Q. I am Deb Ballam. Today is August 21, 2013, and as part of the Voices of Women Project at Ohio State, today I am interviewing Judy Wu, whose birthdate is?


Q. Good morning, Judy.

A. Good morning.

Q. It’s good to see you today. Could you describe the positions you held or roles you’ve played at Ohio State, in what units and over what time period?

A. I came to Ohio State in 1997, and I had interviewed for a position, an Assistant Professorship in the History Department. But I also got a post-doc at another university. So my first year here was as a Fellow. So from 1997 to 1998, I taught a couple of classes. I was finishing my dissertation. In 1998, I began my official position as the Assistant Professor in History. I was promoted to Associate Professor in 2004, I think, 2003-2004. I’m trying to remember what year I transitioned over to Women’s Studies. I decided I wanted to be in another department, a more intimate department, one that had more of a social justice mission. So I moved over to Women’s Studies. Now it’s Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies. And this fall I became a full professor in both of those departments. During my time here I’ve also been very involved with the Asian American Studies Program and I have served on and off as its Coordinator and Advocate Supporter. And Asian American Studies in the last several years has been part of a larger unit called DISCO – the Diversity and Identity Studies Collective at OSU. And this year I’m going
to take over as the Coordinator of mini-DISCO, which consists of Asian American Studies, American Indian Studies, Disability Studies, and Sexuality Studies. And the larger DISCO project also involves four other units; it involves African American and African Studies, Comparative Ethnic American Studies, Latino Studies, and Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies.

Q. Wow, I didn’t know it had grown that much. That’s fantastic. Can you talk a little bit about DISCO and what the overall goal of bringing everyone together is and how that fits into the social justice that you mentioned?

A. I know that other universities are concerned about forced consolidation, that as universities streamline and downsize, they are trying to cut staff and consolidate. The DISCO is not that. DISCO is much more of an organic creation by all of us who are involved, we call them the Identity Studies field, which I don’t like, because I don’t think we’re just studying identity. We’re studying social hierarchy and social injustice and trying to find ways to rectify those social inequalities. So I think that’s one of the reasons we decided to come together, to find ways that we can collaborate and support one another, especially for the four fields that I mentioned before. The mini-DISCO – we just haven’t found a good institutional home at OSU. I feel like Asian American Studies has always been sort of an orphan field: We get attached to departments or get attached to colleges, but we don’t really get full support and recognition. So DISCO was a way for us to band together, support one another – financially, institutionally – but then also because of our intellectual mission, there’s definitely differences between our various fields. But there’s ways we can see connections with the processes and different fields as well.

Q. And so you are going to be the Coordinator for the Mini DISCO?
Q. Okay, great. Can you talk about your family background and experiences that shaped you prior to coming to Ohio State?

A. I emigrated with my family from Taiwan in 1975. At the time I was six years old. My parents had both worked in health-related fields in Taiwan, but it’s a very common immigrant phenomenon to experience downward mobility when you come to the United States. I know there’s often an immigrant narrative that people move up, but I think when people have limited English skills, it’s much more common to move down. So my parents ran a restaurant for a while. They were part of a consortium of families that ran a Chinese restaurant. Then they branched out and opened up their own restaurant. It was an American restaurant that served Chinese food. And we had hamburgers and pancakes.

Q. And where was this?

A. This was in Spokane, Washington. We initially went to the San Francisco Bay area because my uncle lived there. Then we transitioned to Spokane because there was this economic opportunity to invest in a Chinese restaurant. And then after the restaurant business, they went into running a convenience store. Throughout that time it was very much family-based labor. I grew up helping to wait tables, helping to run the cashier. Like our holidays, Thanksgiving and Christmas, those are the days that people come to the convenience store because every other grocery store is closed. So they come there to get milk and butter. I spent a lot of my childhood in that environment, helping to run the family business. In Spokane, it’s almost like Columbus, Ohio. It’s a middle-America, test-market town, so I definitely encountered the experience of racial discrimination in those settings. There were certainly customers who were very friendly but there were also
others who complained about my parents’ accents, just standard kind of business stuff. But it definitely had a racial inflection because of who we were.

