

Kristyn Scorsone (KS): Hello and welcome to the Queer Newark Oral History podcast. I'm Kristyn Scorsone, your host and a PhD student in American Studies at Rutgers University Newark. This podcast is a part of the Queer Newark Oral History Project, a community-based and community-driven initiative supported by Rutgers Newark. Hey, Mi Hyun and welcome to the Queer Newark Oral History podcast. So we're recording at the Queer Newark office at Rutgers Newark, but—so just so you know, you might in the background of this interview hear some, like, giggling students in the hallway outside, but I think that's okay. So before I let you introduce yourself, Mi Hyun, I just want to say that, you know, we aren't trying to, like, frame ourselves as oral history experts. There are many amazing, you know, academics out there who are authorities on the subject. But what we can speak to is our own experience interviewing people as grad students for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. So, you know, me and Mi Hyun are both in the American Studies PhD program at Rutgers Newark, but do you want to say a few things about yourself first?

Mi Hyun Yoon (MHY): Sure. Hi, everyone. Hi, Kristyn. Thank you for having me today. As Kristyn mentioned, my name is Mi Hyun. I'm a third year PhD student in the American Studies program here at Rutgers Newark. I specifically look at the intersection of Asian America and Asia through the Korean diaspora and the United States, looking at topics such as gender, citizenship, nation, nation formation, nationalism, you know. all of those interesting hot topic words, I guess. And then—

KS: That's awesome.

MHY: Thank you. And as Kristyn mentioned, Kristyn has been involved in the Queer Newark Oral History Project much longer than I have, and I actually joined last year, actually, September 2017—

KS: Oh yeah?

MHY: Was when I first started. I believe. So since then I've been working on it. Yeah.

KS: Cool. Yeah, I joined in 2015, like, right after my BA here. Yeah so I guess, like, in your experience so far with doing oral history interviews, how do you establish trust between you and the person you're interviewing to make them feel, you know, comfortable to open up?

MHY: So I think building trust actually should be done the moment that you get that person's contact, so whether where you are setting up an interview through e-mail, phone, or in-person, that moment, how you act as you're setting up that interview will reflect on how they perceive the interview to be. So, you know, if you take it in a serious professional manner, that tone will also set the tone for the interview as well. So the most recent interview I did, we had a lot of

back and forth emails, but we were very professional and—but at the same time, you know, it was professional but included information and I try to make them understand that this is what the interview will entail because I got—this person was actually recommended to me by Whit, so for those—

KS: Yeah, he's our—he's our co-director of the program, Whitney Strub.

MHY: Yes, so he gave me his—the person's contact information and I guess just in case of, you know, personal information issues, I'm not going to mention the interviewee's name, but, so we got in touch. We had a back and forth e-mail session and actually, it turned out that the first time we scheduled, he had an emergency thing that he had to go to and so he couldn't make it. But I had left him my phone number because sometimes people feel more comfortable communicating by phone versus e-mail. So I provided both venues of information to him. So mostly we did talk by e-mail but that day he called me by my phone and was like, "I'm so sorry, this happened" and I was like, "oh, no, that's totally fine, I understand." This is also—they are granting us time, right, it's not like they're getting spending any compensation for speaking to us. They're freely speaking to us because they feel, number one, that our project is important, and they feel that they have something that is valuable to contribute to our project.

KS: Yeah, I agree. And yeah, some some people do prefer the phone. I'm so phone-phobic, so sometimes that's hard for me. But yeah, it's definitely—you have to allow them to—to get in touch with you however is good for them because yeah, it is like a low priority for people when you have work and you have maybe children or a spouse or just any, you know, you're caretaking for someone. But anyway, yeah, I think for me too, I do similar things and then I also, like, on the day of the interview, like, I'll, you know, and I'm sure you do this too, like, take them through the consent process and also, like, how we're going to use their interview, like, often people haven't even—have not seen our website yet, which is, you know, understandable too. So I'll show them, like, what the website looks like and what their interview will actually look like up on the website, like, show them a sample of someone else's and, you know, offer them beverage and try to make a few jokes or whatever just so that they can kind of relax because it's so—I think I would—I know for myself, I would be nervous on the other end too, like, you feel like you're—I'm sure on some level they must feel like they're under a microscope. So, you know, I try to make sure to be like, "I'm going to take notes, but it's not like a therapist taking notes, like, just write down that you said you had X number of siblings so I don't go and say, oh, you had the wrong number of siblings or something like that," but yeah. So another question I had is, you know, Queer Newark has this, like, list, we have like, a set list of questions that we ask people, every single interview, but we are also encouraged and allowed to write up our own, like, supplemental questions if we want to. Do you prefer to do that or do you prefer to, like, in the moment based on whatever they're saying, do you prefer to, like, ask questions based on the last thing they said or do you come prepared?

