

Transcript – Hector Mooney, class of 2011

Narrator: Hector Mooney

Interviewer: Mary Murphy, Nancy L. Buc '65 Pembroke Center Archivist

Interview Date: June 22, 2020

Interview Time:

Location: Zoom

Length: 54:59

**Part 1**

Mary Murphy: Okay, good morning. My name is Mary Murphy and I am the Nancy L. Buc '65 Pembroke Center Archivist at Brown University. Today we are recording another interview as part of the Pembroke Center Oral History Project that, where we sit with members of the Brown University community to hear their experiences during, in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic. Today is June 22, 2020, and each of us, we are sitting in different locations due to the pandemic conducting this interview by Zoom. So at this time, I'd like to ask my interviewee to introduce themselves. Welcome.

Hector Mooney: Hi, nice to talk to you. I'm Hector Mooney. I was part of the Brown class of 2011, and my whole COVID-19 experience was in Southeast Asia, primarily on small island [1:00] in Thailand, Koh Jum.

MM: Okay, so please do tell us, I think where I'd like to start this conversation, I actually like to start with the basics, and then talk about your connection to this really historic moment in time. So if you could, could you please describe your connection to Brown University just to help us loop in people who might be listening 100 years from now? What started your relationship with Brown University, how are you connected to the University, and tell us a little bit about your experience there?

HM: Yeah. I grew up in the Appalachian Mountains of Virginia. It was a very different environment than the environment at Brown. Very, very rural, very conservative. And experienced some amount of I don't know, alienation, isolation, difference growing up there.

And when I heard about Brown in high school, it seemed like a really different sort of environment [2:00] in terms of its intellectual orientation, its political affiliations, that sort of thing, and that kind of opportunity really drew me in. So I heard about Brown in 2006, yeah, and applied and began attending Brown in 2007 where I majored in American Studies, or still called American Civilization at that time, and graduated in the class of 2011 and have remained very active in Brown things since then. A lot of, all my friends, most of my roommates are still people from Brown. I travel with people from Brown, including on this trip. I attend the reunions and alumni events and all sorts of things. Brown has very much permeated my life for the last nine years.

MM: Can I ask you just a quick question before we move on to the current moment? What was the transition like for you coming to Brown [3:00] from where you grew up? Was that a difficult transition to come to Providence, to urban cent, somewhat urban center on the, you know, on the East, East Coast, you know, in quotes, all that stuff? What was that transition like for you?

HM: You know, I think I experienced a kind of a few levels. I think there was the initial sense of like, I feel like so much more at home here. I feel like so happy to like meet my people. Because back in Appalachia, I was kind of involved in a sole, lonely effort of political protests against, you know, like war things and things like that, but didn't really get a whole lot of traction in the place I was from, where a lot of the political affiliations were very different. And for me, as somebody who's just coming into my like LGBTQ identity, I found a lot of connections at Brown where that stuff was much more talked about, [4:00] much more open. I really started to find a voice for describing things like my gender that I just had no access to back in Appalachia. However, some things that were sort of difficult about it is when I was at Brown, it probably still to this day, there was a phenomenon that people would talk about called the "Brown Bubble," referring to the feeling of like Brown being somehow separate from the community around it being you know, this, this kind of like bastion of privilege and ivory tower whatever. And the references to that on campus were sometimes a little bit, a little bit hard for me to understand because so much of my lived experience happened at a place entirely outside of that. And so people who talked about being in a bubble for their, for that experience and for their whole lives, I was like, I can't really connect with this because I very much did not grew up in a bubble.

[5:00] I grew up in, in the rural south, and it was an entirely different environment. And so I sometimes really felt the difference from my peers where they were, you know, really embedded in that kind of talk.

MM: And could you just share a little bit about your parents are, are they college educated themselves? And do, they didn't have any connection to Brown did they? Or do they?

HM: No. My parents went to college in Virginia, but they have no connection to Brown. Nobody in my family did. My dad worked as a judge and my mom worked on various jobs at the local community college. And I have three older siblings. All five of them went to college in Virginia, and I was thoroughly sick of Virginia at that point in my life, and I kind of broke the combination so to speak, and headed [6:00] up north.

MM: Okay. And then one last question about your experience on campus. Did you affiliate or participate in any on campus groups dealing with Gender and Sexuality Studies or commu, LGBT community at all? Any groups on campus that maybe touched your life?

