

Transcript

Note: Most verbal filler words are omitted without indication for clarity, but some are kept for authenticity.

[] used to cut out repetitive phrases; most verbal filler words are omitted for clarity; [sic] for clarification or to show interruption; - indicates change in trajectory/restart sentence; ... indicates an idea trail off.

Awo: My name is Awo Agbevam. Today is October 28th, 2023 and I'm interviewing Sharon Lee through Zoom for the Colby College Korean Oral History Project. Sharon, do you agree to grant the college permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

Sharon: Yes.

Awo - Great. Alright, let's get started. So how are you feeling about this interview?

Sharon -I am anticipating it. I think that it will be a good conversation.

Awo - Can you tell me about where you were born, the places you lived in your life, and for how long you lived there?

Sharon - Okay, so the place I was born. That's a big, there's a lot of questions within that one question so I'll just try to split it up, but the place I was born is Nashville, Tennessee. But it's actually not Nashville, Tennessee, it's Hermitage, which is like 15 minutes away from Nashville which is like... Yeah, and then, what was the next part?

Awo - The place you lived for your life, most of your life and for how long you lived there?

Sharon - Okay, and this was also the place that I lived for most of my life and I lived here for—right now I'm 20, so minus 5 years because I lived for 5 years in a different place in Boston—but so for 15-ish years I've been living here.

Awo - What do you remember doing for fun as a child at home, at school, or at church?

Sharon - I remember, because when I was a child, there was a really big experience that kind of broke my childhood in two. But I think that in the first part of it, I remember I used to draw a lot, and I used to journal a lot, like write down my daily interactions and most of the time it would be about like guys – crushes that I have in class. And then, if I were to interact with other people, like we would usually play house—I think that's pretty stereotypical—and I would go over to other people's houses. I think an interesting thing, though [was that] I wouldn't... rarely would they come to my house, but I think that's just part of Korean culture. We don't really... It's not that we're

not accepting other people into our space but it's more like we care so much about our image to other families so it's like... I didn't care. I wanted people to come to my house, but my mom or my dad were like, "Oh yeah, our house is not clean enough," or "We might not have the things that they're looking for," and things like that. So, I think that that was a key part of what I remember growing up and everything else was pretty much normal.

Awo - How do you think your cultural background influences the kind of things you like to do to unwind as an adult?

Sharon - How did... How do I think my cultural background influenced what I would like to do?

Awo - The kind of thing you do. Basically, in what ways does your cultural upbringing affect the activities you enjoy doing to relax as an adult?

Sharon - Okay, so I think that, I mean, I kind of already partly answered it, but I think definitely my interests were in things that were related to Korean culture. For example, I remember just off the top of my head when I was in preschool I would always talk in Korean, and they would... I just remember them being... You know, obviously they don't respond to me because they don't know what I'm talking about, but just not having the words to be able to express what I wanted to say when I was younger, and even if I did say it them not understanding it, I think that that was kind of a shocker to me But yeah, I think I remember that, and then also just once I kind of grew up a little bit more I think I was able to... Like when I was younger, I don't think Korean culture really came out as much. I remember I was just looking into my first grade portfolio, [for] which we made a summary and there are pictures and stories of what our first grade looked like, and I remember through some of the pictures that I wore a *Hanbok*, which is Korean traditional clothes that you wear for New Year's. I don't even remember doing that but apparently I did. I feel like besides those times—I mean, most likely my mom probably forced me to wear that—besides that, I don't think I really had much interaction with my Korean culture until I was a little bit older and I was like, "Oh, I'm different." And that's when I started to grapple with that idea.

Awo - Okay. This actually brings us to our next session, which is about your Korean American identity, and the question is: How often do you visit Korea and what kind of thing do you do while you are there?