MHY: I do a combination of both, actually. So if there is some information available about the person, especially if deep down, you know, most of our interviewees have already done so many amazing things, and that we—they can be found on the Internet. So I will, you know, give them a quick Google search, see what I can find out about them. Sometimes, whoever refers the person to you will already have some sort of background information about them. So based on that, maybe you find that there's something interesting you can ask more questions. And at the same time, though, I do like to—I have a journalism training as an undergrad, so I do also like to, you know, listen carefully of course, and take notes as I'm hearing the question being answered and if there is something that either I feel like people won't understand or if I don't understand something or it's—if something is interesting and I want to learn more about it, of course I'm going to, you know, follow up with a question.

KS: Yeah, me too. Like, I definitely come, like, with other questions off the bat, and I do that too, like, I'll do, like, a Google search and, like, for my master's thesis I wrote about queer women of color who are entrepreneurs in Newark so of course I would look up, like, what their business was, like, if it had a mission statement, you know, what kinds of projects they're involved in, just things like that that I could—and then I, like, looked up and found, like, even, like, journalistic interview questions for, like, what people ask entrepreneurs, like, what are kind of, like, good questions that—that resonate with them. So I did that as well and I found that really helpful, because there are a lot of, like, really good open-ended questions.

MHY: Yeah. Also too, I think—I guess related to the last question in this question too, what we sometimes forget about is the environment, because the environment, depending on whether that person chose a particular environment, says a lot about, you know, their interests or how they feel a certain place is secure or whatnot. So—also what they're wearing, right, so maybe they're wearing a certain cool, awesome shirt, and then that—you could tie that into your interview or they wear a particular piece of statement jewelry. They probably, you know, people make choices about their fashion and for the most part, I'm sure it means something to them. So that is also something that can not only—you can—you not only can you talk about to build trust, but also tie into the interview, you know, related to a follow-up question or something that's not even a follow-up question, you can just ask about it.

KS: Yeah, that's a really good point. Another thing I think of, like, so I used to do, like—like, a weird thing about me is that I used to do improv comedy and, like, one of the things that they really train you on and—and—because in a scene, like, you don't have scripted lines, the whole thing is unscripted. So—and that's where basically where the comedy comes from is this, like, listening and reacting. So, like, they teach you, they drill it into your head, like, you have to listen to the last thing that someone said and react to it. Don't try to, like, come up with this, like, crazy other idea. Just be in the moment and listening and reacting to what is being said at that

very second and that I totally tap into a lot when I'm doing the oral histories but that's just another, like, weird thing that I do.

MHY: That's awesome.

KS: Thank you. And then, yeah, I just have like one more question for you. So as a Ph.D. student, have you used oral history in your own research or do you think it'll be something that you'll use in the future or, you know, in your career?

MHY: Yeah, so actually, I am, I guess—well, I'm not embarrassed to say it, but I guess it's—oral history as a method of research was something that was unfamiliar to me before I came to Rutgers Newark. I—well, I'm also not classically trained as an historian. My undergraduate degrees are in East Asian studies, East Asian area studies with a—I mean, like, I had a—a language focus in Chinese and also journalism and for the most part, you know, we're not—we're not talking about oral histories or histories, I guess, mostly in general, but it was something that was new to me and I learned more about it as I worked with Mary, Professor Mary Rizzo, here. And because she's not—she's also involved with the Queer Newark Oral History Project and I was her graduate assistant my first year here, so I learned about the project through her. And then I became a graduate assistant for the Queer Newark Oral History Project my second year and that's when I really started to learn and see how, like, what the benefits of doing oral histories are, like, hearing the people's voices and getting their life histories because everyone has some sort of a history, right? It's not—it's just a matter of which histories get told. I think the benefit of projects like this is that we can give a voice to people who are normally, you know, disenfranchised or marginalized. So in that sense, it has got me thinking about tying my research interests in Newark. This is something that is in the works. I don't know when—no, it will definitely be completed probably sometime—sometime at the end of this academic year. It's a matter of to what extent because I feel like it will also be ongoing, but I'm interested in looking at the Korean merchant population in Newark, especially on Halsey Street, and especially now that, as you know, gentrification is happening very rapidly, especially in the, you know, the Newark—Rutgers Newark area.