HM: Yeah, I participated in a queer Alliance and there was a subgroup within it. QPAC – Queer Political Action Committee, I guess. And we were one like, specific way it intersects with my life is we were doing an event where we were like, it was for national like coming out day or something. And we were doing an event for it and putting fliers out about it. And I realized that I was, you know, putting out literature about this event event, but I had never actually had that experience of coming out to my own [7:00] parents. And so the fact that I was doing that, but hadn't done it in my own life, it kind of was the push for myself to actually, like have the conversation rather than it being, you know, a silent assumption that they might have had about me. And to be a little bit more vocal about my identity, rather than just having like a side of me that existed at Brown and another side of me that I brought back home, which I think is a kind of split between the self that many people at Brown and beyond navigate.

MM: Do you want to share any bit about what that experience was like talking to your parents at all or do, or do you want to leave that as a private?

HM: No, it's okay. The, when, when I came out to them I was coming out as gay or bisexual, some ambiguous space in between there, and their reactions to it were mixed, I'd say. [8:00] You know, reacting with a positive response, but also a bit measured. Like, I don't know how other people are going to respond to this, or wanting to kind of end the conversation like, "Okay, that's okay. We kind of knew. Let's move on." I think that in the time since then, they've become more, they've become much more vocal, much more supportive in issues like that. But I think, I think to some extent it was impacted especially at the beginning, by a bit of a generational divide in that my talking about these things of my life, of things like gender and sexuality, were just like, not the kind of conversations they normally had with anybody, including my straight siblings. And so to go into that kind of place for conversation where really talking about any sexuality might have been sort of taboo, you know, it was, that was sort of like interesting [9:00] territory I went into, and I realized that for any LGBTQ youth, you're having a conversation that many of your, your straight siblings never even have to think about.

MM: Yes, this is very interesting and totally aside from COVID-19. I am a straight sibling of a gay man, so, you know, we've kind of where we were going through that as a family in the early '90s in our family. And so I'm definitely connecting to what you're saying here about where you have to like forge these very deep conversations with your sibling and I think that's really an important piece that you're sharing.

HM: Yeah. And in the time since then, my understanding of my identity has changed even more to now identifying as gender non binary, and to some extent, sometimes in my life, of appearing or living as somebody who may be classified as more feminine. I don't want to say as a woman or as a man, because I don't completely identify with those categories. But for anybody who knows me, [10:00] the, how I'm existing with my gender is something beyond "man" as somebody might have once assumed.

MM: Okay. Well, so we're having a little bit of frozen, your my view of you is a little bit frozen. Oh wait, you're back. Okay, so let's just give it a moment to pause.

HM: Okay, I can restart the call or something if that would be better.

MM: I think, perhaps yes. I think I'm going to stop the recording now. I'm going to just if you'll hold for me, I'm going to stop the recording, stop the meeting, let it convert and call you back. So give me just about five minutes if that's okay.

HM: Yep.

MM: Okay, thank you. I'll be back with you just momentarily.

HM: Okay.

## **Part 2**

MM: Okay, okay, continuing our conversation and let's, let's move to, to you going to Southeast Asia. Let's start let's put you in context of where you were as the pandemic touched your life like it has touched all of our lives. So if you could please tell me the story of how you got to where you were.

HM: Yeah. I really love to travel. I go on a big international trip basically every year. And that is definitely something I can trace to my experience at Brown also, because I was not worldly at all before I went there, but it really kind of opened my eyes to the world and through the opportunity I had doing study abroad when I was at Brown in Scotland, I really started to become a huge enthusiast for international travel.

So five months ago, I set off for a long trip of maybe [1:00] three months through Southeast Asia, going to Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. And that experience was supposed to last for about two months and then I was going to go for the last month on to Japan and Hawaii, and then back to United States. And so when I first left for Southeast Asia in mid-January, I had just started hearing about COVID-19. It didn't even have a name at that point, but I had just started to hear about it. And I remember on my flight out of the United States, I was at the very tail end of a cold, and I had this nasty sounding congestion. And I remember thinking then, and just like a few days later, or a week later as the news started to increase, I was like, oh,

I'm really glad that the, [2:00] the talk of the, of the illness wasn't that much at that time because I sounded really scary even though I really wasn't sick anymore. I just had that congestion. And probably everybody would have been terrified of me. And I would have been kicked off the plane or something. And I remember having that thought, you know, just like a week later, still in January. So I was starting to hear, I was starting to hear about it even before I left, but obviously, what it was going to become, the severity of it, I had no clue at that point. I just knew that it was, it was beginning.

MM: So you were able to try, so it's like now I'm like, oh my gosh, you were able to get on a plane so you know, now everything's changed. But you weren't able to get on the plane.