Sharon - So, this is actually a relevant question for me because I've been going to Korea for the past two years, every summer. And it's not something that I'm certain of being able to do going forward, but I do want to acknowledge the fact that they were experiences that I had and while I was in Korea. The first time that I went, the reason was for just like a graduation present, and I think that because I just graduated from high school two years ago but like

I think that in my mind I didn't even think twice about where to go if my dad were to send me somewhere just to have a trip. And, I don't know, I think just in my mind I had an innate desire to go to Korea. Not just the fact that I had family there, but I was just... I mean, it is where people from my home country are, I think that just that aspect of it really intrigued me and when my dad said, "Oh, you want to go to Korea over the summer," I just didn't even hesitate and I was like, "Of course!" So that was the reason why I was there, and then this summer when I went it was more so [because] I wanted to go to Korea but I wanted to have a legitimate reason because I can't just keep going for just leisure, especially as a student now. I have to be more productive with my time. I can't just like... Like in Korean we say like, lululala, it's like just like, just without any thought of what to do for your academic career and just playing. So, the reason why I went last year was for an internship. I was trying to secure an internship position there. And, I mean, that's a story for another time. If we have time for that, then we can go into that later. But, some of the things that I would do are—I mean, I'm a very Christian individual—so I remember going to a lot of church events and that was the way that I was able to socialize with other people who were my age. And a lot of the time, if I wasn't doing that, I would just be hanging out with my family at home. And I have like three different cousins that I lived with and they're all much younger than me. So, but yeah, those are the things that I remember from that experience.

Awo - That's great. Also, you have lived in a Korean community in Tennessee. So, how is it living in Tennessee?

Sharon - That I've lived in a Korean what?

Awo - Oh, so you have lived in a Korean community in Tennessee, right? Have you lived in a...

Sharon - Common?

Awo - Community. Community.

Sharon - Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Awo - Oh, you have lived in a Korean community in Tennessee. So how is it living in that community?

Sharon - Okay, so obviously if you've lived in Nashville or anyone who knows about Nashville, it's a growing city so there's more and more people coming, but I would say that at least like 10 years ago or 15 or so—and even now, honestly—there's not many Asians, period. And there's even less Koreans. And I remember growing up and being really, like one of my biggest wishes was to go to school in Korea. And I think it's because I like

implicitly thought about, “Oh, like what would it be like to go to a school where everyone looks the same or similar to me?” And it was because if there were a reasonable number of Korean people—although there's not really like a set number of what's reasonable or not—but just more people, then I would not have as much of a desire to be in a place where there's more people that are like me, but because there weren't so many I think that was something that came with that. I just remember being a little bit sad about the fact that my Korean community was not stemming from anywhere outside of my family. So, my family was the only Korean community that felt like it allowed me to at least have some of my Korean identity and outside of that maybe like five other people at my church. But yeah, my Korean community wasn't that big, but I do remember that was influential in me at least retaining a lot of that identity aspect of me.

Awo - Yes, so you have mentioned that your Korean community was mostly your family and some people from your church. So when you go back to Korea, how's your experience living in Korea and in America? Can you compare both of them to me?

Sharon - I think that's a good question. For me, I feel like they're somewhat different but also not as different and I know that's kind of an expected answer but at least in terms of culture and things that people expect in interpersonal relationships. For example, obviously taking off shoes before you come into the house or any other house. And then just reusing bags, or reusing cans or things like that – that is kind of common to a lot of other Asian cultures. But those kinds of things, like the things that are kind of unspoken but they're just gestures that we carry along within our family culture, I think can be extended to the culture of Koreans within the actual country. But I think that in the aspects that they're different. I think that definitely in Korea, because they're constantly surrounded by other Koreans who think in the same way, it pushes a specific way to think, and it's even more stronger than if it was in America, because in America, I think we tend to appreciate diversity, and appreciate just difference in thought, and difference of ideas. And I feel like, definitely my parents were still strict growing up, but I think that there were some things that they were more relaxed about. For example, like my weight – I mean, I wasn't stereotypically skinny by Korean standards. When we look at American standards I was pretty normal – average. But if I was in Korea right now, if I told someone my weight people would be like, “Oh, you're a little overweight.” They wouldn't outright say it, but that's the current beauty standard. But my parents, I don't really remember a time when they're like, “Don't eat this, don't eat that, you're going to gain weight, make sure to exercise.” Maybe bits and pieces of that might come out when they're like, “Oh, don't eat too much.” You know, just like very, very rare occasions, but whenever that would happen I think that at that point I was old enough to kind of “talk back” to my parents and be like, “That's not right, I don't think you should be telling me this.” So, in that way, I feel as if there

are some things, for sure, that my parents and those around me are less intense in their views about some things that I view as a more positive change but obviously it's different across different cultures.

