

Transcript – Sarah Kay, Class of 2010

Narrator: Sarah Kay

Interviewer: Shuyan Wang, class of 2020, and Mary Murphy, Nancy L. Buc '65 Pembroke Center Archivist

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Mary Murphy: Okay, go ahead Shuyan.

Shuyan Wang: This is Shuyan Wang and we are interviewing Sarah Kay at Alumnae Hall on Monday, April 16, 2018. So, hi Sarah.

Sarah Kay: Hi.

SW: So to start off, can you tell us a little bit of your childhood and your family background; where you grew up and how it was like in your family?

SK: Sure. I am from New York City. I was born and raised in Manhattan. My mother is Japanese American from California and my father is Jewish American from Brooklyn, so I grew up in a multi-ethnic, multi-faith household in a melting pot city. I also attended an international school from kindergarten through twelfth grade, so the people that I learned from and alongside were from all over the world so I really had a very lucky upbringing to be surrounded by people who were largely nothing like me constantly. So the source of most of my education both within a classroom and out are always is a very wide range of characters and influences which is pretty neat.

SW: Sounds pretty cool.

SK: Yeah.

SW: So kind of moving on. As you kind of moved into your high school and thinking about college years, what kind of led you to apply to Brown and why did you choose Brown?

SK: Yeah let's see. When I was... I guess this is an important part of the narrative, when I was thirteen-- I grew up in Lower Manhattan and when I was thirteen is when 9/11 happened and that had a tremendous impact on myself and my family and...we were out of our home for a few months and....

MM: Could you please-- this is Mary Murphy, I'm also participating in the interview. This is a moment for archivists where we like to stop, pause, and actually have you recollect September 11th, if you can, if you have memories of that time.

SK: Sure, yeah, I mean I have all of the memories of that time. I was in eighth grade and I was in a French class and my school is the United Nations International School and it is on Twenty third Street and the F.D.R. which means it's literally on stilts on the East River on the side of Manhattan. Which means that from our school we could see down the side of Manhattan to the smoke from lower Manhattan. And we were in class and we could see something happening at the window and we didn't know what was happening and a English teacher came in, and let us know that airplane had struck one of the towers of the World Trade Center. And I believe that I made some kind of joke, like that this would definitely be on the front page of the New York Times tomorrow. And then a couple minutes later, or what felt like a couple minutes later, the same English teacher came back and let us know that a second plane had hit the second tower and I think I said something along the lines of like "how stupid do you have to be for it to happen twice"...is what I remember. And I don't remember anyone using the word terrorism yet because we didn't have that word in our vocabulary at the time. And one French class was done, I think the faculty really of course didn't have a procedure in place because before 9/11 no one prepared for things like 9/11. So instead the best that they could do is they sent us--they asked everybody in the high school to go to the roof of the building which in retrospect, not the safest choice. But it was the only way that they could account for all of the humans in one place, and so they sent everybody to the roof. And when we got to the roof, they had us find our homeroom teachers to like make sure everyone was there, and the homeroom teachers did roll call, similar to a fire drill I guess, but we're all on the roof which means we could smell what was becoming the air over New York, and we could see the cloud. And I think that's when someone first used the term "Kamikaze" to me and it occurred to me that like it wasn't an accident but I didn't really, still didn't really understand what that meant. And then the school, again didn't really know what

to do and so they said basically they were like you can't-- kids can't leave until an adult comes, a parent comes to pick you up. But I didn't have to be your parent, it just had to be a parent that would come and like take responsibility for you. So meanwhile this was all going on, my mother had been on Sixth Avenue doing grocery shopping and could see all the way down six that avenue and watched the second plane hit. Because she walked past a little boy who with his mom and the little boy point in the air and said airplane and she turned around and saw the second one hit, and she made a beeline for the school and-- to come and get us-- and when she got to school, I guess my dad separately had also seen or heard and made a beeline to the school so they like met at school and came and found me and my brother. I don't member which one of us they got first. But I do know that they basically signed out all of the kids from my neighborhood. So they just took everybody because we didn't know whose parents were down there and we didn't know whose parents were going to be able to get out, so we had like a caravan of downtown kids. And my dad used to own and run a camera equipment store and so he had a van, like one of those like big sliding door vans-- that's what I like rode around New York City in as a kid-- so we all like piled in the van. And I think as we kind of like made our way, we caught up with people's parents and like distributed children to their parents. I do remember that as we were leaving school, we were walking past someone who was listening to like an old school F.M. radio. Which I never seen before, and someone was saying on the radio was like where the towers were or used to be or something and I said I don't understand why people are talking about it like that-- it's not like they're gone, they're just like damaged. And my mom was like "no, they've, they've fallen, they're not there anymore". And that was the first that I had heard of that step. And then we got in the van and we went to my father's office which was on seventeenth Street and Fifth Avenue and they had set up-- I don't-- again because they were a camera equipment like and supply store they had all this like equipment kind of around. They had an old black and white television which I had never seen before in real life. But they had like a black and white television that they had managed to set up. And everybody in the office was gathered around watching the television and trying to figure out what was happening and my.... A lot of the people that worked for my dad lived in either New Jersey or Long Island-- what we would call bridge and tunnel people, fondly. And because we didn't know whether they were going to shut down the bridges and tunnels, there was a possibility that everyone was going to be stuck in Manhattan and so we decided, my mom was like "we should go get food in case everyone has to stay here" and so we left my brother who was nine with my dad and the two

of us went out to a grocery store called Gourmet Garage which is nearby, and everyone else had had the same idea so the place was packed with people. And I remember the line wound all the way through the grocery store like, like a Disneyland ride and that memory was very like I remember thinking like “oh like a Disneyland ride” in this grocery store. And we got all this food and then we are walking back to the office and we passed some men who were wearing like construction worker attire they're wearing like hard hats and reflective things on their person. And they were covered in like dark (10:00) mud. And were like super dirty like picture like dust bowl photographs style--like really dirty and they were both drinking water. And I don't remember if I said like “ew” because I actually thought it was gross or if I just, if the world was getting very quiet and I wanted to say something to fill the quiet, but I said “ew” when we walked past and my mom immediately said “you know that’s blood?” And it wasn’t a question, it was a statement and I didn't know until she said it, but that was the first like...visual that I had had up close and so then I was very quiet and we went back to the office. And my brother was sitting on my dad's knee playing a video game on his computer and I went and I sat down like on the floor next to his leg and that was the first time that I cried that day. And then I called my childhood sweetheart and we didn't talk and we just breathed into the line for like fifteen minutes and then I called-- I tried to call-- my other childhood best friend had gone to Stuyvesant High School which is right down there-- and I hadn't heard from her and I didn't know she was OK or not and it turns out that while I was panicking about her she was panicking about my family because our apartment was very.... So she was able to get out, but she thought we were there and I thought she was there and so we both were trying to call each other. And then we went up to sleep at my grandmother's house who was on-- she lived up by Central Park West. And we stayed there for a couple days and school was closed and.... People just kept trying to-- basically the news was on in the living room and the kids, meaning my brother and I, were sent into the bedroom to watch cartoons so that we wouldn't watch the news. And then after like two days my father started to get really stir crazy and hated being out of control--my dad's like six-foot-four and from Brooklyn and hates not being in control of things. And he was cooped up in this house and the world was falling apart, and he decided that he like had to go to our apartment to get a change of clothes for us, which in retrospect is like absolutely ridiculous because we could have borrowed clothes or like... and no one no one was going downtown and you like really couldn't and it was a completely like ridiculous thing for him to want to do, but it was really important to him and so he borrowed somebody's bike and he... just started biking