HM: Yeah, at that point in mid-January, I think this was about January 21 or something, there was pretty much nothing going on with flights and so I [3:00] definitely got to Malaysia like no problem, which is where my trip began. However, I definitely started then in that last week of January, very beginning of February, the pandemic was already starting to change things in Malaysia.

MM: And how long were you in Malaysia again? I'm sorry.

HM: I was there for about two weeks.

MM: Okay. So by the time you are, you were there, you're experiencing your trip and then by the time you leave there, what is it like trying to move from that destination to the next destination?

HM: Yeah. So the way, I was already starting to experience it in Malaysia because people were increasingly wearing things like masks, there are temperature checks going on at the airport. That was around February 3. But beyond the temperature checks that were happening at the airport, and an increased number of people wearing facial masks, there weren't otherwise any, any anything going on. I went to Thailand from there [4:00] and there wasn't anything in particular happening in Thailand. And I think that was because, like the difference that I encountered was

in Malaysia I was in just like typically Malaysian cities without many tourists at them. And I think people in Malaysia were a little more cautious about these things. Well, when I got to Thailand, I was going more towards like, beachy areas that had many people from Europe and there was much more, more blasé.

MM: That's really interesting. And so when, so if you could, if you could kind of paint me a picture, I always say like, in these interviews, tell me what's in the polaroid picture, as you are in then, in Thailand. Paint me a picture of what it's like as it begins to occur to you like, okay, like, I need to be cognizant of what's going on here. Like what you're hearing in the news, [5:00] in the local area, like, tell me what that is like the day where you're like, oh, this is real?

HM: Yeah, the first few weeks in Thailand, everything was feeling pretty normal. You know, I knew what was going on, but it didn't feel particularly alarming at that time. But I remember there was a day, I'm going to say it was somewhere around February 20, but I could be wrong on the date. And I woke up to the news that the, the disease had really sprouted in Iran, Italy and South Korea. And it was like hearing about all three of those at once, that really alarmed me because I was like, okay, these are very disparate areas geographically, politically, you know, in terms of public health, government, they're all places that would respond to a big problem in totally different ways, and [6:00] yet this problem has become a thing simultaneously in all three. And that is when I started to become a little bit alarmed. But, yeah, go ahead.

MM: And what were, and tell us about what your worries were as a Westerner but abroad. Tell us about some of the, like what was on your worry list?

HM: I, it really like it's strange, like my worries continued to feel sort of abstract. Because even though Thailand was also being impacted by it, it really felt like something that was like happening in you know, if you were particularly unlucky, or if you were in a very urban area. And it just like didn't seem like something that was close to me, even though I was starting to feel alarmed about the world at large because like, even though the problem was [7:00] picking up speed, life around me as I can see it in Thailand was mostly still continuing as normal. They were doing things like checking people's temperature when they go into the airport. I was

wearing a facial mask when I was in crowded places like on a plane as most Thai people were doing increasingly, you know, any like service employee would always be wearing a mask, you know, that stuff was very much increasing, people on trains and so on. But things weren't like closed, for example, because the lockdown didn't begin in Thailand until mid-March and so things felt somewhat normal. However, there were, there were ever fewer people places, like tourists in the places I was going to, which really became apparent to me by the end of February when I went to Angkor Wat and got the really strange experience of a very uncrowded Angkor Wat. And the guides there were [8:00] talking about how business had just like really taken a nosedive because even though most people still had freedom of movement, at that point, Thailand at least, maybe Cambodia, had cut off travel from China. And China is such a huge source of tourism and revenue in those countries that without Chinese tourists the whole market looked very different.

MM: Wow. So I want to ask you about the call that went out, I guess from the United States, would it have been the State Department, that was like, basically telling US citizens to come back, right? That, was that, correct me if I'm wrong, there was this call that went out that basically was like, "come home." I know a lot of different nation states were kind of doing that calling their citizens home. Did you hear that call where you were in Thailand? Did you, what did you think about that? [9:00]

HM: So at that point, I had gone from Cambodia to Laos.

MM: Okay. Sorry.

HM: And when I was in Laos, I remember it was March 14 when I was in Laos. I was supposed to leave Southeast Asia on that day and go on to Japan. That was the continuation of my trip. But by March 14, the wheels were really starting to fall off. The whole world was starting to go into lockdown then. The State Department call had come out sometime around March 14, give or take a few days. And it just, it was starting to become very apparent to me that just like every day was just this like avalanche of bad news. And I began to realize that borders were going to close, lockdowns were going to happen everywhere, and I really needed to think about where I was,



rather than just like seeing it as a problem like beyond [10:00] me. Because, you know, I was in such rural areas, I wasn't around very many people, it just didn't feel super present. But I realized that as I thought about what was going to happen, where I had three sort of paths in front of me: continue on to Japan, heed this call from the State Department, or stay where I am in Southeast Asia, but I really needed to think, really thinking ahead about where I wanted to be and what was going to be a safe situation for me. And so on that day, March 14, my flight to Japan had a layover back in Thailand, and I took my first flight back to Thailand and then I just didn't get on my next flight.

