idea in that moment because we know as people of color doing all kinds of things, all the time, in many different directions, at the highest level, but for, I think the selection of artists we really, really believed in, but I think to the world it was a big wow, oh wow, oh my goodness. Or perhaps to some people maybe a threat but it was a really—

Q: It explode—it imploded the whole world. It started with the art world and then I think we can still see ripples of that show even today.

Kim: And even in a reactive way as well as a digested way and on very different levels. So yeah, so I think being in that type of space and always being around on a social level, personal level around people of color, and queer people, and so on, and so forth, but not so in the art world. I had worked while I was in graduate school at NYU at Gagosian Gallery, at Peter Blum, at the Whitney, and the code switching was obvious when I did my first internship at a gallery my senior year in college that these were not just a white space, but like the you're going to be examined, and you need to speak this way, and sit this way, and talk this way, and all of that. So

it was a place that I felt so encouraged by Thelma. I think also there was why is this Asian girl curated shows at a Black museum, and at the time besides Thelma I think the only other curator, I was a curatorial assistant by that point. When you have points of entry that have perspective, and experience, and curiosity, that overlap and intertwine in certainly this country's history with these other histories, that's when the conversation can get really interesting. Not that you can't—one should also have designated spaces, but in terms of exhibition making there's just so much possibility there.

Really I consider those eight years, 2000-2008, my formative years as a curator and not just formative of we all start at some sort of institution, I mean like front to back, top to bottom, and beyond as a human being and as a collaborator. And I think it was very much the opposite of the idea of—and which I think still exists, especially in historic areas—where a curator works solo, spends a lot in the library by yourself, and then you go see shows by yourself, but really as a much more collaborative, communal, thoughtful exchange of ideas in addition to all of that. So like we're saying, the rigor and then all the finesse, you know? And of having to think about in a collective way, collaboration, which is I consider a big part of how I work now or how I like to work.

Q: Thank you for that. It was just beautiful, and brilliant, and remarkable, and so careful. Did you see it coming, this mode of working, when you were in high school say? And deciding I want to go and I want to major in art history? And if not that, what was it that you were worried about intellectually, aesthetically?

Kim: If I rewind back to being a teenager say, I remember one of my favorite people, teachers—not a teacher, but administrator, was a librarian in my high school. We had to do these like senior colloquia on something outside of your classes that you're interested in. She was the one who sat me down with a pile of art history books and described the difference between Naturalism, and Realism, Expressionism, and Impressionism, and it kind of blew my mind that there were all these languages. For someone who grew up in a dual language household this idea of speaking through images, pictures, and being able to have these different languages, not only that, but having your own like each artist has their own, and the more you study that artist the more you can kind of—there's a legibility that still may be without words, but still some kind of legibility. I think I was just really fascinated by that but had no idea what that might look like, you know, fast forwarding four, five, six years after high school, after college. But I think I just held that close with the idea of hope that I can figure this out later.

We didn't grow up going to modern contemporary museums, but historic ones, so whether it's like the big King Tut show that came to the De Young or Legion of Honor, something—actually most of what we saw was non-western. When these big shows would come, we'd do a family trip to the museum. But I had no experience of what it would look like to be a curator. By the time, to answer your question, which was getting to the Studio Museum, did I envision my career to look like this? Is that the question?

Q: I'm just wondering—right, for our generation we were told we had to pick one thing and do it, period, even within a discipline. So if you're going to pick art history then you should pick the Renaissance and preferably, I don’t know, something about the Italian Renaissance, brush

strokes with, in oil, and it was that narrow. You seem to—I'm trying to figure you out basically. [*crosstalk*] You seem to find a way to resist that indoctrination that was so prevalent, especially among women students by our professors. We were told so often we can't, you can't, no, you can't, no, you can't. You come in with a thing, no, I really want to do this, and they'd be like no, you really can't. And yet here you are.

