

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY STUDY ON WHITE PEOPLE

The Reminiscences of

Cindy Arizmendi

INCITE

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Cindy Arizmendi conducted by Whitney Dow on September 30, 2017. This interview is part of the Study on White People.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Session #1 (video)

Interviewee: Cindy Arizmendi

Location: Battle Creek, MI

Interviewer Whitney Dow

Date: September 30, 2017

Q: So can you tell me your name, where you're from, what you do and a little about yourself?

Arizmendi: [34:41:49] Sure. Hi, my name is Cindy, last name is Arizmendi. I'm from the Battle Creek area. I have lived here most of my life. What I do is I am a teacher and a student, also. I'm a mom, and I'm a wife, and I'm a yoga wannabe. Yeah, I think that's it.

Q: What do you teach? Do you teach high school, college, elementary school? What do you teach?

Arizmendi: [35:01:45] I teach here in Battle Creek at a community college, Kellogg Community College. It's a two-year institution. I started off there when I was actually going back to school and then had an opportunity to teach part time in the biology department. And I've continued to do that. And I expanded out, did some chemistry teaching, too. Now I'm doing some tutoring. And I just recently started working in a first-year seminar program for the incoming students, and I'm really enjoying that. I've worn a lot of different hats, done some temporary placements to help out in different departments. I like it there.

Q: What motivated you to get involved in this project?

Arizmendi: [35:24:29] Well, actually, Jim Donahue, who is the owner of Battle Creek Books—I'm a frequent book reader. And I was in there one day, and he was talking about it and suggested that I get online and do the interview—or do the questionnaire. And he gave me the card, and I did it. And I suggested it to my daughter, too. As far as I know, I think she did it. But I was asked to do it.

Q: You talked about a lot of things when I said to talk about yourself a little bit: A mom, a teacher, a yoga wannabe. You didn't mention your race. How does your race fit into that sort of description of yourself?

Arizmendi: [35:46:42] Well, my race? So that has evolved over time, I'll definitely tell you that. So my current understanding is that race is a derived term. It's something that we have kind of labeled ourselves with, and it's not true.

Q: What do you mean?

Arizmendi: [36:00:18] I mean it doesn't have any basis in reality. I mean that it's something that we have made up, I believe, to create differences and to separate ourselves from each other. And I don't believe that's helpful.

Q: So you're saying it's a social construct. The fact that it's made up, does that make it or its effects any less real?

Arizmendi: [36:14:18] No, no. Unfortunately, unless you're aware of that, that it is a social construct, we create our own realities, so what we believe is the way we live. And so, no, it doesn't make it less real. It helps put it into context, but it definitely doesn't change the reality of how it impacts people.

Q: You said that your view of this understanding of race has evolved. What has caused it to evolve? What has put you on this path of change?

Arizmendi: [36:36:26] Wow, that's a big question — this path of change? Well, my whole life has been about that. I've had opportunities to have a lot of different life experiences and have always felt like I was learning and wanted to learn. I'm a real big observer. I ask myself questions about my own beliefs and how I came to those beliefs. And so I've done some reading. I asked some questions of people that, you know, probably wonder why I'm asking them these questions. I've had chances to put myself out there, you know, just to say, well, no matter how this turns out, I'm just going to ask this question. So I've had some really great opportunities that people are open enough to talk to me because I was curious about people, and where they're from and what they do and why they do it, and how they grew up and all those kinds of things. I forgot to mention—sorry. Just to kind of tie that in, before I became a teacher, I was a social worker, which is part of my journey, too. So, the curiosity and the questioning is built into that.

Q: Was there any sort of precipitating event that sort of set you on this particular journey about race?

Arizmendi: [37:24:44] Well, I think that it most likely started with my upbringing and that I was raised in an environment where everyone was the same color. And I was curious about that from the very beginning when I saw different colors on television or when we went and visited places. And then I would come back to where I grew up, and I didn't see that. It made me really curious, and that's where it started. And then I had opportunities to go different places. I lived in West Texas for a while and experienced that culture with different colors of people there and different ways of living. And I just was fascinated by it, different ways of living their lives.

And then when I was in college, I was really in a place where—my suitemate was/is black. And I asked her all kinds of questions because she was okay with me asking those questions, you know. I didn't go about it—well, at least I tried not to go about it in a way to separate, but just out of curiosity because I really—I didn't know. I didn't understand, and I wanted to. I wanted to get a bigger picture. That's probably a theme in my life. I've tried to look at things from a big picture, and that started when I was a kid. I didn't have a big picture growing up, so I've kind of always been looking for a bigger picture. And so, yeah, I think that's where it started, was when I was growing up.

Q: Do you remember the first time you had a personal interaction or experience with a person who wasn't white?

Arizmendi: [38:29:01] I think the first time I had interaction with someone who wasn't white would have been—personal interaction would have been when I was in college with my suitemate. Her name was Adi [phonetic]. We called her Adi. Not that I probably didn't have

casual interactions with people before that, but that was probably the first time. She really opened up my world, she really did. I don't know if she knows that or not, but she really did. She took me to her house in Pontiac. I got to meet her family and her friends. It was really neat to be included in a way of living that I'd never experienced before.