Awo - Yeah, so basically you say that Korean ideology and American ideology are pretty different from each other. So based on that, you have lived in America, and you have lived in Korea. And you have experienced both cultures, American culture, and Korean culture. Do you ever feel like an outsider in both cultures or you just... Yeah, can you elaborate a little bit more about that?

Sharon - Yeah, for sure. Definitely, yes, I did. When I was growing up, I know I definitely felt like an outsider in America because of the fact that I just looked different and I spoke different. And even though I was—One of the things that I appreciate about my identity is that I'm pretty good at adapting to different situations. So, I think that I was able to kind of fit the mold of what the best way that I could to be an American. And so if I perceived my friends doing something then I would copy them. I think I was very scared to kind of have my own identity or express parts of my Korean culture because I know that that would mean that I would be separated from the rest of my friends. And I remember when I was five, I probably might have told you this—specifically to you, Awo—but I'll just say it again. When I was five, I remember I was driving in the passenger seat with my mom driving and I was telling her it would be really nice to go to heaven, and she was like, “Why are you saying that all of a sudden?” And I was like, “Because in heaven you can get whatever you want, and I just imagine telling the angels while I'm looking at the mirror and telling them to give me blonde hair and blue eyes.” I genuinely—now, looking back, obviously, it's kind of a sad thing to think about—but I just remember at that time, that was my biggest wish. Like, if someone were to be like, “What do you wish for?” That was my wish, but I obviously wouldn't tell everyone because I knew that there is some sort of aspect of shame tied with like, “Oh, I don't want to be something that I am right now.” And so definitely that was... Oh, and I have another story actually that ties into that question. When I was in fourth grade, actually that was my first year living away from my parents and I lived, like I said, for five years I lived in Boston and I was living with a pastor's family. But when I was in fourth grade I had a really good group of friends but I remember at some point there was this one girl who would laugh at me a lot of the time and I think she told that it was because I was a little bit different, like she liked my reaction if she would laugh at me or she would pretend that she's mad at me [and] then I would take things in a very serious way and I'd be like, “Oh, why are you mad at me?” And it was just kind of something that she would joke around with, and I remember she would do that often. And I remember one time when we were outside playing in the snow—and I grew up in Nashville so I don't really know much about the snow and what you're supposed to do to get ready for the snow and how you play in the snow and things like that—but I knew that I was a little bit different, obviously having come from Nashville, but I

never processed in my mind that, “Oh, I'm different because I'm Korean. I'm different because I'm Asian.” I think that thought wasn't in a significant way, up until that point when she was pretending like she was mad at me again. And we were going back inside and we were waiting, like I was so paranoid and I was like, “Why is she mad at me? I really don't think that I did anything wrong – what am I doing that's different?” I think in my mind, even in that statement, I perceived the difference to be bad even though it's not, but I was trying to think, “What was I doing that was different?” I realized that I couldn't think of anything and the only difference that I could find was that I was Asian, and so I told her... I was like, “Is it because I'm Asian that you're mad at me,” and she was like, “No, of course not,” and they started laughing and I just remember that as a core memory in my mind. I was like, “Oh, okay.” Even if they say that they're not mad at me because of that, it was the first time I processed that could be a reason where they could be treating me a little bit differently. Ever since that point—I mean, it wasn't drastic—but I was slowly becoming more self-aware and feeling like an outsider, and also... Sorry that this is a really long response, but in Korea, I've also felt like an outsider because at least as of last year I didn't really feel as much of an outsider because I've already been there a year before when I was like a little bit more developed in my mind, but two years ago when it was almost my first time where I'm going by myself. So, I just remember trying... just being different from them too, and not really knowing what to call myself when they would be like, “Oh, where are you from? What's your name?” And things like that. Like, “Introduce yourself.” An automatic thing that I would say is, “Oh, I'm Sharon. I'm from America.” And they would all be like, “Oh, what? That's crazy!” Like they actually had a positive like response to that and they would be like, I mean, some people would also—not in that public setting, but just on one-on-one conversations—they would be telling me, “Oh yeah, you're definitely different from a lot of the people here in terms of just how bright you are, and bright in terms of how smiley you are and how you're able to express certain opinions when they're not usually accepted.” So I think that was definitely a core experience also in terms of me developing my comfortability with my identity, because I was an outsider but they treated me as a special outsider, as someone who was a guest and someone that they wanted to learn more about. So yeah, and it wasn't as hard for me because I'm pretty fluent in Korean. I think it would have been harder if I was not.

