

Transcript – Meera Viswanathan, Faculty

Narrator: Meera Viswanathan

Interviewer: Mala Yee

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Mala Yee: This is Mala Yee, class of 1991. I'm interviewing Professor Meera Viswanathan of the Brown University Comparative Literature Department. The date is November 6, 1989. This interview is being conducted in her office at 108 Marston Hall, Brown University campus, Providence, Rhode Island.

Okay. I'm going to put this here.

Meera Viswanathan: Certainly.

MY: Okay, you gave a...a talk recently, entitled "The Asian Immigrant in America: the Myth of the Melting Pot, Salad Bowl, and Other Gastronomic Fantasies," on Friday, October 27<sup>th</sup>. And I'm just going to ask you a lot of questions regarding...

MV: Certainly.

MY: ...some things you said there. You brought the...you sort of categorized your life into Melting Pot period and then Salad Bowl period, so, if you could get back to the early Melting Pot period...

MV: Certainly. Mm-hmm.

MY: ...and just talk about...you talk about...I like the story about the Tooth Fairy (overlapping speech, inaudible) to be very American...

MV: Would you like me to recapitulate that then?

MY: Yeah.

MV: Alright. My parents...well, rather my father came to this country in 1959 to pursue a PhD in electrical engineering at UCLA. And my sister, mother and I joined him in 1961. I was about...I was not quite five years old. And we moved to an apartment in Los Angeles. This was a radical experience for me, particularly because it involved a kind of linguistic displacement. My native language was Tamil, and even though in India we have two national languages, Hindi and English, and even though my parents and even my sister was well acquainted with English, I had yet to begin school. And therefore I didn't know any English. And so as soon as we arrived, even though my sister's English and parents' English was seen as "accented" and different, nevertheless, they could interact with other people. Whereas I felt extraordinarily isolated; I could not

play with the other children. And I remember the first few months, all I did was watch television, day in and day out. And as a result, I was able to—after a few months of constant, sort of, television watching—I was able to speak English, understand English, and understand enough of cultural references to know how to situate myself.

As time went on, I thought that I and my sister, as well, began to lose our grasp of Tamil and our parents' speech was in Tamil, English, or a combination, but we would invariably respond in English. And thus began our whole, sort of, assimilation process. Now, I remember when I was in the first grade, we in...had to in social studies read about immigration, and what America represented. And in fact, the glory of America, according to our textbooks, was in fact this wonderful sort of bringing together of immigrant races and forging a new nation in which there would be equality for all and tolerance for all. This a wonderful idea, and of course I always liked reading about immigrants because I thought, "Well, so am I." But it was distressing, because they'd talk about the Italians, and they'd talk about the Irish, they would talk about other immigrants. They would talk about slaves...but, of course, there was no mention of Asian immigrants. And...and...and if there was, I think maybe occasionally in junior high school textbooks, we'd hear about Chinese or Japanese immigrants, but never were there any Indian immigrants. And in fact, of course, at this time, there were very few scattered families, and there was no such thing as a kind of Indian-American community.

I think my sister and I both felt very...alienated at times, and we sought very hard to fit in. And it was difficult, because the elementary school we attended, in a sense, the composition was half Chicano and half Japanese-American third generation. And we didn't really have a group to fit in. And we became allied with the Japanese-American/White coalition, if I can use that sort of phrase. But I think we always felt somehow that we were different, we were "other," we were marginalized. I remember in school when we had to fill out forms—there were the endless census forms for schools to gain monies from the federal government—they would ask "race," and I would look for my race, and there was nothing. And so I always had to check the box "Other." I'd look..."Religion," again they were all these boxes, but my religion wasn't there so I had to check "Other." So I began to see myself very much as an Other being.