downtown. And he took a backpack and a bike and he biked downtown, but there were there were police... what's it called... like barricades every ten blocks or so, so he'd like bike ten blocks, hit a barricade have to like show his ID and talk his way through and then bike another ten blocks and hit a barricade and show his ID and talk his way through....And like somehow managed to like either bully or sweet talk his way through all these barricades to like get down to our apartment. And when he got down there like and this is two days after, so the whole place looked like Mars, it was all ash, it was all-- also one of the things that they did right away was that they had to like clear a lot of debris, and so they had just taken like bulldozers and stuff and just pushed debris up from from Ground Zero to try to like clear space, which means that like where we were there were like literally like cars like stacked on top of each other. In front of our apartment and it just looked like...it looked like a giant had like crushed a bunch of hot wheels into like kind of a wreckage of metal because they were just trying to like move anything out of the way. So it looked terrible and was very scary and totally lonely, he was like the only person there that wasn't like full of military. And there was no electricity so when he got in the building it was like completely dark and he had to go up in the dark with the bike and when he got up there...fortunately, I guess the woman who used to help, like come once a week and help my mom like clean the apartment, had been in the apartment when this had all happened, and somehow she had had the wherewithal to close the windows before she left. So like that one detail is the only reason that like our apartment was OK. So our apartment was OK, and he like filled a backpack with one pair of clothes for each one of us. And then, and this is probably the story that I hold dearest to me as an adult, when I was little I had a baby blanket and a stuffed animal lion that was like my...childhood lovelies, and they are named Blankey and Lion, creatively. And my father saw them in the house and the like didn't know if we'd ever get back to the house again, and didn't know what was going to happen next, so he took out his pair of clothing and instead replaced it with my blankey and my lion and he, he couldn't get the backpack zipped fully so he had this stuffed animal lion's head sticking out the top of the backpack. And he rode all the way uptown through all of these police barricades and the ash and the wreckage with the backpack on, and eith like this lion's head poking out over his shoulder and when he tells the story he says like the only way that he like got through all of it was to like whisper to this lion the whole time and be like "we're OK, we're going to be OK". So, strangely enough what was once my like baby lovey had like become this like strange like family, yeah token, our... Yeah exactly. That like Lion and Blankey now belong to like, to my family. And still me but like.... You

know like my brother who's a twenty six year old man will like come home, and I'll find him like watching T.V. with my like stuffed animal lion on his shoulder because it's symbolic of something more than it was before. Yeah, those are most of the memories. We stayed with my grandmother for probably about a week and then, my parents are both photographers and before they got married my mom lived in a Loft in Soho that was like her bachelorette pad. And she built by hand a darkroom that she would-- because her work was doing prints for more famous photographers, and so she spent a lot of time in the darkroom, that was like her special tree house. And when they got married they kept the loft to use as a studio, but we never spent time there. Except in this time period, after we left my grandmother's house my father really wanted to try to get back downtown. And it is the one thing that my mother and he probably will forever or that she will never let go, is that he had us come back downtown much earlier than she would have wanted, or probably was healthy. So we came and lived in the loft for a few months. Which was in Soho. So it wasn't in Tribeka, which is where my actual apartment was, but it was a little bit higher up. Yeah and that's where we were for a little while and it was very difficult and my parents fought a lot and my brother stopped speaking for a long period of time. And...

MM: Did you say he's younger?

SK: Yeah, he's four years younger than me, he was nine. And it marked the end of his childhood right in a very sharp way and so I, I often have a lot of survivor guilt around the way that I was able to come out of that time period and the way that he was...differently traumatized by that time period. Because in addition to being nine and seeing his parents' marriage failing and the world falling apart, he also-- his favorite teacher committed suicide in response to 9/11. So then we had to figure out how to deal with that and...it was a lot for him. Anyway. After being down there for a month or so we were...maybe even more, I can't remember now, but eventually we were able to go back and again we were super lucky that our apartment had not been-- I think there is still a lot of difficulty with the air quality and... Every couple of years I get (20:00) asked it yet to this day I get asked about my lung health in relation... But what's strange is there are certain things, as you can see, that I remember in like scalding detail, and then there's also parts of it that are just totally erased from my memory. Like I was trying to write about this a couple years ago and I was talking my mom about it and she said something about crutches, and I was like, wait what about crutches? And she

was like “Do you not remember that I broke my ankle on September 12th and was on crutches for the next several months?” And I was like “nope! I have no memory of that whatsoever!” And I don't know why my brain would decide to like erase that particular detail, but it did and I think maybe that's just the nature of trauma that there are certain things that are incredibly sharp forever and then there are certain things that just get washed away. But that is one that I apparently just completely blocked out for some reason.

MM: So, if you can take that line of thinking and memory and thread us back to thoughts about carrying some of that with you as you applied...(overlapping)

SK: Yeah, well so the reason that I brought it up in the first place was to say that in this time in my life where I was, you know it happened when I was thirteen, and then that summer I turned fourteen and would have started high school the following year....Whenever you're in those kind of transition moments, either when you're graduating middle school or you're graduating high school or whatever, people love to ask you like well “what do you want to do” or “what are you going to be” or whatever, so it's a moment of reflection where you're trying to figure out like “oh now is then the next big step of my life”. So this happened in eighth grade and so then all of a sudden it was not only me going through this this experience, but also saying like “who am I” and “what do I want to do” and “what do I want to be”. And I think probably the biggest life change in that regard was that--or two things, there were two things. One, was that I had always really loved theater because I grew up in New York and I got to go to Broadway shows sometimes, or off Broadway shows and I was very lucky to get to see a lot of live theater. And I loved it, and also knew intrinsically that there was no space for someone that looked like me as an actress and so I couldn't do that. And instead I thought “OK well I'm a good writer and I am bossy and so I could be a playwright or a director maybe” and that's something I could get excited about, and so that became like... when someone asked “What do you want to be when you're grown up?” or “what do you want to do?” I would say I want to be a director, I want to be a playwright, I want to be a screenwriter-- I think that was sort of like the the stand-in dream that I had held onto that as I started high school. And the other thing that happened was that I got accidentally signed up for a teen poetry slam. Somebody signed me up for a poetry slam and I had never been to a poetry slam, and I never heard of a poetry slam. And this is before YouTube so I couldn't even like to look up what that was. But--

SW: And how old were you?

