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Dr. Corinne Kodama Oral History

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Interviewee: Dr. Corinne Kodama

Interviewer: Ada Tong

Transcribed and translated by: Ada Tong

[Generating and Reclaiming our Wisdoms: A Collection of AAPI Stories at UCSD](#)

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Time	Transcription
0:02	<p>Ada Tong: Hello, my name is Ada Tong and today is June 3, 2021, and I'm interviewing Corinne Kodama through Zoom for the University of California San Diego Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies Community Archival Project. Do you agree to grant the university permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes, Dr. Kodama?</p>
	<p>Corinne Kodama: Yes</p>
	<p>Ada Tong: Great, thank you so first off, I just wanted to ask what is your affiliation and relationship to UC San Diego?</p>
	<p>Corinne Kodama: I worked at UC San Diego from - that's a good question - in the mid-90s. I'm not sure exactly when I think it was '92 to '96, I think, maybe '97. And I worked at what was called the Student Affirmative Action and Human Relations program? and then I also worked at Muir College for a year.</p>
	<p>Ada Tong: Thank you. I know that you did start your career here at UC San Diego and because of your work with the Student Affirmative Action and Human Relations program it played a huge part in bringing the Cross Cultural Center here at UCSD. Could you talk about how, you know, your work kind of helped, you know, make that happen back then?</p>
	<p>Corinne Kodama: Well, my supervisor at the time, Dawn Valencia, is pretty much single handedly responsible for the Cross Cultural Center. I'm not sure she gets enough credit for that. But when she hired me, she was already working on it and there had been people working on it for a while led primarily by her. And so, I was just helping her with whatever we needed to get it going so like I remember. She secured the space, the original space in the year that I worked for her. And so, I remember going over looking at the space we picked out the carpet, like us, and the interns the student interns picked out the carpet and you know, whatever, and she started the search, I mean I don't think she was in charge of the search, but she helped start the search. So yeah, a lot of the groundwork for the Cross Cultural Center was work that she did, and I think some of it was through committees and some of it was all around it and I don't even know the details, because it was already happening when I got there. And then she left the year before. When the search was happening, she was not there anymore so she had left after I was there a year or so, I can't remember exactly when so when it actually started to get going, she was not there, but she was the one that laid the groundwork for it to happen ... along with a few other people. But I'm just because I, you know she seemed to be the leader of that, based on what I observed.</p>

3:08	Ada Tong: Thank you for that. Could you elaborate a little bit more on why you think there's such a need for the Cross Cultural Center and you know similar programs, such as that?
	Corinne Kodama: You mean, then, or do you mean now?
	Ada Tong: Then and now.
	<p>Corinne Kodama: Well, I mean I was new to UCSD, so I mean I didn't have, I don't know that I can answer that question fully because I hadn't really been there, so like I think you know, in order to answer that question, you have to know the institution really well and know where you're at. And I was new so I'm not sure I'm the best person to answer that question. I mean, I think, generally, I feel like, you know, cross cultural centers are important in two ways; one to educate the campus and one to provide support for students, but every campus has a different balance of that, depending on what that campus needs. So that's what I mean you know, without being there it's hard for me to answer that question.</p> <p>But I do remember, one of the things I remember most about that time was the students were very, very active in pushing for that and actually, particularly the Asian American students at the time. And some of them, you may be interviewing like Melanie - I don't know if you're interviewing Melanie de la Cruz - she's the one of the people I can think of, in particular, that was leading a lot of that work, Lisa Cacho. A lot of them are still working in the field like they're working in Asian American studies. And the students were really, there was a really active group of students of color in the time that I was there, and they were really pushing for their Cross Cultural Center.</p>
	Ada Tong: And thank you for that, I myself, I'm not interviewing them, but you know that that is the purpose of interviewing you so that we can you know, keep a list of these names.
	Corinne Kodama: Yeah, for sure Melanie. For sure for sure for sure which I'm pretty I can't imagine she wouldn't be on your list. And I would also say, probably Lisa there are others, but Melanie for sure.
	Ada Tong: Thank you for that, I also wanted to ask about you know so like you said you have been away from UCSD for some time. But in recent years, particularly in 2018, you did come back to share some of your research, and you talked about the support for Asian American students on campus. Could you talk a little bit more on you know what you presented there at UCSD?