You mentioned the Tooth Fairy anecdote...one of the things when I look back that amuses me but also appalls me so much is the self-conscious way in which my sister and I tried to make ourselves American. This was clearly the goal. This wasn't even a question mark. Somehow we felt the transformation was necessary, just and right. And we disliked the ways in which our...the experience of our peers differed from our own. In the case of the Tooth Fairy, we were fascinated by this custom that was explained to us by our...our peers, and I believe this was at the age of about seven, that's when children lose a lot of teeth, and...one...one of my friends said in school, well, she had gotten a quarter. And I said, "How did you get the quarter?" And she said, "Well, I lost my front tooth and I put it under my pillow, and the Tooth Fairy came at night and took away the tooth and left me a quarter. And this why." Now, of course, I was a very savvy child, a less gullible child than others, so I said, "Was it really the Tooth Fairy?" And she said, "No, no. It was my mother." I said, "Oh!" Clearly this was something mothers should

know how to do. Well, so I went home and my sister, too, had had a very similar experience, and so we explained to our mothers—to our mother—that we wanted to indulge in this same custom. This Tooth Fairy custom, which would involve our losing teeth, placing them under a pillow, and then receiving a quarter in the morning. But we cautioned my mother that she should only do this when we were already asleep to maintain the whole sort of secrecy and sort of sanctity of the act. Sort of, I think we were anxious to preserve the notion of myth. My mother was horrified. She thought it was a terribly unsanitary habit, she couldn't believe that our friends' mothers encouraged this sort of thing. And in fact made a deal with us that she would promise to put a quarter under our pillows if we promised, in turn, not to put the tooth our pillow. But instead, throw it in the garbage can where it belonged, she felt. Well, we accepted this, because we were greedy little children, but it was not altogether satisfying. And we had similar experiences with Christmas trees, with Fourth of July, with Halloween. My mother, I think she pitched very hard, she really tried, but I think she couldn't quite understand why we needed to immerse ourselves in all of these customs. What she didn't realize, I think, and I'm not sure how she would have, anyway, is that for children, these really constitute the fabric of your identity. And somehow, participation along with your peers was essential. It's not a question of believing in Santa Claus, or the Tooth Fairy. It's a question of knowing that the custom will be tacitly respected and accommodated in your house. And that's what we wanted to achieve.

MY: Do you feel that...you talked about the linguistic difference...did your parents start speaking English after a certain point of time (inaudible)?

MV: Well, of course, initially, they only spoke Tamil to me because that's what I understood. And of course, my parents are bilingual, and...and could speak both Tamil and English and often among urbanized, particularly, I think (inaudible 7:13) Tamilian people, in Madras or other cities of the south today, it's...it's very commonplace to mix and English and Tamil in the same sentence and even my grandmother doesn't speak English, would insert a few words of English, which had just become accepted in a kind of Tamilized pronunciation. My parents, I think, began by speaking Tamil to me solely, but I think as time went on and particularly because they, too, were not in an Indian environment, they began to sort of speak more and more half and half. And I think that they reserved pure Tamil for those occasions when privacy was needed. So, for example, when...when some sort of social lapse was observed in public, then of course quickly we'd move into Tamil. When there was some cautionary thing to be informed about, that would be, again. So Tamil began to be a kind of private, secret language, almost. Somehow in opposition to the mainstream, open, above-board language of English.

MY: Mm. Mm-hmm.

MV: And I think by the time we were probably in sixth grade, even though we understood Tamil perfectly well, we would answer completely in English.

MY: And now you only speak English (overlapping speech, inaudible)

MV: And now I still understand Tamil, it's interesting. My sister's older than I am, and one would have thought that because she knew Tamil and English initially, she would have retained more. But in fact my sister cannot even understand Tamil anymore, simple Tamil. I think perhaps because I had a group of Tamilian friends in college, somehow maybe that revived it in me? I think it's kind of a latent knowledge. I suspect, for my sister, too, if she were placed in a Tamil-speaking environment for a few months, it would come flooding back to her. So the result now is that I can understand Tamil perfectly well, but my spoken Tamil is so rudimentary that it's embarrassing. Also, I speak with an American accent. Much to the delight of my Indian relatives.

MY: Do you in any way regret that...that loss of that language which...

MV: Of course. I think that's precisely what happened in the next phase of my being. The sort of Salad Bowl mentality of my pubescence and adolescence was paralleled, I think, by a change in American values. If we can use California as a kind of vanguard state, I think in California we began to see a...a new acceptance of different ethnic value systems. I think in the '60s what we saw was this acceptance of various races, but then the sort of necessity of conformity to the American ideal once they arrived here. I think what we saw in the '70s, really, was much more a shift to, "Oh, we don't want to simply produce a kind of homogenous melting pot person, rather we want an eclectic, diverse, pluralistic society, and each person has his or her sort of flavor to impart to the salad."

