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Prof. Espiritu

Interview Transcription

DB: First of all, thank you for taking the time out of your day to go ahead and do this interview. The first question I wanted to kind of ask you is just to get to know more about you and to get to know uh, kind of get a sense of your kind of background and like your community. So go ahead and just tell me some initial background things about yourself.

AH: So I'm originally from the Bay Area. Um, I grew up there and didn't want to know what I wanted to do after college. So just kind of fell into substitute teaching, which led to, you know, teaching high school, uh... did that for about 10 years and for the better part of that time I was teaching the Oakland Unified School District. I burnt out and um — but still really wanted to — I liked working with students and wanted to kind of push myself to-to-to do it at a higher level um so I um actually applied for the Latin American Studies Masters program at UCSD and got in. But I — after teaching I took a break and moved to central America and my acceptance letter didn't show on time. So I ended up going to UCLA um... and um got a degree in — a masters in Latin American studies. Kind of just sampled all kinds of different disciplines and um ended up pursuing a PhD in geography at Florida International in Miami. So the combination of experiences between those two different programs brought me to focus on the war on drugs in Colombia. Uhh and take kind of like a political ecology approach to it. I wanted to position myself as, you know, a U.S. citizen whose government was putting pressure on Colombia and financing different aspects of the war on drugs in Colombia. My original thesis project for my masters program was interviewing displaced Colombian peasants in a major Colombian city about their experiences of violence. And so I wanted to kind of look into one of the factors that caused the massive displacement of peasants in Colombia. At the time it had the second largest population of internally displaced migrants in the world. So that's why I kind of switched to a focus on the U.S. war on drugs and leveraging my citizenship in that way 'cause I knew I could talk to people at the U.S. Embassy, and different armed forces, and that I can also have access to all this kind of, you know, Colombian drug policy officials and I eventually interviewed farmers — peasants in the Colombian countryside in the Pacific region of Colombia. Um so, I graduated, did the dissertation, blah, blah, blah. And end up in San Diego because my wife teaches at UCSD, or she doesn't teach so much at UCSD but she's a professor at UCSD of Public Health. And so I actually got involved with Allies because I was trying to — well one: I was encouraged to do so, and in second place I was also thinking, "I'm here I need to start kind of reframing what I'm doing," and, you know. And I have a kind

of an activist mentality but I'm not like a super activist you know? So I was figuring that through doing that, through teaching, and working with students was a good route. I ended up teaching at San Diego State for a semester — Professor Kate Swanson. And she's one of the main folks that's involved with the Allies. So especially on the San Diego State side of it, I think she's read every single letter and there's like now almost 2,000 right? So I taught her class and she kept saying, "Alex you should get involved" and I was like "okay". So when I had some time I started attending their meetings and their meetings are different from the Monday or Sunday night meetings that happen. Their meetings are, you know, specifically with students who are doing the transcription work. We even had a guest speaker, someone who was recently released, come in and talk to us for a couple hours. So I got to see kind of the inner workings, 'cause you know the letters are stored in the San Diego State library and what not — got involved in those conversations and eventually transitioned to the Monday night conversations which is the people, you know, putting checks in envelopes, and brainstorming, um what — mission statements, and how the website's gonna look. And most recently, being more explicit about the kind of activist intentions of the organization. So the organization has been renamed like a few different times in the short time I've been involved, right, and so that's all a reflection of that work, right? That's how I got involved and I thought it was actually a kind of a cool way 'cause I keep this — there's kind of like a constant theme in my work which are: violence, displacement, you know, imperialism and the War on Drugs. So this felt like a way to kind of tie all those things together. Even though, you know, there's not — you're not going to see a whole lot of Colombians migrating or ending up at the Otay Mesa Detention Center because of that. But nonetheless like — and, you know, my family's Salvadorian — my dad's side of my family is Salvadorian too so you got kind of that history and wanna connect to those stories as well.