Awo - So this actually went to my next question and is about you speaking Korean. So I know you do speak Korean and also I have read an article that mentioned that among individuals of Korean ethnicity in the US, those that identify as Korean speak Korean the strongest, whereas Korean Americans, or rather those who identify as Korean Americans, tend to say their English skills are stronger. What are your thoughts on this statement?

Sharon - I think it's almost obvious to me. To other people, maybe when they read that kind of article, they might be a little surprised, but for me, because it was my personal experience. I do

I think that most Korean Americans that I've run into, including myself, when asked the question, "What language do you feel more comfortable speaking in?" Most of the time we would say English. Pretty much like 99% of the time. And I just remember that it changed for me, at least. I do think that it could have been represented about the people's childhoods growing up, too. But when we were younger, I think since we're not being influenced as much by American culture because we're not going to school. So when we're in the house and we're just growing up and with the care of our parents and our family. Family and family friends and things like that. We're kind of the only thing that we need to speak as Korean. And that was my first language and a lot of other Korean Americans' first language. Depending on whether their parents... It really depends on... Like some parents I know, even my cousin, or an uncle, they don't want to speak in Korean to their kids because they wanted to kind of make their adjustment to America a lot easier. But some parents, like my parents, or like the pastor that I lived with for five years, they were very, very passionate about making sure that I learned Korean as a Korean individual, even though I'm living in America. So when I was younger, I spoke only Korean, which is why I spoke in Korean at preschool. But generally, that was more comfortable to me. And it's kind of hard for me to imagine. Because right now, English is so much easier for me. I can still speak comfortably and think comfortably in Korean. But if I could choose, I would obviously choose English. It almost makes me question myself, how could I have had a time where Korean was more comfortable for me? So sometimes I wish I could go back to that time and just retain that and not learn us. I mean, actually, no, I'm thankful for where I am right now. But for sure, I think that that was definitely part of my childhood growing up.

Awo - Yeah, let's tie it back to the "Korean identity", speaking our native language kind of affects the way that we connect to our own heritage and society. Do you know about times in elementary school, middle school, or high school that have shaped you towards accepting American things versus accepting Korean things or rejecting one or the other?

Sharon - I think that I kind of touched on a lot of aspects of that question already, but if I were to kind of reiterated or kind of say something a little bit different, I would think that like I said when I was younger, I didn't really process things like, "This is American, this is Korean," or "This is what I grew up with, this is different." I think it was just more so like, "This is different from what I'm used to," but I didn't really know the reason why it was different. I guess I might have been inclined to accept more aspects of American identity when everyone... It's just throughout school, I feel when everyone was doing a certain thing or when everyone would be listening to a type of music, like even if people are not explicitly saying, "This is American identity, this is American culture, like this is why I'm doing that." I think that just in the unspoken things, the nature of how people are, the things that we listen to, the things that we eat, the things that we talk about – all of those things are so tied to Korean, or sorry, to culture in general. And I think that in those ways for me to say things, and for me to be at