I think along with this sort of change in the times, there was a kind of change in me as moving away from childhood toward pubescence and I think in pubescence and adolescence, there's a kind of a rebellion that takes place. It's perhaps the first time the individual questions the values that are implicit, part of the system, and seeks somehow to distinguish him- or herself.

MY: Mm-hmm.

MV: And I think that's precisely what I sought to do, and suddenly, I looked at this sort of Americanized culture and thought, "This is not the only thing I am." And at this point, I began to sort of grow backwards and think, "Well, you know what I really like, in fact, was, in fact, Indian food, I like Indian music." I liked hearing Tamil spoken, but of course, in a sense, it was too late. And I think I do have a tremendous regret. One of the things that's encouraging to me today is when I look at the Indian-American community at Brown, at least some of the students, I think, either by virtue of the fact that they live in a large metropolitan area which has, for example, a temple, or Indian vernacular language schools, or they have parents who are very aware of this tendency for language loss, have insisted they retain the vernacular language. And I see this, and I think it's very good. I still see many students who are in the same position I was in, in fact, now look back and say, "I wish I had remembered my Gujarati" or Bengali, or whatever it might be.

MY: Mm-hmm. You...you talked about one particular incident when you looked in the mirror, and it was this thing of reflection and you were just shocked that you weren't

white. Did you...did you want to be really...was it that you wanted to be white? Or just like everyone else? Or...

MV: Yeah. Well, I think that's a hard distinction to draw, in a sense, what everyone else was was white. Not necessarily in my school, as I say, my school was a kind of a curious ethnic merging, but I think in terms of media representation. One saw, basically, white models. In advertising. And this represented the kind of aesthetic ideal, the beauty to which we should all strive. When they would talk about Miss Clairol with 35 shades of blonde, and you'd think, well not one would suit me. Somehow there's a sense of distancing. The plate glass was a very odd, disturbing experience. I think I was about seven or eight, and I was with a group of friends. And I think they were white and Japanese. And I had seen enough Japanese-Americans to feel that somehow that was an acceptable mode. I think perhaps for a child who had grown up in Dayton, Ohio that wouldn't be. But in my neighborhood, that was still a kind of acceptable attractive. I think there was a hierarchy in my neighborhood, that went from white to Japanese-American to Chicano. And if there had been anyone who was black, I think that person would have been at the bottom of the hierarchy implicitly, in sort of the neighborhood value system. I think I was sort of brown-skinned, so in a sense I looked most like the Chicanas, but at the same time, my value system I had sort of made to accord with the white/Japanese-American value system. And so therefore, I was between groups. In any case, I was walking down the street with friends and the light happened to be shining—it was around noontime—on plate glass windows such that our reflections were all evident. And I remember glancing at this picture of little girls, you know, all trooping along excitedly, and thought, "Hmm." Suddenly I was sort of taken aback because there was one who was sticking out like a sore thumb and I thought, "That's really an ugly child. Who is that terrible-looking child?" And I thought, "Boy, you know, she doesn't deserve to be (inaudible) us." And then there was that horrific realization when I realized that it was I, myself. And I couldn't accept it. I was just sort of dumbfounded and transfixed by that experience. And I thought, "But how could I look like that?" and "How could I not be aware?" And I realized all the times I looked in a mirror, I really looked in the mirror with all of my friends around me. And it was possible to somehow imagine myself looking just as they did, and in daily intercourse with them, of course, I'd only look at their faces and assumed that in fact mine reflected that.

MY: Mm-hmm.