KS: Yeah.

MHY: I mean, as you know, I mean, if you want to give a brief background about how the LGBTQ Center got pushed out, right.

KS: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. The developers bought, like, basically the whole block. So they were located at 11 Halsey Street since—oh, I'm gonna get it wrong, but they were there for about three years, and—two or three years, I think three. And then yeah, so basically big developer came in, I think they bought the whole entire block.

MHY: I think so.

KS: Thank—thankfully, the Newark Public Library offered to give them a space inside their institution, which is really amazing because they're only located about a block—block and a half from, you know, where the Center was located, which, being that it's so central, it's good for all the LGBTQ people that are located in different wards. It's like a central spot for them to get to, which I think is really awesome.

MHY: Yeah. So, I mean, like, places like that are being pushed out and, you know, businesses are, you know, declining. So it's—I think it's only gonna be a matter of time before these people, you know, these Korean merchants are going to be pushed out due to, you know, rising rent costs, gentrification, et cetera. So in—what a lot of us don't realize is that a lot of these Korean merchants have been here maybe as early as the 80s or even—maybe even before, so what fascinates me is the fact that in LA there was a big sort of interracial conflict.

KS: Right.

MHY: Initially, right, it started with, like, white on Black sort of interracial conflict and then it evolved to being—well, I don't wanna say evolved because that's not a good sort of evolution, but it—it's kind of—it became more to become a Black and Asian sort of an issue with Korean specifically.

KS: Right.

MHY: In LA.

KS: Yeah, I learned about that in the context of the LA riots, right.

MHY: Yeah. But I feel like here, for the most part, it has been quite peaceful. I mean, you—you don't hear of racial riots that happened in Newark, I mean, since right, we had the '67 riots or rebellion or the Puerto Rican.

KS: Right.

MHY: That was—was that '74?

KS: '74, yeah.

MHY: And then—but since then it's been relatively calm and that's why I'm sure there must be a reason, either from one side or the other, or maybe both work together. So I'm trying to find out more about that before all of these people are pushed out and we can't track them to get that history.

KS: That's awesome. Is that gonna be—are you looking to make that into a paper or your dissertation or?

MHY: So it's part of a project I—so it's an idea that I had and I'm a—so at the Clement Price Institute for—it—it's a really big name. I think it's Ethnicity, Race, and the Modern Experience.

KS: Yeah.

MHY: They have this fellowship called the Amiri Baraka Fellowship and as a part—as one of the fellows, there's four other members, but as one of the fellows, that was my idea coming into the fellowship. And there are different components of that project, but because of my interest, you know, related to Asian America, that's the history that I really want to get down before they're all—they are all gone.

KS: Right. So you'll go out and interview these merchants?

MHY: Yes. So IRB process is in the way, but, you know, they get back to you with some changes and then you're not—you're busy, so you don't always have time to change things and so it's like a process, as Kristyn knows, but eventually that IRB process will be done and, you know, we will go out and interview and depending on whatever language they feel most comfortable with, I could be doing these oral histories either in English or in Korean.

KS: Oh wow.

MHY: And the thing that kind of concerns me is that, as you may know, Asians and Asian Americans in general are more of a quieter group and they don't like to speak in front of other people, especially if they're being recorded, so I think, if anything, it might not be a complete sort of an oral history, but at least a portion of oral history where they—we can at least capture that moment where they came, you know, that moment when they came to Newark and what—what they did and how they felt about the racial interactions and that story, even if they're not telling me from, like, oh, from birth to, you know, the current moment, so hopefully that will be some—that will be uploaded as part of our digital mapping and, you know, incorporation with other parts of the project where we're also talking about space and histories and I don't know if you heard that there was a—there was a—I think that there was a slave burial site or something?

KS: Oh.

MHY: At—near NJ PAC?

KS: Yeah, I think I did hear that. I don't really know that much about it.

MHY: Yeah, I don't know too much about it, but that's something that Lauren was working on, but it also connects to the Hal—like, it's called the Halsey Street Project, but it's related to the Halsey Street Project, so.

KS: That's awesome.

MHY: Hopefully, more things—

KS: That's really fascinating.

MHY: Will be coming, and yeah. So hopefully it will be—it will be finished by April of next year.

KS: Cool. Awesome. That's really, really exciting. So—and just to close out, is there anything you want to add or anything you want to plug or, like, social media or, like, if you're watching something or listening to something or reading something, anything of those three categories that you want to add?

