

Interviewee: Shaun Tuazon

Interviewer: Ryan Okazaki

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Ryan Okazaki (RO): Hello, so my name is Ryan Okazaki. Today is Tuesday, May 21st, 2019. I am here at Miramar College to interview Shaun Tuazon for the Race & Oral History Project. So Sean, what is your name, age, and place of birth? [laughs]

Shaun Tuazon (ST): Hello, well thank you for having me. My name is Sean Tuazon, I am 31 years old, and I was born in Oakland, California.

RO: Thank you. If you have a hometown, can you describe it?

ST: I do have a hometown. So I was born in Oakland, but just a few minutes south. I was raised in a small little island town called Alameda, California. It used to have a big old Navy base on it, but the Navy has since moved on and businesses have moved into the old hangars. It's kind of crazy looking at it now and going back to all the places I used to go when I was little 'cause now there's like a brewery and a winery. One of the hangars has like a huge sports complex with like a gym and like two hockey rinks and one of them even has a movie studio on it, like so random. I grew up in this small island called Alameda and in the mainland, it's so small that there's pretty much like four or five main roads that travel throughout the length of the island and if you don't live on one of those main roads, the street that you live on will intersect one of those roads at some point. So it's really easy to find your way. You can't really get lost. You can if you don't know direction but if you can find one street you can basically tell somebody how to find how to get to where they need to. It's kind of a weird place. Being an island, the only ways off are by boat or in a car, you can either go over bridge or through a tunnel, so I grew up a lot going through the tunnel. It was always a cool experience, and the tunnel was made famous when The Matrix came and they shot on location in Alameda on the old Navy base. And then in the tunnel there's like a freeway chase scene where...I forget what the girl's, the character's name...but she is on her motorcycle and she's like going through this tunnel and it's like, I watched the movie and I'm like, "I grew up going through that tunnel. That's pretty cool." [laughs] Yeah, that's my little hometown. My immediate family still lives there. It's actually kind of neat growing up because I'm sort of on the west side and if you take one street and you go four blocks, you hit my grandparents' house, and then if you go another four blocks, you get to my mom's side's...the house that she grew up in where my aunt and uncle live now. And if you go a little bit more, you go to another, on my dad's side, another aunt and uncle. So it was kind of neat growing up in a small little town so close to so many immediate family. Really cool.

RO: Thank you. How do you identify in terms of gender and sexuality?

ST: I identify in terms of gender and sexuality as a homosexual male, but as we grow and, in this society, the term "male" to me and my family unit is ever-changing and growing. We're just always questioning what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman, and as we're growing, we're coming to learn that it's so fluid that labelling yourself as a man doesn't necessarily put you in the same box as other men. It's been fascinating growing up

in this changing society where we're all kind of learning and experiencing new things and meeting new types of people who are living their life a certain way. I've just recently grown to start questioning what that means, to be a quote on quote "man," because often times growing up, I was told I wasn't manly enough so I would try to prove them wrong by like trying to play all the sports and trying to, you know, be rough like they expected me to be. But it always felt so strange. It just felt unnatural to be like this aggressive boy, which is funny 'cause in my family, my older sister, she grew up more considered a tomboy. She's the one that played all the sports. She played soccer, she played hockey. It was funny 'cause she was the more aggressive one, you know. She would be the one to start fights with me, and just growing in that environment I learned to fight back when I needed to, but it always felt alien or, you know, forced to act a certain way because of the gender that I was put in this box. But naturally I was just more of like a, more soft spoken, a more quiet, artistic individual as a kid. But that has definitely affected and shaped the person that I am today and sort of this art that I create as an adult. Thankful for the different influences that I got as a kid from, you know, my sister and also my parents.

RO: So you said that you identify as a homosexual male.

ST: Mhm.

RO: What do these identities or terms mean to you?