We were talking before about how even in working-class families, that there’s still an expectation that the children will have educational achievements. So my parents definitely emphasized that, with both my brother and myself, that even though we spent a lot of time working in these family businesses, they really wanted us to do well economically. They invested a lot in me in terms of my piano training. So I took piano lessons growing up, even though it was a big financial hardship for my family. It was something very important to them. I think those things helped contribute to my going to college. I went to Stanford University, and at the time there was a lot of financial aid. I think it’s really cut back since then, but it was less expensive for me to go to Stanford than it would have been for me to go to a public institution because there was just more financial aid available. I guess I became quickly involved in trying to advocate for ethnic studies and also ethnic student services. There was a racial discrimination incident in the African-American theme dorm. This is the dorm where anybody can decide they can go in and live there and learn about black history and culture. I wasn’t living there at the time, but there were some students on campus who disagreed with the idea of having a dorm like that. So they posted these flyers that were supposed to be caricatures of black people. This is also the time that Black Athena came out, questioning the roots of western civilization, saying that there is a possibility that western civilization actually began in Africa rather than in Europe.

Q. Now what year was this?
A. About ’87, when I went to college. But around that time there were all these debates about multiculturalism. What is considered a culturally literate person? Should it just be the great books, which have very much a European tradition? Should it be much more of a multicultural vision of education in our society? All these debates were happening at that time. And I think some of the students were reacting to that by denigrating the idea of having a black theme dorm. So I became involved with a group of students, and we came from various backgrounds – Asian-American, African-American, Chicano, American-Indian, white students – and we decided that we wanted to advocate for much more inclusive vision of the University. We wanted to make sure we had classes so we could learn about each other’s histories and cultures. We wanted to make sure there were student services, so that students from nontraditional backgrounds could come to Stanford and feel a sense of home. I was really spending a lot of my time in college just kind of hanging out in the couches of the Asian-American activities center. I think I became involved in those types of activities of my family background because I came from an immigrant family, because I experienced racism growing up, that it really resonated with me. Out of that protest, they hired the first Asian-American history professor at Sanford, and I was actually an undergraduate representative on that committee. We had both an Asian-American historian and an Asian American literary specialist. So I felt like that student movement really changed the University, and changed it in a very structural, institutional way. But it also changed us because we felt that we could make change, that even though we were undergraduates, we could have meetings, we could have petitions, we could really change this institution, that was much larger than we were. So that experience really shaped who I became intellectually and
professionally – becoming someone who specializes in U.S. history, looking at race relations, gender relations, social hierarchies. And I think that protest movement again is connected to my family experiences growing up.

Q. What again did your parents do when they were in Taiwan?
A. My mother was a nurse and my father, I guess, was a medical administrator.

Q. I never really thought about how immigrants do have to do a downward mobility.
A. My father had much better English skills. But my mother still has difficulty expressing herself in English. So it was unlikely for her to be able to take examinations and become a nurse again. And there were certainly advantages of being a business owner. There’s a lot of hard work, a lot of long hours. But then they controlled their own wages and their time.

Q. Why did they decide to immigrate?
A. I think, well, probably for educational reasons, but in Taiwan – like some of the other countries – there’s a mandatory military service requirement. So I think they were concerned about my brother, that he would have to go into the military.

Q. Okay, interesting. So I would guess then, this is off track, but this is interesting, that the children of the immigrants who suffered the downward mobility, probably shoot way up, because certainly that’s what’s happened with you.
A. There’s definitely this idea of Asian Americans being the model minority, that they do well economically and educationally, despite suffering setbacks. And there’s ways in which the immigration policies tend to privilege people who have higher social economic skills. So if you are educated, you are more likely, you are a more welcome immigrant. Or if you have economic capital and can have investments, you are more of a welcome
immigrant. I think my family came in through family connections. And if you’re coming through family connections, you may or may not have those high-achieving skills. But I think, certainly, my parents were hoping for the next generation, that we can move up.

Q. I would think if people come in with the kind of education your parents had, that they would have that kind of value system for their kids. Where did you get your Ph.D.?

A. I also was at Stanford for my Ph.D.

Q. Were you a History major all along?

A. No, I did American Studies as an undergraduate. And I was able to do a little bit of concentration on ethnic studies. So I took Native American Literature and Chicano History. And then for graduate school I decided to focus on History.