Q: How did that change the way you saw yourself?

Arizmendi: [38:58:22] It made me recognize how limited and small I had been and then, gosh, how big the world is and the variety in it. So how I saw myself? I had a lot to learn. I had a lot to learn, yes.

Q: Did it change you to think about your own race? I understand you saying, okay, I see the world, there is a lot of variety and difference, but that's different from recognizing something about yourself and the impact of your own race on your life.

Arizmendi: [39:20:54] Okay. I think I understand what you're saying there.

Q: And if this doesn't make sense to answer, don't worry about answering it.

Arizmendi: [39:25:02] Yeah. You know what? At that time with my first experience with someone of a different color, I didn't process it that way at that time. I don't think I really processed how my color has influenced my life until much later, probably even within the last ten to fifteen years maybe.

So it was an outward journey at first. It was looking out, and it took me a while to turn that around and start to look in. Now I think much clearer how my particular color, even though I didn't choose it, it has influenced, you know, not only who I am, but my beliefs about things and my choices and my interactions, too. My interactions with people, I'm sure; not only how I interact with them, but how they interact with me.

Q: Can you talk to me a little bit about those experiences, how you think it impacted your life, your choices and your experiences and interactions?

Arizmendi: [40:08:55] Sure. Well, my choices? So I've had a really privileged life. Not that I haven't had, you know, things I've had to overcome, but I always kind of thought that whatever I wanted to do, wherever I wanted to go, I would be able to do that and that would be okay. I've never really thought about, I shouldn't go here because of my color or I may experience violence or pain or something because of the color of my skin. I've never felt that way. And there is people that do, you know. So I've had a lot of freedom in my life and ability to create my own sense of self, free of—well, I shouldn't say free of—but less influenced, I guess, than people of other colors. So, yes, definitely my color does influence, but I think it's maybe not as a big an impact. Again, that's from my perspective, again, too, so.

Q: How often do you think about your race?

Arizmendi: [40:58:11] I think about it more than I used to. How often? On a daily basis, probably not very much. In different situations when I'm around people, I think about it more.

Q: Can you describe a situation that you remember where you became acutely aware of your race?

Arizmendi: [41:14:21] Oh, sure. Well, the first thing I thought of is we've had opportunity to travel, and we have gone to Mexico, different places in Mexico. And getting off the plane and going into the terminal in Cancun, I was definitely aware of my race then. And it was kind of neat. It was kind of neat. It was uncomfortable in a sense that I felt out of place, but it was also really cool to think, wow, this is an opportunity for me to feel what it's like for people who have that type of experience when they encounter people of my color, all the time when people of a different color is in the minority and I'm in the majority.

Q: What about here in the States? Any situations where you were sort of made to feel aware of your race here in Battle Creek?

Arizmendi: [41:51:35] Well, I worked at Head Start program, and I was a family worker. The majority of my coworkers were black, were African American, black, and I was in the minority. I felt that at first; but then after I got to know them, I don't know. I didn't feel that way anymore. They made me feel welcomed.

Q: What about situations where it's all white? Do you ever feel aware of your race when you're around just other white people?

Arizmendi: [42:12:03] Sometimes. If there is talk about race, yes.

Q: Just think about the way your race and your gender intersect. Which has had a bigger impact on your life, your gender or your race, do you think? And can you put my question into your—

Arizmendi: [42:25:57] Sure. So my gender and my race, which has been a bigger influence? Wow. I would say that at times, because of the time that I've lived and grown up and the awareness of gender—I don't know if it seems to be greater or it's just my awareness of it has been greater. So gender, as far as women's rights and things like that, that was really influential for me when I was growing up in the 70s and early 80s. And then my race—I don't know. I don't know if I can answer that. It's been there, but I don't know if it's been bigger than gender. You know, it's been different than gender, I can tell you that. It's different than gender. And my awareness of it has changed, too. That's a good question. I don't know if I can really differentiate that at this time.

Q: You've talked about the advantages that you've gotten being white. Have you ever consciously taken advantage of your race or used your race to get something or have a situation unfold the way you wanted it to?

Arizmendi: [43:34:01] Not that I'm aware of. I don't believe, to my knowledge, that I've ever used my race for my advantage. I don't know. I mean, that doesn't mean it hasn't been an advantage.

Q: When you think about your own culture, your family culture, your history, everything, do you feel like you're connected to a white culture in that—yeah, you feel connection to a white culture?

Arizmendi: [43:52:39] Do I feel like I have a connection to a white culture? Yes, yes. It was how I was raised.

I don't feel stuck there, but I definitely understand that a powerful influence on anyone's life is their upbringing and the culture that you're raised in, so yeah.

Q: How would you describe white culture? What is white culture? What are the hallmarks of white culture?