Kim: Yeah. I grew up with, I think both my parents would agree to this, always a kind of suspicion or not wanting to do the thing that I'm supposed to do and maybe circling back to it later, but always questioning or challenging the prescribed path or the expectation as a girl, or as a Korean American. It seemed very unthreatening or un—what's the word I'm thinking of? I was totally fine with kind of going off the path, because even though I studied art history as an undergrad and minored in French Comp Lit and Asian American Studies, by the time I applied to grad school it was exactly those people who I was thinking I don't need to be the Renaissance scholar who studies egg tempura in Italy or whatever because it didn't have the tactility, the application, the imagination, the vulnerability, right? When you're studying something that's so changing in real time, and difficult to grasp, and people are going to argue with you and make valid points, all of these things that are much more slippery and opaque was just ultimately more interesting and I wanted that. I think about Edouard Glissant *Right to Opacity*, I felt like I had the drive and the right to think in these kind of more problematized—these problematic subject or problematized things that are stable but maybe can afford to be unpacked or shaken up or taken down.

Q: It's not to tie a bow on it, but it's like your parents may not have been Inglewood and Compton, it's like you ended up some place partly by your own accord and it was very intentional. And then the historical moment, and what was happening in art history with those first shows that you guys curated changed the world, and it seems like you all said yes. No, no, no, you didn't say no, no, we can do this— [*crosstalk*] We're going to do it with $25,000. [*Laughter*] You know?

Kim: Yeah.

Q: And we're a multiracial, multicultural, multi-ally, open—you keep using this verb open, open, I don't know, open aesthetic of curating that allowed for so much change to come into museums. The older we get we understand that museums have a profound impact on the world, so in effect you guys changed the world. I guess what I'm wondering is, were you aware of that, Christine? It's like you said, how many Asian women are in—have a focus on Black art? It turns out there's more than just you, which is wonderful. We don't celebrate enough of that. Same with the reverse, there's lots of Black artists who study Asian art, we don't—there's just so many of these—allyships isn't the right term and I don't know what the right term is, you're much smarter than I am, maybe you can come up with it. But it's like there are ways in which people of color in art, in all kinds of art, are looking at each other collaborating with each other, thinking about using ideas from one camp to think about ideas in another camp, to help each other, oh, did you see this, how about this? I guess I just long for those conversations, you know? Because I do think we're having them with ourselves and privately with a few others.

Kim: Well it's very—oh my gosh, there's so much there Robin, oh my gosh. I think there's the piece for me that is kind of sticky and unresolved from my mother's side for which I have a lot of sadness and grief, but is kind of a fuel for another kind of awakening or realizing or something because at a certain point I had to accept that she was not—she didn't have the capacity or lack of interest comes out of a capacity issue, she was very engaged in learning, and always had stuff going on, did a lot of volunteer work, but in terms of really internal unpacking, the kind of things that people spend years in psychoanalysis for, was not going to happen, wasn't part of her program. Not being able to go to her and asking her the same questions of what happened when you were—you know, and these things, and wanting her to divulge these stories that are painful, or traumatizing, or you know, that that just had to be left alone, and I could only kind of figure out my own path, and find the things that are actually incredibly beautiful and mysterious about her life or our histories. I think it's exactly true like what you're saying how they ended up in Inglewood, in Compton, and then down in the OC, and then up to the San Francisco Bay Area, that gravitating toward—all these stories of my dad, the guy who calls him Seaweed, and the gardener, that's how kind of the best stories are coming from these types of places of people just engaging with one another. Whether it's because they have to because they work in the same warehouse or because they have goals like in a museum I want to be here and make these kind of shows that change the conversation or shift things.

I think that is a part of what is in me and part of my drive. I think the other piece of that, which is really external, I mean external and really moves me, is that people with these stories, people of color, marginalized people, the urge, the impulse is to be together. That is the natural organic thing to strive for, to look for, to want. It's not just some kind of forced prescribed thing you have

to do, but it's all the other noise that prevents us from really doing that in a way where we can be vulnerable, we can disagree but try to figure out where that comes from, take responsibility and accountability, we can show up for each other, all of that kind of gets threatened. Then people start to drink that Kool-Aid, the institutional, or the governmental, or the military, the corporate, whatever, because it's all over, it's in hospitals, it's everywhere. You just have a few sips and then you yourself you're kind of poisoned with the toxic that don't enable you to come closer to this human impulse to connect because even though we may be marginalized in different ways, or look different, or speak different languages, the impulse is still there. I think that I never lost that. I mean, I was definitely in high school in with the randos, the thespians, the queer kids. Accepted by the popular girls but not quite, you know?

Q: Popular enough?