MV: And I remembered that after this experience I had read the story of Pinocchio in school, and you know, it's not that I was a gullible child in the sense of Pinocchio, but I was a pragmatic child, I think. That well here's Pinocchio, wanting to be a real little boy, rather than just a wooden puppet, and he prayed to the Blue Fairy and poof! the next morning, he became a real little boy. And I thought, well, it was worth trying. So I remember praying to the Blue Fairy that I fr...that I could wake up and be white. And I woke up the next morning and I wasn't, and I was a little disappointed, but I tried it for a few more nights and then figured well, it was just one of those other wives' tales. But what I didn't doubt was the...the feeling that I had. And I remember telling my mother about it, in fact, the reason I remember this whole episode now, my mother reminded me

about it a couple of years ago. And suddenly I realized I had tried to repress that memory for a long, long time. And I think it must...that's why I think that it's very, very difficult for somebody's who's not other than white, someone who is not of another ethnic persuasion, perhaps, to know how a person who's been placed in this other category feels surrounded by this sort of (inaudible) media. It's interesting, my field is Japanese Studies, and I meet numbers of American graduate students and scholars who have to go to Japan periodically for sabbaticals. And invariably, they say to me, "Oh, it's this Japanese, homogeneous society." And I say, "My god! These people are racist!" "And they look at me so strangely; I'm Other; I don't like it..." And it...it's curious to me because, of course, while Japan is much more homogeneous than America is as a society, nevertheless, I've already experienced what it is to be marginalized and Other. In fact, when I go to Japan, it doesn't bother me particularly. I mean it's there, but it seems to me I've reconciled myself I have come to expect it. I think the feeling of most of these graduate students, most of whom are white, I think, is this is the first time and they're aghast. And that's why I think it's a rather useful experience in terms of understanding what it is to be considered "otherly."

Many people, particularly many of my friends and acquaintances who are white say to me, "But I don't possess any negative feelings. I don't judge people differently." It's funny, it's not a function, necessarily, of an individual's response to you, it's a kind of aggregate response. And you know very clearly when you're in a group, whether you're viewed as Other or not. And the intentions of every single person in that group may be very fine, ennobled intentions, but that doesn't necessarily change the fact that you're viewed as Other and different. And that...that somehow invidious value is attached to it.

MY: Mm-hmm. To go back a little to when you mentioned in your neighborhood that the...the hierarchy that the Japanese-Americans were closest to the white, and that's also a common idea in our society *now*...

MV: Exactly.

MY: ...that Asian-Americans are much more, you know, more assimilated, or more white, really.

MV: Mm-hmm.

MY: But I find, especially in the society of Brown, that there is a difference between Indian-Americans and Chinese or Japanese or Korean in...and it...it seems almost to be truly based on skin color, but on...

MV: Mm-hmm.

MY: Do...do you feel that...

MV: What do you mean by that, why don't you expand on it a bit, so I...

MY: Well, I feel like the Chinese- and Japanese- and Korean-Americans here at Brown sort of stay together and are perceived as what people call the Asian-Americans. But people don't necessarily—when they're referring to "Asian-Americans"—don't necessarily include Indian-Americans.

MV: Mm-hmm.

MY: And it's truly, truly a different color, almost, in that the Indian-Americans here also tend to be grouped more together separated from the others.

MV: Well, in a way, I think the whole notion of "Asian-American" is a kind of construct, isn't it?

MY: Mm-hmm.

MV: It seems to me that we also don't think—it's not just Indian-Americans, of course, or Pakistani-Americans or Bangladeshi-Americans, Sri Lankan-Americans. What about Filipino-Americans, too? It seems to me that they're also in another group. Partly one can argue historically that we see a kind of...that the earliest Asian immigrants were East Asian. And there was a sense...in fact we even still today have this sort of merging of China and Japan, there's no distinction. In fact, people often say, "Well, why bother distinguishing?" as if, you know, these were commonplace (inaudible). But I think the whole notion of an Indian-American group is a very new idea. And I think has only come really into focus in the last five or ten years. Yeah, I think it's partly a color thing. But I think it's more than that, too. I think that Indian-Americans themselves feel—even on those forms, there's a space for Asian-Americans, then they'll have (Chinese, Japanese, Korean). And then there'll be "Other." So that the very sort of category system that our society encourages a distinction between "Asian-Americans" and those in a sense we can argue that Filipino are Asian groups, too, but in a sense they're not grouped either. I think one way out of that is that they all have Hispanic surnames, and the Filipino-Americans are included under that rubric. But I think it's a kind of a *problematique* that's reflective both of the way traditional society views immigrants but also of our assumption that somehow...I think we...you know, it's very popular—and I say this in my classes all the time—to invent a kind of dichotomy between "The West," and you have to have a counterpart. And it's got to be "The East."