Q. Did you do activism then?

A. Not as much. This was a transition year between – actually, the activism that I was engaged in was really in my sophomore and junior years. My senior year I became much more engaged in writing a research honors thesis. And I was researching the ’60s San Francisco Chinatown, looking at the social activism of that time period. So I did a lot of oral histories and that was really fun. I applied to graduate school, but I wanted to take a year off and make sure that that’s what I wanted to do. So I worked for a year at the Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project. At the time they were publishing – or the person I was working with was working on Volume 3, the Montgomery Bus Boycott volume. And that’s when Martin Luther King became a national figure. It launches the civil rights movement, if we want to date it to that time period. But it’s also the period when Martin Luther King becomes this nationally known figure. So it was really interesting looking at the letters he was writing, the letters people were writing to him, and getting a sense of
the larger landscape. So doing that made me realize that I wanted to be in grad school, that it was a much more organized research experience than I had had on my own. I had to make sure I documented what I was doing for the next group of people. But it was also a job, so I was beholden to somebody. And I realized that I really liked the freedom of being in school.

Q. That’s what I loved about being a faculty member. I just thought I was an independent contractor.

A. Right. So I think in grad school, there were times when I was supporting undergraduate activism and sometimes we engaged as grad students ourselves in activism, but it was less of a – I don’t think it was a direct part of my daily activities. I think I’m someone now who does activism through my teaching or through the intellectual community building that I’m doing, or I might support students in what they’re doing. But I’m less on the front lines.

Q. I think you’re still on the front lines, with all the DISCO and Asian-American stuff. But it is in a different way than the undergraduate, which is appropriate. That’s what should happen. You’ve touched on this some, but in terms of how you generally identify yourself, how do you see yourself? How do you think others see you in terms of all these different possible identities?

A. I definitely developed a consciousness of being Asian American in college. I think when I was growing up it was Chinese or American, like there was a polarization. You have to be one or the other. And in college it was very liberating to think about the possibility of integrating both of those aspects, and that Asian American is a distinct form of American identity, but then also there was a pan-ethnic consciousness as well. That my experiences
can connect to Japanese Americans or Vietnamese Americans. So that consciousness is very strong for me, and it’s also defining my intellectual field in Asian American History or Asian American Studies.

I definitely see myself very much shaped by being a woman. I saw it in the family dynamics. The people who were active in the student movement that I was involved with as an undergrad, a lot of them were women. And it wasn’t definitely something that was consciously spoken of but in terms of the speakers, in terms of the organizers, a lot of them were women. And it was great to have role models, especially a woman of color as role models.

Q. Why do you think that was? That’s interesting.

A. I think a lot of women are involved in social activism. And I think they tend to have the interpersonal skills to organize. I think that movement wasn’t necessarily out to kind of get individual attention; it was really about creating social change. And so I think it sort of eliminated some of those folks who were just there to make a name for themselves or to their careers. I don’t want to say that all women are more inclined towards kind of community-oriented activism, but I saw that a lot when I was an undergraduate. Both in grad school and coming to OSU, the initial moment of entering those types of institutions, was kind of a shock because it’s very clear that white men have power in graduate school or at OSU when I first came. But I think over time in both of those settings I developed allies and friends and found ways and pockets that I can maneuver and feel more comfortable in. So by the time I finished my grad school there was definitely a cohort of women of color that I was very much connected to. And I think of DISCO as another form of kind of personal and community empowerment, that there’s
other people who are invested in similar types of intellectual and political projects and who are trying to create spaces in the institution to have those types of conversations.

Q. What was it like the very first year you came here to Ohio State, as an Asian-American woman faculty member in the History Department which is still predominantly male, predominantly white and straight?

A. Right. I remember going to orientation and looking around and just being aware of how much a minority I was. So I definitely noticed it in terms of gender. I definitely noticed it in terms of race. And I think with the History Department, my initial years there, I was really invested in Asian American Studies. So I found ways outside the department to create a niche and to support what I wanted to support, and to develop connections that I wanted to make. So I think my initial year was sort of finding an alternative community to do that type of work. Maybe it’s because I’m inclined towards interdisciplinary work, so that it sort of automatically draws me outside of the History Department. And also there just wasn’t – the people in History – there just weren’t that many people who could kind of understand and support what I was doing. I think there are more people now. But all those folks tend to be engaged in other efforts as well. So [there is Associate Professor] Lilia Fernandez is in History, but she is also very much connected with Latino Studies. Hasan Jeffries, [associate professor of] African-American history, is doing all sorts of stuff with the Kirwan Institute [for the Study of Race and Ethnicity]. So I think over time the department composition has changed, but those folks also are inclined, both to try to change what’s in History but also change the larger institution through their efforts.
Q. Now I know that a lot of people will look at overall University statistics – which I’ve always objected to looking at, we’re units really of one University – and say, “Well, there are plenty of Asian Americans,” because we have more than 10 or 12 percent on the faculty. When you start breaking it down, of course, by unit, only maybe 20 percent of the Asian-American faculty are women, but then when you look in Humanities there aren’t a lot of Asian-American faculty. Are there other Asian-American faculty in History? I’m not even sure.