5:51	<p>Corinne Kodama: I mean, that's a lot of my work, is working with college institutions to talk about how to better support Asian American students so I'm not sure I don't think it was anything really specific to UCSD necessarily. It's just something that I think all campuses need to work on, but that was at the time where Windi was trying to gain more support for, you know, building more resources, or attain more resources for Asian American students, so that was part of the reason that I was there. And then, that is what my research is on, is how to better support Asian American students on college campuses so I mean that's what I presented on. You know, at the time, again, I know, Windi was working to try to do more, but you know, I didn't really have a good sense of you know, not being there, it's hard to come in and present to students, in particular. Like, I think, staff is easier to talk to, but with students, you know, students in California are very different from students in Chicago or Maryland or wherever so, you know, that's a little harder to get a read on but I spoke to both students and with staff and faculty about, you know, what are some better ways that you can support Asian American students.</p>
	<p>Ada Tong: Thank you for that. Do you remember the first time you were introduced to Asian American studies?</p>
	<p>Corinne Kodama: It was probably in college, so I went to the University of Washington, and they had a pretty big ethnic studies program. And I was not an ethnic studies major, but I had heard about the courses. And I had, I think I took some ethnic studies, I took an ethnic studies class that wasn't Asian American specific. And so, I was exposed to it a little bit, but I didn't do, I didn't have like a lot of my own classes or that kind of thing.</p>
	<p>Ada Tong: What impact did those ethnic classes have on you at that time?</p>
	<p>Corinne Kodama: I think, for me it was just learning things I didn't know, and you know I grew up in an all-white environment like there were no Asian people, there were no black people, there was like nobody. I think, for me it was just curiosity and wanting to learn more about different cultures, because it just wasn't something I was exposed to growing up. So, I think it's different than with people who grew up in a city that had a lot of that around them, and was more familiar with issues or even tensions, or whatever I just didn't have that. And also, my parents are from Hawaii and so when your parents are from Hawaii, they have a very different conception of race and ethnicity and that kind of thing. So, my parents didn't really talk about it in this same way that I think other parents would have. So, for me, it was more just curiosity, I didn't really grow up with a lot of like racial trauma and experiences like a lot of people did. So, for some people, for a lot of people I know Asian American studies really helps them get through that. I</p>

	<p>didn't have that experience so that wasn't as important to me, but I know that is important to a lot of students.</p>
9:22	<p>Ada Tong: Could you talk about how race relations are different in Hawaii compared to the United States? I know it's a huge question, but from your perspective.</p>
	<p>Corinne Kodama: Yeah, I mean that's a little challenging to answer. So, I'm not going to answer definitively because I don't think I can. But what I will say is, first of all there's a majority of Asian Americans in a lot of parts of Hawaii, so you're not a minority in that way. So, it's not a big deal like it's not something that people stress out about like at all. Because that's the norm is that there are a lot of Asian Americans and also the norm is that a lot of people are mixed race. And I will say not really so much black, so you know there aren't a lot of African Americans or Latinx people in Hawaii. There's some but there's not a lot, and it's pretty common for people to be mixed race or mixed ethnicity, in some way and it's not like unusual or a thing or marginalizing or anything like that. Because, I would almost say the majority is mixed race, which is not true, but that's what it seems like when you're there is that everybody's mixed up, as they say. And also, the culture there is a little more mixing in general, I think with food and traditions, and when I was even though I didn't grow up in Hawaii. When I grew up a lot of the foods my mom made, I never knew, whether they were Chinese or Japanese or whatever, because everybody, it's all mixed up like in Hawaii like everybody eats each other's food, so which is different. I think that, on the mainland where communities are more kind of insular a little bit or more really siloed in a way that is not the case in Hawaii. And also, everybody knows about the different cultures in Hawaii too, just because you know so many people that are you know and again, not as many African Americans but within the Asian community it's much more just mixed up and blended in a way that is not the case on the mainland. Not to say there aren't race relations, because there are racial issues. But it is different, particularly related to Asian Americans, it's just not the same kind. I feel like on the mainland there's a lot of kind of anxiety and marginalization and burden and feeling like you don't belong, and all that, that's not there in Hawaii.</p>
	<p>Ada Tong: Thank you for that. Taking a quick pivot, as one of the founding associate directors of the Asian American Resource and Cultural Center at the University of Illinois Chicago. Here at UCSD, we are also trying to lobby for a space for the APIMEDA program Asian Pacific Islander Middle Eastern Desi American program. So, what suggestions would you have for the folks here, and if you were to have all the resources, what would be some things that you would really want in an AAPI space for students?</p>

12:42	<p>Corinne Kodama: Well, I mean, I think the first thing is, you have to fit it to your community and your campus, so I can't answer that question. Because I don't know what the dynamics are on your campus. So, the demographics of your campus, the politics of your campus, the support from staff versus faculty versus students, all those things you have to consider. So, I don't think there is a right way to do it, I think it's very localized. So, I feel like to say everybody needs this and this, doesn't really make sense, because it's so much depends on your campus because Asian American centers are different on every campus and there's a reason for that. So, I mean, I think the advice and the suggestions I have, I think, are pretty generic. You need buy in from everybody, students, staff, and faculty and the community as well. You don't want to be, ideally, you want to be connected to the community, which is something that I think UCSD has always had an issue with because it's like this Tony campus in La Jolla right? So, at least, when I was there, there was, you know that was a big issue because it's like it seemed like it was all by itself. And so, I think that is an issue from UCSD and that I think is considerably different from UIC, for example. So, ideally, I think it's connected to the community. But the community might not match who's on campus right, and so, then that's another issue, I think at UIC that is similar, at UCSD it is not. So, again, I think there are a lot of local specific issues that you have to deal with. I think, ideally, it's connected to an academic program if there is one. That's not true on every campus, but because a lot of campuses don't have any Asian American studies at all so, but if it is ideally there's a connection and a collaboration between the Center and the studies program. I think that was really important to UIC, again that's not important everywhere, but we've seen the biggest gains when there's been actual, like, really active collaboration. So, that would be something else I would say, but I don't feel like I can say this is what UCSD should do, because I think it's very specific to UCSD and San Diego.</p>
	<p>Ada Tong: Thank you for that. And then one last question, kind of like a fun question, what were some places that you enjoyed eating at on campus, if you remember?</p>
	<p>Corinne Kodama: So, the thing about when I was there is, there wasn't all that stuff off campus that there is now. There wasn't very much off campus. But I did live near campus, but there's a lot more there than there was when I was there. I remember, there was a coffee shop, it's probably still there, a coffee shop at the back of the Price Center that had really good muffins. It was on the backside towards the building with the neon signs on the top. There was a coffee shop back there that had really good muffins I remember that.</p> <p>Is the Che Cafe still there?</p>