DB: Wow well that's, you know — thanks for giving me a little bit of your background. That's awesome to see. It seems like you've done a lot of work that, you know, fits in really well with the kind of work that, you know, obviously Allies to End Detention is doing and that we're trying to get a sense for through this project so that's awesome. And you mentioned that you got involved with Allies to End Detention, you start working, you know — the name changed a little bit and that's reflective of the kind of work you guys are doing, that you guys are, you know, kind of trying to go along — you guys are constantly moving, constantly evolving um...

AH: Yeah, yeah. And I've been kind of peripheral to those conversations to be completely honest 'cause (*indistinguishable stuttering*), 'cause I'm — I'll get more involved when the quarter eases up or when there's break and stuff happening. And

um, so I wanna like stay engaged in the conversations but I don't always feel um — I'm always kind of like hesitant to state an opinion or a strong opinion because there's people that are there *all* the time that are constantly working on this stuff and I'm just kind of like floating in and out. So I don't wanna like, you know, at times I do have strong opinions but I'm not — I'm not doing — I'm not there all the time doing that work so um I just kinda — I just wanna stay tuned in as much as possible.

DB: Yeah I actually understand how you feel about that 'cause that's — especially for me, you know, being a — being a student, you know, just sitting in on a lot of these meetings, a lot of us feel, kind of like, we *want* to help but it's kind of like...we don't know *how* we can help 'cause there's not — especially right now, which is like the biggest issue. That, you know, we're dealing with which is the, you know, COVID pandemic, just making things a lot more difficult so yeah, I know I totally understand that. I mean, have you felt that like this pandemic has like kind of affected the way that you've been able to kind of engage in the conversation at all or?

AH: I mean I mostly just been engaging through uh — through the slack feed, and going back and forth and then having, you know, looping people into my — the classes that I'm teaching. There's three different — Destina, and I don't know if you've met Jen or umm... and Jess are gonna talk to my class in a couple weeks, right? Umm and as you're talking about this project, like the main way I'm thinking I can contribute is to recruit students to do the kind of work that I'm just not finding the time to do. And I think that a lot of students would be really interested in it. The only thing is it's a little bit daunting because it involves mapping and geography which is not even a, you know — does not even exist as a major at UCSD. So finding people that are interested in that kind of work would be kind of a challenge. But once I describe it to people — like I'm having my — I'm teaching U.S-Mexico Border and Comparative Perspective this quarter I'm having all my students make story maps. It's a really powerful tool. So I'm kind of teaching some students, I'm hoping at some point to recruit some of those students to work on these kind of side projects that I have going.

DB: Cool. Yeah I've actually um — I've taken a class similar where I've done like a similar thing where we made like a sound map. It was like an Ethnic Studies class about like sound and race. And at first, you know, it was kind of confusing but at the end of the quarter I actually thought it was like a really cool project. We actually got to make a Google Maps thing, like, it was really interactive — yeah, it was really cool. Um but yeah, so you talked about getting — your part in getting students to kind of join the cause and kind of, you know, enlisting people that are willing and able to contribute

whatever they can, um and so you said that you're gonna have the guest speakers in your class?

AH: Yeah, yeah. I mean I'm having them, I'm having border patrol, I'm having Border Angels. So I'm trying to get like a spectrum of people that we would have talked to in person but now we're just going to talk to, you know, online.

DB: Yeah, okay. And hmm let's see so... um, I'm kind of interested in knowing more about like — if you know, about the Otay Mesa Detention Center 'cause, I mean we've talked about it, but I kind of wanted to get another kind of like perspective about what goes on and like the kind of things like — the kinds of criticisms that are behind it.