ST: What do they mean to me? Well...it's definitely changed and evolved through my history as a person. Growing up in Alameda, being such a small town, you know, being so close to my family and seeing them every day. Like from preschool through my senior year of high school, I was pretty much in a class with a relative so it's been interesting in the sense that like, I almost kind of feel like growing up I wasn't truly able to be myself because I was growing up with a member of my family so close in my class. So a lot of the, you know, I guess the sort of identities I put on were either to counteract that person or to complement that person, so I was never truly able to, like, be someone where, you know, a family member wasn't watching. And even in elementary school, my aunt, she worked at the school, so it was like, if I got in trouble or if I did something, my aunt, somebody in my family would know. So it always felt like, you know, this sort of sense that, like, Big Brother is watching you, but it was like no, but like aunt is literally in the next room like she's watching you. And so it definitely made me grow up very cautious of how I acted and how I behaved because it always felt like I didn't want to make a wrong move or didn't want to, you know, make the wrong choice because I didn't like getting in trouble. Being in trouble was, like, very scary to me. There's one day where every week we'd have a, or every month or so, we'd have like a what we call a hot lunch when we get little tickets if we pay so we can like get our food. And I remember one day I let my ticket in my desk and so I ran back to the classroom. And of course running's not allowed but I didn't want to lose my place in line. But I ran back, I turned the corner, and totally just ran into one of my classmates and like made her mouth bleed and my forehead was like--I cut my forehead. So obviously I got in trouble because I was running and that was very vividly probably the worst day of my young life because I didn't like to get in trouble and here I am like what we call a DR a disciplinary referral. I was bawling my eyes out whereas people in my class like they got in trouble. They got DR's like every week, so it was nothing to them, but here I am. This is my very first time getting in trouble in school at all and I'm like crying. So sad. So yeah, it's just, growing

up as a male in that society, in this Catholic school--I didn't mention that I grew up in a very Catholic school. We wore uniforms every day. And so trying to conform to gender the way that, you know, everyone else was in my class like--it was definitely difficult because I didn't like to play the sports but all the boys always played, you know, they play some sort--they played basketball, they played kickball during lunch. And it was just never something that I liked doing, but there were some days where, because I was a boy, I felt like I needed to join them so I would begrudgingly like you know try to play. And oddly enough, I was still never last picked [laughs] even though I was probably a garbage player. But yeah, it was definitely a unique experience growing up in a Catholic setting with all these boys and girls together. Because I always wanted to just play with the girls because they would, you know, maybe it's because I'm lazy, but they would just sit there or like play switch or tag. They don't like to get too sweaty. But yeah, definitely affected the way I acted around my classmates.

RO: So we can talk a little bit about your school more. Was it mostly--

ST: Yeah.

RO: Filipino?

[12:54]

ST: Uh, my school was, uh, what was interesting is it was a Catholic school, but it wasn't, maybe it was because growing up in, in the bay area where there's so many, it's sort of just like a melting pot of everyone. Um, it was not majority of anything really. I think there was, it was, uh, there were Asian kids, there were, there were black students, there were white students, there were Latinx students. So it was kind of like the whole gamut. And that, just because we are a Catholic school, it didn't necessarily mean that everyone was practiced Catholicism either. Um, so we did have different religions, um, different students, students of different religions attending school. Um, but yeah, we did have to go to mass at least once a week. Yeah, it was really great actually growing up with so many diverse faces that when I, when I later in life, when I went to college, when it wasn't as diverse as my high school, it was, it really took me back and I was very, it made me feel very strange and like, I don't know alone outside because all of my friends in high school, we were, you know, all of my friends were so colorful that we had, you know, we had, you know, Mexican, we had Asians, we had black kids, we had white kids, like when all were together, we all had fun and we all like laughed. And then when I got to school in San Diego, it was very segregated. I found myself walking through campus and seeing, you know, a group of, I found the Filipinos, they'd always hang out by underneath this tree and then, or you know, the white kids were always, always together, always. Usually, you know, dealing with some sort of like sorority or frat. And then, yeah, it was very, it was very strange being, seeing that segregation in a college setting where my entire school career it was very blended.

RO: Um, do you feel like your religion or what part, what role did like religion or Catholicism play in, I guess, your upbringing as well?

ST: Religion was something that was just there all the time. Like I just early, early days of, you know, having to go to church with my parents and my grandparents. Um, but it was never, it was never something that I was like afraid of, or maybe it was because maybe what was taught