Kim: Yeah, not exactly. A little bit not the right t-shirt, not the right sandals, whatever. So yeah, I think then getting to Harlem, I think that it was funny when we were working on *Freestyle* and for *Frequency* also, I took the lead with the West Coast artists, so I was coming back and forth to L.A. and I think—who was here in L.A.? It was Eric Wesley, Rodney McMillian [Rodney was in *Frequency*]. Anyway, for both of those shows I was the kind of L.A. person who would come back and forth, and that actually is in part how I ended up in L.A. I mean, not in a literal way, but the familiarity and the community that I kind of came in touch with by just spending time here and research. By research I mean not just doing an hour and a half studio visit, I mean, meeting up again at 9:00 to meet your friends. We're all the same age, I was in my late-twenties, early thirties, you know? So the studio visit is like going through the front room of the liquor store

where dudes are playing dominos because the studio is in the back and the person selling the stuff has to move the cart to let you into the door to get to the studio. All of that is very much like my kind of how I like to, and it's not always possible or even appropriate, but how I feel like understanding a person who's making things and putting them out into the world, and how they're being communicated and written about, which is also sometimes of a different kind of register.

Q: Christine also it sounds like how you grew up or how we grew up. Like yeah, around the dominos table, off in the back there was somebody doing something interesting. Or if went to durational performances, sit around a domino table long enough and you'll learn something about art, and timing, and music, and math and science while you're at it.

Kim: Totally. We never had babysitters and we would just go to everything. Drunk parents, woman loses her shirt, whatever.

Q: Totally. I don’t think it's a coincidence either that you're such an astute curator of art from the Black world in addition to art from the Korean world. I don’t think it's a coincidence. That's what I'm not doing a good job of asking you about that somehow you were able to do both and they're not—maybe it's just me, but I don’t necessarily see them as separate practices in your work.

Kim: No, they're not. I'll also mention we always, you probably did too, there was always someone sleeping on the sofa.

Q: Oh, come on.

Kim: Like who's he? [*Laughter*]

Q: Our whole lives, our whole lives.

Kim: Always someone—

Q: My whole childhood, my whole childhood.

Kim: Right, and then as a teenager you're like, "can these people get out of our house?" [*Laughter*] I was so inspired in high school learning about the Civil Rights Movement. I think that's where a lot of Asian leaders who are allies, who are collaborators in the Civil Rights Movement, and beyond. You can think of before that W.E.B. Du Bois and Mao, it's really not a new lineage, it's not a new friendship, or effort, or understanding. Absolutely the ways in which you grow up where things are just piled on top of one another, and it's almost like you need that otherwise it feels fake. It feels like you're going for some purity and this kind of purity just doesn't exist. Or if it does than you're some weirdo white supremacist. The jawbones of East Asians and Native Americans, all of these on a genetic level, the way that we're connected, but back to this kind of long arc in time, but in terms of how you grew up, and family, and intimate in a more personal way, it's absolutely, yeah, even something like watching kids play and the hierarchy that kids develop, always feeling like what's going on over there. Why is she over—what's—do be curious about all of these dynamics I think.

Q: Now I feel like Los Angeles neighborhoods are a little bit more segregated than they used to be, but that's the wrong word. I shouldn't say segregated. They're a little bit more self-selecting in terms of monocultures. But now it's changing again and there are so many different people in the neighborhoods all over again. But the people who are not in the neighborhoods are white people, except for a few who dare. Which is also welcomed with so much love, welcomed with so much love, like this is what it's supposed to be. I was thinking again about—and I'm sorry, I can't remember the name, I'm going to write it down about the name of that film, the 8000 things have to happen.

Kim: Oh, it's *Past Lives*.

Q: Yeah, but is it?

Kim: *Inyun*, *inyun.*

Q: Can you transliterate it for me? E-N?

Kim: I-N-Y-U-N.

Q: Okay, *inyun*. Right, I think about that also in terms of communities, you know, and what we're doing here, you and me, friendships. Like things have to happen and I think things did happen historically and that's why I wanted to interview you and invite you to come and be a part

of this project. It's like look at this, you know, *inyun*, look at it. Not one time, not two times, not 400 times, 8000 times. My mother walked around Compton College at the same time your mother was walking around Compton College, that's crazy. I just got off an interview with someone, Alondra Nelson, who we figured out that yet again, there's now three people I've interviewed whose family members grew up on the same street in New Orleans, or right around the corner, at the exact same times, and they were children—parents' generation, there was no way they didn't know each other, there's just no way. I joke about it's kind of like my version of *inyun*, I joke about it that I wish we would start talking about diaspora as being scattered as opposed to finding, having been found, you know? And there's something about our life's stories that confesses that.