school, I think, my identity was very much shifted, or pushed into the more definite American as best as I could. Obviously they were parts that were drawn out as I was a Korean but I would try my best to kind of push that into the mold even more. Yeah I am, and then I think the shift started to happen when I was in high school, even up until middle school, I think I just remember like not really liking the fact that I was Korean but then, once I go to the high school and that's when like people start to celebrate their identity more like within a national fair and like dressing up and just all of these things actually fighting people that were also Korean too. I think I started to actually want to be different sometimes because once we grow up, I think we start to understand the concept of oh this is different. This is the same and I want to be a little bit set apart from the crowd because I think when we were younger we want to fit in with them and we're older we're like we want to be unique so I think that through high school for sure like I was like oh this is what makes me different I might as well like emphasize that more, and I think one of the key things that pushed me to like slowly become more accepting of my create identity. What is the use of the word white washed like I recently talked about this in my Crino history class? I am taking creamer history class, but like just the concept of the word white washed it's implying that there's some thing that we need to wash something that we need to like hide or cover up with something else and obviously in the situation you would be like I need to cover up my current identity with this white culture and I think that when someone ability use a negative way like to to show that like why are you acting it in? Oh me white washed oh like you don't know anything about your current identity you try to hide your create identity and you are no different from any of these white girls that are walking down the hallway and there's nothing wrong with being similar to them but it's just they wanted to show that you should be different because you look different. Of course everything you do and everything you think should be different but Amber. Me grappling with this specific term in the beginning it was more so why do I need to feel that's wrong because it's kind of in me because all I see is because I grew up in a very predominantly white community so all I see is that so that's the only influence I get so obviously I'm going to adopt her the things that they're doing oh I like just like if I was if I was a white individual or living in Korea, I would obviously like adopt some of the ways that they do things like their makeup style or their clothing style and things that cause that's what's available and so I think that I was a little bit mad with the term white white washed because I was like what do you expect me to do? What am I? Actually, one of my African-American friends from high school was one of my best friends but she will tell me like you don't like I feel like you're kind of white wash and I was like well. What what do you expect me to do like she's like I was like well there's not like she like the clothes that you wear a very white like you don't like what a lot of white girls wear and it just was used in such a negative way and to me and my eyes like that was what was seen as like beautiful like I wanted to have that style and for her to not be accepting of that and being like oh like and so I was like is there like an Asian style that like is out there that I should be wearing like I don't really know if there's that predominant of a culture within a live event to know what that even looks like so like

is a little frustrated with that word but then eventually I was more so like like more excepting of my identity and like just like OK this is how I grew up in like all the aspects of who I am right now whether it's more American whether it's more Korean or whatever it's in between I'm like I'm still like that still be like I need to fit into a certain mold and like someone saying that I'm white wash light it's just negative if in both ways they're like putting down on people who are not embracing their Asian identity or like an open way and they're also putting down on those that except they're because they're pushing a term called white washed so yeah, I think that that was a very big part of my process.

Awo - Let's jump into the next session of the interview. So you mentioned a little about your faith life before and you growing up in a Korean American church. Can you tell me a little about your experience growing up there for 5 years?

Sharon - Oh like while I was in Boston?

Awo - Yes, while you were living 5 years away from your parents. The pastor's family.

Sharon - I'm gonna try to make it sure is possible because it is a very very compact story, but I think that the reason why I was sent to live with a pastor supposed to staying with my parents, were because my parents as immigrants like they have a small business in terms of like having a cleaners and basically what they do is like they alter buy clothes like and then they like clean the clothes and they return it and like this kind of thing what is something that occupy an a lot of time and the resources and they didn't have as much to give to me in terms of like oh this is how you do your homework and let alone like they did grow up in a Korean education system so they don't really know how to do much of what I'm doing in school so like at least they would know but it's different but anyways, so like then, not being able to provide for me in a educational way was one of the biggest reasons and another reason was just for a spiritual aspect where because my pastor's family were actually on they were like hosting a lot of international Koreans within their house so it was like some thing that wasn't just something that me and my brother because my brother did it with me but as to what I do but it was like something that was a common culture common for their family to take it like other students so definitely like just within that like there is like it was for spiritual and educational training so you could take that how are you well but I am that was yeah that was just a reason why, was there anything else you want me to say about that experience?

Awo - No, have you run into a conflict or how have you ever faced any conflict in the Korean church in those past five years?

Sharon - What do you mean by conflict?

Awo -What I mean by conflict, since you have been living away from your parents for those past 5 years, have you ever felt like the way they are treating you at the church or the way you have lived in that church is different from the way your parents will actually raise you back home?