MY: Mm-hmm.

MV: And anyone who's been in the culture of China, Japan and India knows that you can't imagine three more different cultures. And so I think that in a sense, it is a kind of...it seems to me that the separation in a sense is a natural one. Why should necessarily...we can say the same thing about African-Americans, right? Or rather African-African, I think, peoples. For example, we sort of band them together. Well, what do people from Senegal necessarily have in common with people from Egypt, South Africa or Nigeria? It seems to me these are all very, very different countries, different histories, different races of people. And there's a kind of blurring, I mean, even today, if

you show the map of Africa, it's usually undemarcated. This is Africa, and somehow that sums it all. Individual nations don't matter. If you ask college students, "Name me two countries on the coast of East Africa and two countries on the coast of West Africa," there are very few students probably who could name me four *countries* in Africa, much less geographically place them. And I think that again we have a kind of psychological map that's drawn. We see Europe in extraordinary detail; we see Asia as a sort of huge, looming mass "out there," and then we see Africa as "The Dark Continent," not even worthy of history or demarcation of any sort.

MY: Yeah.

MV: And this is I think the implicit map of the world children are given.

MY: Yeah. Yeah, and it brings up the...the "Asian-American," the identity of—especially at college, I think—when we have so many student organizations and associations and that there's a...there's a great risk of losing individual countries' identities, you know. I'm Burmese-American; there's *no* other Burmese person...

MV: I can bet that.

MY: ...in this entire campus, and I...I don't feel that I share anything...

MV: No.

MY: ...with...with most Asian-Americans here.

MV: I suspect not, but yet, I suspect most people mistake you for Chinese-American...

MY: Or Filipino. (overlapping dialogue, inaudible)

MV: Or Filipino, or some other group.

MY: And how...and how being lumped into this Asian-American identity can be very...can be very bad for my identity, in fact. You know, the establishment of AASA [Asian-American Student Association] and SASA [South Asian Student Association], the point is to...to have a support group, and to have...

MV: Solidarity.

MY: ...people like you, and...but in fact, there is that other side of that, which is that you very...you very much can lose a lot of your individual identity because you're trying to...to be this one Asian-American group.

MV: In fact, I think that the sort of umbrella organization of Asian-American students and so forth is principally a group that's been put together for reasons of solidarity. Not to somehow homogenize the Asian-American or to somehow assume their implicit

sharings of value systems. I don't think there are. I think it's commonplace in America because, I think, most people are fond of saying things like, "Well, you know Asian-Americans, they're docile; they're hard-working; they value education" and somehow this is seen to be true throughout all of Asia. Well of course, that's not true, I think. It's very much a function, also, of class. We haven't...you know, in a sense, issues involving race invariably overwhelm or dominate issues involving sort of socio-economic concerns, religious concerns, and I think we're not taking those into consideration.

For example, I would say that Indian-Americans, until about, oh, 1975, consisted principally of "higher class," "upwardly mobile," highly educated individuals. And so we have this relatively large group of doctors, engineers, and so forth. Starting, I'd say, in the mid-seventies—and this is, of course, very rough, based on my sort of observations—I think that with the advent of this Indian community that required Indian support services like temples, like restaurants, and so forth, we had, for example, people who emigrated to...for service positions. And so now, for example, it seems at times with every kiosk in New York is manned by somebody from the subcontinent. Or womanned, I should say, or...or...or peopled.

MY: (laughter)

MV: Personned? And...and this is a very interesting fact, and I think this affects perception. Well, clearly if you have a group that already within their sort of social group values education, this becomes a kind of...a kind of view for mainstream society to group all others from that country. Well, in fact that's not true. For example, there's a very large Sikh community in Northern California, and they're a group of farmers, principally. And...in...Asian-Americans are traditionally seen as what? Docile, hard-working, non-aggressive, and very, very highly educated. Well, these...this particular group of Sikhs as I say is a farming community. And in fact education perhaps isn't as highly stressed as perhaps for example a group of Brahmins from Madras.