16:18	Ada Tong: I don't think so.
	Corinne Kodama: I didn't think so. The Che Cafe was kind of fun. Ask about it, ask your old timers, friends about Che Café. That was a pretty cool place. Yeah, and that's not there anymore, but that was cool and honestly, even just for the food, but for the atmosphere.
	Ada Tong: Where was the Che Cafe located?
	Corinne Kodama: It was kind of by the old Student Center. Those kind of wooden buildings as you head up into the hills. And it was like the kind of alternative granola like revolutionaries center, and they had food and they had protest stickers and they had like I don't even remember all they had.
	Ada Tong: I stand corrected, I believe it is still there.
	Corinne Kodama: Oh, I heard it was gone.
	Ada Tong: Well, we could always double check with our folks who will be transcribing this. Great, thank you so much for your time. Is there anything that you would like to add that I didn't ask, Dr Kodama?
	Corinne Kodama: No, I don't think so, I just think that you know, a lot of the questions you asked me I think are very specific to a time and place. And so, like I don't feel like I can speak to what's going on there now, or what UCSD should do because I'm not there and I think that that's a mistake that a lot of campuses make is they want to do what other campuses do and I don't think that that always works. Because you know, like, you know, if you compare UCSD to UIC, they're about as far apart as you can get, right, on a lot of issues. So, the idea that the kind of center we had at UIC is what UCSD should have to me doesn't make sense, right? I mean it might but, like you can't just assume that because it worked on this other campus that it would work, you know here. And so that's one thing that I would say is, just you know I think a lot of this is very and also even the kinds of Asian Americans that live in San Diego right are really different than the kinds of Asian Americans that live out here right, so you know all of that, you have to take into consideration. It's very specific to I think time, place, geography, demographics that change. So, you know UCSD is really different from when I was there, like when I went back a couple of years ago, it didn't even look like the same place so it's hard, I think, asking someone like me about like what's going on now. Is it, maybe the best, I'm not really the best person to ask about that.
	Ada Tong: No, just wanted to clarify the reason why we wanted to reach out to you and to some of the professors at the time, is because we want to capture what

	<p>was happening on the ground so when you mentioned Melanie and Lisa, like these are the stories that we are archiving-</p>
19:20	<p>Corinne Kodama: I mean I guess related to this. I feel like the leaders on campus related to race relations in general that time was APSA, the student group which Melanie was the President of for at least one of those years. And I remember when I moved there, when I started working, that really struck me that they seem to be kind of the leaders for the fights on affirmative action, which frankly that was much more important than Asian American studies when I was there, was affirmative action. Because we were there then affirmative action went down and all of that. And the people leading a lot of that was APSA. And there was a change in student government I don't know if you heard about that, but that a bunch of students of color like took over the student, like won elections and took over the student government which had never happened before, and their president was a white woman. You know that led this coalition of like, students of color and they ran the student government and that had never had before, and all that I feel like a lot of people in front of that were was APSA. I mean not only APSA, but I feel like APSA was a big leader at that time I don't know if they've continued to be like that, but I remember that really struck me when I was there is how kind of racial justice oriented APSA was, because it wasn't about Asian Americans at all really, it was about affirmative action, and it was about students of color. So, there was a lot of drama around affirmative action stuff when I was there and again it wasn't about Asian Americans really at all. And APSA was one of the leaders of that for sure, like all those groups that I worked with were, APSA, KP. So, I remember just being really impressed by the work that APSA was doing and also KP and all the student conferences they used to do. Do they still do those? Yeah like that was crazy that they would just do all those things, volunteering, I thought that was crazy, it was great, but I couldn't believe that they were doing all that. So that's why I said Melanie and Lisa and they could you know tell you other people. But I just remember the Asian American students being at the forefront of a lot of it, not staff or faculty, it was the students for sure.</p>
	<p>Ada Tong: Thank you so much for your time today, Dr. Kodama.</p>
	<p>Corinne Kodama: All right, good luck with your project.</p>