SK: I was fourteen. Every year in New York City there's a...there's a citywide teen poetry slam that happens and anyone between the ages of thirteen and nineteen can sign up for it. And it's cool there's like a bunch of them and then they slowly get whittled down to a semi finals and those go on and on to finals and then at the end of it they have what becomes the like youth team to represent New York City at the teen National Poetry Slam. None of this meant anything to me, I didn't know anything about this. All I knew is that someone signed me up for this poetry slam, and the only thing I knew about that was that I thought there would be other people that liked poems, which I did. And so I went to this teen poetry slam and it just so happened that this particular event, they had rented out a place called the Bowery Poetry Club which was like a shitty dive bar on the Lower East Side. They had like rented out the space for this teen poetry slam and I went. And very few things in my life have been as transformative as that, and I think -- I don't think, I know that a huge part of it was because I was just coming out of 9/11 and it was a time when none of the adults in my life had time for my fourteen year old fears and flaws and silliness because they were busy trying to hold the world together. And it was the first time as a fourteen year old girl that I felt like a room full of my peers, a room full of anyone for that matter, saw me and were listening to me and I was allowed to talk about anything that I loved, or was scared of, or believed in whatever words I wanted to. And I would be greeted with attention and care and applause, and it absolutely changed my life. And I was like "What is this?" and how do I do it as often as possible. And I saw a thing that said that like they hosted a poetry open mike in poetry slam every week at this place and I was like "oh perfect, I'll just keep coming back here" but I really didn't understand that they had rented out this space for this one teen night, but three hundred sixty four days of the year it was a dive bar. And that like very much escaped my understanding, and so I started to show up at this dive bar every week for this open mike and this poetry slam and I was a fourteen year old in a dive bar. And like somehow nobody sent me away and they just let me hang around and I would sit literally underneath the bar because it was down the center aisle and so it was the best view of the stage. So like people's legs were hanging down and there was like gum above my head and I would sit literally under the bar and watch poets perform every week. And that is how I fell in love with poetry, it is where I fell in love with poetry, and I think it's worth noting, because my love of poetry did



not happen in a classroom, it happened in a community of artists. And I learned about the art form in like an old-school, apprentice-style model. And having a place to go every week where a room full of people made room for me was the best way for me to figure out what I wanted to do with that space and that time, and if I was allowed to be whoever I wanted to be, then who was it that I was. And so the forging of my identity happened absolutely through that art form and it was a way to heal, it was a place to build, so you know it was a very very.... It is both connected to the events of what had just happened and also responsible for the events that followed. And so those who are--

MM: What was the name of the bar?

SK: It was called the Bowery Poetry Club, which still exist although it's under different management now and now looks like a kind of bougie burlesque bar but I think time it was this like a very decrepit, gnarly dive bar that--a montra at the Bowery Poetry Club was if you give a performance artist a bucket, they will pee in it. Just so you understand the kind of establishment we're talking about here. So anyway, those two things: thinking about wanting to be a playwright or director like in the world of the creation of theatre, and having this other space in which I was...doing... finding poetry and finding my voice and forging an identity in this art form-- those are the two things that kind of carried me through high school. So that when I was in... I guess I would have been a junior in high school... I applied to be part of what was the very first year of something called Theater Bridge, which is a Brown summer program for high school students. And I believe they still do it now, but it was literally the first year. It would've been 2005. And my theory was, I can go and learn about how to be a director and I can go and learn and maybe this will help me figure out some of these things. And I came here--so the first time I came to Brown was for a summer program, was for his school summer program. And I really enjoyed it and I really loved it and...because it was the summer, Providence is so lovely in the summer and it was very easy to fall in love with Providence. And although also that summer somebody held up the Creperie with a butcher's knife. So you know shout out to summer in Providence (laughs). I remember that very distinctly too. Anyway, so I really loved it and because I was here for this program--like a lot of the summer programs at Brown I think are short, they're like one week or two week programs, but ours was longer, which meant that we felt like big guys on campus because we like knew the ropes and completely unwarranted really. But it really felt like it was our

campus, and I felt like this this home here that I really loved. And then when senior year came around and it was time to apply to colleges, I applied to Brown, although truth be told, when I was that Brown-- I don't know if this still how it is-- but when I said Brown, like everybody I knew that was at Brown (30:00) fit into one of two categories: either they had applied early to Brown and gotten in, or they had applied early to Yale and gotten rejected. Those were genuinely all of the people at Brown. Is it still the case? Yikes, I don't know what that says. Anyway, I was in the latter category, although in my defense, I think it was because when I was in high school, our school didn't do valedictorian, but they had they had like a one zero award which was the (inaudible) scholar. And you were-- it was awarded to you as a junior and then you had it through your senior year, and then you awarded it to another junior. And I was awarded it my junior year, and like the three (inaudible) scholars before me had all gone to Yale, and so I sort of was like "cool,cool, I don't even need to research this, like I'm done, I'm out" Like this path has been set, easy breezy I don't have to waste any time on this. So I like applied early to Yale, barely thought about it and then applied regular to a bunch of other schools. And when I didn't get into Yale I was like "oh no now I have to like to learn about schools, I have to like make these choices". And at the time I remember being a little bit snobby and being like I don't want to go back to Brown because that's like summer camp and I want something like new that I don't already know, as though like the summer program for high school students had anything to do with college. But I didn't know that the time so I really was like "No I don't I don't think Brown is where I want to be." And I couldn't be at ADOCH, I couldn't be at the accepted students weekend because I had like a chorus trip or something, so instead my mom and I just came up for the weekend. And again I was like I don't need to see it, like I spent three weeks here, like I'm good I'm fine. And she's like, "let's just go and check it out" and while I was walking around on campus, I ran into a girl named Charlotte Graham who had been one of the RA's for my summer program. So she was like one of my counselors and the summer camp. And like just happenstance saw her, and she was like "oh my god you got in and like I'm so excited are you thinking of coming?" And I was like "I don't know, maybe." And she said "I'm on my way to my acapella groups rehearsal, do you want to come sit in on the rehearsal?" And I was like "oh yeah that sounds kind of cool, I like I sing in high school and that sounds fun." And I went and I sat in on her acapella group's rehearsal, and it was a, it was a rehearsal for the higher keys. And I sat in one of those-- I don't even remember-- what's the frat that's like the literary frat?

SW: I don't remember.