MM: Oh, wow.

HM: I just, I just stayed in Thailand. And I did a, I did a lot of thinking about what I was going to do, a little more rushed at that time, but you know, I thought about it more and more as the days went on, and I decided based on a [11:00] few things. The first is, I didn't want to go to Japan anymore because the problem there was a little bit hard to gauge because it was becoming apparent that the numbers for the virus were being suppressed in order to, in order to paint a rosier picture, so they could still hold the Olympics for the summer. Because, it feels so funny now to think about things like that. That was very much part of the conversation in March, like, are the Olympics going to happen? Now it seems silly, but back then that was very much on Japan's mind. And so I was like, Japan is a colder place, it's going to be winter, it's more expensive. I decided that wasn't the place for me. And then I was getting a lot of messages, especially from my concerned parents being like, "Have you heard about what the State Department is saying? They're saying everybody needs to come back to America now. They're not going to offer international [12:00] assistance for anybody. They're closing the consulate, you're going to be stuck where you are, blah, blah, blah." And I, you know, I, I hated to upset some of the people that were scared for me, but as I thought about what was happening in the United States, and it's very, very rough response to things, you know, the very slow pace of it, how people weren't acting alarmed about it, the fact that the political powers that be were not really responding to it in a very vigorous way. I imagined myself re-entering a situation that seemed quite dangerous to me, being in a place that seemed quite leaderless to me. And in being stuck inside, you know, who knows where, because I could go back to my parents' home, but

then I'd be stuck in Appalachia and also I'd have to stay away from them for two weeks. [13:00] They're in their 60s and I wouldn't want to get them sick. My, my apartment in New York, I had a subletter, but even if the subletter left I would be going right into the epicenter that was starting to appear. You know, I can go to my brother's garage in Los Angeles. None of them really seemed very appealing. And all of it seemed way more dangerous than where, than where I was. Because by that point, you know, measures were increasing of responding to it, containing it, that sort of thing in places like Thailand. So I decided to go from Laos to Thailand, because Laos has a much less developed medical system than Thailand does. And a lot of people from Laos will go to Thailand for medical treatment. And government is more open, I'd say in Thailand, not completely open, but if you, you have more access to information there. So I ended up going down to, I ended up [14:00] leaving Bangkok, going, flying down to a more southern province called Krabi, which I had been in earlier in my trip, and heading to the island of Koh Lanta because I thought, you know, if I'm in a place that's an island that offered some, you know, natural safety measures. It wasn't that far from things like hospitals and international airports if I needed them. But otherwise, you know, with so many businesses closing, the whole country was going into lockdown at that point, the things that an island offers like the jungle, a beach, nature, you know, fresh food growing, things like that, that remain eternal even when things are in a shutdown. I thought, you know, I can still have some quality of life rather than being stuck in somebody's house. I can, I can still swim, I can still exercise, [15:00] I can live cheaply. And it doesn't seem like such a bad way to be because at that point, I was like, wherever I am, I'm stuck there. I'm not going to be not seeing anybody, I'm not going to be building quality time with anyone, I'm not going to be going to any businesses, so why not have it be a tropical island? And so I spent three weeks on Koh Lanta and then I took a boat to the neighboring island of Koh Jum and at that point, boat transportation was totally shutting down in Thailand as well. And so I could have gone back to the mainland I think a few weeks later, but for the most part, I was like semi marooned on the island of Koh Jum. And I spent two and a half months on that island. So it was an extensive period. [16:00]

MM: Okay, I have two questions. This is quite fascinating. And I'm so grateful to you for sharing this story. So when you flew back from Japan to Thailand and you, you literally are taking that step where you're like, I'm supposed to get on another plane, whatever. And you decide no, I'm

actually just going to leave the airport. What was that moment like? Just like that really tiny moment? Emotionally.

HM: It, I think that it felt a little bit like this really like tiny kind of devastation of realizing that that's when I knew like, oh, the world is changing. The world has changed. Because at that point, I was making a decision that I would have never anticipated. And I had to really admit that the wheels were falling off as I said, that everything was going in some totally different direction and all my carefully laid plans, because I had everything booked and planned [17:00] and plotted, that it just wasn't going to happen. And some other new future was opening before me that I had no concept of, of I didn't know the places that I was going to, I didn't really know anything about them. And I, it was like, it was scary. It was also kind of exhilarating. And it really felt like going into, into the unknown.