wasn't necessarily oppressive. It didn't seem oppressive at least, or, or maybe the parts of that were oppressive, I just blocked out of my memory. But church was the first place where I sort of found my, my voice or at least singing voice in terms of having to sing, you know, the songs at mass. Um, it's sort of where I first, you know, saw what sheet music was or what notes were. And I would try in my little kid brain figure out like what, you know, what notes meant. Um, and so I'm actually very thankful for my church upbringing that it exposed me to music in a sort of stale way. Cause you know, the songs are, you know, not too exciting and they're very elementary songs. And growing up and seeing the choir seniors stand up and sing and sort of, I was always like, oh, one day, maybe one day I can sing with the choir, and I never did. I did in high school but never the church choir. Um, but yeah, religion to me growing up was, it was just something that was there, um, yeah, so I was going into music. Um, I got confirmed, uh, after being baptized. Obviously these just basically just continuing your journey through the Catholic faith. Um, and even in school we had to take, or at least in high school we had to take a one like religion class every semester. Um, and one of them was world religions where he did learn about other religions, other cultures, which is really great. Um, so maybe that maybe my school is, my Catholic school was different than some others because it definitely felt more, it felt more accepting, if that makes sense to, to others and sort of helped teach a love and tolerance and if it, and you know, maybe I blocked out if it wasn't teaching that, but that's what I got out of, uh, you know, my religious upbringing. Catholic school, literally from kindergarten through senior year of high school. [laughs]

RO: You said that there were people that didn't practice Catholicism at your school too. Do you know what it was like for them?

ST: No, we didn't really, it wasn't really talked about much. It was just like, I would just notice like when we would go up for communion, they just wouldn't take the wafer. They wouldn't take the sip of the wine. They would just, you know, taught to just go up there but, and then like bow because that means you just are not going to take it. Um, but yeah, it wasn't really, it wasn't really addressed, but it also wasn't a problem because like I said, like they made you sit there but they didn't make you like actively participate too much. Yeah.

RO: So how have your identities shaped your experiences within your family?

ST: So within my family, I guess I think I'm very fortunate in the sense that I, I grew up in a very, um, loving, very tolerant family. So it's my, um, my mom, dad, and then I had two sisters, one older and one younger. And um, yeah, growing up my parents were, I guess not that, not the stereotypical Filipino parents. Um, I hear so many stories from my Filipino friends now how, you know, how strict that their mom and dad were. Um, you know [laughs] in terms of like, you know, having to be act a certain way or, you know, curfews and whatnot. Like my parents were always very chill and very trusting actually. Um, like we, we never had like a, it was never like a curfew. It was just like, well, just don't do anything that you shouldn't do and call us when you need help. Like, if you ever need help, you can just, you know, I think my, I remember my mom actually saying that to me, like, if you ever are in a situation, it doesn't matter. I'm not gonna get mad. Like, if you need me to come help you, like I'll just, I'll be there. And so I think that was, it's really great to hear, um, because, you know, it just felt like, oh, I shouldn't do anything bad. Because if I do, I feel like I would, it'd be taking advantage of that sort of, that trust. So I was always, I was always the good kid. I at least I felt like it. And if I, you know, and I knew if I did something wrong, I would, I would try to, you know, own up to it and not try to hide. Um, but yeah, I think them being such great parents, I think it was because they were both the babies of the family. Both my mom and dad came from large families. Have many brothers and sisters

and um, maybe, maybe it's because of the way that their siblings treated them. I Dunno, it, it instills some sort of, I don't know, a deeper understanding of what it's like to, you know, live in a house with parents and brothers and sisters. So I'm, yeah, I'm very, very thankful and fortunate to have had such a loving and accepting environment. Definitely.

RO: How did like your gender or sexual, like identities play into, or how does your family like play into all of that?

ST: Ah right, so growing up I, I kind of, I tell myself that, or I tell people that I felt like I was just, I was just dumb. I didn't know. I didn't know what it meant to be homosexual. I didn't quite understand that concept. Um, I just, I did know that I was different than all of my male friends, but it just didn't understand how or why. Like growing up, I would guess one time he went to my, my good friend's house, um, because we had like a school project that we wanted to work on and I, we did like a sleepover and I'm in my brain, I'm like, well, you know, we're just gonna, you know, work on this homework. And then that was it was like, I think it was like my first time going to a friend's house too. But I remember he went over there and then we did homework and then like we finished the homework and then he wanted to like play like MLB baseball on his Nintendo. And I was just like, I'm good. So, I literally just watched while him and his brothers played baseball and I just feel like, pretended like I knew what was going on, but I had never seen this baseball game, video game before. I had no idea. So I didn't, I didn't know what was going on. I was very clueless. Um, I, and that same friend, I remembered when we transferred from third grade to fourth grade, uh, our teacher was like, she was this blonde. I don't know how old she was. I was also in fourth grade, but I remember we like went to the bathroom. And, um, he was like, Oh, don't you think you want to date like this misses whatever? And I'm like, yeah, sounds like a good idea. So that's like, I was completely not interested in this, you know, teacher, but he was at, but I didn't, I didn't understand quite understand like why. And then even, um, getting into eighth grade is when I got my, it was gotten my first quote on quote relationship, which actually lasted a very long time. Um, but we had this new girl and her twin come in and, um, you know, I, I, being the person that I am, I just like, you know, I liked people and I liked, um, hanging out with the girls. Um, I didn't know what that meant, but, um, yeah, my one friend was like, oh, I think I can tell you like you like her, don't you like her? And I was like, yeah, yeah, she's cool. And he's like, you should ask her out. And I'm like, no, I won't do that. And so like literally one day it was a rainy day, so we were all like, we're going to play outside. We were, they sent the eighth graders to like help babysit all the younger kids during lunch so that the teachers could have a break. Um, and I remember there was this, like this scheme with a couple, with a few of my classmates and they were like scheming to get me in this girl together to be boyfriend and girlfriend. And I don't even remember what, how they did it, but it just, it happened and they sort of asked each other out for us and we felt like, okay, well I guess we're boyfriend and girlfriend now because they made us do this. Um, but I was just like, you know, in eighth grade I had no idea what was going on. I didn't know what that meant. I was just like, yeah, I like this girl, I guess. And I guess she likes me. So I guess that means we can date. I don't know what that meant. Uh, but for most of our dating life, we didn't see each other outside of school. It was just like a school time thing because I'd had no idea what I was doing and nor that I, you know, want to be in a sort of relationship. But it was, um, yeah, it was very strange, very strange.

RO: Thank you. Next question, how have your identities shaped your experiences within the Filipino American community?

ST: This one is a little harder for me 'cause I felt very, maybe this is not the word, but I kind of felt out of touch with the Filipino community. Um, my parents both being the young babies of their families, um, they, neither of them speak Tagalog. They don't. So if they can speak, then they couldn't speak it to us. So that means me and my sisters don't speak or understand at all. Um, because when they were growing up, at least for my mom's on my mom's side, she remembers her, her mom and dad talking in Tagalog to her brothers, 'cause all her brothers couldn't understand. Uh, but when she would walk into the room, they would immediately stop talking Tagalog and didn't speak in English. And I guess they told her they didn't, they didn't want her to have an accent, especially 'cause she was, she was born, she was actually born in the same hospital, the same, you know, hospital that I, me and my sisters were born in. So she, um, yeah, she was, they wanted her to be very American. Um, and for her, she wasn't very, she wasn't in touch with a lot of her, her Filipino heritage at all, really, either. So in raising us, my parents, um, there wasn't, it didn't feel, I dunno, maybe it didn't feel very Filipino. Like we, [laughs] we didn't have the spoon, the big sport fork. And spoon on her walls, like my grandparents definitely did. Um, but yeah, it was, uh, yeah, I've, I've sadly felt very disconnected, um, to my Filipino culture, at least I had been says growing up. Um, you know, we would go to our family parties and stuff and you know, there'd be all the Filipino food of course. Um, but outside of Filipino food, I don't know if there was a strong a connection to, you know, a Filipino culture. Uh, I will say, that was the case until about eighth grade. Um, uh, one of my classmates, um, him and I think he was his mom or dad. They organized me in, and so it was a total of four of us, the Filipinos in our class and we got together and we, um, we learned the Tinikling and we would perform like as a Tinikling troupe, I guess, and we would perform it like, gosh, I haven't thought about this in so long, but we would like go and perform at like parties or I remember one time was a gym and I don't remember. I have no idea what the function was, why we were there, but we performed the Tinikling in this gym for these people. Um, and that was the first time that I had sort of learned about this Filipino tradition, this dance, the Tinikling with the, with the bamboo sticks and the, you know, jumping in and out. Um, so that was sort of my first experience with the Filipino culture 'cause I hadn't really gotten that within my family unit. Um, so applying that to, so how my identities have shaped within the Filipino community is a little cloudy because for a long time I felt very disconnected, unfortunately. I wish I wasn't, but I was. Maybe that had something to do with, with my families or my Grandma and Grandpa wanting, wanting my family to assimilate to American culture. So they, they didn't bring up a lot of the Filipino traditions and customs. Um, so that we, you know, could sort of fit in to the rest of the Americans in the community. That I'm not sure. It's interesting to try to break that down and figure out why I felt so disconnected.

RO: Okay, so next question, how has being Filipino American shaped your experiences within the LGBTQ community?