SK: It's on Wriston, they have like one of the basements with like a leather chairs or something. Anyway, they somehow got to use this for their rehearsal space. I went and I sat and they were rehearsing a Gershwin medley. And I was so impressed, and so immediately in love. And I was like "uh- oh...this is amazing." And then when we were done, another girl in the group named Lane Bryant [?] was like "hey I'm on my way to go see this student-produced play at P.W. production workshop. It's entirely student-directed and written and created, do you want to come see it?" And my mom was like "yeah well let's go, we don't have anything to do tonight." So we like walked over to P.W. and on the way, I was asking her about her time at Brown, and she told me that she was a chemistry theater double major. And the idea that you could be a chemistry theater double major and sing acapella and go to student-produced theatre, like was too much for me. And I was like this is the most amazing possible thing. And the last thing that did it, is I got a chance to sit in on one class while I was here. And it just so happened that it was Larry Marshall's solo class, which, at the time, it used to be--I think it probably still is, although Lowery has retired so someone else probably teaches it-- but at the time, it was sort of the equivalent of like a thesis for theater majors, theater concentrators. And it is-- you can only take it in your spring semester of your senior year and you have to apply and usually only like ten people get in. And you spend the entire semester writing, creating, and producing an hour long one-man or one-woman show. And that's the class--it happened to be the class that I got to sit in on. And again, the idea that like of this was school, but the most incredible possible learning environment where like all of these young people were sitting in a black box theater working on each other's shows and giving each other feedback and getting up to share and write and direct each other-- I was like what even is this magical place.

SW: You just got accidentally introduced to the Brown theater?

SK: Yeah but it was so-- it wasn't just theater because I didn't even think I was going to do theater. You know I thought-- I actually was a chemistry concentrator for my first two years at Brown, plot twist. But the idea that you could be a chemistry and theatre person, the idea that you could like sing acapella and also go do these other things-- like that was so.... The musical director of that acapella group was a math major and that also like blew my mind.

Just the fact that that was-- I think this is now later when other young people are applying to colleges and I meet them and they ask me “did you like brown?” or “why did you like Brown?” The thing that I always tell them is that when I was applying to school, something that I didn't think mattered very much was whether or not there were core requirements, right? It's just like one factor on a long list of facts about Brown-- they're like, “you know we don't have core requirements, it's just there requirements of your concentration, and that's it.” And at the time when I was in high school I was like “well it doesn't really matter to me because when I get to college I plan on taking a lot of classes in different fields anyway, so if there is a core curriculum that's fine, and if there isn't that's fine, it doesn't matter.” But what I didn't really understand is actually what it means is that at Brown, every single person is sitting in a class because they want to be in that class, and not because they are required to be in that class. And that actually makes a huge difference in the quality of the class, in like the way that people navigate their education and the education of others. And there's just a general aura where like people do things because they authentically and organically really want to do it, which leaks into all the extracurriculars. So people that do acapella are all in on acapella. And people that do student-produced theater are all in on that. And that kind of like full passion and full buy-in is rare and is unique, not necessarily only to Brown, but certainly something that made Brown incredibly attractive to me and proved to be the case when I was here.

MM: So can I ask the question now about your grandmother? Did you know when you were applying to college that your grandmother had attended Pembroke?

SK: You know, I am sure that at some point someone said something about that to me, but if I'm being very very honest, it was in no way something I held in my head at the time. Like when I thought about Brown it was like “oh yeah that's why I did summer camp” and like that was the extent of my connection to this place. And it wasn't until much later that I like really understood at all I mean her history-- I mean I didn't write about her like in my application, I didn't-- you know I mean-- like she wasn't connected to my interest in Brown or my connection to it as far as I could tell. Later it has become incredibly meaningful to me that we both share this. But at the time-- (overlapping)

MM: Tell us that story

SK: --so my grandmother, my mother's mother is June Suzuki Kawamura, and she was born and raised in California. And when she was--when she should have been a freshman at U.C.L.A. is when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and.... Executive Order 9066 was put into place which facilitated the internment of Japanese Americans on the West Coast. So she and her brother George and their parents were placed in....First they were placed in a holding camp at Santa Anita Race Track, where they were housed in converted horse stalls, barracks. And eventually they were moved to Gila, Arizona, to the camp in Gila. A strange loophole at the time was technically the language was that you couldn't be a Japanese American on the West Coast, but theoretically if you were a Japanese American not on the west coast, sometimes there was like a way to maneuver it so that you could be not in the camp. And because my grandmother was of college age, she managed to be sponsored by the Episcopal Church which basically means this school church like wrote a recommendation to say like "we promise she's not a terrorist" and they allowed her to leave in order to attend college. And at first she went to Keystone college but after (40:00) she was at Keystone for a little while-- Oh I believe actually she applied to Penn and Penn turned her down because... well I won't assume to know why they turned her down. But Penn turned her down and she was heartbroken, but she got to go to Keystone for a little while, which I think was in Arizona. And then her freshman year at Keystone, I think a dean recommended that she transfer to Pembroke. And she applied and was accepted.

MM: What is that connection?

SK: I think they saw that she was smart and they knew that Pembroke was going to be a place that she could pursue. Specifically she ended up being a chemistry and biology major. But what it means is that in the middle of World War II, while her parents were in internment camp, she as a Japanese American woman traveled alone by train across the country from Arizona to Rhode Island. And from what I understand, there was a part of the journey where there was an F.B.I. agent who was assigned to her. And basically tailed her and shadowed her the whole time, which she remembers as being her great fortune because it meant that people weren't harassing her. For a Japanese American woman traveling alone across the country. And so she thinks of this F.B.I. agent as like a little guardian angel, in some ways, though she would not have used that phrase. But anyway, so she came to Pembroke and attended

Pembroke, and I believe she was the first Japanese American woman to attend Pembroke college. While she was here I believe there was maybe one other Japanese American student who I think was a man, who was a Brown student. I could be wrong about that, but I'm pretty sure she wasn't the first Japanese American at Brown, but I do think she was the first Japanese American woman.

MM: We can find that out for you.