MY: Mm-hmm.

MV: Additionally, the notion of passivity is not highly valued necessarily in the Sikh community. And I understand that farmers in the area—white farmers, and I think Hispanic farmers, too, and Japanese-American farmers—have been put off by these people, and say, "Well, you know," somehow "these are *bad* people. These aren't *good* Asians." Somehow they represent a kind of...they do violence to the stereotype, and therefore the problem lies in them. While in fact I think they simply reflect a different community, and I think if you were to go throughout India, you'd find different communities with different sets of values. And yet we somehow cling to the view that we need to have a way to sort of pigeonhole people.

MY: Mm-hmm.

MV: I don't think it's useful. I think you're quite right, too...I think it's dangerous to see the sort of umbrella ethnic organizations as a kind of...pitting a kind of adversarial "us

against them" necessarily, because I don't think it works that way. Also, one can argue that there's a kind of ghettoizing impulse in that as well. I think there's something to be said for that. I think, however the benefits engendered by solidarity are great, provided one has an awareness what...these are ethnic groups that don't necessarily have things in common. What they have in common is that they've all been marginalized. Right?

MY: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

MV: And the question is how can...how can they benefit from sharing their experiences. Not how are they all alike.

MY: When you went to college at Stamford, what year did you...did you enter Stamford?

MV: '74.

MY: '74. You didn't have any kind of...there was no such thing as AASA, was there? Or did you?

MV: No. No. We didn't have...there was actually an Indian Students' Association, but that was principally a graduate student association because a) there were no...I think there were two or three Indian undergraduates, and we were sort of scattered over the campus, and therefore we really didn't see one another, but there was a group of Indian graduate s... principally male, 90% who were electrical engineers, and I would say 90-well, maybe 75% who were from Gujarat, the city of Madras in South India, and therefore spoke Tamil. And they were fond...this organization was primarily devoted to things like celebrating national Indian holidays. For example, religious holidays like Diwali, which is a kind of holiday all over India, or, for example, Republic Day, the sort of secular holidays of the Indian state. We would in a sense celebrate those with the help the growing Indian community. But that was a very, very different kind of organization than what I think I see at Brown today. The assumption was not, "How are we perceived by others?" There was never any discussion of racial groups, ethnic groups...the assumption for most of these young men was, of course, that they would return to India. Having gotten their PhD they would return to India and in a sense bring their education back to India and live there happily ever after. Interesting, what happened, despite the fact that I've heard numbers of...at least, friends tell me that of course they would return to India, in fact most of them ended up staying and many of them did go and have arranged marriages and brought their wives back, but they've settled in this country. Partly because the job situation is so difficult in India, I think also partly because their value systems had changed without them realizing it.

MY: Mmm. Do you feel that there's a strong difference between, for instance, those graduate students who...and...and let's say students of present? Because it seems more unusual now to have people celebrating, let's say, the holidays of their country. They may be less in touch, because they may be second or third generation. I mean...

MV: Mm-hmm.

MY: This is...this is some...some students. And...and also I find...I find personally that people are much more interested and concerned with, now, the racism inherent in American society and...and trying to cope with this identity of being both.

MV: Mm-hmm.

MY: And of course, there's...most of these people, let's say, have been born in America. Do you think that there's...therefore a great difference between being in that situation and...and...take those Indian graduate students who...who ended up living here, but...

MV: Whose ties were still very much founded in India?

MY: ...whose ties...yes.

MV: Well, I think also it's important to remember that we can't homogenize the position of, for example, Chinese-Americans, Japanese-Americans and Indian-Americans, to take those examples. Principally because, for example, the Japanese-American students who are at Brown are almost all fourth generation, or in some cases, even fifth generation, whereas the Indian-American students at Brown, they're the first generation to have been born in this country. And I think that makes an incredible difference.

MY: Mm-hmm.

MV: Hence, their families are still interested in celebrating Diwali, and so forth. Whereas I think the Japanese-American families, mostly fifth generation Japanese-American students, do not—the third generation Japanese-American students—didn't speak English. I mean, didn't speak Japanese. And therefore they certainly...I think the expectation for fourth and fifth generation is increasingly less. So I think what we have is a group that is...that views itself as American, but is not perceived as such based on physical appearance.