A. There is another Asian-American woman. There’s something else that happens, is that they conflate Asian with Asian Americans. So there are some international Asian scholars who are at OSU, and certainly the line between international Asian and Asian-American is not that clear-cut, but I think there are differences of experiences when you come to the United States as an adult and already have certain professional credentials as opposed to either being born here or being raised here. I think in History there is one other person who is Asian-American. There also now are two other people who are international Asian women. It’s still a very small population and I think overall the Humanities looks good because we have the Department of East Asian Languages and Literature (DEALL). And the same thing in terms of African-American statistics: We have African American and African studies and there’s not necessarily a connection between those fields and people’s identities but there tends to be more people who are Asian/Asian American ancestry in DEALL and more people who are African-American in AAAS. But I think in terms of the traditional departments, it’s still an experience of being a minority.
Q. You’ve talked a little bit about this too, but can you talk a little bit more about how being a female has shaped your life?

A. I remember taking my first feminist studies class and just being enraged by what I was discovering, that it wasn’t just a family dynamic but it much more systemic. And, in fact, I had to sort of take a step back and almost catch my breath because I think once you discover gender oppression you just see it everywhere and it can really enrage you. I sort of then try to integrate that into what I teach. I teach U.S. Women’s History; I teach American History that really looks at women, that really incorporates their experiences and not just sort of an add-on experience. And I think about gender hierarchies. In the classroom I think about gender hierarchies, in departments [as well]. I think about it in terms of the types of works that I use, that I use to teach.

I also think about it in terms of my research. My first book was about a Chinese-American female doctor. There’s a really striking image of her in medical school. She’s the only woman. She’s the only person who is not white. This is in 1916 at the University of Southern California. And I just started to imagine, what would it have been like? In some ways she stands out and in some ways she doesn’t, because the way she dresses is just like all the other men. And so you think about coping mechanisms that people have, to blend in and be one of the guys, when you are so unique. My second book I just finished. It’s about American anti-war activists and their international travels. And so I think the popular image that people have of anti-war activists is that they are white and male, maybe they’re hippies, maybe they have long hair. So I really focus on women activists. I really look at people-of-color activists. And I began that book talking about Cora Weiss, who was a Jewish-American housewife at that time, and her activism. She is
someone that I think most people envision when they think about Vietnam war activists. So I think I try to challenge peoples’ perceptions of what women do and to re-imagine how we think about history and historical actors more broadly. One of the reasons I decided to move into Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies is that it’s a much smaller department. We just had a retreat yesterday. I think we have twelve faculty now, maybe a couple more people, so it’s a much more intimate department. It’s much less hierarchal. People, regardless of their rank, feel really comfortable saying what they want to say about the department and where it should go. It’s a much more flexible department, and I really appreciate that coming from History where it’s much larger. It’s much more hierarchal. It just feels like a bureaucracy. You can make a suggestion, but it’s not clear whether it’s going to be implemented. I chose to go into Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies because I wanted to have that type of experience.

Q. How big is the [History] department now?

A. It used to be huge before all the retirements. I want to say now it’s maybe 60-something. Before it might have been 80-something. But that’s, like, with all the faculty, including the regional campuses.

Q. And it’s interesting how departments do have their own cultures. Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies is something that is much more collaborative, which would certainly be consistent with the mission.

A. In History there has been some effort to appoint women to positions of leadership, but in some ways it’s almost because some of the senior men won’t take up that work.

Q. They don’t want to do the work.
A. Right, and they get accolades for focusing on their research. They can publish books all the time but in terms of department service, it becomes very gendered.