SK: Yeah I'd love to fact check that. But I do know a couple facts about her time here that I love. One is the Avon movie theater on Thayer Street was a place that she went and watched movies. And I know that it delighted her to learn that it was still here. And another thing was she was, I think part of her being here, she was sponsored by a number of Rotary Clubs, and as a result, as sort of like her payment for that she would go and talk to Rotary Clubs about what it felt like to be a Japanese American person at this moment in time. And it was because of that that she learned that a lot of people on this side of the country did not know that we were keeping Japanese Americans in internment and concentration camps on the West Coast. That it was not information that was readily understood here. And as a result, she would get up and talk about her experience, and the reason why this has become so meaningful to me now is I did not know for years and years and years that this is a thing she did. And then I found...at some point we tracked down some of the text that she--like her speeches that she had given to some of these Rotary Clubs, and I realized like hold on a second, like she was a Brown student standing up in front of rooms full of people to talk about herself and her life experiences and like, oh shit that's literally exactly what I do. She was totally doing exactly what I do now but I had no idea, and also I am sure she would not have connected those two things. Like when she knew what I did and never at any point in my life was like "oh me too" like that was not a connection that she made I don't think. But I made, and it is very powerful to me to know that there was a moment when she was a young woman and standing up and saying these things and much in the way that I do now. And one of the texts of the speeches is written in the form of a letter to her parents and the letter begins "Dear enemy alien" which is what they were viewed as at the time. And it's basically a description of how much she loves it here and how beautiful campus is in spring time and how she wishes they could see it. And it is by far-- it's still very very very...you know it's in no way heavy handed, and in no way hard-edged, but it's still the most political that I think I ever heard her be, by which I

mean I never heard her be in her life that I knew her. But to find this document was very startling to me because the way that she talked about internment, and the way that she talked about that time was always--there's a Japanese phrase (Japanese audio) which means "it can't be helped" which is a phrase that a lot of Japanese Americans use when they talk about that time period, and also a phrase, ironically-- I guess not ironically, but also a phrase the Japanese use when they talk about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And it is like a particularly insightful.... It is evidence of a particular mindset that that phrase is so prevalent, that the premise that like it's not worth complaining about, it's not worth dwelling on, and it's not worth placing blame, but rather it is something that cannot be helped. And so in her life she never spoke about internment with anything other than matter of factness. She never spoke about it with rage, she never spoke about it with you know frustration or sadness, and so to find this one document where it betrays-- like at one point she was a young woman who was feeling those things is very important to me to see, even if I never heard it from her. But yeah she really liked her time here and she made-- it was very important to her that people know that people at Brown and people at Pembroke were incredibly kind to her and nobody ever made her feel out of place, and nobody ever discriminated against her. This is what she would tell me anyway, and even though like every photograph from that time is like all blonde hair blue eyed beauties and then like my one Japanese American grandmother in the corner. As far as she ever told me it was a very positive time here. She was a chemistry and biology major. And when she was done with school, when she graduated, her parents were still in the camp and so she didn't want to go back to the west coast lest she also have to go back to camp, and so instead she volunteered to go teach on a Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. And so she went to be a teacher on a Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, basically until her parents were released and then her parents called and were like "you have to come home and get married otherwise you're going to be an old maid." That was... and so she did. But it sort of broke my heart, breaks my heart now, only in that I think she would have made an amazing doctor, and I think that's probably what she wanted to do, and it was not societally available to her even when she had that degree, and even when she had studied what she had studied. So instead she went home and got married and had five kids and still managed to do a lot of amazing work. She did work for a scientist for some time, she also-- my grandfather did agriculture in California, and so she helped with the family business of that and raised five kids obviously, and learned how to pilot an airplane. So she was a pretty big--she was a total badass. But yes, somewhere I have-- when she passed away, they were--

we have a lot of family members and so we had to figure out where to put all of her earthly possessions, and she didn't really care very much about earthly possessions and so she hadn't-- she was sort of like "you guys can figure this out when I've gone." So we had all these objects to kind of divvy up, and one of them was her jewelry box, and she didn't have any like valuable jewelry. It was all kind of costume jewelry. But one of the things she had was a pen-- pendant that is the Pembroke seal, and it has her initials on the back. And so my mom gave that to me because I'm the only one in the family that went to Brown or would have any kind of connection to it and...that's very special to me to have some connection. (50:00)

MM: You're describing Archives gold to me. We'll talk about this after the interview.

SK: (laughs)

MM: I mean have you thought about a home for all the remarkable material...?

SK: Yeah, so that's her story so, yeah

SW: So you got to know her whole story after you got into Brown?

SK: Yeah I mean kind of even after I graduated from Brown, and maybe that's on me for just like being so self-absorbed that I never thought to ask more. But I guess I knew a little bit about it because when I was in fourth grade...when I was in fourth grade, we had to make a-- we had to do a biography on someone, and I chose to do it on her. And my mom and I like dug up all these archives and I made a little documentary film, which is narrated by me in fourth grade. And it's about her and so when we did that, I had you know I had access to all of these things so I knew, somewhere in my fourth grade brain, that this was the case, but between fourth grade and twelfth grade I promptly forgot all about it or didn't think about it very much. So it was certainly not an active part of my consciousness when I was here, and not until later did I really start to connect, you know, the work that I do with the work that she did.

SW: So kind of bringing it back to you: imagine that you have that passion for writing and poetry younger, but like as you enter Brown, what was your major of study? And then how it



developed?

SK: Sure. I was a Modern Culture and Media concentrator at Brown. Which used to be Art and Semiotics, but it was MCM when I was here. The reason that I picked that concentration is because it was the concentration that allowed me to take the most classes in other concentrations, and I was determined to milk the liberal arts system for all it was willing to give me, which is how I was able to take all those chemistry classes and still wind up with an MCM major. And also, it was the closest I could get to a film degree at the time. I don't know if they've changed that, but they didn't have like a film production concentration and so MCM was kind of the closest thing I could do. When I came to Brown, I as a freshman, I had just gone to my first-- like that summer before freshman year, I had just gone to my first National Poetry Slam, which had been amazing. And I had also, that October of my freshman year, I was invited to be on a television show called Death Poetry Jam, which used to be on H.B.O. and was kind of the only like mainstream, accessible spoken word poetry show. And that was a funny thing to have happen my freshman year. And something that was noticeable to me was when I was in high school, I was this like very overachieving kind of like obnoxiously school-minded geek. And also didn't drink or smoke in high school, which at the time felt like just one of many choices. But I ended up being maybe the only person in my graduating class who didn't, so it became this very like defining characteristic. And people would, would kind of... got the idea like "oh well that girl thinks she's better than us because she doesn't party" and it was this shadow that hung over me when I was in high school that I was very concerned about people... I was very concerned that people thought that I thought that I was better than them. And it was a real Achilles heel, and so I hid a lot. I never shared like you know when I was winning poetry slams at this dive bar, I didn't tell anyone about it, and I did eventually start to share poetry with my high school but not... In different ways. I didn't do a lot of celebrating. And a huge and very noticeable difference to me was when I got to Brown and I was on this T.V. show in October. And it came out-- I can't remember when it came out exactly, but when it came out, friends of mine here found out that it was coming out and they like rented out the cave, which is like the black box theater and put up a projector and invited everybody, and we had like a screening of it just for my friends and they like celebrated. And it was you know like a three minute poem, but then we had the space and then they were like well let's watch all your other poems, so then they started to like watch every poem of mine that they could get their hands on. And it was being celebrated for things that I loved that I