There was also in that moment some a, some kind of stubborn sensibility in me. The stubbornness was partially like well, I'm out on an adventure so I'm going to stay on an adventure. And also some stubbornness in, in how I interacted with the, with the people that were messaging me because a lot of people were very concerned about me. And, and, and I didn't think of things necessarily the same because I was [18:00] really interrogating my assumptions about what is life well lived. And then what, what am I doing if I'm, if I'm stuck in a place, or if I can't see my friends or I can't see my family, what am I doing? And I had to interrogate some of my assumptions about home because, you know, there's this deep instinct in us that we're supposed to trust the place that we're from, that we'll be safe from where we're from. And my parents definitely had that very strong nesting instinct of being like, come back, be here, be safe, our medical system, all of that sort of thing. And I had to really unmoor myself from, from those assumptions about where I'd actually be safe because as I as I read about how things are unfolding in New York City and beyond, I just I didn't feel convinced that that was really a place that was going to be safer for me than being in Thailand.

MM: I think that's such a poignant thing [19:00] for you to say because I feel like, as we've talked with other people we've interviewed that the pandemic has pulled back this curtain on the United States' capabilities, where there's a story about the United States and our capability of taking care of its citizens. And then now we see this kind of reality, and that there is a sadness for

people who are citizens who are, who are just like, wow, it's over. Like this story, this story is, it's a story. And that, that brings sadness to people and I'm sure it brought sadness to your parents as you make that decision. You're like, I'm actually safer in Thailand.

HM: Yeah.

MM: So.

HM: That's very much how I felt because, you know, I was a little disillusioned with seeing all things related to the United States anyway, but it just brought it into such sharp relief. And as their responses evolved over those next three months, [20:00] my parents', and they started to realize like, maybe sort of begrudgingly, that I was kind of right. I think that was, that was hard because that was, that was a loss of something that they believed in for much longer than I did. You know, my dad said to me a few months ago, I don't even think he was talking, I think it was even before the pandemic, but just talking about other things of the political situation with the United States, where he said, you know, "For so long in my life, I always have believed in the United States' ability to, everything ends up okay in the end, that we write our path, that our institutions are strong and capable and can check each other." Because in so many ways, he really lived that, that kind of American success narrative of, you know, from, from how he grew up to what he achieved, and to learn that he was really losing his faith in that you know, in his [21:00] 60s is hard because he was holding on to it for so much longer than I did.

MM: Yeah. So now I want to ask you about how you sourced food when you were on the island. Can you tell me a little bit, so it's because I'm, you know, I'm recalling my own experience here in Providence. It was like, we really kind of started building stores in our home like we went we purposely food shopped and brought, bought things that we could freeze, and we had the freezer all set up. And so for you, you were starting from a completely different place. So tell me about how you sourced a place to lodge and tell me about how you sourced food when you went on the island where you, well, I guess both islands. You said three weeks and then a second Island, right?

HM: Yeah. It was, all of that was a, was a strange and interesting experience mostly because the things that were happening on the islands were [22:00] so different than what was happening to almost everybody in the rest of the world. And then I knew what was happening, not just in the United States, but even like mainland Thailand, where people were doing things like the storage and all of that. But well, getting a little bit ahead of myself, I'll just kind of take it chronologically. When I was on Koh Lanta, things were still relatively normal. And then I could just get on a website like booking.com or whatever and just book a place to stay. And I didn't really feel like I needed to hunker down yet because the lockdown had not begun in Thailand yet. And then I was being careful. I would be like wearing a mask if I was in a taxi, that sort of thing. But I didn't feel like I needed to like establish, you know, my little fortress.

MM: Bunker, yeah.

HM: Yeah. And I realized that things were changing, though, near the end of my time and Koh Lanta because a place that I had booked to stay for a few days said, [23:00] "We can't have anybody here anymore, we're closing." And then another place said, "Nobody's allowed in the pool anymore." And then another place they knocked on my door said that Thailand has instituted a curfew from 10pm to like 6am, 4am, something like that. So those changes were starting to happen. And when I left Lanta, I really left it at like the last possible chance because at that point, I was like, okay, I could maybe experience one more place, the neighboring island of Jum, or I could spend the whole rest of my time on Lanta. And for me, somebody who's kind of hungry for adventure and change, I took that last possible opportunity to take a boat to the neighboring island of Jum. And, and then I, there I was pretty much stuck because then boat transportation was over. So the thing that was really interesting though, about being on Jum is because boat transportation [24:00] ended and, they're at that point foreign tourists were not being allowed in the country. They hadn't been allowed in the country for probably, I'm going to say like three, two, three weeks at that point. It meant that people were only leaving the island. Nobody was allowed to come onto the island. No tourists were allowed into the country. It's, the number of people was really dwindling. So when I arrived there, from the local like, medical clinic, a person came to like, take my temperature and record any symptoms I had like three times over the over the next like two or three weeks. I didn't have anything and from talking to

people on Jum, the virus never reached the island. We never got sick and then they closed down transportation and so it's just was like this sort of like bastion of good health, while the rest of the country was in shutdown. So, [25:00] in terms of building up like a store of food and that sort of thing, I never, I never had to do it, because the businesses that are on the island which are only really small stores, you know, like a produce kind of market that's outside, they just kept running and people on the island just kept going to them as normal even though the rest of Thailand, that stuff was not going on at all. Other places in Thailand where it's in very severe lockdown, that just never happened on Jum because it's so rural, so few people live there, that it didn't reach us.

So I found a place to stay by looking at listings online and then like walking to the place and seeing if there was anybody there because everything was closed on the island that wasn't like, you know, a place to get food like all the, most of the hotels were closed, the island is really becoming quite deserted except for locals, and that's [26:00] how I ended up meeting the family that owned the bungalow that I stayed in for over two months, called the [inaudible] family. And I, they had like a little collection of little bungalows out in the garden and I was the only person there and I stayed there for over for over two months.

MM: Whoa. So you just went up to their door and were like, "Hello. Can I please stay here?"

HM: Yeah. I, at that point, I knew I needed to find a place to make myself comfortable, you know, from the first place I'd arrived and stayed in just when I arrived on Jum. So I was like, I need to find a place that has air conditioning because it's so hot here. And you can't always find that there. I needed to find a place with a refrigerator so I could store food. I needed to have functional internet. Again, not something you can always find in a place like Jum, which, you know, has like lots of rolling blackouts, for example. [27:00] Because I, you know, I wanted to be able to connect and just to be comfortable. Because I started to become aware I didn't know at all how long I was going to be there. A few weeks, a few months, I had no clue. So I kind of scouted things out, met this family, and they became pretty much the only people that I had much of any contact with for these for these last few months.

MM: Wow, that is so kind of them to open one of their bungalows to, to keep you safe. That's like just so wonderful.

HM: But of course, it was also going the other way of everybody on the island who was in any way involved in in hospitality industries. Their entire income had been cut off. And a lot of people in Thailand are living on way less than people in the United States are and so when the lockdown happened with no evident ending in Thailand, [28:00] it has been, so many people were being thrust into poverty. In a place that's as undeveloped as Jum it kind of goes two ways because, you know, people there are really living with not much, but at the same time as a rural tropical island, it's quite self-sustaining because all the produce I was eating was just stuff that was like growing out in the yard. And so it was a really like fresh organic experience. It was a kind of place that could sustain itself, but any outside income was just totally cut off because you couldn't even come to the island. For, it's not just that foreign tourists aren't allowed in Thailand right now, they're not even letting all Thai people back into the country. They're doing it in this very controlled sort of way where they have like one flight a day from some country to let people back in. But some of those are Thai people that have been waiting for one or two months [29:00] to try to get back into Thailand. Not the way it is in the United States where you can just get on any commercial flight and enter the country, as long as you're a US citizen.

MM: We, now correct me if I'm wrong, but Thailand has been lauded as controlling the virus far better, subsequent to, as time has gone on, and clearly these like very tight measures is the way, this is like the only way we have to do this, right, or any nation, if they're willing to do it. But that is so, what you're articulating is how truly difficult that is, and the impact on people's lives financially.

HM: Absolutely, because Thailand has had a lot of successes, but also the devastation from it is pretty extreme. And, you know, for a lot of people who are who are living much closer, you know, to or below the poverty line in Thailand, there's been a lot of stress and anxiety about it for people. For example, [30:00] with a lot of people being plunged into poverty, things were happening in various places in Thailand where, you know, they were giving out, like food donations, like food pantries were opening up so that people wouldn't starve, but inevitably, people would start crowding them and grabbing for food and hoarding it, whatever. And suddenly, all these problems that they were trying to avoid were happening right there, you know, with people crowding and all that sort of thing.