Arizmendi: [44:13:21] Oh, the hallmarks of white culture? Well, the word that comes to me is privileged; and without some type of a counterculture, not a lot of balance.

Q: In this journey you've been on where you started to become more aware of this, has there been anything painful? Is there any loss involved in this journey? Is it all positive? You know, on self-improvement, is there loss involved?

Arizmendi: [44:41:32] Yes, there is loss involved in this journey. I really don't think that you can move forward without having some loss. You have to leave certain things behind on the journey. And some of that has been painful, as far as recognizing that—well, first and foremost that the beliefs that I have aren't shared more widely. And then the loss that I oftentimes wish I would have started on this journey earlier. That I would've gotten it when I was younger, had opportunities to learn about it when I was younger, and that I could do more, I guess, where I could be more part of the solution and not contribute to the divide.

Q: Are you happy you were born white?

Arizmendi: Am I happy I was born white?

[Interruption]

Q: So the question was: are you happy you were born white?

Arizmendi: [45:36:53] Am I happy that I was born white? Well, I wouldn't say happy. When I was younger, I used to think about what it would have been like to be a different color, you know. And I'm still fascinated by people who do those social experiments, you know, and they go into a place where they change their color. [Laughs] I think that's so great. That just is really appealing to me. I think, wow, what a great way to get a different perspective on things, you know.

Now that I think more about race as a social construct, you know, and that it's, for me, even though I can't deny the reality of what color I am doesn't—it doesn't influence me, I guess, as much as it did. I don't know if that makes any sense there, but.

Q: Do you want to deny the reality of the color that you are?

Arizmendi: [46:15:23] I don't want to deny the reality of it. I just wish that it didn't cause division. I wish that it wasn't a dividing point and it was more of a place where we could get together. I understand that my color can be a barrier.

Q: Are you happy? I should say, how attached are you to your whiteness?

Arizmendi: [46:37:33] How attached am I to my whiteness? Wow. Well, I've not ever been another color. However, what I thought about was my hair color. I was really attached to my brown hair before it wasn't brown anymore. And that was an adjustment to let it become the color that it is now. But I like it now. I like it. There's times when I wish it was still brown, but it's not, you know. So I don't know if that's a way to answer that question or not. It's the closest thing I have to an example of what it would be like to be a different color. So do I think people treat me differently because of my hair color? Yeah. If I can expand on that and say do I think people would treat me differently because I was a different color? I would say yes.

Q: I guess with attachment, I would think about if you were leaving, there are two doors and one you would walk through and stay as you are and one you walk through, there was an arbitrary chance that you could emerge as a black woman on the other side, which door would you choose? Would you not care which door you walked through, or would you choose one or the other intentionally, and why?

Arizmendi: [47:22:24] Well, yeah, if I had two doors to choose from and there's a fifty-fifty chance I could be a black woman on the other side if I walked through one door as opposed to the other door, yeah, I would walk through the door that was a fifty-fifty chance. Yeah, no question. No question.

I may not like it when I got there, I don't know. I may not like it. But life is a journey. It's been a journey this color. I think that would be challenging, but also really eye opening to be able to do it in a different skin color.

Q: Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you think you really wanted to say or that's an important question we haven't asked here that you think would be important to touch on?

Arizmendi: [47:55:45] Well, things that you haven't talked about? You know, for me, personally, I'd want people to know that we just all have something of value, and it has nothing to do with our skin color. And to recognize those differences and learn to appreciate them, instead of the way that I lived part of my life, which was looking at them as ways to separate people. It's a mindset shift. It's a way of thinking and being in the world that's—I still feel like

I'm learning. And now I'm teaching so I'm hoping that in some small way, I can at least be a part of that conversation of people being able to be willing to look at themselves and the people around them in a different way. Because we can't deny what color we are. You can change it temporarily but you can't change it forever, unlike hair color. Yeah, I guess that's it.

Q: How has this process been in participating in this project? Has it been interesting, challenging, what you expected, not expected?

Arizmendi: [49:03:26] Yeah. I think for me it has been challenging in a sense that it's made me realize some of the questions that were asked that I hadn't really thought about for myself and some things that I need to think about to kind of process. And more will be revealed. I don't even know if I've touched the surface, but I'm glad for the opportunity. I was kind of nervous, because I didn't know what this was going to be like. I've never really taken a big—not a big chunk of time, but a chunk of time to just kind of go through where I've been and where I'm at with race, with this issue. So it's been kind of neat to be able to put the pieces in order more. And maybe it will remind me of some pieces that I haven't thought about in a long time.

Q: Thank you. We really appreciate you coming in and speaking with us. It's a very generous thing to do, talk to somebody who you never met before about some things that are so personal. And we're going to take a few stills of you now. This is the hardest part of the process. You just have to sit there and do nothing.

Arizmendi: Okay.

Q: You don't have to smile. You can also smile now; you have a very nice smile.

Arizmendi: Oh, thank you.

Q: Thank you.

Arizmendi: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW