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HI244

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Reimi Kusaka: Connecting to Culture and Connecting with Family Through Food

Grace Jones: My name is Grace Jones, today is March 15, 2023, and I am interviewing Reimi Kusaka in person for the Colby Korean Oral History Project. Do you agree to grant the college permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

GJ: How do you feel about this interview?

Reimi Kusaka: I'm feeling nervous, but mostly kind of excited because I get to reflect on my family and kind of connect with my culture in some kind of way.

GJ: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

RK: I was born in Boston, and I moved to New Jersey when I was around five. And I have been living in the same house since then. My dad was born and raised in Japan and my mother was born and raised in South Korea, and they moved here in 1999. They were actually planning to go back to Asia, to live together after they got married, but somehow they are still here.

GJ: Okay, so you touched a little bit on this in that question, but can you tell me a little bit about your family's history?

RK: My dad was born and raised in this little rural area called Nara in Japan. His whole family, they all lived in Japan for a while. I don't really know much past my dad's direct parents, but from what I've heard they're very prideful of their country. My dad doesn't really know about his family either. He really loved traveling and so he would work three or four jobs to go backpacking across Europe. When he ran out of money— like one time, he went to New Zealand

and he got pickpocketed so he had to go back to Japan to work again to make enough money. But he loved learning new languages and cultures and he ended up going to London, and Italy, and New Zealand to learn English. That was his main goal. My mother, on the other hand, she was born and raised in South Korea. Her parents, her family, is very prideful of South Korea. I think it is really commonly seen in Koreans that they are very prideful of where they are from. Especially because my mom's dad had a direct [ancestral link] to the king. Like forty-two generations before. They were especially proud of that. Unfortunately, because my mom lost her dad when she was six in a car accident, she never really got to ask her dad questions about [her family heritage]. Like it wasn't so different because nowadays, not that it is irrelevant, but it was okay. It was more a fun fact rather than they had to do something because they were related to the king. It was kind of just a fun fact, but I think my mom wanted to ask him more questions about what that was like. Or if he had any close relationships with his family because of it, but unfortunately, that was never the case. She ended up going to England to study English, and that's where my parents met. They met in England. They got married in LA three months after dating and then they moved to Queens, New York, in 1999.

GJ: Have you ever talked to your grandparents on your dad's side about the end of Japanese colonialism in Korea?

RK: I have only, on my dad's side, I only have one grandparent left. And it's my dad's mom. And I think, like as a female, I don't think she was really involved [insofar as she did not participate directly in the] fighting. I'm pretty sure she also grew up in a wealthy family so she was very distant from what was going on. And then by the time she had my dad [inaudible].

GJ: How did your parents' families respond to your parent's relationship initially, and has their view changed at all over time?

RK: So, my dad's parents, they were okay with it. I think it's very fair to say, after looking at the relationship between South Korea and Japan, South Korea definitely has more than a right to feel this anger and frustration towards what happened to them. So rather than my dad's side getting mad, it was more my mom's side that was pretty surprised and quite confused about her relationship with a Japanese man. Also because she was not only a female in the family, a daughter in the family, she was the second daughter out of the three kids. She has an older sister and a younger brother. They really only cared about her younger brother because he is responsible for the next generation of the family because he is what is seen as relevant compared to his two other sisters. So not only because she was a female, and that she was the second female born, they were kind of like, "Whatever. She's irrelevant anyways." They didn't care as much because her position in the family wasn't as high. Probably in the family, she had the lowest position, or rank, in her family. [Many family members who did not approve of the match] didn't attend her wedding. It was only my mom's mother, my mom's sister, and my mom's younger brother. Her direct family were supportive, but no one else was. But my mom was extremely close to her family, her direct family, meaning her siblings and her mom, so she didn't really care what other people thought. She was completely okay with it. But I do think to this day, my mom's relatives are not happy with the marriage at all.

GJ: I read about this concept called *koinonia* and it's a case study to research emotional reconciliation between Koreans and Japanese people. And the evidence that this case study shows is that everyday events such as religious celebrations and sharing meals can bring the two different groups together. I was wondering if this is something that resonates with you as something that you and your family might want to pursue, or you might want them to pursue.

RK: I actually have never heard of that term before. When I think about bringing two foods, bringing two groups together, I was thinking about this specific dish called *donkkaseau* (chicken cutlets). It's like breaded chicken. Basically, I know that my parents, my mom, is very prideful of her country, as I was saying before. It's a very typical Korean thing. Sometimes my parents have arguments about whether some dishes traditionally [originate] from Japan or Korea, so the same dish, they are almost fighting over. Sometimes my dad will be like, "This is definitely Japanese." And my mom is like, "This is a Korean dish." In that way, I feel like my mom kind of shows this…not hatred towards Japanese people, but kind of that anger of like, "You stole so much from me as a Korean person. Don't take this dish away from me." In that way, I see how Korean and Japanese history affects my mom. Especially through food, if that makes any sense.

GJ: I'm gonna skip around with my questions and go to my section on connection to Korean culture through food. So, how often do you and your family eat Korean food?

RK: Oh, like a lot. Especially because my mom is the one who cooks in the family. My dad barely knows how. She tries to add in Japanese dishes for my dad and a way for me to stay connected to my Japanese side, but I would say at least five times a week. We barely have any other cuisine. Other than Japanese or Korean. It's what she knows best how to cook. And being born and raised in Korea, that's probably what her taste is. That is probably the food she is used to and likes. I am glad that she is able to bring at least that to the States.

GJ: That's good. We read about this in *Tastes Like War*, which is a book we're reading in class, and one thing that the author's mom struggles a lot with is getting the correct Korean ingredients. So I was wondering if there are a lot of Korean markets where you live that allows her to have access to these products.

RK: Yeah, when we first moved to New Jersey— I live in this small town called Englewood Cliffs— when I first moved there when I was five, apparently it was a majority white community. Then suddenly in 2012, I don't know why I remember this year so clearly, there was such a big boost in the Asian community. There were so many Asian people coming in. And there are a bunch of H Marts nearby, but there is specifically this town called Palisades Park that is la ten-minute drive from my town. I personally think that it is a better Korea Town or K-Town than the one in New York City. You would get around speaking Korean more than English. Like everyone there also seems like the restaurants that they have, especially, are owned by older Korean women or *ajummas* ("aunties," a term for middle-aged women) they call them. And they seem to have moved here from South Korea to have a better life. They moved here to help their children. So a grandma moving to America to help their children. Or like their new mothers to help raise their children. So basically, helping them raise their grandchild.

GJ: Okay

RK: But also another thing with Korean culture is family is like a big, big thing and I feel like a lot of Korean *ajummas* their age have come to America to help live and take care of their family. I'm grateful that they have these markets and lots of restaurants so close to my home and it's just nice to be part of a majority sometimes. When I'm being in and walking around in that town with like my family, I don't feel like an outcast. I'm surrounded by people who are like me. It's nice.

GJ: That's nice. Are there ever any food, Korean food festivals in New Jersey that you like to go to?

RK: Festivals?

GJ: Or favorite restaurants?

RK: Yeah, everyone goes to this town called Palisades Park. They have really traditional food. I have been to Korea, fortunately, maybe two or three times in my life, and there are times when I kind of like some [of the Korean food] in New Jersey better. My mom has even said that some of the food that we have in that town has been better than the ones that she had in South Korea. But yeah, there is traditional, very like… I'm trying to think… like the hamburgers or very common foods like in America, so like hamburgers and french fries, [the Korean] equivalent of [those common foods] would be *jjajangmyeon* (Korean black bean noodles), which is a dish, [or] *tangsuyuk* (Korean deep-fried beef or pork). It is really nice to have restaurants like that nearby because it's a tradition in Korean culture that if you move somewhere, you have this dish called *jjajangmyeon* (Korean black bean noodles), and it's kind of hard to make it at home. But to be able to [get] ttake out and have that food and be able to practice that culture and tradition, it makes you feel connected. Having that option is comforting in itself. So I don't really go to festivals, but I do in that way kind of celebrate the culture.

GJ: Do you have any specific Korean dishes that you eat for different holidays or occasions?

RK: Yeah. Every year on birthdays there is this dish called *miyeok-guk*. It's called seaweed soup. And I'm sure you can find this online if search it online [for the reason] and why [Koreans] drink seaweed soup [to celebrate birthdays.] I may be wrong, but it sort of symbolizes growth. And it is very important. For some reason my mom is like you cannot miss having *Miyeok-guk* (seaweed soup) on your birthday. I am blanking on the reason behind it, but stuff like that. Even if it's just a simple bowl of soup, being able to have that kind of consistency in my life. And having that as a way to… Almost a reminder to never forget where I'm from it's really nice.

GJ: This is kind of connected. Are there any special recipes that you would like to pass on to future generations or do you plan on making the seaweed soup for your hypothetical future

children?

RK: [laughter] Yeah, I l want to be able to pass it on. I want the same pride that my mom and her family has had of being Korean and being proud of it. Because being an Asian-American, it's kind of hard sometimes to be proud of being Asian or looked at [as other]. Feeling different and also looking very different from my peers. But I think that food is in that way such a powerful tool almost. It's a way of remembering your ancestors. So, I definitely want to do that with my family.

GJ: That perfectly segues into my next group of questions about personal cultural identity. How do you view your personal cultural identity?

RK: Yeah. Ugh, I talked about this in therapy today!

GJ: [laughter]

RK: No, no, no. It's great because it's so important to me, because it plays such a big role in how I feel like I am today. Because when I moved here, or when my parents moved here, they didn't really speak any English. That class that they took in England to study English, they did not do well. [laughter] Like they did not pass, so I do not know why they decided to come to America, but they didn't know how to speak English, so I grew up in a household in America, but never spoke English at home. I didn't feel like a true American, almost in that way. I was born in Boston, Massachusetts, but besides that, there was nothing very American about me. So, when I started to go to kindergarten in American public school when I was five, and suddenly I was surrounded by…This was when my town was predominantly white, so when people looked different from me, and also spoke a different language, ate completely different foods. It was very overwhelming. But I remember wanting to be liked by them and wanting to feel included, that I spent so much of my life trying to fit into this white community that I clearly don't think

I'll ever be able to fit into. Just because that's who I am, it's not like I can change the color of my skin, or change the color of my eyes. It is something that I am born with, but it took me a long time to realize. I still struggle with it. Even accepting that, and being okay with it and to be honest, being proud of it is kind of ridiculous tothink about because I grew up being so ashamed of what I look like. So I'm trying to get to that point, but I think I very much still struggle with it, being and looking different.

GJ: This question you also touched on a little bit. What was it like growing up in New Jersey as a Korean-Japanese-American? One question I have specifically is did you ever speak English at home before you went to kindergarten?

RK: No. I still don't speak English with my parents at all at home, we speak in Japanese. I… [inaudible]

GJ: Yeah, what was it like growing up as a Korean-Japanese-American in New Jersey.

RK: It's complicated because I also felt like I had an Asian identity and then an American identity, but within my Asian identity. I didn't know if I more closely related to my Korean identity or my Japanese identity. So it was like… I didn't know who to affiliate myself [with]. I remember feeling really angry and betrayed by my Japanese side when I learned about the colonialism, which interestingly enough I did not learn ever at school.

GJ: No, me neither.

RK: So, if I was not Japanese-Korean or Korean-Japanese, or I don't know… I don't think I would have ever learned about [Japan's colonization of Korea], which angered me. But I also didn't know who to talk to it about because it didn't seem like anyone cared. It made my dad uncomfortable to talk about because… and then he had no idea [since] I don't think [Japanese schoolchildren] learned about it [either]. My dad growing up in Japan. It's something that they

rightfully should feel ashamed about, but that also means that they haven't been owning up to their mistakes. And I don't think they've apologized about it either, for "comfort women."

GJ: Yeah.

RK: My mom really is the only person who really cares about it, I think. And she's not someone who lived through that time either. I think it's not talked about enough.

GJ: Do you feel like you had opportunities in school or other activities to embrace and share your culture with your classmates/peers?

RK: No, but I think if I tried, maybe. Because I put so much of my energy and committed a lot of my time and energy into not being seen as an Asian person, I almost didn't want to, in a way. So that's on me. I was almost ashamed to be Asian, and I didn't want to be seen in that community. So maybe, if the case was different then probably [I would have pursued educational opportunities in school or through community outlets]. But I just was never actively seeking it.

GJ: And then you kind of touched on this one earlier too. Oftentimes in the US, East-Asian cultures are often fused together. I'm wondering how or if you actively try to distinguish between your Korean culture and your Japanese culture, or have something that is uniquely you.

RK: In some ways it reminds me, especially being in a white community like this, [of how at] Asian restaurants with Japanese, Chinese, and Korean [foods] they fuse them together. It's kind of like we're seen as one.

GJ: Yeah.

RK: Just like an umbrella. But I do try to recognize that each culture is so different. Like Japanese food and Korean food. In that way, I think I am very grateful for my mom being able to make both dishes, from Korea and Japan. Because in that way I am able to distinguish what is Korean, and what's not, and what's Japanese. But it could be confusing sometimes. I do speak

Japanese at home, but I feel like I am more Korean in a way because I eat more Korean food, and I feel like I am more connected and relate to the culture to Korea more than I do with Japanese. I don't know. I don't know how to describe it. It's odd.

[laughter]

GJ: Are there any cultural differences that you notice between any of your grandparents, your mom, or your dad, and then yourself?

RK: Yeah. I think… It's the three of us. I don't have any siblings, so it's just me, my mom, and dad at home. But I find myself often… We comment on each other. My mom will be like, "You're so American." Or to my dad, "You're so Japanese." Oddly, or not oddly… my mom when she uses the term, You're so Japanese," it's usually not in a good sense.

GJ: [laughter] Oh no.

RK: Yeah, because of that pride that she has. There's this term called the Japanese smile. And Japanese people are known for being really nice and caring on the outside but it's almost scary because you don't really know what they're truly thinking about on the inside. I could be smiling and telling you nice things, but on the inside, I might be thinking evil things. That's really common in Japan. Outwardly everyone is really nice, but inside like you don't know what they are thinking.