had never experienced before, and that community at Brown is the thing that I remember the most. That like everybody here was doing something that they loved and so it was it was so easy to find joy in watching other people succeed, and to find joy in celebrating what other people were doing. And so that, that creates this incredible energy of support that I've been very lucky to have continue throughout the rest of my life. I found my family here in acapella. I got here, I auditioned for acapella. I knew I was going to be in the Higher Keys. I like to tell me that I was a Higher Key before I was a Brown student (laughs). I knew I was going to be a Higher Key, it was like I had blinders on, it's like all I wanted, and I got in and that group became like my family. You spend-- you see them twice a week and you sing with them, and it's so funny because I'm not even a terribly good singer. But it didn't matter, it, again it's the energy of like caring so much about something that you put all of your time into it that unites people. And so that was my my people here. And as a result of that, I actually didn't really do a lot of poetry on campus in terms of there was an amazing community of poets here that are now like out in the world. I mean, Phil Kaye, Fatama Askir, Franny Choi, Laura Brown Lavoy, Jamila Woods are all like incredibly celebrated, well-known professionals in the world who I adore, and they were all here at the same time. It was a golden era of poetry at Brown University, and I was definitely, I would say I was definitely part of that community. The group here is called Word, or it was called Word when I was here, and they would meet in the basement of Rights and Reasons Theater. And I would go whenever I could, but I would say that for other folks, like that community was their... you know family. And for me, acapella was. So I was lucky to get to kind of dip in and out, but it wasn't the like place that I was, you know, was forged in some ways. So my poetry, when I was here was kind of like just one-offs, or we'd do a show and I'd do a show and... I took a couple... Language Arts, not language arts-- Literary Arts classes. Although, and here is my first like anti Brown sentiment: I was never accepted into a higher level poetry class while at Brown University. Not one time, and I applied--believe you me. I was never accepted to a higher level poetry class of Brown University. I was not a Literary Arts major. Last summer I was doing a show out in New York City-- they had these this beautiful like outdoor amphitheater on the East River. And I was doing a show there, and afterwards this young woman came up to me with her mom and she was like "hey, I'm a student at Brown right now and I just wanted you know we like study your poem in my class" and I was like "say what?!"(Laughs) "Oh word, could you email me that curriculum real quick?" Which is very satisfying.

MM: Wow, that's a great...tidbit.

SK: Yeah fun fact. Brown was not interested in my poetry while I was here.

SW: Well their loss then.

SK. Their loss! There was, you know, whatever. But I think it...what would I say about that. I think, in general my, my time at Brown had very little to do with what was happening in a classroom, unfortunately. And much more to do with what was happening outside of the classroom with the community that was here. When I was in high school, I was such a school kid, you know, I was like in my class. I took--I was in the IB and I took like four higher levels which you're not supposed to do. And I was like all about it and hard working, and you know writing fifteen page papers for something that an assignment that should've been two pages-- I was just like obnoxiously over-achieving. And truly the worst, I can't imagine having to go to high school with me, it must've been terrible. And when I got to Brown, I think I suddenly was like "who am I doing this for, and what am I actually gaining from any of this?" And there wasn't that same anxiety around it, which doesn't mean I didn't try-- I tried very hard and I did well in a lot of the things that I, you know, did. But I no longer was like in that... what's it called... the gerbil-- the hamster wheel. Yeah I was no longer in the hamster wheel. And as a result, I was able to like make time for things that brought me more joy in addition to like singing acapella at midnight, I also (1:00:00) while I was here.... Early, like my freshman or sophomore year, a poetry mentor that I had had in New York reached out and was like "hey I'm coming through Providence. I'm going to be performing at a school that's like right near Brown, do you want to come open for me?" And I was like "oh yeah, of course, sure no problem" and it was Hope High School. And so... I'd never been to Hope High School and I was like "oh, great, I can just walk there, this is so close." So I walked up the street and I got there and...he had me open the show. And I got on stage and I started performing--again, I think I was probably a freshman so I was probably like eighteen, which was not far away from a lot of the kids in the room. But I started to perform this poem that I had written, which is about-- I say this with like a lot of air quotes around it: what it felt like to be a teenager in America. And while I was performing the poem, I like looked out into the audience and I saw girls in the audience that had like newborn babies on their laps. And I-- it

was as like ridiculous as this sounds, you know, I went to an international school which was an independent school in New York City, was incredibly privileged education, and I kind of had never spent time in an American public school before. And this was like one of the first times I was encountering it. And like the absurdity and the like audacity of me standing there and like trying to be like “I know about being a teenager in America” was like so suddenly aggressively so clear to me, and I went home and I... like you know walked from Hope High School past the like Starbucks where all my classmates were on their macbook pros, and like into my fancy dorm room, and like sat on my bed and cried for an hour, because I was so embarrassed, and ashamed, and...frustrated. And I was like, “I don't have any marketable skills and I don't have anything to offer these kids. The only thing that I know is that spoken word poetry is the thing that allowed me to forge an identity in high school, and I don't know what it feels like to be a teenager in America, but what I do know what it feels like was to be me which was a teenage girl in New York City and the only reason I know that is because I spent four years learning and practicing how to articulate it and do it authentically and in the way that I really feel like this art form made me who I am. I also believe that like these students who are dealing with more in their lives than I have ever had to deal with in mine are going to need to know how to tell their own story in their own words, otherwise someone else is going to try and do it for them, and to try to ascribe who they are allowed to be and what they are allowed to do.” And I called up their school and I was like “Hey, can I teach students like after school spoken word poetry workshops?” And they were like “Uhh...sure...” (laughs) And they said yes, and so I started teaching weekly poetry workshops at Hope High School on a Friday afternoon. And we started with like two kids, one of whom got sent to me because he was hanging around the office and wouldn't go home, and they were like you have to go somewhere--go to this poetry workshop. But slowly over time, it grew and it built, and there was an amazing teacher there name Meghan Thoma, who was a teacher at Hope High School who like lent me her classroom, and was there, and helped with the workshop. And we built it out, and by the time I graduated from Brown we had a ton of kids coming, and they would stay after school on a Friday afternoon to write and share poetry. And when I was getting towards the end of my time at Brown, and all of my friends were either going to grad school or law school or med school and I was like “Uh-oh, what am I going to do?” I really thought I would go to film school. You know, MCM was my major, I was doing a lot of stuff in post-production editing, I did my study abroad in film school in Prague. So I really thought film school was the next step. But I knew I didn't want to do it right away. And I