AH: Yeah, I mean um, unfortunately I've never — there's people that would be a lot better at talking about this, you know, that have actually been there. I've been invited a few times. I always get these invitations at like Sunday morning when I'm not even awake yet. "Hey can you come translate? So and so needs help," or whatever, so there's this one professor, or former professor, at San Diego State that's kind of like gone rogue and she uh — she goes and like — she's like very emotionally invested so she has all these different, uh, folks that she's, you know, made relationships with and, um, and she asks for help sometimes 'cause she doesn't speak Spanish. She tries to get people to go down and — so I've never actually been. So I don't wanna — first I wanna be clear about that. Um, you know, I don't have any great insights as to what's happening there besides, you know, what I've been reading in the news and what I've been seeing in my slack thread. I know how *I'm* framing it in my class, which is that um that it's all part of — there's all these different ways that um people are treated to discourage them from being here. And so, I feel like — this just — what's happening now just makes that easier, right? And so the kind of um — connecting to the different projects I was talking about, uh, mapping projects, uh, I see that primarily as isolating them, mistreating them, and removing them at any point without notice to make communication more difficult. So I see this as kind of like I've been framing it in — and I'm also teaching Life, Death, and the Human so I've been framing this as like necropolitics. As the — you know, if you think about who's lead in — who's led in this country and-and how that's managed, that's kind of a form of biopolitics right? Like, the regulation of life to kind of like maximize the society and the quality of life, at least that's how it's framed that's not how I'm saying what it does. Whereas necropolitics, I'm kind of looking at *this* is necropolitics because you're intentionally allowing people to die and not doing anything about it. Um because — simply because you don't want them. You don't want them in your country and you feel like it's somebody else's responsibility. All of that of course masks the histories of imperialism and, you know, unequal economic

— socioeconomic relations that exist between the U.S. and a lot of these countries that are, you know— people are fleeing from. So I go into that a lot as well.

DB: Yeah that's what I was just thinking um, that I know that the center is privately owned or privately run and so yeah, like you said, on top of all of that they're capitalizing from, you know, from this mistreatment of these individuals and from this kind of continuance of necropolitics as you're saying. But yeah, thank you, I mean that's — yeah that's actually really really interesting and really insightful I find that whole idea of necropolitics really interesting. I was actually — I was actually about to take that class but it actually like didn't with my schedule very well 'cause I was taking another class but yeah, so that would have been interesting to take. And so I've heard — I've actually been trying to keep up to, uh, keep up-to-date with like, uh, what's been going on in terms of individuals who are detained, uh, who are like vulnerable to the COVID pandemic and so I've heard that a lot of the um, a lot of the work that Allies to End Detention has been doing is: 1) to #FreeThemAll. That's the initial — that's the primary campaign that we've been dealing with but obviously there's been a lot of obstacles with that in terms of the logistical kind of things — actually freeing everybody who's detained in there. Like where are we gonna be able to house them, you know? How are we gonna get them resources? You know, all that kind of stuff is just — you know, it's ten times harder right now when we can't do it in person and we can't meet in person. So on top of that, well, we've been doing the #FreeThemAll and then I know that they've also been lobbying and talking to officials like Kamala Harris and someone else — I forgot who. But they've been contacting their offices a lot and kind of demanding an investigation because a lot of the kind of criticisms that have been coming, not only from outside of the center, but from inside of the center have been completely ignored. There's actually an Instagram page that deals with a lot of local San Diego — they post like a lot of pop culture things and kind of like historical things about San Diego but they also — lately they've been posting a lot of updates about the Otay Mesa Detention Center. And they actually — I actually saw that yesterday they said that it was reported that somebody died. That there's actually been — that there was finally, I hate to say finally but, you know, I'm sure that we all kind of saw it coming, um, that someone passed away. And so I'm kind of interested in talking about like what are your — do you have any ideas of ways that this problem could kind of be fixed or do you have any, you know, ideas or solutions to any of these problems?

AH: I mean yeah yeah immediate solution I mean the first part of your explanation you know I often what happens when people do find somewhere to go and they don't have a family to go to is to get a sponsor right and so how does that happen am I at the way I've been seeing happening just as kind of apps can be really random sometimes wear