Kim: No, absolutely. I think that when people say biracial, I also think isn't it all like multiracial?

Q: Yes, thank you for the corrective, I agree.

Kim: In the sense that like Lulu, who is my older child who's fifteen, whose father is Black American, but has some white, has some Native, probably under 20 percent but it's there, and we were talking before we're all from East Africa, then Central Asia, all of this, that it's in our biology.

Q: It's in our biology.

Kim: Anthropological history.

Q: And yet we sit here talking about four centuries in America, it's like come on your guys, we're so much more interesting than that. Our timeline, and not to say there's anything wrong with focusing on America, I'm just saying, you know. And there's something about the Pacific Rim and the southern part of it in the States that such—I just think that they didn't realize, [*laughs*] they couldn't police it, they didn't realize how much influx was going to happen, how much interracial, multiracial communities were going to rub up against each other, and then ultimately like it, right? It just became this moment. Now L.A. has changed a great deal from what I'm talking about, but it hasn't changed for the worse, it's just gotten more normative. There's like Samoan Black kids running all around L.A. for generations.

Kim: Koreatown is predominantly Latinx and Black at this point.

Q: Exactly. My neighborhood is now mostly Arab and white, it's just changing like this. The people who in the neighborhood where I grew up, where Christine's been to, it was all Great Migration Blacks, Black Americans. Now I'm the dinosaur, we're all the dinosaurs left, and nobody—they don't even know what that means not to mention who we were. And I'm kind of—that used to make me sad. Now I'm kind of like this is exciting, let's see what happens next with these strange human beings.

Kim: I think sometimes curators should take a break from writing. And I'm not just saying this because I'm on a writing deadline, but because so much of what we're looking at there are no words for. We need time to develop those or at least have words in circulation meaning other

things to use them with the acknowledgment of their multiple meanings, or expressions, or whatnot so that when we absorb or behold maybe, as opposed to understand or kind of grasp, to just kind of make a correlation or a sort of analogy between that and what you're saying. I wonder maybe we should do a show, but what would that show even be? Like a bunch of stuff that people stand and read? Then it should be a book. Why isn't it a book? Kind of like you're a film "An Intimacy" where you're using language and image but as an exhibition maker, as a curator, Southern California and it's being at the kind of epicenter of a very specific kind of place—especially the latter part of the twentieth century. You're right, it's different now. Just all of this possibility, and mixing, and I think people don't want to see it. They look at Lulu and they see Black girl or Brown girl and if you do—if we're side by side we look so much alike, but I think it's both in the way that people want to read the products, the offspring, of all of this as being—and I have a lot of Asian-Black couples who have babies and their kids look like they're Mexican or Latinx or Sephardic and it's kind of amazing. [*Crosstalk*]

Q: Totally.

Q: So L.A. [*Crosstalk*]

Kim: If we just beheld that and stopped trying to write it or read it and put specificity to it. And just let that hover as all of these people that most likely they're multiracial in some way and they probably have—because of the time that we're in, they probably can identify and tell the story with pretty good accuracy, right? My mother is this, my grandfather was blah, blah, blah, came this time, and how do we make that—so as an exhibition maker, I have no idea of how that can

be—and I don't think the show needs to have some like master narrative to teach people a lesson, but like what is the way to just let this be out there for people to absorb and behold in a way that's relevant to the actual existence of these people, which are just people to talk to and be part of a conversation with, and not as this kind of white guys looking at an immigrant or a Black person, or whatever a person's history, and trying to come up with a biography for it. I think this project of I'm telling stories around Southern California is great and I also wonder, it's not a but, but an and, how there are other mechanisms or forums for this for people to just see kind of what you think or what you see is not actual—if I could show you my family albums, you'd be like where does she come from, who's the parent of this kid over here.