ST: Yeah. And that's any, no, this exactly. It goes very hand in hand with that previous answer of like, oh, what does it, what does it mean to be Filipino? And then what does it mean to be homosexual? And as a Filipino. I always sort of functioned as this, uh, you know, person who I just feel sad, I feel very American in the sense that like I didn't speak another language. I, um, you know, don't, not until fairly recently I went to the Philippines for the first time, I felt very disconnected. So I wouldn't say being Filipino American has shaped my, me in the LGBTQ community much at all, at least early on. Um, definitely now as I'm growing up, um, a couple friends, um, and myself have started, um, this theater collective called MaArte Theater Collective and where we are creating a space in theater arts for the Filipino American narrative. And so that, being involved in that, it excites me because I, where I felt like I've been disconnected from my culture growing up, I feel like now is the chance for me to be able to connect with my roots by way o these theater makers in San Diego who are Filipino, who are

more Filipino than I am, or at least they feel more Filipino. Um, so me getting to learn and experience life through their lens or, you know, hear their stories of what it's, what it's been like being Filipino American, and a lot of them gender in gender queer community. It's exciting that I get to do this now at 31 years old. I get to really explore my place as a Filipino American member of the LGBT community. Yeah. It's, uh, it's, I feel like it's, it's so late. It's a late for me to be exploring what life is like in what creating art means with these identities. Um, but I'm so excited for the future and what, what's in store for me as an artist and where, you know, I can grow.

RO: So what is life like as a gay Filipino American?

ST: Life is great. Um, as I said, I'm, I'm so, I'm so thankful to have the family that, that I have. Um, we are, we are very Filipino. We're just, we're full Filipino. Um, life is, um, life is good. Um, being raised Catholic, as many Filipinos are, um, you know, one might think it could be difficult trying to live this, you know, life as a nice Catholic boy, um, with a layer of, and then also being homosexual. Um, I know it's difficult for some people. I know a lot of people have struggled with that. But I've been fortunate enough that the values that I learned in the Catholic Church, at least under the roof of my house, has always just been at the basis of, of love and acceptance. And unfortunately not a lot of people in a religious household yet to experience that, you know, Jesus is love in, you know, in that way. Um, but I was very fortunate that I never once felt like I needed to hide and, and didn't have to, you know, you try to convert myself out of one, you know, one identity. Um, growing up was a little, it was a little complicated just because I didn't, I didn't quite know what being a homosexual was. And so like in high school I did have, I did have girlfriends. Um, but it kind of, I didn't, I just didn't really know what I was, what that meant. Trying to fit a mold of or trying to fill the ideal, you know, male, especially being the only son in my family being like, okay, so you have to have a family so you could continue the name, the family name, um, and that with your kids and so on and so on. Um, so I guess there was a little bit of a pressure to live a certain way, which is maybe why subconsciously I was like, I'm going to have girlfriends and then, and then I'm going to have a wife and then I'm going to have kids. Um, but that was, that was in high school. And so once I was able to leave high school and go to college was where sort of this whole world of exploring gender and sexuality sort of opened its doors for me. Do you have any advice for future generations? Do I have advice for future generations? I do, but it's like, I see this, the, these kids growing up. Because obviously we have things like social media and, and Youtube there's so, there's so much access to different stories. And I'd I feel like the kids going up these days are very, it's two things. It's, it's very fortunate and it's also very difficult, um, growing up in this social media age. Because of things like bullying and, you know, the whole, the whole idea of your social media life is different than how your, your real life is. And people, people tend to on social media posts only the positive things in their lives. And not showing the times where they're really struggling or the times that are really difficult. Um, so for kids nowadays, I would definitely just caution them to not look at life through the lens of what they see, the happiness that they see on the surface. Because no matter how happy a person can be, there could be something really dark and really heavy that a person is going through, that they're not showing the world. So my advice for kids is just to know that life is hard and it's never perfect for everybody. Um, if you're feeling alone, okay, you will find people who are going through the same things that you are, or if they're not going through the exact same things you'll find, you'll find and hear stories = of similar happenings in other people's lives. So, yeah, I just want everyone just to make sure that I'm top, uh, over everything, they're just loving and respecting themselves so that once they can love and respect themselves, maybe that can, you know, affect the way that people love and respect them in return. Yes. [laughs]

RO: Okay. Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about?

ST: Um, I don't know. I could, I guess I could talk more, but I don't know. Do you have anymore questions based off of anything I said?

RO: Um...no.

ST: Cool. All right. Well thank you so much.

RO: Thank you for being interviewed, yes.