That aspect was actually very critical for my being able to stay in Thailand. Because what started to happen, as the shutdown began, is a lot of a lot of foreign tourists were stranded in the various places they were and, but our visas, were going to run out. My visa was set to run out on April 11. And at that point, I was on an island that was closed off from the world and I couldn't even leave. So what happened is the government extended [31:00] any foreigners' visa until the end of April, and then until the end of July shortly after, so that all those people could stay in the country for their own safety, so that they weren't crowding immigration offices anymore, which was what was happening, and so that anybody involved in the service industry in Thailand might still have some source of income, just as I was the [inaudible] family's only source of income as I rented their little bungalow.

MM: Oh, wow. Wow. So as we kind of run up on our, I feel like I could talk to you all day. This is just fascinating story. You, you then take this time and you're with this family. And then as we move up to the current moment, I'm sure you had some really beautiful, peaceful times on that island. I can just like, imagine what that was like, but when it comes to an end, and you decide, okay, it's time to go to the next spot. Tell us about that moment. [32:00]

HM: Yeah. Time on the island was, was great. It was like very tranquil. I was just like swimming, eating lots of fruits, you know, looking at monkeys and crabs and lizards, all the things that live on the island. But it was also a very strange experience because my understanding of the pandemic was basically just what was happening on my screen. It was not part of my life. The ways that it impacted life were so far away from what I was experiencing and it was very strange talking to friends family back in places like the United States or Britain, who are all kind of having one experience and then I was just having this totally different experience where I was just like wandering around in the jungle. And it felt, it felt very bizarre to have this like weird kind of like divergence occurring where their lives were just not relatable to mine at all. And the fact of it all happening on my screen became especially weird because, you know, sometimes the family would be like, [33:00] because they spoke a little bit of English, I spoke almost no Thai, but they would ask me about things that were going on in the United States with, with the virus and then in recent weeks with the Black Lives Matter protests, because they would hear about it in Thailand, and they would watch the, they would, you know, see the pictures and they'd be



like, “What is going on in your country?” Especially because things like the controversy over wearing masks don’t exist in a place like Thailand the way they do in the United States so it sounded totally strange. Anyway, but as I –

MM: Did, can I ask a question?

HM: Yes.

MM: Did they think that the government, that the US government was falling by any chance? Did, was there any kind of a, was there a feeling that that this would precipitate like a falling of the government?

HM: I don’t think that they really had that thought. So I couldn’t say for sure because the, the level of communication between us is pretty low. But they weren’t, they definitely found it to be [34:00] shocking, alarming, and weird. You know, it was like, they would like, they would shake their heads at it. When I talked to other Thai people on the island, you know, whether that’s a business and they’d be like, “Where are you from?” And I’d say the United States, and they would react with like, “Oh, the United States, very dangerous, don’t go back there,” which is a real weird reaction to receive from people. But of course, you know, as time went on, I did eventually make the decision to go back and it was a hard decision to make. But I, you know, I thought I can be safe here, I can have a nice time on this island, I am having a nice time with this island, but my life is also composed of my friends and family. And at that point, I had been a very long time since I’ve seen a single person I knew and the idea of not seeing anybody I knew, I just, I felt like I was [35:00] treading water without any, without any endpoint in a place that was paradise, but without anybody to share it with. And so even though I felt a lot of trepidation about coming back to the United States, because I felt so peaceful and safe there, I did want to have the opportunity to see people I know to, to speak English in, you know, full and complicated sentences, you know, to have the things that otherwise I thought constituted my life and my identity, but suddenly become no part of my life at all.

MM: That’s so fascinating. And what about, that’s so interesting, and what have you thought at

all about how that relates to your gender identity?

HM: You know, the Thailand like, as a whole is somewhat conservative on things like gender and sexuality, but probably especially where I was on Koh Jum, [36:00] which is, it was an entirely Muslim Island, and so that kind of, that kind of like expression of myself was just like no part of my identity there. That was not a conversation I was having. It was it was just irrelevant. And any part of like, me like experiencing my sexuality or being sexually active, the combination of an ongoing pandemic, and being in a conservative place, like no way. Those parts of my, of my life just became totally separated from me, which is a thing that I've done before because, you know, I've lived in very different circumstances where I grew up, and I've done lots of international travel, and so I know how to turn off aspects of myself. But the idea of doing that in this extended indefinite way without receiving the relief of people who know you, people who get you, a place you can express yourself. It did begin to wear [37:00] on me a little bit.

MM: I think that's very important to share that for the record. I mean, you think about 100 years from now people listening into these interviews and any hearing that piece of the puzzle we just so fascinating. So you did return home and, well, to the states.

HM: Yes. I landed three days ago.

MM: Okay. And did you make a stop through, through your hometown or you went right to New York?