MY: Mm-hmm.

MV: And in fact it's even harder, for example, I know this with Japanese-Americans, for example third, fourth or fifth generation Japanese-Americans to go back to Japan, because there it's the reverse situation. Based on their physical appearance the expectation is that they will behave and they will speak Japanese as Japanese do. Great tolerance is afforded to people who are [Japanese term *kupats*?], who are blonde-haired, blue-eyed, 'cause the expectation is they are *gaijin*, they are foreigners who of course are going to make mistakes, who of course are going to do gauche things. But for Japanese-Americans, there's no measure of understanding.

MY: So, oh, when you at Stamford, I wanted to talk a little about how did...did the college life change your experience? Did...were you at this point in...in your salad bowl state...?

MV: Right. I was in my salad bowl state, and I'm not...I think I sort of...what shall I say?...reverted to the curry pot? It's hard...no. I think I began to sort of question...up until this point I had assumed I was American, but I was a different kind of American. I added a certain piquant touch to that salad bowl. But now I think I began to question whether or not, in fact, I was really Indian, and this had all been a kind of masquerade up until then. And I think I tried very hard to sort of fit in, for these Indian sort of parties, we would wear saris, we would speak Tamil, we would eat Indian food in Indian ways, the topics would be Indian things, and I had a very jarring awareness which was that I didn't fit into that culture, really, either. And I think that's when I became really aware of my predicament. That somehow I had feet planted in both worlds, and that I somehow couldn't, you know, embrace one or the other completely.

MY: Mm-hmm.

MV: There was a breakdown of the value system on either side.

MY: So in college you mostly spent your time with Indian people?

MV: No, I...not at all, in fact I would say that I had two completely different sets of friends. That's what really made it interesting. I had my [peers?] friends, my undergraduate friends, my roommate, people in my dormitories, people in my courses, and I was very, very close to them. And they were principally Caucasian, there were a few Asian-Americans, a few Hispanic-Americans, a few Afro-Americans, but generally it was quite a white school, I would say. Not unlike the Ivy League. My other set of friends was completely different, and in fact I tried once or twice to bring the two groups together, and in fact it was a disaster. And I don't know if other Asian-Americans or other ethnic groups have the same experience, but I found that in fact there was no hope of inter...the only common bond they had was in me.

MY: Mm-hmm.

MV: And my Indian-American friends were principally male graduate students in engineering, there were certain activities we did, there were certain topics we talked about in certain ways, and then I sort of turned...I had two different hats, in a sense, I wore. One for one set of friends, one for another set of friends. And they were both very dear to me, both sets. And yet somehow I couldn't...it seemed a kind of perfect metaphor for my life...I couldn't bring the two parts together.

MY: Yeah. Yeah. I...I was interested in your personal opinion about the...the term Asian-American. When it started to be more prominent...for instance, at Brown when we had the "Black Walk-out" in '68, I think it was, and the Administration made a promise to the students, started admitting more minorities and in 1969 admitted many

more black students and...and started then admitting Asian students. And looking back in the yearbooks, I noticed that this was the year when Asian students who lived in America, as opposed to Asian students who were international, you know, foreign students, going back to Hong Kong or Japan, started coming in, and in '73—in '69, I'm sorry—AASA was established. And I was curious about... since you were in college a little bit around that time, if you might remember a little bit about, or feel a little bit about that term and when that whole concept started to start, because now it's such a big thing...

MV: That's right.

MY: ...that I'm really curious about the history of that.

MV: Right. Well, I'm not sure I can shed any light on that, except that I remember that it was very commonplace when I was in elementary school and then through college, for example, for Japanese-Americans to identify themselves as Japanese.

MY: Uh-huh.