came out of that workshop one Friday and I was like “wow you know what? This is the happiest I am all week. And when I get to be in that room with those kids talking about poetry and watching them, you know, figure out what they want to say in the way that feels best to them-- nothing makes me as full of joy as this does.” I was like “How do I do this more, and how do I do this as often as possible?” And there was a fellow Brown student here at the time named Phil Kay. Same last name, no relation. And he was really part of that Word Club or Community. Yeah. And we had already started-- you know occasionally we would perform together and.... On a couple like different school breaks we would, we had gone with couple different schools to do workshops together. So this was something we were already like kind of experimenting with, and I had really experimented with this when I was in high school. And when I was in high school is when I had created this little project that I called Project Voice, and the reason that I created it when I was in high school was because I woke up one day and was like “hey everyone is a lot more angry than I am. Everyone seems like really mad all the time and really Emo and I'm like kind of not and I'm in a great mood and I wonder if it's because I have this art form that allows me to feel seen and listened to by adults and by the world in a way that you don't always get to feel as a teenager. And maybe if other teenagers had access to this art form they would have the opportunity to express themselves and feel seen and heard and maybe this is the answer, and maybe I'll bring it to my high school then everyone will love me I'll be really popular forever”-- this is how my brain worked. And I made this little thing called Project Voice, which was three steps: it was a performance of poetry, which in actuality was me writing a bunch of poems and forcing all of my friends to memorize them and perform them with me, so that it looked like this was already a really popular art form-- which was a lie. And then I asked a poet to come and teach workshops so that students could give it a try and see if they liked it. And then the last step was I hosted our schools very first open mic so kids could get up and share their work, and this was my way of like trying to bring it to my high school. Because up to that point I had always kept it separate as like the thing I do in secret at the Bowery Poetry Club. But that was it-- that was the whole project. It was like three little steps, and it was a gift for my school, and I called it Project Voice, and I really thought that that was it. And then when I was at Brown and I was becoming a teacher, and learning how to teach this art form, and seeing how much joy it was bringing me, and how much good I thought it was bringing into the lives of these teenagers at Hope High School, I was like “Hold on a second. Maybe, maybe we can maybe I can do this again, but with a slightly wider lens.” And so Phil agreed to team up with

me and together we kind of masterminded like Project Voice 2.0 which was basically the same format, which is like a performance to show you what this art form is, a set of workshops to introduce you to the skills involved in trying it yourself, and then hopefully an opportunity for you to give it a shot. And when we were graduating, we were like “OK well we can spend a year not knowing what we want to do and dicking around and then eventually we'll get a real job, but for right now like we'll just try this for a year like what's the harm?” And so that was the plan, we were going to like graduate and just like try this for a year. And we started doing it and then, I was asked to give a TED talk. And this was in 2011. And I...

Sw: The “If I Have A Daughter?”

SK: Yes. At the time, it sounds silly now, but at the time it was before TED Talks had really gone viral yet. And so I was asked to give this talk, and all I really-- I knew about TED because I'm a nerd and love learning (laughs). So I had already watched you know as much access to TED as I could. But I don't think I ever, like I don't think it was as widely known yet. So I was just like “Hooray! I get to go be in the same room as you know Al Gore and... John Hodgeman... and smart nerds, like this is great. And I went and I gave that talk, and I... didn't know that it was going to be seen as widely as it has been seen. It just passed 11 million views.

MM: Wow.

SK: Which is a lot of views.

MM: Yes (laughs).

SK: And.... Yeah, it had obviously a very profound impact on the shape that my life then took, because what I thought was going to be a year of us figuring it out very quickly became “oh the demand is so high and there are so many schools that are interested in bringing us, (1:10:00) I'm actually running an education program” and I would really like-- I know a lot, at this point I knew I'd been doing it for many years now-- I knew a lot about teaching spoken word poetry. But I didn't know a lot about pedagogy, and I didn't know a lot about education history, and sociology in this country, and I didn't know a lot about a lot. And so I suddenly

was like “Uh-oh, if I'm going to be running an education program that I want to be something that is not disruptive but rather, helpful to educators, I really need to know what I'm doing.” And I decided to come back to Brown and get my masters degree in education, and so I did the MIT (?) program which, in retrospect, it was a terrible timing to try to do-- I mean I had just given this talk which had then gone viral and my life-- like I have never had.. Yeah?

MM: Who asked you to do the TED talk?

SK: Her name is Kelly Stetsal (?)

MM: Which is a friend, or colleague...?

SK: No, zero of those things. I think they saw a video of a poem on the Internet--

MM: OK.

SK:--And I think someone may of put a good word in, although much like my original getting signed up for the Youth Poetry Slam, truly no one has ever fully-- that-- no one has ever fully owned up to signing me up to that you poetry slam, and on the opposite end, everyone wants to claim that they're the reason I got the TED talk (laughs).

MM: So someone contacted you?

SK: Yeah, someone sent me an email. The way it happened actually, I was still at Brown--it was May of my senior year, I was still at Brown. Someone sent me an email that was like “Hello, we are at TED and we are interested in you. Could you give us a phone call?” And I was like “cool, cool, I don't really know what this means, but that sounds fine.” So I gave them a phone call and Kelly Stetsal, who was the curator at TED was like “hello like, I don't know how much you know about TED, but we have these TED talks that are eighteen minutes, but we also have these little smaller things.” Sometimes they're two minutes or six minutes, and not only that, but when we have a guest who's a performer, they don't necessarily do a talk, right? So like Yo-Yo Ma comes and plays; a dancer would come and dance; and she was like “so I'm not sure yet like what capacity we want to have you in,

maybe we'd have you come in do a poem, or maybe we'd have you come in and just do like a late night thing for the conference attendees” and I literally said quote: “I will hold your towels if it means I get to come to the TED conference.” And she laughed, and she was like “Well this year's conference, the theme of the conference is the rediscovery of wonder. What does that mean to you?” And I laughed and I was like “That sounds like my job description.” And she was like “What do you mean?” And I was like “Well I spend all my time in this high school with teenagers who have been run down by a lot of voices telling them you know that they can't be fazed by anything, that they can't be excited, or scared, and that they can't let on that they're feeling that way, and that they're not allowed to, you know, have these these moments of genuine, you know, fear or joy or excitement. And so a huge part of what I try to remind them is like you're allowed to to feel, and then you're allowed to take those feelings and articulate them into stories so that we know what the world is like from, from who you are.” And once you get me started on that as you can see I can talk about it for hundred years, so I was rattling on, and she stopped me and she was like “hold on a second. I changed my mind, I want you to give an eighteen minute talk.” And I was like “oh no, wait, wait, wait.” I don't know how to do that. I've never done that before, I have never given a talk before... of any kind, other than like my high school graduation, maybe. And I was like “Let's go back to when I was just doing a poem, which is a thing I know how to do very well. And she was like “No I think this is great.” And then hung up the phone and that was it. So it was kind of a fluke. And then it led me to a lot of people seeing it, and a lot of people being excited about bringing us into their school, and I tried to go to grad school at the same time ,which-- I don't regret going to grad school, but I do regret going to grad school at that particular juncture in my life. I've never been busier. I've never worked harder than that single year. I would basically like, I was teach-- as part of the, as part of the MIT program here, you are like placed in a Providence high school and are the English teacher you're not like a... Assistant student teacher, you are in the English teacher. And so I was teaching in, at Classical High School and so I would, you know, show up at 7:45 and teach until 3:00, and then go to class in the evening, and then like lesson plan, and grade, and prepare for the next day until midnight, and get up and go back to school. And that was Monday through Friday. And then Friday afternoon at three o'clock school would let out, and I would go either to the train station or to the airport to fly to do gigs from Friday to Monday morning for Project Voice. And then I would show back up at--it was a total, ridic-- I did not sleep for a year of my life. Who knows what happened in that year. However, I also learned so much more about, you