HM: I arrived in New York. My hometown is not near any airports so to get there would be would be an expedition. And I don't, I'm not being around anybody yet because I'm fresh off of some international flights. I feel like, you know, I might be a biohazard right now. So, even if I had gone back to my hometown, I would be staying away from my parents for a few weeks and from everybody so as not to risk anybody's health because my flights, I took [38:00] one boat, one bus, and three planes to get back. And so I was like, who knows what I picked up along the way. So I'm going to come back and isolate for a few weeks.

MM: Did they, when you were on the island and, they must have lifted the boat travel ban? They have started taking people back to mainland?

HM: Yeah. As far as I know I'm not sure if they were allowing people onto the island anymore or if they still, if people are still banned from coming onto the island, but people were able to leave the island. I was probably, would have been able to leave the island by like, probably like mid, late April. I arrived on the island in like early April and I could have left later in the month, but I just stayed on, you know, all the way through mid-June.

MM: Was it sad stepping off the island getting on the boat to leave?

HM: Yeah, it was sad because it, I felt so grateful to the island and to the family, and to the [39:00] people that I met there, because, you know, I was, I was really vulnerable when I went on to the island because I didn't know anybody, I didn't know what was going to happen. And I really relied on the help of people around me to take me in. Or, you know, the family gave me so much like, so many of their coconuts and mangoes and stuff like that, you know, that made my life so much better. And so I was really grateful for that. And I was also feeling sad about it because I knew that as soon as I stepped onto the mainland, all the realities of what was going on in the world, which has been this, like ever present background for me, I knew it was going to suddenly become the foreground of my life. So as I enter the mainland of Thailand where you know, to enter a store or a mall, you have to write your phone number so that they can do a contact tracing, or they take your temperature when you walk into the store, and, you know, all those things are suddenly going to go into my life. It was going to be so intense because I'm three months late on everything, because I kind of went off the face of the earth in a minor way [40:00] as soon as that stuff was all beginning. And so it's just like boom all in my life at one.

MM: Well, I think for my last question to you, because we are running up on time, did it feel like a boom like an explosion when you landed in New York?

HM: It felt, I think that I had made myself very prepared for it because I'm, I'm in communication with people from back home, I pay attention to the news. You know, I try to be

knowledgeable about what's going on. And I, and I thought a lot about everything beforehand. But then when I arrived back in New York and saw things in the United States for the first time, it felt, it felt very depressing. It felt like a loss. It felt like my concept of home, like I left home, flown away for five months, and then just like arrived into a place I didn't recognize, you know. It, it, it [41:00] vanished while I was gone, which was a really strange feeling. You don't expect that when you go on vacation you're going to come back and you don't even get the homecoming that, you know, that, that catharsis of return that you usually hope for.

MM: And including with this incredible civil unrest, so it's, you know, right out the window is the demonstrations and everything else. I mean, it must have just been a lot

HM: Absolutely.

MM: Well, I want to ask you just one last question. This is what I call our kind of free share segment of this where, you know, oftentimes when we're talking, I can totally miss something that somebody really wants to get on the record that like 100 years from now a researcher or a scholar, that you really want a person to know. And like, maybe why you wanted to do this interview at all. And so please, if you'll just take the last few minutes, if there's anything else you'd like to share that I didn't ask you that you want to get on the record.

HM: Yeah. [42:00] I think, I think what I'd say is my motivation, which is that, you know, for me as somebody just taking a vacation, I, I never really thought that anything that was going on with me was that interesting or exceptional. But as the experience went on, and I realized I was really staying here on this island for a long time, I realized that, that what was happening in my life was so different from the lives of anyone around me. And it really was a very different narrative than most people were experiencing. And because it was, you know, by the day, every week or month that I was there, it just became the stranger and stranger and more divergent experience. I realized that it might have some kind of historical merit or interest, just as a way of showing how somebody, how a different place on Earth was a very different experience during all of this. [43:00] And to show the story of somebody who got kind of caught between many different currents all at once and had to navigate the situation literally from as far from home as possible,

and figure out what survival and a good life looked like when all the things that would normally signify that we're suddenly stripped away almost all at once.

MM: Wow. Well, I think this is a really perfect, important place to stop. So I want to thank you officially, I'm going to stop the recording just a minute, but I want to thank you for sitting with me today and taking your time to share your story. Your story becomes part of our Oral History Collections so your interview will join over 250 other interviews with alums going back as graduates from the class [44:00] of 1911. So just a really wonderful thing. So thank you for being part of our interview set.

HM: Thank you.

MM: Okay.

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