MV: I identified myself as Indian. The only people who didn't have to identify themselves were white, you know, Americans, because they were mainstream. If you were anything other, you had to have a tag. The preferred term when I was an undergraduate for Afro-Americans was "black." Now I understand there's a move to...to go toward instead of Afro-American, even, African-American. In a sense to provide a parallel to Asian-American, Hispanic-American and so forth. But I don't think there was...in fact there was precisely that kind of confusion engendered by, for example, a Japanese-American calling him- or herself Japanese. The expectation was that person should have knowledge of that particular culture. And in fact, I think many of us felt sort of...fraudulent. In some ways, I felt very in touch with Indian culture, and in other ways, you know, I didn't at all. For example, I couldn't read or write my native language. And there was a sense somehow that I was a sham. But after all, here I was, Indian. In fact, I don't think I saw myself as Indian-American until a few years ago. That...would I have used that term for myself. And so I think that that implies a whole different awareness. It somehow legitimizes you. It no longer makes you an inadequate Indian.

MY: Yes.

MV: Right? Or a would-be posturing American, but implies a kind of status, a legitimate status.

MY: Yeah. Yes, I think that's...that's a big change that's occurred recently.

MV: Yeah. I think it too.

MY: But it also can be quite confusing for...if you've never experienced...I've never experienced that term until I got here, and, you know, freshman year, first day, I get a

letter in my mailbox from AASA and...and my first reaction was, "I'm not Asian-American!"

MV: Precisely!

MY: It was...it's a very strange label, because I...because my parents immigrated here, and so, I thought you have to have your parents be "Americans" themselves to be an Asian-American.

MV: Right! It implies a lot of different things, I think, to different people.

MY: Yeah. Yeah.

MV: And I...what also is interesting is, I've noticed for myself, and I hear this in you now—I don't know if it's true generally—is that most of us feel so labelled all the time, that we somehow like to view ourselves as rebels, as individuals, as not being aligned to any particular group, as being...possessing a kind of objective stance. And we resent a kind of tagging.

MY: Yes.

MV: Because it somehow reminds us so much of the sort of ethnic stereotyping.

MY: Yeah.

MV: I, too, saw myself as different from other Indians, and I sought to sort of enforce that view, I think, in my behavior.

MY: Yes, because while I...I have a lot of Asian-American friends here and I enjoy...and I...I find myself...we unconsciously slip into common jokes or experiences that we've shared based on our parents' being from a different culture. And I enjoy that very much, but at the same time, I will completely separate myself from them and...and I will often try to break stereotypes that I believe are there when, you know, because I...I need my individual identity to be established and I don't...I don't want someone to see me and say, "Well, she fits into this particular group, and they all are docile, and they all do math and engineering, or..."

MV: Precisely.

MY: And...and I think that that ties into that whole need for individuality.

MV: The question is; can we ever appear as individuals?

MY: Mm-hmm.

MV: I mean, are we ever viewed that way? I...I know, for example, that when people view me they see a brown-skinned woman and those who are...are, in a sense, well-traveled, perhaps, can identify me as Indian-American, or Indian or something of that sort. But I...I know that that's how I'm registered in peoples' eyes. I sense that from behavior too. Often, as soon people see me and greet me and I greet them back and they compliment me on my level of English, the assumption, of course, is "You have brown skin. You don't look American. Therefore, this must be the acquisition of a second language." And there's a kind of patronizing impulse in that. "How well you've done! You must have worked hard. Your people generally do." And I hear that.

MY: Yeah, and it's so ironic because when you were in elementary school reading about the glory of America is the melting pot, or is the different races we have, and that there's no one American person, and that every, you know, one [is?] American. But in fact, it's very true that "American" equals "white," basically, and...and that we don't *all* fit in equally.

MV: No. But how could we not feel that when given, for example, dolls, until very recently, almost all dolls had light colored hair, blue eyes, and very sort of unnaturally pink skin?

MY: Yes!

MV: This is what we should be. I remember once trying to give a Barbie doll a kind of tan, so that she would look more as I did. And the result was that I had a very dirty Barbie doll, ultimately. In fact, I was embarrassed about it. But I wanted desperately for...for these things to reflect me, and I think children must.

MY: Mm-hmm. Do you feel...I'd like to get into the topic of the present-day students. You...you said early in the talk that you felt that you must have a very different experience because now we have the community, whether or not we choose to access that community. Do you think that that's the difference, for instance, in terms of now we have more solidarity, as you said before or...?

MV: I think there are two differences really. One is the emergence of ethnic communities, large ethnic communities from various parts of A

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