

Alaina Zulli

Okay, this is Alaina Zulli interviewing Fumio Ichikawa on June 4 2007, in the Barney building of NYU. Okay, Fumio, start by going over your background. Tell me about where you were born when, etcetera.

Fumio Ichikawa

Okay, I was born in 1968, in a small town in Kanagawa, which is a prefecture next to Tokyo. My parents were both from that region. And they lived in Tokyo at the time. But traditionally women go home to their parents to give birth so I was staying with my grandparents when I was born. It's an interesting story that my great grandfather passed away two weeks before I was born. It was a natural death, he went to sleep, he had a habit of taking a nap in the afternoon, by the sunny spot on by the window. And in one day, he didn't come back after the sunset. So my father was [unintelligible] my mother, and it's in my maternal grandparents home. And my father went away, got my great grandfather, and he never woke up.

So he, my father was actually the first one who discovered my great grandfather passing and it was almost like exactly two weeks before I was born. And you know, depending on what you believe in, but in some of the Buddhist mythologies and the ideas about, the idea of like, passing from this life to the next life, and in between, that's just about the time where you're supposed to be crossing over this lever that separates this world to the next one, wherever that may be. And they may be, you know, he may never have left, he may have stayed with me. And so they decided to take residence in my mother's room. And the reason why I mentioned that is my great grandfather actually wanted to come here to the United States. He was a fifth son of a very large family, and because of the primogeniture, the oldest son takes over the family business in the land. So he wanted to get a strike a fortune outside, so he actually got on the ship, heading over to the United States. I think he made it over to Hawaii, then that's when he found out that his

older brother passed away, and he had to go back. So he never made it to mainland. But his plan was to come to the United States, make a lot of money, go home successful. It's quite didn't happen. But he did make it to the uh, to Hawaii.

So my family came here when I was 17 because of my father's job. Everybody left but me after my father's assignment, and they went back, I stayed behind. And I have a feeling. I never thought of it that way earlier. But now that I think about it, I think it's my great grandfather making me stay. So that's one of the family or the personal, that I have about me being here. So I grew up in a suburb of Tokyo. It's within Tokyo prefecture, but it's one of the new developments in the 70s. There was a lot of urban growth, but not affordable housing in central Tokyo. So there was planned housing projects, all over suburbs, in the countryside there was nobody. So I grew up among people from all over Japan. People, their parents came on in the job assignment, they came for higher education and stayed, or they're transient, you know, moving from different city to city. But it was an interesting environment. Nobody was from there. Anybody sort of came there, anybody lived there. But so many different dialects, so many different cultures. During the summer vacation, the town emptied out, because everybody went back home where their grandparents were from or their parents are from.

So it was a very interesting time that everybody knew each other and their parents and nothing beyond. You came there with like no baggage, no family history, just you. So there was no sense of like, insiders, outsiders and also the kind of what we call village mentalities that a lot of people associate with the Japanese, where you're closed in, which is basically everybody knows everybody's parents, cousins, you know, who knew who we didn't have that growing up. We didn't have natives versus outsiders. We, our class sized up from like 15, starting on the beginning of the year, by the time we move to the

next grade, we had 30. So that was the norm, which is very unusual in most of Japan.

AZ

The growth you mean?

FI

Well, just in terms of the, the growth as well as sort of the mobility of people is quite unusual. So when I compare my experience to my cousins who grew up closer to my grandparents is very, very different thing, where they grew up with all kinds of history, like, even before they go to school, everybody knows you. Because both my grandparents were teachers. So all the teachers from your school, the next school over, the parents, they knew who you are before coming in. Whereas where I, me and my sister grew up, it's just you. And, you know, you get to know other people's parents through the kids of, the connection were the children, not necessarily the kind of kinship or the location or sort of family history that you brought. So that was unique, I think.

So that gave me a different perspective from a lot of people who grew up, so tied to the land and the community and family history. So that was really interesting and fun place to grow up. And then my father was transferred here, when I was when I was 16. We didn't come here until the year later, because my sister really, really, really wanted to graduate from junior high school before coming here. I was happy to leave Japan, my mother and my sister weren't. They were so afraid of going to places where they don't speak the language, they don't have any friends, all kinds of anxieties. I was ready to leave, I was not happy where I was. Because of many different things, but um, and also, I had a very different image of the United States being a more individualistic, freedom, creativity, democracy that a lot compared to sort of Japan in the 80s, where things were very structured, what seemed very structured.

AZ

Even in your area?

FI

Yeah, well, it was because of the national sort of, um, it was a time of economic growth. And there was an expectation that the parents wanted their children to do better. And there was a very specific and clear path to do better. Higher education was the key, and there are school [unintelligible] and it was very clear that which colleges or university you went to connected you to the types of opportunities you had after graduation, it's a lot more systematic than here. Really, here, it's more sort of implicit, in sort of class and networking aspect of it. In Japan, once you get to a particular school, the network is there for you. It doesn't matter where you come from, you get plugged in, so everybody understood that. And everybody sort of aspired to that.

And also, there was a shift from highly urbanized economy and society around that time, like market economy. And global economy impacting a lot in terms of how Japan was shaping up to be very much urban centered society. Transition from like the more, more small towns, villages, and diversity of that, too, everybody aspires to be the city dweller with the latest and greatest. So I think it was a time of convergence of many different influences, defining very clear a singular idea of what's successful. And [unintelligible, laughter].

Yeah, part of the reason is, you go through entrance examination after you graduate from junior high. I mean, some wealthier kids go through that earlier but for most, you know, kids, that's sort of the first rite of passage on age 15. After you graduate from junior high, you choose a high school to go to, you decide if you can go to public schools, private schools, you stay close to

home, or you travel. There aren't really that many boarding schools. So it's really I think, you take the train to commute, an hour and a half versus staying that's the school that's close to the home, maybe, [unintelligible]. So not but, that's sort of the first time you get filtered into different groups based on, supposed to be based on academic performance, but there's a lot more to it than that.

And when I got to high school, it was a very different world because we mixed with, well, that was my first encounter with people outside of my community, which were very, very – It was weird. I go to a new community, it's a lot more homogeneous than the diversity that I was so used to in terms of people's expectations. The, the weird thing about where I grew up is economically very homogeneous, because of the housing project, housing prices, rental system. I guess there'll be equivalent to coops here, determined in the your parents income level, right? Like where you live and the community we lived in was based on the fact that everybody could afford to live in the same housing project.

AZ

And it was middle class?

FI

It was really like the middle class back then, in Japan, versus what we think of middle class here, versus what we think of middle class in Japan, now are completely different thing. It was sort of for the the economic bubble of the nine, early 90s. So it's, it's a working community, mostly, like white collar, mix of white collar office workers, some professionals, teachers, you know, a lot of school teachers, office workers, but not like senior management. It's sort of, you know, middle to lower. And also, generationally they were still young, so and they were on the path to becoming middle managers, and senior managers but not quite there yet.

So, culturally, we were very diverse but economically we were very homogeneous. And then, when I went to high school, we get thrown into the places where economically, it's very, very diverse. That was the first time I actually met somebody whose parents own like sushi restaurant, you know like the small business owners, the shop owners. We weren't, I wasn't used to that, I'm used to dealing with, you know, teachers, office workers, people who commute to work. Versus you having business at home, and you sort of grew up in an environment that was very different. But at the same time, it was very, I mean, I think it's the same, high school everywhere, it was very cliquy.

And um, I didn't quite fit into, both the cliques, and also sort of the culture at the time. That was really, um. It's gonna be like the long history of the 60s, the 80s. But it was a time of very conservative period, a lot of the people who were student radicals in the 60s, late 60s, early 70s, sold out and became an office worker, and they're sort of, you know, telling the children that you have to study really hard, you know, go to the good school, get a good job, work for major corporations and your life will be successful and stable. And I knew those are the same people who burned down the campus and didn't have a graduation because they were against what was going on in Vietnam, what was going on with the uh, the treaty between the United States and in Japan the Security Treaty. They were against the nuclear war and whatnot in the 60s, and it's the same people telling us, "no, this is the way to happiness."

So I was really frustrated with the fact that I'd have to sort of stay within that scheme of things. And I wasn't creative enough, I wasn't talented enough to just say, Forget you, I'm going to do my own thing. So I was reasonably smart enough to do well enough in academic performances. That was like what I was good at, but I didn't really like that, that was the only thing... and what you get at the end. And also the fact that there was a vague understanding and expectation that even if I do as well as the boys, you know, I can score as high

on exams, but there will be other "attributes," and in quotation marks, attributes that teachers would add to the application process, that would not necessarily disadvantage me in terms of going to college itself. But at the end of the process, that, that that sort of is not going to matter less than the fact that I'm a girl. Which, unbeknownst to me drastically changes in the four to seven years that I'm going to be away. But that was the understanding then, before I left.

AZ

So, you're saying that it was harder for girls to get into college?

FI

No, cause, not, cause examination process was fairly straightforward. You take the exam, you pass you get in. There weren't any slot based on gender. But to get the high school, especially public high schools. There was a little bit of a backlash on heavy reliance on testing, academic testing. So a few years before I – well maybe, when I was in junior high school, the government decided, well the Tokyo government decided to add a few extra, um, weight to like art, music, Home Economics, and, what's the last one... physical education. We had nine subjects, four, those four sort of more based on, you know, academic talent, and we have like five different subjects, Japanese, English, math, science and social science, before you take the exam in five subjects, if you score high you get in. After the reform, you have to carry the score, the uh, your grades from your school. But your four subject is going to be weighed a lot heavier than your academic subject. So before you go take the exam, you also need to have schools that you can apply to predetermined by how well you do in your school, including those four non academic subject, which is very subjective in terms of either getting these categories versus taking the exam and scoring 100 on the academic side of it.

So and it's it was fairly common that if you had the same score, and if you're sort of borderline between the A line schools versus the B line schools that the teachers get a little bit of an edge to the boys. And also, the expectation is that a lot of the women would go to junior college as opposed to the four year college, work a few years and, and get married. So the aspiration, it's not necessarily that it was structural barriers to get into four year college. But the aspirational pattern was very different for boys and girls. It wasn't that case with my family, the expectation with my parents always like to go to the four year school. And I think, looking back, my father never said that I couldn't do something because I was a girl. And I think I owe that to my paternal grandmother. But it was a shock to me when I was talking to my classmates in high school that your parents actually told you that you know, these are girly, girly, like things or things that women are not supposed to think about or wish for. I mean, it's a very stereotypical view of the Japanese society. But it was true to some extent, especially with the small business owners more than professional families. But even then, most of the mothers are stay at home or work part time, but there aren't many professions that women can stay after they get to a certain age or they get married and have families. So it was mostly teachers, nurses, very few office workers, or professional.

So that was sort of the environment I was in and I was also not happy with the way everything is weighed the same. You could be really good at one subject, and equally suck on another subject. And that will bring your whole average down instead of you know, you sort of developing what you're good at. And sort of keeping up with what you're not so good at but passing, and still be able to go to a place where what you're good at, and what reflects your curiosity and desire to fulfill. Like, everything has to be sort of average downwards, to where you're not good at. And I had this whole image of the United States being different, that you can actually develop your own personal sort of strength. So, and also, like sort of gave me a way out of being ordinary, you know, going to New York. And then everyone is like, woah you're

going to New York. So it just, you know, automatically, you did, I didn't have to do anything, just by the virtue of my father being transferred, I'm somebody special, which was a nice feeling as an average kid.

So that brings us to 1986. Spring of 1986. So we waited until my sister graduated from junior high school, got here in April. Not a good idea because academic is about to end and then nobody wanted to put us into uh, into school. Because they were about to, it was about the time now in New York State, and I don't know how familiar you are with the New York state education system, but they have a regions exam. And it, all the teachers are concerned about getting anybody passing the exam And because we didn't speak English all that well. And because some of the bilingual students are their star students, they didn't want their students, their star students sort of being distracted by babysitting basically. So I started school in Long Island in the ESL classes, most of the subjects except math, because math, you know, you don't need language. And the math teacher in that class I really hated, [unintelligible] because she thought I was going to drag her star student down. After we take the exam, for me, it was like high school entrance exam, I thought it was a joke. I didn't think it was 11th graders. So once they saw the score, just, you know, complete turnaround. You know, teachers, teachers look at me, and math was my worst subject.

AZ

You're worst subject? Okay.

FI

So it was, it was an interesting experience. But for a few years after that, because of my limitation in understanding spoken English, everybody treated me like I was five years old. That was the vocabulary and the range of expression that I had. So it's not easy being a teenager in Long Island around that time. But on top of that, there was the struggle of having a 17 year old

brain stuck behind the vocabulary of five year old. Yeah, so my high school days are pretty much confined to hanging out with other kids from ESL. But the other kids in ESL classes from all over the world, which was great, in one way. But at the same time, there's definitely a divide between what we would call the regular class students and the ESL students. And gradually you move on to, you move over as your English gets a little better. And also, you start to take classes. And for us, most of the Japanese kids, we are really well trained to read and write. And, you know, we take homework seriously, we try to keep up. So in terms of trying to get up to speed in being able to participate in regular classes, wasn't that big a deal, like, we just need a little bit of time to get used to it. And spend extra time between classes or at home to try to do as much preparation as possible so that we'll be prepared to go into class. And even if we don't understand what the teacher is telling us, we've read the textbook. So we know what to, you know, we have a little bit of comfort level in trying to figure out what the teacher is saying, as opposed to the teacher teaching us history. It's more like we try, us trying to figure out what we read in the history book, and where the teacher is in explaining that to us. So in the, the book knowledge, and you look up the dictionaries and you tried to get that in your head before going to class.

AZ

It's a lot of work.

FI

Yeah, but you know, that's the only way, that's, that's what schooling is. So it was more you know, trying to bring your English up to the level where you understood spoken English and listening at the level of your understanding of the written English. So, by the time I graduated, I was taking most classes in regular class with ninth graders, 10th graders, not necessarily twelfth graders. But but at the same time, I still spent a lot of time in this one sort of class that was dedicated to ESL students and their volunteers helping them with

homework. So I think I picked up more Spanish language than you know, English in this time, and now it's fun. And it was also an interesting experience seeing people from very different backgrounds and very different expectations about what a 17 year old is supposed to be and how much responsibility you have, either because you're in immigrant, and you're the one who has to take care of a lot of things for them, you know, for your parents. Then some of the roles that sort of, that happens because you are the one who understands English the most. Even if my English is limited, it's much better than my mother's. So you know, anything that goes wrong, I have to call and trying to figure out what the right people to call, is this an emergency or is this a normal thing? Or you know, if you have parents teacher conference, I have to interpret what the teacher is saying to my parents and then interpret backwards with my limited English. So a lot of the relationship between parents being the guide and protective influence versus children being sort of shielded from dealing with all the everyday things, it reverses at that point. And you sort of become the grown up, you sort of become the public face of the family. So that was, that was interesting, too.

So that was sort of a transitional period where my language skill was very, very limited. But at the same time, I had to make the most of it. And I couldn't really shy away from it, because that was my responsibility for the entire family. Because I mean, my father was using English somewhat at work. But he wasn't there, most of the time he was at work. So I have to get the driver's license quickly so we can go grocery shopping, instead of waiting for weekend. Or just to you know, drive people around. So a lot of things, housekeeping, things that I had to learn to try to do it quicker. And it was different from what I was used to. It's not that I didn't do that at all in Tokyo when I was growing up, but it was a lot easier for kids to do. I could get around on bicycles anywhere. Whereas here, especially so at first, you have to have a car to get around.

AZ

Yeah. So where in Long Island did you move to?

FI

Fort Washington.

AZ

Okay, I lived out on the North Fork, But it was not quite suburban.

FI

Yeah, well, the reason why my parents, my father picked Fort Washington was because it's at the end of that Long Island Railroad he used to commute. So he learned that when he was younger that because of the community, Tokyo is notorious for being packed and very uncomfortable, he always wanted to find a place at the end of the line, and he would stand, and get a seat, like, you know, like half an hour earlier, let a couple of trains pass and you can get a seat and take that in, all the way through, and you thought it was going to be a thing here. So pick the thing. And also the fact that they had a very good ESL program. So looking back, it was a beautiful place, but not having a way to get around was very very difficult. So I spent a lot of time taking the train to come into the city, you know, go into The Village. And you know, how life was in The Village was so different from how it was in like the malls in Long Island.

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Yeah.

FI

That's, you know, that's what I did. And then I went to school in the city. So I moved out of the house, I lived in a dorm.

AZ

College?

FI

Yeah. I went to Barnard for four years. So that was the first time living away from home, and also living 24 hours in English, which was very very stressful. By the time I graduated high school, I was fairly competent at school, because of the fact that you can actually prepare for school, right? You know what to expect. And you can interact with the teachers within the classroom. Social life was different. But you know, you could get by feeling that you understand what's going on with living in a dorm, most of the interaction, most of the critical interaction is outside of the classroom. And really just learning how to explain things like real day to day, in a way, whereas if you're tired, the different kinds of tiredness or just, it's a lot more about explaining how you feel than a subject matter that you know what you don't. And that was a very different experience. At the first it was very, very stressful, that I didn't have a break from that. The fortunate thing is that Columbia had an amazing Japanese English Library. So I spend a lot of time in the library reading the books that I like, but at the same time, that's sort of like a little bit of space I have, because of the fact that I have spent, it takes a lot longer for me to digest textbooks than my classmates, so it was really nice to be living in a dorm so that you can spend, really spend a lot of hours studying, preparing for it, spend time in the library. But at the same time, just not having that sort of break in coming home and being comfortable in my own language was difficult for six months.

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Yeah.

FI

But then also you make new friendships, you gain different friends. The first year, all my friends were children of immigrants. They're the first generation Americans or they immigrated when they were very, very small. So it was

fortunate that they understand the fact that your limitation on language doesn't necessarily mean that you're stupid, which is a big, big, big help, in terms of communicating because they never talk down to you. They may repeat themselves, but they'll never like talk down to you and slow it down, like you're talking to a child because they understand that's not the case. I mean, some people did do that, thinking that's helpful and it is in a way. But it's also at the same time very, very insulting. But I couldn't say that at the time, because I could tell that the person on the other side meant well. And it's much later in my life that I learned the expression, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. And when I heard that I'm like, I know exactly what that means. So, so I spent four years at Barnard and spent also six months in London, in my journey. I really liked school, I really liked college. But at the same time, I wasn't sure if I wanted to stay in the United States after I graduated. That was around the time when Japan was doing very, very, very well, economically. And there were a lot of opportunities for students returning from overseas being bilingual. I had a very hard time understanding Americans.

AZ

Americans?

FI

And I realized now that it's not the Americans in general, but it's northerners, people in the North urban, people who seems very nice, very friendly, but they don't really mean it.

AZ

So you mean you have trouble understanding them?

FI

In terms of the social distance, not necessarily the language itself. And I always would sort of attribute it to like, well, maybe I didn't understand what what the person was saying. I misunderstood what the person was saying. But I didn't relate [inaudible]. And no, it's that's just the way they are. They say things they don't mean. And I had a lot of that in college in social situations, especially the barrier part. So even though my language skill was getting

better, and I began to understand a lot more about my surroundings, I wasn't quite comfortable. And I wasn't sure if I wanted to live in the United States. At the same time, I didn't know I wanted to go back to Japan yet. I knew it was much better than I expected at the time, in terms of the opportunities that you have, and also the professional chances for women in general. At that time, it seems to be so much with economic boom that they actually the first time in the history they had equal employment opportunity legislation encouraging employers to hire or give equal opportunities men and women. There was no enforcement, there was no quote, there was no measurement of achievement or compliance with that. The law is symbolic, but because of the economic reality of companies looking for well educated workers, it was actually happening. So I knew that that was a possibility that I could actually find a professional opportunities in get real job and that I could stay and expect, you know, being expected to stay not just, you know, work for a couple of years and, you know, get married and move on. But at the same time, I felt like, well, I spent a few years here. I sort of know, New York in the United States. But when I go back, I'll probably lose a lot of what I learn, probably lose my language skills. And I didn't feel like I gained something solid enough to take back and not lose all the things that I worked so hard for. So I wasn't I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do after I graduate. So in my third year of school, I decided, well, maybe there's another way. Maybe it doesn't have to be Japan or the US. So did some research and found that there is some kind of, it's not an official program, but at least the reciprocal agreement that the bond that will recognize the credit from the University of London.

AZ

okay, yes.

FI

So I decided to go to the School of Oriental and African Studies at University of London for six months. The reason why did that for the springtime is that British system is similar to what, Japan copied the British system, so they have the trimester. If you go in Spain, you get to do second trimester and the third. So I figured you get more out of spending a semester away by taking two instead of going in the fall was just the first time. Also at the time I really was into British music and culture. Well, not food, but you know, fashion everything.

AZ

Yeah.

FI

Okay, I'm gonna go to London. So I spent six months in London, thinking that the school life is similar there. So first, I live on campus housing, there was no such thing. There was no campus, I saw there was only one building. There was more like the NYU back in the day. Well, even here now, like you have different schools. University in London have like different schools, but over all around downtown, some of the more mainstream colleges, like King's College, I think had a dorm nearby. But SOAS didn't have anything. They had a whole bunch of flats in North London, about 45 minutes on the tube. That's when, at I first I looked for a room share and you know, posted in a student's office and went on on a few places. And honestly, this is not working, way too many creepy people. And it wasn't nearly a room, share. It was just like the corner, you know, one side of the flat you have it [inaudible] on the floor. And then like, that's your room and let's say 500 quid a month [inaudible]. So I wanted to keep it to the same level as like what my father was paying for the dorm here, which was expensive, too, but didn't want to cost him any more than he was spending already. So, so North London is where I spent six months among a whole bunch of students from Middle East. That was my first time I actually got to talk to somebody from Lebanon, Kuwait. And a lot of Arabs living in, coming from Africa, actually. Some of them actually lived in Africa. Yeah, I think there are some Syrians, mostly Lebanese and Kuwaitis that I met and an American who wanted to go to Africa, but they were the place he was going to go to just adapted into a civil Civil War, so he couldn't go so he decided to come to London because he already took time off from school. He couldn't go back. An Antiguan American, I don't know why he was—he wasn't in the same school, but he was friends with the American kid. A South African born Indian living in, coming from a suburb of London. A whole bunch happened so I met a lot of Asians there, Asians in London at the time were South Asia and I'm East Asian but we were more Orientals than Asians.

AZ

What year is it?

FI

The 90s. Early 90s. And that's what I learned when I went to SOAS. I realized like the why SOAS was next to the School of Tropical Disease. It's a school for Colonial bureaucrats and administrators. So you go study the language at SOAS, so you learn in African, East Asian, all the the colonial footprints that the British Empire had. At SOAS you go to School of Tropical Disease to get immunized and then you're off. Yeah, we were like nifty school of Tropical Disease.

AZ

Interesting.

FI

It was fun. It was interesting. But so you definitely saw the legacy of colonialism there that a lot of the students there were from former colonies, and also Middle East where [inaudible] gets educated outside of their own countries. Yeah, Dutch guys, and then also the European Union, they didn't charge tuition, if you're with the European Union, that they have list, you didn't have to pay tuition for universities. So I mean, they love foreign students, because that's where they got, they get to charge tuition. So there are a lot of language students from Asia, particularly from Japan, just come to the London School. A lot of Americans on study abroad program. Well, not a lot at SOAS but a few, and people from all over. So it was interesting living with South Asians, and especially Middle Eastern friends, because that's the time of the first Gulf War. I was there when it started, it was very, very interesting, watching it on TV, on British television, among the Arabs talking about a very, very different perspective, and take on what's happening, or what it means. And that was my first experience for war as well. That was the first, I mean, I grew up in postwar Japan. And we're like, no army, no weapon, we don't engage. And we are not allowed to engage in that. And we don't want to live with the mistake of the World War II. So even though in Britain, you know, they had the Falklands, so they this sort of have modern conflict. For me, it was a first experience of knowing that somebody that I know may actually go to war. And, but I knew so little that I actually call back to my friend's home and say, are you going to be drafted do you have to go to war? Because that was the

image that I had. And once you know, country engages in the war, you get drafted and you go to war, but no, it's a volunteer army, that doesn't happen until they get really desperate. So, you know, like college age kids, I thought, like, there'll be the prime candidate to get shipped off. But that didn't happen. So it was really good to see that, especially, you know, looking at what's happening now and how it gets broadcasted here. The whole controversy with the friendly fire now is the first Gulf War most of the British casualties were killed by the Americans. And also it was very, very tense going to school, because we had a very large concentration of Middle Eastern students. So we used to joke about it, we should just start, we were joking and we would say, like we should go to a really expensive restaurant, you know, eat whatever we want. Leave a big, you know, duffel bag on the seat and just run away. Say no, we're all extremely students and trying to save money. Yes, really good [inaudible]. So, you know, we had enough sense to talk about it, but at the same time was a very tense time on campus with all the newscasts that descended and tried to ask opinions of the Arabs on what's going on. And so I really actually did like living in London.

AZ

You did?

FI

Even though I didn't like living in North London and having to take the two, three songs into the city. But culturally speaking, I had a much better, easier time understanding the social distance of the English than the Americans. Even though I didn't understand a lot of the words that they were saying a lot of the accent that they had, I understood what they meant, versus what is the distance between, it's very, very similar to what I grew up with.

AZ

Can you describe that difference?

FI

For Japanese, what we say and what we mean are two separate things and there's an understanding of that, depending on the context, depending on the relationship, depending on the situation, we say certain things, but you need

to read between the lines. There's a conventional expression and understanding of the personal distance, that you may extend something to somebody, but depending on your relationship with that person, the other person would understand that if it's a real invitation, or if that person is being polite to you.

AZ

So it's very nuanced?

FI

Yea, yeah, and it's a lot more. The conversation had a lot to do, a lot more to do with the relationship with each other. It's never, and also sort of social hierarchy. So the politeness of, I think the politeness of it, the degree of politeness that the British or the I should say English displayed to each other, in the context that I understood was a lot more similar. So, the relationship between teachers and students, it was a lot, the distance between the two, I feel a lot more comfortable in the, in the UK university system than in the United States, where there are still professors pretend to be your peers. I was uncomfortable with that. I mean, there's definitely power relationships, but they try not to acknowledge that a lot of the times in the United States. Especially with older people, younger people, older people try to, they try too hard to be cool. In the US, they try so really hard to be young or understanding of the youth. Whereas in Britain, there's no pretense like, if you are of certain age, you're supposed to behave a certain way. And that's okay, that's, you know, that's not a reflection of you not being cool. So I think that yeah, I think the value of the definition and the value that you place on a certain characteristic isn't in definition, based on social standings, age, all these other attributes, I had an easier time understanding. It's not that I liked it or not, I mean, it's very structured. And sometimes it prepared me it makes it difficult for real friendship to develop, if your understanding is so different. But also at the same time, if it does happen, it makes it more meaningful. Which has been my experience with some of my friends back home who are of my father's generation. But it was just was easier distance. And there was less disappointment in terms of what the other person extend to you versus what you understood the closeness be or the friendliness. So I really liked living there, and I wanted to stay there longer, but I wasn't sure of the job aspect. But

graduate school definitely, like I was thinking that's a possibility. And because of the fact that, SOAS especially, emphasize a lot more of getting a language to the native level before you move on to graduate study. To me, it was it was a must, you have to be able to leave things in primary language, and do research in primary source to do your undergraduate thesis.

AZ

Undergraduate?

FI

Yes. So I was sitting in the class, undergraduate class, reading modern Japanese from 1890s, which is a very difficult Japanese for us natives, we had one too, but I was sitting there discussing what, or reading untranslated work, so it was easier for me.

AZ

Right.

FI

[inaudible] but in that was the expectation. So in the US, I could take Japanese language classes, but everybody discussing the work that I'm familiar with, reading it in English and discussing in English. So I mean, discussing in English was fine, but just the fact of having to read it in English and looking at weird translations was different. So, so I came back with the sort of sense of okay, maybe that was the place culturally speaking, except for the fact that it was very hard for, I mean, it was really hard for anybody to get a job in the UK at the time. But that's a really no, I mean, I can go on for that was my first like, 20 years of my life and I can go for the next 17 years, but you might want to skip ahead or?

AZ

Let's move on to your sexuality.

FI

Okay.

AZ

You identify as—

FI

Lesbian.

AZ

Lesbian. Tell me about when you came out. Actually, go back to when you knew.

FI

I always knew actually, I always knew when I was growing up. But in Japan, teenage homosexuality for girls was sort of almost expected, you know, you sort of practice, you wanted a real thing. So everybody joked about it everybody knew girls used to give me you know, flowers or not flowers, but even make me lunch, make me things. On Valentine's Day in Japan, it's a big commercial conspiracy. But the candy companies came up with this idea and came up with some legend somewhere in Europe that that's the day the girls can actually get to convince the boys what they feel, how they feel about it, unlike, you know the girls are supposed to wait and not really be forthcoming. That's one day of the year, you can be in, you know, in charge of expressing your opinions. And it was universally understood that I'm going to be on the receiving, I'm going to be on the receiving end on that day instead of giving. But I always knew, but I always knew I was much after the girls, but it was, but it was different from sexuality, because the idea of sexuality was very much a grown up thing. So the part about the sort of orientation part of your emotional attachment, like your attraction was fairly clear. But that didn't get connected to the actual sexuality part of it at a much, much, much later.

AZ

By you or by your culture?

FI

By me, I think. I mean, like some of the girls, I think it's a lot different now. Things change so much, and a lot more young people know about sex and sexuality much younger. But when I was growing up, I don't think we really

talked about it in junior high school. I mean like, we talked about dating, like, you know, having crushes on boys and things like that. But it was more like, well I want to, you know, like spend time with them, get close to them, hold hands with them, to that extent. I think kissing came into play maybe in high school, but it was still like whoa, big deal, then. Because even though we didn't call it school, the boys worlds and girls world was segregated. It was sort of implicit. And also, like crossing over got so much backlash from your group and got a reputation that's like, oh you really like boys kind of thing. So even in the co-ed school, that was the context. So a lot of the girls who had the practice one with the girls that they did, like, a close relationship and in girls was a lot more explicit on Valentine's, and then that was completely acceptable.

AZ

Was it talked about?

FI

Yeah, everybody knew, I mean, like parent's kids. You know, my straight friends who went to Catholic High School, she had long hair very feminine, but she got letters, candies from underclass girls all the time. Yeah most likely the younger students may be having a crush on upper class, not men, but upperclassmen in girls, schools, talked about, written about, practiced. And I think for grownups point of view, it was sort of a safe thing, because precisely because it didn't involve sexuality, or they assumed that it did. It was sort of like emotional relationship without the threat of sexuality. And I don't know, I didn't go to girl school so I don't know to what extent there was actually sexuality involved. But a lot of the grownups think that it's sort of like healthy development in terms of having curiosity about forming a relationship, but it's safe. So it was funny, like when I was in junior high school, trying to find, you know, think about which high school to go to all my friends, like, don't go to girl school, don't go girls school, so then you get the taste of it, you will never get out of it! It was a worse than understanding that if I were putting in a situation, that would be that I'll feel very comfortable in that situation. I'll never come back to sort of graduate in that phase and in, you know, behave like a girl. So, in that sense, I always knew and I think people knew and even sort of my parents and my relatives always talked about, I have a younger sister, two

and a half years ago. I was the oldest grandchildren, grandchild on either side, but everybody's expectation was my sister's gonna get married first. And I'm going to be a working woman. And also the fact that that the way I dressed and the fact that I always wanted to do things that people associated with boys or I can I could compete with them. I was very competitive. I'm because I could compete with them. And also, in terms of leadership in class, the class president, or the student government, like the roles that I play was always sort of like a leadership role. And maybe they sort of didn't give me a hard time about, which I think is kind of unusual. And I think it has to do with the fact that we were in a new community. And we also got very young, eager teachers because of the fact that it was very new development, and it was very [inaudible]. It wasn't connected by public transportation yet. It was a planned community so they worked on the town first, and then they put the label after we got enough density to sustain the, the legal plan. So a lot of the times, young teachers stayed out of school who wanted to come to Tokyo and stay in Tokyo take the exam for the prefecture. Their first assignment tend to be in remote places, like in islands or us. We got a lot of great teachers coming in, who are not necessarily super experienced, but they had a lot of great ideas and they weren't really caught up in conventions and traditions. So I never thought, it's usually like when you look at any kind of literature, which is comic books. In co-ed situations, it's usually the class leader is the boy and the vice chair, whatever the title is, will be the girl. Wasn't the case, when I was allowed, everybody sort of understood that I'm the leader and whoever is going to be the second you know, you elect like one male, one female to the position, and then it's almost expected that the boys will be number one, they got the segment that didn't have. Yeah, so I was used to that. And I think that was part of the reason why girls are looking at me as sort of pseudo-boy kind of role. Then it's the same thing from girl's perspective, it's a safe alternative to actually being, you know, engaged in trying to build relationships with boys. Because you don't get to use that, as you know, not as love but like as a boy crazy or you don't get the kind of scrutiny you'll get from your parents if you're hanging out with boys. So anyway, I think so in terms of I knew I knew early and people knew me and but I think the expectation was I'll grow up at some point. And it talks of since this is about style and fashion. So in terms of how I dress when I was younger, I did like wearing pants and jeans and t-shirt. I mean, I dressed up I did like

wearing like pants and jeans and T shirt. I mean, I dressed up in the formal occasions, my father was in the apparel industry. So you know, we would always get the best suit for the graduation. But in terms of everyday wear, I think I was fairly aware, early on that the girls had to show [inaudible], like, you know, there was a very strict expectation about what girls aren't allowed to do. And I wasn't happy with that. So I thought the way to be taken seriously, the way to be equal was to behave like boys. I don't think necessarily, I wanted to be boys, I was just pissed off that I couldn't, you know, be on the same level as them in the eyes of the grown ups. Or like anybody, you know, my peers or my upperclassmen. So I think I was fairly consciously trying to destroy the expectation every chance I got. And I also learned that that's possible. I think, once you prove to them that you can do it. You know, I mean, they'll call you names, but they'll call you names and, but you can earn certain respect that way, and, you know, wearing girls clothes and was sort of not conducive to the activities that that I like doing. And you know, running around beating up all the boys showing that you know who's the boss.

But when you get to junior high school, at least in my district, you have to wear school uniform. And I agonised over like, asking my parents for boys uniform. But I didn't even get picked on like, right away by the upperclassmen. So I'm like, Okay, I don't want to sign up. Sorry. When's the last time the girls uniform and, you know, people made fun of me for wearing skirt and like, not interested in skirt. But, you know, you get used to the uniform that sort of made me a little bit self conscious. It's not that I didn't like dressing in skirts. I mean, I mean, any formal occasion when my father brings home the brand new three piece suit with like nice pleated skirt, I loved it. So it's not that I didn't like dressing, but I think I was sort of aware of the fact that ,if you dress like a girl, people make fun of you. Because they're not used to seeing you once they sort of have an image of you as a particular type of person, then. And a lot of the boys tease me like, you know, you behave like a boy. So it sort of does sort of stuck with me. So whether I liked it or not, it's one of the things that people tease you about, if you were deviate from what you would expect of you. So, Junior High High School, even though wore uniform to school, on

weekends, it's pretty much back to you know jeans and T shirt. Then when I came here, and I also always had like, hair, kind of short, never grew my hair long. So when I first came here, one of the things that was really liberating was nobody has any expectation of me other than the fact that I'm Japanese. And I didn't speak English, all that well. Later on, I realised that you know, the whole Japanese female thing and what you have to deal with, but at that time, the language thing was a lot bigger.