GJ: Okay.

RK: I remember my dad lying, or something like that. Something along the lines of that. And my mom being like, "That's so Japanese."

GJ: [laughter]

RK: I feel like Japanese people have this people-pleasing tendency of caring and not showing any sense of hurt, or almost being fake in a way.

GJ: Okay.

RK: And Korean people are the opposite. They are super stubborn, in the best way. But they are never fake, they will be upfront with you. They are super close with their families and they fight, but in a friendly way. But that's very much not like the Japanese people. And then for me, apparently, I don't notice this about myself because I'm just doing what I was raised to do. But there will be times when [my parents] will be like, "Oh wow you're so American!" I think unknowingly I act so differently from both my Korean and Japanese side.

GJ: You touched upon the Japanese smile, are there any other conflicting cultural beliefs between your mother and your father?

RK: That food thing. My dad will jokingly be like, "Ugh! You Korean people, you just copied Japanese things." I'm blanking on what [the food in question] specifically was. But [my parents] often fight about one side stealing dishes, ideas, and traditions over the other. Almost like a competition. I think they are prideful of their own country and so they want to claim some stuff as their own, but in reality no one really knows.

GJ: Do you feel like the general distrust of Japan from Koreans is beginning to age out throughout more and more younger generations who don't have as much of a direct connection to the colonial period? And also [due to] growing economic relationship between the two countries?

RK: From what I know personally, unfortunately, colonialism didn't happen that long ago. It's really sad but there are only a few amount of "comfort women" who are still alive. But they are actively trying to still get an apology from Japan. So, for me personally, I don't see it necessarily fading out.

GJ: Okay.

RK: Because these super brave women have been fighting for all of their lives basically to get this apology. And luckily some people are willing to continue their stories and get this apology. I even heard about this from over here. So hopefully it's bigger over there and more people hear about it over there. From what I know, politically Japan and Korea aren't on the best terms either. So I definitely think there is always going to be tension as long as people don't forget about what happened. And I hope that no one does.

GJ: Yeah.

RK: On both sides. I feel like Japan has been trying to sweep it under the rug, whatever that phrase is. And Korea is really doing their best to be like, "We were wronged." Rightfully so. Maybe [the conflict] will [fade], but I kind of hope not in a way.

GJ: Shifting back to some stuff we talked about earlier. We are talking about the Korean community, and then we're going to try to talk about it in New Jersey versus at Colby. Have you always felt as though there is a strong Korean community around you?

RK: In New Jersey?

GJ: In New Jersey and at Colby.

RK: In New Jersey, yeah because of that Palisades Park. I kid you not, one day I wanna take you. But it's like you're in a different country when you're in there.

GJ: That's so crazy.

RK: There's more Korean people there than I have ever seen anywhere else. So in that way, I feel like, it was really [meaningful]. Having Korean food, which is the way that I connect to my Korean side, was super accessible. So, it was easy, and I felt like I had a Korean community in New Jersey. Here [at Colby] though, because I am away from home and I don't have that food to eat and then also being a student-athlete here, and on top of that my struggles of being an Asian

person in a predominantly white community is like…I feel as though I am not actively seeking a Korean community. Maybe, I feel like there have been other Korean people on this campus who have had a different, completely different experience from me because they were looking for that. But I don't think I have taken the steps to do that. So, I don't want to say "no," because it's kind of on me for not looking for a supportive group here. But I will say, it's much harder to find.

GJ: Yeah.

RK: Yeah.

GJ: Are there any other ways that you and your mother engage with the Korean community in New Jersey besides through food?

RK: I think my mom does her best in trying to support local stores that are Korean-owned. All of these stores typically are family owned through generations [by] people like my parents who moved here from Korea. Even to take my passport photo, there is a photography store in Palisades Park that's owned by an old Korean man, like we'll go there instead of going to CVS to take it. In those ways, there is a strong Korean community where there's almost a role for each different thing. To take photos you go to this man. To eat this specific dish, you go to this person. Everyone, I feel, is trying to support each other in that way, and I think it's a really cool thing.

GJ: That's so nice.

RK: Yeah.

GJ: Have you ever met anyone else who has a Japanese and Korean heritage?

RK: Yes, once. But I met her through Japanese school. So, I feel it was almost… And she kind of lived far from me too. It's really rare to find a Korean-Japanese mix. But I met her in Pre-K and never saw her again. And I think it's because… Her mom is Japanese, and her dad is Korean, which is the opposite of mine. But the thing is we met because we were searching for a

community. A specific Japanese community. If it weren't for that, I don't think we would have ever met. But I've never met a Korean-Japanese person after that ever. And I don't think I honestly will to be honest.

GJ: Okay, well that was my last question.

RK: Yay!

GJ: Thank you so much for doing this. It was so lovely of you!