Sharon - Yeah, thank you for clarifying clarifying by the way, but I feel as if it's almost obvious like how different my my identity would be if I didn't have the experience like obviously like I'm pretty sure you took interest I called you taking it right now, but like there's like the nature versus nurture debate, where it's like how much your identity is formed by just biological reasons, or

how much of it is formed by like environmental reasons, and I feel as if this was something that is very influential and environmentally and upon my identity and I'm definitely like just in every single way cause it was just a very like extreme environment like they would like they would definitely physically punish me if I did any sort of thing that was near wrong in their standard, so, for example, if I ran up the stairs when they told me specifically, not to they would you know like punish me and I was kind of forced to like pray for an hour in my room, and I would come out, and then they would be like I don't have to go to the pastors wife, which and like, and she would have to like confirm whether we were forgiven by God or not I mean, it wasn't like. Maybe my memory is a little bit construed after having come back, but I think that it was definitely a

little trippy like I don't like like back then I didn't really think much of it because that was the only thing I knew but like coming back I'm like that's definitely very very different from the as of the religious aspect except that's definitely very very different from what I've been told right now about what God is like and I mean I guess just in the aspect of like how God is a good God that I believe is very forgiving and not condemning and they definitely taught otherwise so I think that in that way I was very loved deprived and arm like and I don't think that's representative of Korean culture. I think that was just their specific way of raising kids because my parents remember like cause cringe like I feel like this physical punishment is kind of like a part of critical try to remember you shared a specific story about your past involving physical punishment but like it's like within like the school system of Korea like a long time ago like there was like you know like feeding involved, but not like actually like severe feeding, but it was just like you know like spanking like things like that. Oh no, there's none of that angry anymore but as far as I know, but homes like there's still the aspect of oh, you should discipline your child, but I remember like specifically if my parents were to discipline me, it was done with so much love that you could see you like even as a child like you could see how much they love you through that and like they would cry and they would be like I'm only doing this to you, so obviously like there's a lot of questionable things that come with discipline but because you have to do it the right way, but I could tell that if it was ever acceptable that my parents were doing it out of love as opposed to in Boston it was more so just like straight up just punishment and there's no sense of love in my personal opinion so that definitely shaped a lot of my identity and that was definitely a lot of conflict in my understanding of God and my understanding of family and people that around me.

Awo - so, as you experienced many positives on your parents side of the family when you grew up with them, and also negative things when growing up in the Korean American church in Boston, how has this shaped your personal faith? Has that drifted you away from God mostly when you were living there for the past 5 years or did it get you closer because it was more strict on you?

Sharon - I think that's a really good question and I think that definitely like I did have Cassidy for who God was and I wanted to know like I want to see kill whatever that meant like when I was younger even before I went to Boston but like once I went to Boston I think that that like I definitely learned a lot about like in terms of like her knowledge about like what the Bible might say, and like just with just the basic things, but actually don't not the basic things like just like the details of the old testament that the average person would not know because I would be like reading the Bible, every single day memorizing the Bible every single day, like writing the Bible, and create an English, and I think that definitely like it helped me in terms of just knowledge, but in terms of the actual faith itself I did have I grew a lot in terms of like it being because it was such a strict environment. It forced me to kind of think of religion in a strict way, in a very intense way so like definitely like even coming back I can sense that like it has an effect on how important faith is to me because of how that experience was so intense and on I think that I could I guess it's a positive thing that comes out of it but also just like in terms of like just the negative things, they were teaching me that, but if I were to die right now, then I would go to hell and that if I were to say on that I wanted to go to heaven or the I thought I was gonna go to heaven after I die, which is the essence of like the fundamental aspect of Christianity is that if you believe in Jesus Christ as your savior, and Lord, he is like you are safe, and that means that you will go to heaven, but that fundamental like John 3:16 is the most popular verse in the Bible and that was mistakenly type in a different way so I thought it was really noteworthy that they taught so much about Christianity but they got the essence of Christianity wrong and so in that sense like I definitely feel like there was a lot of struggle coming back from that experience on and trying to grapple with like what is the truth like what really is my faith and what is God like and like just having a lot of like having to change a lot of the misunderstandings about who God was that was really tough and it still is really tough but yeah I think that was a lot of conflict.

Awo - Ok, that's good. I think that's all I have for you. Thank you so much for your time and I will keep in touch regarding the post-interview process and I hope you enjoy the rest of your weekend.

Sharon - Thank you so much for being such a good listener and just allowing me to kind of process through my Korean Identity

Awo -You are welcomed, thank you.