Q. I think that happens in a lot of departments. And I wonder what would happen, if we all left, if it would all fall apart.

A. I think what happens is some other women step in.

Q. I know Leila Rupp was Chair of the department. She had to have been Chair for part of the time you were there.

A. It’s really interesting. She’s been in a very traditional department. Everybody loved her. I think part of it is her interpersonal skills.

Q. But she wasn’t able to change the culture of the department.

A. I think the Chair does play a very important role in setting the tone, and she’s not Chair anymore.

Q. That’s true and she left. And I know Warren Van Tine was Chair, but that might have been before you were there.

A. I think when he arrived Mike Hogan was the Chair.

Q. Mike Hogan, okay.

A. Warren was on my search committee.

Q. Okay. Yes, I think it is true. I think the leader of whatever the institution is has an enormous impact on the culture and it’s almost immediate. It’s been amazing to me, as Presidents have come and gone, to see the impact they have on the culture and Department Chairs. And you’ve talked a lot about this also, but in terms of your Asian American identity, is there anything you want to say about how that shaped you?
A. I was going to add something about women. I’ve really appreciated the work that you and the Women’s Place have done. It was not really central to what I was doing on a day-to-day basis, but I knew that you were there and you were there to help support, and that has meant a lot. Also for a period of time we had a female President. We had a female Provost. We had a female College of Arts and Sciences [ASC] Dean. And definitely when Jackie Royster was here as Dean, I felt like she was looking out for me and trying to figure out ways that she could kind of support my career, by nominating me for the President Provost Leadership Institute. Was that created under Karen Holbrook or did that exist before?

Q. We created it at the Women’s Place when Karen was President and Barbara [Snyder] was Provost at the time.

A. I think that was sort of a magic moment, to have that level of senior female leadership at the institution. And it’s disheartening to see how much that has crumbled.

Q. We even had a Chair of the Board of Trustees, Tami Longaberger, when Karen was President, Barbara was Provost, and Jackie was ASC Dean. Those were the top four positions really in my mind and were all women.

A. That’s really remarkable.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about how you’ve seen that fall back?

A. Well, if you look at all the senior leadership, it’s almost all white men again. I just went to the Bryn Mawr Women’s Leadership Higher Education Resource HERS Institute [HERS Bryn Mawr Summer Institute for Women in Higher Education Administration]. But I was interested in the role that search firms are playing in these various senior searches. We had a person who was in charge of a search firm come and basically tell us
that you need to be more aggressive when you go for interviews. Those are the people who are putting together the short list that then colleges and institutions are looking at.

Q. I’m not sure that [then-OSU President] Gordon Gee used search firms. I think he just went out and found people he wanted. Clearly, he hardly used search committees.

A. It’s a very top-down institution, and I feel that more and more. And I think that’s why I do all this more grass-roots, I guess, activist intellectual work. We try to find these pockets and create communities that do things that we find are meaningful, because I think it’s very difficult to change the overall structure and to have dialogue and influence at the higher structure.

Q. I think it illustrates what we were talking about before, the impact the leader has. And women have definitely, when you look at the statistics, we even have fewer women department chairs than before Gordon came back. It’s had this trickle-down effect. It seems like a very different environment than when Karen Holbrook was here. In terms of overall social change, what do you think all that means even? I always try to tell people, the dark before the dawn, it’s their last stand because clearly, with the percent of women in all academic fields greatly increasing, we can’t sustain institutions that are just constantly run by white men. It can’t continue, can it?

A. No, given the demographics of the United States, it’s definitely a hold-over. There’s this kind of lag between the demographics of our student population and the faculty composition and definitely between the faculty and administration composition. I think it has to change. Something else I wanted to mention is that for a period of time Debra Moddelmog – John Roberts was the Dean of Arts and Humanities and Debra Moddelmog was, I think, an Associate Dean under his leadership. And she made a huge difference as
well. She and [Department of Comparative Studies Associate Professor] Maurice Stevens and other people put together this diversity enhancement program that advocated for cluster hiring, that tried to create mentoring networks, that created space for people to talk about issues related to teaching, tried to provide a workshop for people preparing their scholarship. So they really had a very holistic vision about how to change the composition of the faculty. And that made a huge impact in terms of bringing in faculty that are usually not seen as faculty, and trying to ensure their success at OSU. And again, when there is a leadership change, those programs are not always sustained. I’m actually sad that Debra is no longer coordinating DISCO, because she really helped envision what DISCO could be and really worked her butt off in trying to create buy-in, create a sense of excitement about DISCO. And I feel really sad that she’s not here. She would be willing to continue, but the administrators sort of look at that work and say, “Thanks a lot, see you later.” That is really sad because we have incredibly valuable human resources that were not actually nurturing, investing, supporting.