Q: That's what I'm trying to say. That is exactly like when you think about Great Migration west, which people didn't really start thinking about until *The Warmth of Other Suns*, and that was a commercial literary book. So really historians, only a few historians were working on Great Migration in the United States west. But it's impossible, I think, to think about great migration of any kind without thinking about all these little so-called side stories, side shoot that are happening all around, because I think it is a part of it. I think it's what makes migrations happen. Your dad working in a factory with Black workers or gardeners, whatever, it's like so important these stories to talk about the ways in which these major narrative categories do not even fit, do not even fit the actuality of what these people were doing, and that's why I wanted you here, and that's why I really wanted you to talk about your parents, and how it is that your mom ended up at Compton College, and how it is that you ended up working at the top of the game in the art world, and engaging work by and about these issues that are completely interrogating all of these

fixed categories that are for the most part completely evacuated now. It's just been profound, so thank you, Christine.

Kim: Oh of course, thank you. I'm so honored. I hope we've covered what you had hoped to cover

Q: If you would like to talk about your personal life, you're more than welcome to.

Kim: What can I say about it?

Q: Like I'm thinking now what are you thinking about for the next—like the future? And now that we have, and I've been talking to a lot of middle age women, now that we don't have to play so many games, and by that I mean in our heads, not to mention in our jobs, like what kind of things are you dreaming about? Like really really this is what I want to do?

Kim: I would say on a third-person level I've been really thinking about how, what's the conference that these dudes, I mean, I think they're all dudes, probably all dudes, around like the AI conversation are getting together to talk about how it's like going to make humankind extinct, Chat GPT, and computers that can write your paper, or figure out your travel itinerary trip around the world, whatever, and how the invention of this pencil, or they are all things that were about efficiencies but also about erasing ancestral knowledges or indigenous knowledges. So yeah, now you don't have to break off the branch, and sharpen the thing, and make a spear to

catch one fish for the whole village, great, but we've been losing knowledge and skills for a really, really long time. It's not like some new thing we're going to make ourselves extinct from a computer, we're just making ourselves lose so much of the awareness. And not just awareness of how to peel a whatever, but really knowledge about a kind of way to conduct your life that creates value and meaning.

I think that's something that I've been thinking about coupled with Southern California and how we have this winter, which everyone bizarrely is like, “oh, we're out of the drought, everything is great.” It's like no, that's a bad sign that the—heat wave in London last week, these storms and all these disasters related to climate change, the global south of course will suffer the most, but thinking about Southern California, the fires, having the ocean here which has been sort of like the postcard draw for all these—people from Asia it's kind of the gateway. LAX is the biggest airport, you have a high Asian population, I think Chinese more in San Francisco and Korean more here, but all of these kind of big things. Pointing to where I want to be, so many of us had these conversations during the pandemic, after Floyd, in 2021 of like I can't take this, the red wave, or the this, or the that, I'm going to move to Canada, I'm going to move to New Zealand, and whatever. I don’t think the goal is to leave people hanging because you can afford to be somewhere else. I mean, for some people it is, but like how do I lean into the problem just enough—we have to be so protective, we talked about this a lot, about our own health and our own mental health, and I tend to oftentimes lean in too much, and I think a lot of people—and I think that the work that I've done professionally has been a result of leaning in too much.

So it's not a bad thing, but at a time where I don't want to breathe in this smoke. I mean, you guys have smoke too now, but just where we go specifically in this region—and by this region I also mean Baja California and the north part, just climatically as well as locally what happens there, and even more specifically how can the museum, how can contemporary art—like we're saying, I don't know how to make an exhibition that gives someone the experience, or sensibility, or opens things up to make them more curious about these mixed histories in Southern California, which are so common to people like us, and so unknown to so many people, even my Jewish in-laws. That's the kind of backdrop of all of this stuff.

And then how to in this moment—because at the end of the day I am an optimist and I always think that there are ways to communicate and ways to participate, to write books, or make exhibitions, or have conversations, or a panel discussion, whatever form it might be, to think about how we can like look at what we have lost and can regain, back to the whole ancestral knowledge, family knowledge, all of these ways and stories amidst—instead of focusing on oh my god, we're going to make ourselves extinct, well how do we make ourselves relevant or relevant again through art.

Q: One of the things that makes me not worry at all is when I go home and I hang out with my nieces and nephews. They are in their twenties and thirties, some of them are in their high school, and these conversations they'd be like we got this. They're just so far ahead of us in terms of what we call allyship. They're so far ahead of us. It does feel to me like the 1970s used to feel where we were all just together taking care of business. I don't know if that's true, I don't know if that's what I need to believe, but I don't think this generation—as much as Millennials get on

my damn nerves, I think they're much smarter than we give them credit for with this regard. Their level of acceptance and celebration is pretty high. Which is to say I think that the work continues.