know, the challenges of being a classroom teacher that I didn't already know. And the students that I had I still am connected to many of them. And so I'm glad that it happened, and it also very genuinely did inform the way that I was able to shape Project Voice to be more effective. And it--as part of it, you have to do kind of like a thesis project, and I really I was doing all this research on like what else has been done with spoken word poetry in education spaces, and everything I could find was like "oh yeah spoken word poetry is a great extracurricular" like "oh yeah totally like spoken word poetry clubs after school" and I was like wait a second, but like, I think this art form has a real place inside a traditional classroom, and like could be very useful to teachers across content areas, and that's what I like focused on. And I did this research project about like how you can use this art form to teach any of the things you would teach with a traditional, you know, essay form et cetera. And it became this like quiet life goal of mine to have it taken seriously as an education tool. And so nowadays in addition to the work that I do with Project Voice, where I travel from school to school to school and perform and teach students, I also do a lot of professional development work with educators to talk about how they can make use of this art form in their classrooms. And I do a lot with like education conferences to talk about like how we need to abandon the old fashioned ways that we've thought about what literacy is, and take this seriously as another form of literacy.

SW: So do you find your undergraduate time at Brown is more like-- because you coming in thinking about you're going to do you film or go to film school, like kind of like the community that you like outside of the classroom kind of lead you to like kind of another path in education?

SK: Yeah... yes. A lot of you know I-- I'm very lucky that I get to be a professional poet which is not a thing that I think a lot of people know exists, and a lot of times people use rhetoric with me where they'll say like "oh like you're living the dream" or like "Is this a dream come true?" And I always feel the need to like to say no, because that would imply that it was something that I dreamed of, or thought was in the realm of possibility. And like I did not grow up knowing that being a professional poet was even an option, and I did not have that-- you know I loved poetry, and poetry was a part of my life, but so was chemistry, and so was filmmaking, and so were all these other things. And so it certainly was not like "oh man, if I just work really hard I'll be a professional poet." That was not the trajectory, this

really came out of left field in a lot of ways. And I'm also very lucky that I get to-- I'm very lucky and I work very hard to get to do this. And certainly I think what Brown gave me that got me here was what we were talking about earlier, which is the mindset of doing a thing because you really, really love it, and because it brings you joy and challenges you. And even if it is something that is not in a classroom, and even if it is something that like doesn't even make sense to other people, throwing yourself fully into it is a thing that people here do, and is a thing-- like me being like I want to just like teach kids poetry here did not seem like a crazy thing to say or do, whereas elsewhere I think perhaps that would have been a ridiculous thing to suggest. So yeah, I don't-- if you ask me like what did I learn in a Brown classroom that is now part of my daily life? I would be hard pressed to figure that out. Although not nothing, but but less that, and more just like the general mindset that I learned while I was here. And again, like the ability for people to collaborate, for you to collaborate with people who are in different fields from you, for you to be excited to celebrate other people's accomplishments instead of (1:20:00) finding their accomplishments somehow competition. That's a huge part of what I learned here. You know poetry is something that even though people like to talk about poetry slams, which I guess are competitions, and unfortunately because there's so little funding for the Arts, sometimes it does feel like a competition-- and like there can only be one success, and there can only be one, you know, fellowship, there can only be one-- that's such an unhelpful way of thinking about it, and I think like the ability... plenty of excellent artists are terrible people, but also it is possible to be an artist and also generous. And it is possible to be an artist who cares about, and fosters community, and shares resources, and that's the kind of person I'm interested in being, and I think that that's the kind of person I learned how to be starting here.

MM: I think we're running up on our time now, and take too much of your time. But I want to--I think Shuyan and I want to offer another last opportunity for you to share any other tidbits that maybe you brought with you here today that you wanted to get on the record. I just want to make sure that you have a moment to kind of free share.

SK: I mean I think we have we covered a lot (laughs).

MM: In terms of a hundred years from now.

SL: Yeah, oh god, a hundred years from now. Maybe. So...let me think about what I want to say here. Here's what I think I would say. I would say that: I grew up in a space when I was a kid which was defined by different voices from different people from different backgrounds and different life experiences. And that listening to someone that is different from you, and learning how to empathize with a foreign narrative is perhaps like the defining life lesson from my childhood, which then perhaps is a direct line to falling in love with an art form that depends on people taking turns listening to each other, and bearing witness to each other, and making room for each other, which is the spoken word when it is done well and supported well and.... I used to say that the number one lesson I learned from spoken word was it is equally important to listen as it is to speak. Which is very clear when you're in the room, everyone gets their turn on stage, and then everyone spends the rest of the night in the audience clapping. And I think that I was very lucky that at Brown I--that a lot of that continued, and I was able to find vocabulary for it that I hadn't had before. And so Brown is the first place that I learned about gender and sexuality, and the way to use language to be ex-inclusionary instead of exclusionary, and how that has helped me be even more thoughtful about the language that I use, as someone that tries to be thoughtful about language anyway. But a lot of that kind of higher level academic approach that I received here, I'm very lucky to have received. And that doesn't mean that everybody here is great, and it doesn't mean that every experience here was wonderful, but it has allowed me to continue into the world equipped with a conviction that I've always had, which is the listening to people that are different from you, and the making space for yourself to speak your truth in the language that is yours. Live on an equal plane. That that conviction was not stifled by Brown, but rather enhanced and supported, and given even more language to... is something that I only forget about when I'm far away from Brown students for a long period of time. And then I run into alums or Brown undergrads and I remember like "Oh wow yeah like there aren't.... Not everybody is a Brown student." And it becomes very evident in a lot of the ways that they talk and a lot of the ways that they are-- a lot of the things they are sensitive to, and a lot of the thoughtfulness in language, I think, that I learned here and hold myself accountable to in the world. So I hope that that continues, and I hope that that remains part of students' experience while they're here. That kind of willingness to make room for each other and ability to speak for yourself that go hand in hand, I think. And the thoughtfulness around language to continue making more space for people who have not felt welcome previous. That's what I do with poetry and I think that that's what Brown should be doing with the

students that arrive at its gates. Yeah I guess that's what I would say.

MM: Well we want to thank you.

SW: Thank you so much--

SK: Yeah.

MM: --for participating today.

SK: Thanks for having me.

MM: It was a joy to have you do this interview with us.

SK: Yeah, thank you.

--End--