Q. What has happened to the Diversity Enhancement Program? Has it gone by the wayside?

A. Yes, it’s really gone.

Q. Part of that whole culture change.

A. I think when people are in positions of leadership who don’t really have that deep investment in these programs, they’re not going to thrive.

Q. Right, right. In terms of your identities, and you’ve actually touched on a lot of this, too, but just in terms of the identities, how have they shaped your experiences specifically at Ohio State?
A. I think those identities shaped my intellectual political investments, and those intellectual political investments are what I try to enact when I am at OSU. So just this year, I’m coordinating Asian American Studies and we’re going to start an Asian American Community Oral History Project. I feel kind of inspired by what you are doing. And we thought we would begin with community leaders because maybe they would be more open to talking and it would be great to record their experiences. And we were thinking about having mapping component, so that we can have a map of Central Ohio and point out different institutions that are really important to the Asian community, whether it’s religious institutions or social service institutions. I’m trying to think about how to get that started. And it has a pedagogical component because we want to work with students and try to do oral history. It has a potential research component – that we can archive this material for future scholars who might want to write papers or books. And it has a community outreach component. We’re going to be talking to the community, but also maybe the community would be very interested in what we’re finding, and they might be able to integrate that with whatever projects they’re working on. So that’s an example.

In some ways it’s current to my identity but it’s also my intellectual and political commitments that are driving these types of projects. It definitely shapes the types of classes that I teach. I’m not teaching this year but I helped develop a class called “Natives and Newcomers” with Lilia Fernandez, who is a specialist in Latino history and Lucy Murphy who is a specialist in Native-American history. So we wanted to think about comparative experiences of migration, whether voluntary or forced. And to think about migration within the nation but also to the nation and also within the nation. So that’s a really fun and exciting course that, again, comes out of my identity but also because of
my intellectual and political interests. I think it sort of permeates the type of work that I do.

Q. That’s all very interesting. It’s interesting having this conversation. If an Asian-American woman joined the History Department this year, as an Assistant Professor, how do you think her experiences would be different from yours when you joined? Was it fifteen years ago you came?

A. Sixteen, 1997. There is a woman who is from Asia.

Q. I’m saying if somebody came.

A. I’m hoping that there’s now a more visible and cohesive group of people who might serve as mentors at OSU. Even though within the main campus there’s not an Asian-American woman, there are three new faculty who are coming in. And two of them I helped to hire on the search committee. I was chair of the search committee last year. And so I’m just trying to figure out ways to make their lives easier, to help give them suggestions about teaching. I want to start this feminist summer camp for next year.

Q. That sounds great.

A. And so I’m trying to get them on the topic of transnational feminism. So I’m trying to see if they want to get involved. But also knowing that they may be overwhelmed and overcommitted. So I just want to let them know that the opportunity is there, if they want to help organize, but even if they don’t want to help organize they can benefit from that experience. So I’m hoping that people who are coming in now will see that there is a wider array of resources at their disposal, and also more people that they can turn to for advice and support.
Q. I know you mentioned to me that as an undergrad at Stanford you spent a lot of time on the couch in the Asian-American Activities Center. When I was in law school at Ohio State, really one of the first classes that any significant number of women, still only 20 percent, and we spent a lot of time on the couch in the lounge. There was a women’s lounge. Because that’s where we just really felt safe. So it sounds like what you are doing, is you are creating that couch for the new people coming in, so they have a home. That’s just so important for people who are very much still a minority, to have that safe home.

A. I really like the way that you put that. And it’s harder, when you’re not a student, to have that actual physical couch.

Q. I always hoped that the Women’s Place can do that and I always wanted a space where there could be an actual lounge that people could just come and hang out. We were never able to do that. It’s a very important work that you’re doing, I guess is what I’m saying.

A. I really appreciate the programming that the Women’s Place is doing and the initiatives that it is sponsoring and supporting.