and it's often it's often the same way that families it works like a kind of like a family thing too 'cause you'll have you know there's a like a retired professor at San Diego State that has taken in you know a few people and basically it's kind of like word of mouth. "You should talk to so and so" right? And sometimes those connections are based on... uh, seems like a lot of the them are faith based — like, you know, belong to the same kind of religious groups or of the same kind of beliefs, right? And so it seems to me really just kind of random how that plays out and not, you know, systematized at all. It's very much, like, a reflection of, um, the neoliberal order where everything has just become — people are just kind of on their own and everything's kind of privatized, right? Um so whether or not someone could find somebody that's willing to sponsor them... uh, it's also just kind of a reflection of the contacts that they've made... and that's why these letters come into play, right? This is your attempt at reaching to reaching out to someone on the other side and putting together a compelling narrative that moves someone enough to want to get to know you and then you're hoping that that person on the other side has enough power to do anything about it, right? So in terms of your last question, I never look at it as like — I'm always such a pessimist about this kind of stuff that I don't see a solution. Um I...I feel like in order for a simple solution to work there has to be so much education about what these people have been through and what it has to do with the United States and... and just a whole revamping of our education system. Right? So that it's not just like in an ethnic studies course where this information is getting transmitted to everyone it's more, kind of... you know, common knowledge, right? So I feel like in that respect, when I wonder if I'm doing enough I feel like at least I'm contributing some of that.

DB: Yeah, and do you feel like — do you feel like what's going on right now in the Otay Mesa Detention Center is like umm... do you feel that it's something new or do you feel like it's kind of Reflection of another part of the... I guess just like the history of the United States? Is it something that —

AH: Oh it's definitely a part of the history, you know? I mean, uh in my — in the Border and Comparative Perspective class... you know, the early 1900s they were forcing Mexicans crossing into the United States to take gasoline baths, right? Um, to make sure they didn't have — I think it was lice. And so this kind of like — there's a different version of this every so often, you know? That version is kind of a reflection of the Eugenics movement in the early 1900s. There's some version of this happening always is — in my opinion. And so I think it's helpful to look at it not as an isolated incident, but a historical continuity and a geographical continuity because this is just one detention center. By this point I think there's probably at least a thousand more... right? Um that-that were either constructed to be detention centers or buildings that were

converted into detention centers. Like county jails, right? Or-or schools that have been closed down or whatever. They're not — that are proliferating because of the kind of sociopolitical climate we're in.

DB: No, yeah. Yeah, I mean I would definitely agree with that. There's been — in the sense that um when you say that this is — that you feel like this is always happening. Yeah I-I definitely agree with that. I just feel like the craziest part about this is that... like... yeah. Like that there's so many of these detention centers now that house so many of these people in such bad conditions and that... you know, it's not like people don't know about it but it's — it's just that... I don't know. Like you said earlier, it's — I think it's a lot of the — the biggest problems that people see it — it may not even be an individualistic thing that like — just, like, certain people see — don't see it as a problem but I feel like a lot of people have just been kind of conditioned into thinking that it's not their problem.

AH: Yeah and that's accomplished by dehumanizing the folks that are there. Right? And so — and so all the kind of discourses about, you know, “bad hombres” and drugs and rapists and all that is part of that, right? And it doesn't, its — kind of further building upon the point you're making like, it's not just the detention center, right? It's also when someone gets released or anything like I was — for instance I was in D.C. — I forget, maybe it was 2 years ago. And I had two experiences that kind of, um, that speak to this. Right? So one was as soon as I got in a Uber Lyft from the — or a Uber ride from the airport and it was a East African guy who had been in detention. He had been in actually the Otay Mesa facility. And so um so he ends up, you know he has family in D.C. so he ends up in D.C., and he had this like... he had this really positive experience. Not in terms of how he was treated, but in terms of forming community with the other people he was in detention with. And he told me his WhatsApp and he was still friends — he learned Spanish and he has all his, like, Salvadorean homies now and — it was crazy, right? And then I'm leaving D.C. and there's a girl who's clearly from Latin America and I'm guessing that she's from Central America or Southern Mexico and she has severe down syndrome. And she has no idea where to go and she asks me to use my phone. And so I was like, you know— and her Spanish wasn't that good so I'm thinking this is like her second language. But I lend her my phone and she doesn't even know who she's calling. She's like — she called — I look at my phone and she called Canada. Right? And she — in her hand she had her ICE paperwork. So they drop off this girl with — they put this girl on a plane and she ends up in D.C. and... and like doesn't know like... she could — anything could've happened to her. Right? And then, you know, me and these other people kind of banded together and walked her and found her family in another part of the airport but that's just — to me that speaks also to

that situation which is they just don't give a damn. "It's someone else's — it's someone else's responsibility, it's not ours. You know? And they're not part of our community so... screw 'em."