MHY: The one thing that the—I guess my last parting words related to oral histories is the advice that I actually got from Kristyn when I—when I started first doing oral histories, which is—and also this is the general advice, I think, that you—people give you when you do any sort of interviews. I—I think I usually give this advice from the journalism side, right, when you're doing interviews, which is to ask them—to ask like—to have—let the interviewee have the opportunity to, you know, gather their thoughts at the end and let them say what they want to do. Like, so just like as Kristyn just, you know, said, do you have any last thoughts? We would—you would ask, is there anything that you want to tell me that I maybe forgot to ask you or didn't get a chance to? And then at that moment, if there's anything that's lingering in their minds, they'll usually have that opportunity to kind of do a full-on confession about that, about that item that they have on their—in their thoughts. So that I think also provides to be an interesting way to get more information and I feel like there have been times where you thought this was going to be over, but then they start going, you know, you asked that question and they start going on an entire different tangent and they're like, "Oh my God, this is, like, we should keep going. You just told me a whole bunch of other things that I could follow up."

KS: Yeah.

MHY: So I think just letting the—also, like, letting the interview take the direction it wants to go. You shouldn't try to make it so structured, and I guess related to that, just leaving yourself enough time to do a full interview because worst-case—worst thing would be, like, you tell them, "hey, I have an hour" and now they're—you've already kind of given them the message that, "oh, whatever you tell me, number one, is probably not that important because everything's gonna fit in an hour."

KS: Right.

MHY: Like, nothing nicely ever fits in an hour in life, right?

KS: Yeah.

MHY: Something—something always happens, so.

KS: Yeah, for sure. Yeah, I agree with that cause I—I had an interview with someone and I asked them that final question, like, "is there anything else you want to add that I didn't touch upon?" And usually they're kind of like, "no, it's fine." But this one person was like, "sex. You didn't ask me about sex." And I was like, "oh, yeah, that's true." And—cause it's such a difficult subject and you don't know, I don't know, I always worry about putting someone on the spot and what I think I really should do is, like, incorporate that into the—to the rapport before the interview. Like, "can I ask questions about sex? Can I ask?" You know, I've been trying to think about that lately, like, how can I make this comfortable for me and that person cause it's, you know, it's a two way street.

MHY: Yeah.

KS: But—but yeah. And it was great that he said that because then he went into this. whole, you know, conversation about AIDS and, you know, and, like, things like PrEP and stuff like that and how he, you know, where he felt—fell in the line of, like, those issues. So it was really fruitful and yeah.

MHY: I think—yeah, I think what—I think what we forget too as interviewers is that, like, yes, sometimes we have uncomfortable questions to deal with, but the matter of the fact is they already know kind of generally what they're getting themselves into, and if we are upfront about it in the first place when we are doing our initial introductions, like, I mean, even before recording, right, like as you said, you know, just making sure, like, "oh, are you—oh, are you

comfortable with this topic?" And most of the time they'll be like, "yeah, I'm totally fine." And they'll be so happy to give you so much information about it.

KS: Yeah. And then also too to speak to, like, what you said about time is like on the converse side of it, sometimes they have time constraints. So I would just, you know, always be mindful of—so if somebody's like, "I gotta be out of here in two hours," you know, just keeping an eye on the time and getting them out on time. Because often if you do that and you—and you get them out, even, you know, in advance of when they need to leave, they'll likely come back if you need to ask more questions for a second interview or—or something like that. So it's—it definitely, like, creates more trust and establishes a much nicer relationship, but so yeah, but thank you.

MHY: Yes. And then I guess two things I will plug, which is—

KS: Yeah.

MHY: I'm sure Kristyn has already done this, but follow Queer Newark at—so it's @QueerNewark on Twitter and on Instagram and on Facebook.

KS: Yeah.

MHY: And then I can be reached at. So it's Mi Hyun, M-i H-y-u-n, underscore, last name is Yoon, Y-o-o-n, at Twitter. So awesome.

KS: Very cool. Thank you.

MHY: Thank you.

KS: The Queer Newark Oral History podcast is produced by me, Kristyn Scorsone. This episode was recorded in the Queer Newark office located in Conklin Hall at Rutgers University in Newark. Our theme music was remixed by DJ JustLove, an amazing local Newark DJ, and is from an original song by K. Sparks. The title is "Music" and you can find more from K. Sparks on freemusicarchive.org. As for DJ JustLove, you can find her on Twitter @DJJustLove and on Facebook. Thank you so much for listening and we'll see you next time.