AZ

What do you mean Japanese female thing?

FI

You don't understand how many people stop me on the street, like I lived in Japan it's great. It's mostly former servicemen.

AZ

Oh like men hitting on you?

FI

Not necessarily hitting on you they are friendly. But you know, you have certain expectations of Japanese women being submissive, docile, provide, you know, really takes care of their man kind of thing.

AZ

Okay.

FI

Which is. And also, there's a whole image of Asian women in American popular culture, dating back way back, there was a great documentary on PBS on the spirit image of in Asian women being juggling lady versus the what's that Madame Butterfly, because those are two iconic images. And sometimes men have a fantasy of having both be the same person. So you

know, you may look very innocent and pure and quiet in a circus. But once you get to that point, you're a freak, and you have all kinds of amazing sexual abilities. And I learned that lesbians have the same stereotype. Yeah that we have some kind of special techniques. But yeah, that's much later. So at that time, I was sort of completely free to reinvent myself in a way. I mean, it was hard, not being able to articulate what you were thinking about what you observed and what you meant to express. But at the same time, that sort of took the edge off of how people saw me like, you know, I was always very vocal. I was always the there's this thing in Japanese schools that when you graduate, or when you move on to a different way, you actually come up with like a little booklet, to sort of commemorate your classmates or your experience. And, you know, we were brought in, like in the [inaudible], you know, the most successful all the things that you do. Yep, it's a similar

AZ

Superlatives.

FI

Yeah, so that was the fastest Monday class. We didn't need it the most popular like, we had like all kinds of things like, I'd always be the toughest. Boys and girls one on top is number one, and also the one who speaks so fast. I'll be the fastest speaker. So you know the way sort of my mind worked and the way I articulated myself, tend to give people a very strong impression of maybe not I'm feminine, but at the same time, it's a very sort of outspoken personality that people don't necessarily associate with virtual femininity. It wasn't ideal for characteristic for women. So the fact that I couldn't speak all that well, and I didn't speak much, and the fact that I'm in a completely foreign environment where people people dress different you know people their hair different. High school kids wore makeup, which could be a cause for dismissal back in the days in Japan not anymore, but you know, when I was growing up, just curling your hair or perming your hair, there was a cause for

suspension. Actually, nobody said anything if I wore a dress. Now, they said, Oh, that's a nice dress, or, you know, where did you get it? But they didn't make fun of me for that. So I was like, wait a minute, it's like, you know, I can try different things and not necessarily have to deal with people's image of me. And also the fact that when I came here, I couldn't find a hairdresser that I could trust or I couldn't explain to them what I needed done.

AZ

Yeah.

FI

My mother's best friend at the hairdresser's I've never had anybody else cut my hair. So come here, white folks in [Long Island?] don't know what to do with my asian hair, I wanted it short, but it always comes up awful. So I decided like, Okay, I'm gonna, I'm not gonna go through the trauma was sitting in a you know in a beauty parlour, like, praying that they don't mess it up. So, I started growing my hair out in high school, and I kept it long. So I looked you know, very, very different, and nobody really made fun of me for growing my hair, or getting perm more. So that was interesting. In terms of my own idea of gender image. I always thought like, I was a boyish girl. And I was comfortable with it, but then I started to question it's like, was I doing it because like, to behave like a girl was disadvantageous to what I wanted to do. Is it something that people taught me to do versus like what I really felt comfortable doing? So I sort of went and lived in that body for a while, which was kind of nice and which was kind of fun. And I realised like I'm much more feminine than I thought I was, and I'm much more comfortable being feminine. I'm less embarrassed about dressing like a girl and it's actually kind of fun. I never really went so far as to put on the makeup my mother traumatise me when the first time I put on lipstick my mother was like you look like a drag queen. Thank you mother I mean you know I picked up the lipstick my mother my grandmother had yeah that was my mistake. But so she kept me in check

about like, you know, what's suitable for me versus like so you know, I never really after and I'm like okay, I'm not putting on any makeup. Most of my college years I looked quite girly, I'm not girly girl but you know, wore more skinny jeans and skirt, but I didn't make much of wearing a dress or really girls clothing [inaudible]. And then at the time, I thought I could be bisexual as well no, I think I wasn't even thinking about sexuality in terms of my attraction to girls I mean you know i i definitely pay more attention to women and how pretty they are or I will look in there or like the who appealed to me. But at the same time it's almost like it was like the other way around. That it's a practice for me that I thought like I could actually date boys. So and I did have a chance a few times.