DB: Yeah... I think that also plays a part in the United States' um... I mean it's been seen throughout its history um, this kind of nation building project of, you know, kind of getting everybody on the same — in the same mindset. You know? Even people who may fall into those same categories that um, you know, that are marginalized and oppressed in the same way that these people are. Um... so yeah, yeah, that's really interesting those experiences that you mentioned. Thank you for that. And so, what do you think — what do you think still stands in the way of... of, you know, making progress against these kinds of things?

AH: Um... in terms of like — the goal of ending detention?

DB: Uhh yeah! Yeah.

AH: Well I think — I mean uh... I think a smart strategy that a lot of people are pursuing is linking it to mass incarceration in general. Um... I really appreciate uh... you know, former Ethnic Studies grad, Kelly Lytle Hernandez's work because she, um... you can see that connection on how unwanted undesirable populations are removed from U.S. society. Um... and so, I honestly don't see this slowing down at any point, if anything it's expanding because now they're starting to use some of the same tactics in Mexico and it just seems to keep moving South. Uh... kind of, immigration enforcement now starts well — even further south of Mexico, right? So... uh... I think what needs to happen is it needs to become uh... and it's always framed as a matter of national security. So it has to be disconnected from that discourse. It needs to be disconnected from the War on Drugs because these aren't narcos seeking asylum. I mean, in some cases they probably are, but these are people affected by that violence, right?

DB: Right... that is, in part, you know... the United States is indirectly and, at times, directly involved in as well right?

AH: Oh yeah it's a business. And catching (stammers) and prosecuting people and making seizures; all that's a business too, right? And it keeps the profit of all of that up, right? So I — yeah, from my point of view, as like my nerdy professor point of view the uh... the focus should be on um, you know... the academic focus should be on deconstructing those discourses. Um... on the ground, the people that are already

writing letters to Kamala Harris and everyone, they're already doing it. Like, I think that's as much as you can do right now. You know... people go and — I mean, in my class, people made the contrast between those folks that went over and were honking their horns outside of the detention facility a couple weeks ago were cited and meanwhile people congregating because they don't think the lockdown is fair, nothing happened. Right? So um... so there you have it. I feel like it's the mindset that should be the main focus.

DB: Right, right. Yeah well that's, you know... it's interesting that you bring up that comparison with the protests because that's been — me and my roommates and, you know, people that I've talked to, other students in my group we've been talking about it too and it's just... just crazy to see what people are concerned about in — during such a crazy historical moment.

AH: It's um- it's entitlement, right? It's like... and people think that uh.... You know, people are gonna have hard times being out of work, there's no doubt about that. But if you put that in the context of what, you know, being down and losing a job in somewhere else in the world looks like, there's no comparison. Right? It's like, "oh okay so you don't, you know... so you had to sell your Playstation, right? Like... you had to cut back on using AC, right?" There's no comparison. As far as I'm concerned.

DB: Nah, yeah, yeah I agree. Well it looks like for the most part we covered a lot of the topics of the questions that I had asked — that I had written down. Was there any final comments or anything, you know, you wanted to say? If not it's fine.

AH: No nothing in particular, like I said, like my — like I feel bad 'cause I've been telling everybody that my engagement isn't what I think it should be but... I'm looking forward at some point to... to getting students to look at the letters in a different way. And so I'm gonna talk to Professor Espiritu about that actually because I realize um... I feel like I'm almost kind of um, not wasting my time, but spinning my wheels — well I guess that is wasting my time — that students could do this — a lot of what I'm trying to do a lot better than I could. (Stammers) And so I feel like that's what I should be doing. And I'm looking forward to this quarter ending so I can get more involved again, um.... Yeah. I don't wanna — I can keep going — keep babbling for a while.

DB: Alright well yeah, you know, thank you for your time once again.