Q. It was an attempt to create that couch, which is critical for people.

A. There’s a designated unit that reminds me that there are issues of women face and we’re not there yet.

Q. Right. And we aren’t there yet. What do you think we still have to do to get there, for women and for every group, focusing specifically on the University?

A. Yes. I mean, I think definitely looking at the composition of the leadership at the University is really crucial. That I think there should be changes. It would help my life a lot more if there was actual institutional support, greater institutional support, for the
types of programs that I’m helping to build and create. I feel like every year we’re sort of begging for pennies. I think having that type of financial commitment, so it’s not just, “Oh, we support diversity,” but actual staff and monetary support. There is some but it would be great if there was more. I think in the classroom, that’s our job, to help change the way our students think about the world. But there’s definitely resistance in the classrooms as well. When I teach U.S. Women’s History, it’s a required course for students who are thinking about becoming teachers. If they want to become teachers they have to take it.

Q. Like high school teachers?

A. Right. So it tends to be much more gender-balanced compared to some other women’s history classes. But there’s also a lot of resistance there as well. And so that’s something I’m hoping to change through my teaching. I don’t know if there are ways in which the University can do more, and maybe they could do that if they actually had people in positions of leadership who are more diverse in terms of gender and race.

Q. I’m thinking back to your Stanford days, the activism that you were engaged in to change the institution in terms of the leadership at Ohio State. What could people do to change that, because we really have no voice in that. The Trustees pick the President. What do you think we could all do? As I talk with people there is great dissatisfaction of all the things you’ve talked about. It can even be straight white men – that’s the culture that’s being created.

A. We don’t really have a very strong faculty governance tradition. We have a Faculty Senate [Faculty Council], but I don’t know how much power that Senate has. It seems like a lot of the decisions are very top down, everything within my department,
everything that we vote on is advisory to the Chair, but the Chair can counteract. And the Chair reports to the Dean, and the Dean can override the Chair. It’s interesting to know that other universities that actually ousted presidents that they don’t approve of, that they really exert their power and say, “No.” It would be great if we had more power like that.

Q. As someone who spent my career at Ohio State, I wish I had done some things different now.

A. What would you do differently?

Q. We had that Women’s Grass Roots Network for a whole decade, and that was really an attempt to move from the bottom up. And I think we did have a lot of power. And I know it led to a lot of positive changes at the University, but still we are where we are today where it feels like we’ve slipped back. And I wish we had somehow been able to, what we really did, and I’m sure you’ve experienced it too: When you are doing activism and it’s all volunteers and it’s on top of everything else you do, people burn out. And basically, as I could see the burnout coming, that’s when we moved the effort to get the Women’s Place created. You always see the Women’s Places, the institutionalization of the Women’s Grass Roots Network, but of course when you are an actual administrative unit you have to work within certain confines. And I miss that activism, and I think that’s what we’re going to have to do. With this new presidential search, maybe that’s the time. I’ll have to un-retire.

A. That would be great. I think there’s that tension as well within DISCO, that for a long time it was much more an organic formation, and now that we are receiving institutional support, which we need, it does make our lives easier.

Q. And it changes the dynamic.
A. Right, absolutely.

Q. We kind of need a new generation to come in and have the energy to reactivate. Could you talk about the most powerful experience you have had here?

A. I was thinking about this. Two things: One is in 2005-06, I was coordinating the Asian American Studies Program, and Rebecca Nelson and some other folks were trying to talk about ways to commemorate Japanese-American internment. So as a result of that collective conversation we decided to do this Japanese-American Oral History Documentary Project. And we involved 42 students in working groups and they interviewed ten people who had been interred during World War II who now live in Ohio. So that was a really amazing experience. And to support their efforts, we trained them in oral history. We brought in a speaker who could do that. We brought in an artist, brought in a performance artist. So this was an amazing series of events. And then at the end the students created something. They created these mini-documentaries. One of the students decided that she didn’t want to just have these mini-documentaries. She created a feature-length documentary and she went on to become a documentary film maker. She got her MFA [Master of Fine Arts] in documentary film. And we took some of the students to go to Amsterdam to present on this project. We helped give orientation and advice to a Native American Oral History Project. So I just felt it was this transformative organic experience. At the time it was very difficult to pull together, but the end results are pretty amazing. And I still use those interviews when I teach. I’ll talk about the fact that students created this, and that the materials that they captured are absolutely amazing. They were amateurs but the content was really amazing. So I think that’s one of those really powerful moments for me.
The other one, I think, really has to do with DISCO. There are two events that really struck me. One of them was right after the passages of the laws in Arizona that were empowering the police to really go after people they thought were undocumented and also banning ethnic studies. So there were a lot of people who were really concerned about these developments. And we sort of threw together this program; it came about very, very quickly. But we had involvement from all the different units in the larger DISCO Project, and it was towards the end of the school year. I wasn’t sure who was going to show up, but people just, like, packed the room and just kept on coming. So I really felt like we were tapping into the need to have intellectual dialogue about these pressing political issues. And something very similar happened with DISCO, maybe it was last year or a couple of years ago. And it was right after, I think there was a defacing of the Hale Center, and it happened that day. There was a very similar energy. And the topic was an attack on ethnic studies. So that’s what I am hoping that we will be able to continue with DISCO. I was thinking it would be great to have a discussion about the Supreme Court cases that were decided this summer, along with the Trayvon Martin verdict. I think it will pull together people from different parts of the University who have different forms of expertise, can speak about issues and think about connections between them. So that’s what I find really exciting.

Q. And those are the kinds of things, of course, that have a ripple effect. We never really even comprehend all of the people – when we think of those students with the internment project and how that would have changed their lives forever, and lives will change. So you’ve talked a lot about your work with DISCO, is there any other work you’ve done in
terms of institutional change around equity issues? And so what do you think the outcome has been, both for you personally and for the institution?

A. I think a lot of my work has been involved with intellectual program-building but not in a very traditional sense. It could be either intellectual programs that have a political impact or have a social and cultural impact on campus. So I would say that that’s kind of my, that’s where my primary investment is in and it’s through Asian American Studies and through DISCO, I’m trying to revise the Women’s History field, as well within the History Department, with Susan Hartmann retiring. This year we have three new people, two of them who were hired through Women’s History, and the third person came through Urban History, but he has an interest in sexuality and politics. So that’s another example where I would like to have a much more kind of active intellectual community and to have speakers and have events and provide opportunities for people who are already here to work.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about allies who supported change as well as people who have been obstructionists?

A. I definitely feel like everything that I’ve done was not just me; it was really part of a larger community of folks. It wouldn’t be that interesting to be at OSU if I felt like I was the only person doing this. Do you want me to name names?

Q. Whatever you feel comfortable with.

A. Definitely, I mentioned Debra Moddemog, Maurice Stevens, [Martin Joseph] Joe Ponce who has coordinated Asian-American Studies and also has been a big advocate for sexuality studies in DISCO.

Q. He’s from the English Department?
A. Right. I mentioned Rebecca Nelson before. There’s definitely just larger groups of people who have been invested in and supported these initiatives.

Q. Have there been any straight white men who have been allies?

A. I’m sure there have. I’ll have to think about that. There are definitely people who are more sympathetic and who have an investment in what I’m doing. So one of my colleagues, David Hoffman – his wife is actually going through chemo treatment again – so he’s not around very much. But I remember early on he would always just come to events, even if it had nothing to do with his intellectual interests. He was just interested and curious and wanted to support. I really appreciate colleagues like that. I’m trying to think of, in terms of a day-to-day basis people I’m working with, I think there’s people I feel I can go to ask for support in terms of financial support. They are not necessarily directly connected or as intimately involved in some initiatives that I’m working on.

Q. Okay. I know we talked a little about this but what remains undone relative to the programs of women and other diverse groups at Ohio State?

A. More.

Q. Numbers are critical. I would always cite that research from Rosabeth Moss Kanter from Harvard.

A. What are the specifics?

Q. When stereotypes start losing their impact. When are left in 10 percent of whatever group and they start to dissipate a little, and when they get to 25 percent they have dissipated a lot, but 35 percent seems to be the magic point. If you can to 35 percent, the stereotypes seem to lose their negative impact. Numbers are critical. Are there any topics that you want to talk about that we didn’t talk about?
A. I don’t think so.

Q. Well, this has just been wonderfully interesting.

A. Thank you for inviting me.

Q. I really enjoyed the interview, so thank you for doing this.

A. Thanks.