Kim: I will mention one thing that is related to what we're talking about. The reason why I'm pausing is there is only so much I can say at this point, although more can be revealed later. But I have been working very quietly with Lauren Halsey for about a year and a half now. I mean, we've been in conversation on a regular basis since 2015, but really culminating in the piece that's now on the Met rooftop. Which is, for your listeners who are unaware, the Met commissions an annual rooftop project. It opens in the spring and closes in the fall. Major artists recently like Alex Da Corte and Huma Bhabha have done rooftop projects. The one up right now is by Lauren Halsey who is a young, queer, Black woman artist from South Central who studied architecture at El Camino College, and then she went to Cal Arts and studied with Charles Gaines. Anyhow, when I met her in 2015, and she was sketching, and thinking about, and working on this a monument, she didn't have a name for it, but it was about South Central, it's about this one specific block where there used to be an ice cream shop called Gwen's where people would congregate, whether you were elderly or a kid. She would ride her bike there. All of the tags, the hairstyles, the store signs, the hieroglyphics, the markings on the piece come from specific people, and places, and histories in South Central.

So the idea in her mind was always a monument not just about South Central, but for South Central. The Met invited her to bring the work to New York, which is great, and is an incredible, incredible project. But at the end of the day what she kept saying to me is that this is for and

about South Central. I just kept thinking about it. She didn't have a budget to bring it back to L.A., and she'd been working on this for so long. The early prototype for it was at the Hammer in "Made in L.A." in 2018. I met her just after she was an artist in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2014 to 2015, a program that I managed when I was there. So we're going to bring this back to L.A. All these projects are overlapping full circles.

Q: Oh my god, how exciting.

Kim: We're bringing it back to South Central. The details will become clear soon, but it is happening thanks to some brilliant people who really see that we can respond to the question of Robert E. Lee and Maury Fontaine, and all these Confederate monuments coming down, and people up in arms about destroying their white history, so on and so forth. But like the challenge, and this is where I'm talking about how do we make new kinds of exhibitions, is no, we have to also talk about what replaces that. It doesn't have to be in bronze in the middle of a plaza of Times Square. Just having a physical something where people can congregate publically without having to pay, that whether it's to walk your dog or have a picnic, that there are spaces like this. And you're looking at something, or you're inside of something, or you're sitting on something, whatever, that is about something that the community respects, and admires, and speaks to something that carries meaning and value.

I think that this project, and I'm doing this through LAND, which stands for Los Angeles Nomadic Division, which is one of the non-profits that I've co-founded in L.A. when I first arrived to situate site-responsive art in different neighborhoods all around L.A. And that was

really in the wake of the 2008 economic downturn in trying to utilize spaces, whether manhole covers, or laundromats, or peoples' homes, to show art when museums are only doing permanent collections, you know, out of their kind of economic distress came all these possibilities. So really what a community or what different communities want to memorialize and what to kind of erect as something that speaks to what they value. In this case it's the community, you know, she's not a memorial to herself, or a human being, or a war, or you know, this kind of thing, but to people. I jumped on this project and said let's figure this out together, this is not Tate work, let's do this. Because I get it. I don't want to pretend that I grew up in South Central or that I know exactly what you're trying to say, but what I do get is the impulse in a big scale, this is a monumental work that is inspired by Egyptian architecture, hieroglyphs, temples, Karnak and Luxor, and that having to—using my knowledge and experience as a curator through this non-profit that I started, that there had to be a way that we could make this—sort of bring this back.

It will be different but I just wanted to mention that because I think it responds to what you're saying about things that I'm doing or I have been doing revert back to or kind of echo sensitivity and kind of social and cultural interest and desire to move in a certain direction. In this case even more specifically the location of it being in South L.A. or here in L.A. and South L.A., which is something that she's determined as an artist. Yeah, so I do think there are new ways and these young people today, a lot of them are figuring it out.

Q: Truly. And I think a lot of it has to do with you, Christine.

Kim: Thank you.

Q: I do. Thank you so much for this.

Kim: Thank you.

Q: Thank you, thank you, thank you. And we'll be in touch very soon.

Kim: Sounds so good. Okay. Big kiss, bye.

Q: Big kiss, bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]