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Davis-Undiano: Welcome to "Understanding Oklahoma." A series of conversations looking at the richness but also the complexity of the traditions and cultures that contribute to Oklahoma's distinctive identity. I am so pleased today to welcome Bailey Brooks. Welcome to the segment. She's a native of Tulsa. She studies Creative Writing and Rhetoric in the Department of English at OU. Her work includes creative nonfiction essays about growing up in Oklahoma as a young person at the nexus of intersectionality and an historical novel set in 1969, 1970, Oklahoma. It's really great having you here.

Brooks: Thank you so much for having me.

Davis-Undiano: Now, you describe yourself as really an intersectional person. What does that mean?

Brooks: [LAUGHTER] The term intersectionality goes back to Kimberle Crenshaw who coined it in the conversation of trying to understand how black women are both affected by racism and misogyny at the same time. But now really it's used as a, not quite a catch-all term but any intersections of different identity. I'm adopted. I was adopted by white parents. My birth father was Muscogee Creek and black while my birth mother was white so I identify as a mixed-race person. [LAUGHTER] Then my parents also adopted another child, my brother. He's black. We're not biologically related. That's always the follow-up [LAUGHTER] question there. We grew up in Tulsa, in South Tulsa. There's a lot of complex intersecting identities there in that area.

Davis-Undiano: You have a very rich heritage. [LAUGHTER] Could you talk a little bit though about the separate identities teaching them out and how people respond to them in Oklahoma. Any ones that you want to discuss.

Brooks: It's interesting being a card-carrying member of a tribe. The Muskogee Creek Nation specifically, there's interesting politics about card-carrying membership versus really identifying with the cultures that have been so suppressed in Oklahoma. I know you've talked with other people specifically about the history of black people and black communities in Oklahoma. You have Greenwood, you've got all-black towns like Boley. There's a lot of different associations [LAUGHTER] that can come up when you put those identities together.

Davis-Undiano: Can you talk about any specific experiences that you've had that maybe define what it's like interacting with the culture here from one of your perspectives?

Brooks: Yeah. There's been several. Growing up in South Tulsa it's a very white, very affluent area. Growing up with white parents and a black younger brother, we had some interesting encounters out in public. Then school growing up, my mom, people would see her near my brother and they'd be like, "Oh, I didn't know you were remarried." Assuming she had remarried a black man or something. [LAUGHTER] There's that. Then as I came to college, there was different periods of reckoning with different intersections of my privilege and my discrimination as a woman of color. But I did grow up in South Tulsa and so there's a lot of privileges associated

with that. I graduated from Jenks which is very affluent district. When I came to college, I met people who were also from Tulsa and I had assumed that I would have something shared but I remember one person in particular and it was actually Dr. Henderson's history of racism class. This other student grew up in North Tulsa and I assumed that we would have a connection there. But after he started telling his story, I realized we had completely two different completely experiences. I think that's probably one of the biggest moments that I can think of that really stands out as the epitome of these intersections of my identity and then my childhood.

Davis-Undiano: It seems to me that people would want to relate to every part of your wonderful past and the different identities that you claim now they're there for you. Is the problem that too often we view each other in a monolithic terms where we let one facet of them define the whole thing that really denies that the living dynamic reality of another person. That must be what it feels like to be on the end of it.

Brooks: Yes, absolutely. I feel like looking back as I'm reflecting in these creative nonfiction essays that I like to work on. There, I can almost separate my life sometimes into different stages where in high school I felt a little bit more native, like I was able to ingratiate myself into the native American Student Association there. Whereas towards mean of college, I got involved in more like Black Lives Matter activism and on campus and so I felt a little bit more ingratiated into the black community. I got the opportunity to study abroad in Jamaica and that particularly was also a moment where I really felt in touch with my black identity. Yeah, there's different points where it does seem like based on my environment, I feel funneled to focus on one aspect of my identity as opposed to allowing all of them to interact and inform one another.

Davis-Undiano: It seems to me where you live really matters. If you're same age coming to college now in California, it can be very different in Oklahoma. How has the unique, distinctive quality of Oklahoma as a culture, as a place to grow up, and learn about yourself, impacted you? There's a distinctive culture here, I think.

Brooks: Yes. Even within different places in Oklahoma, I feel like the three places I've lived. I grew up in Tulsa. After I graduated from OU with my bachelor's that is, I moved to Oklahoma City. Oklahoma City and Tulsa City and Norman are three distinct places in my memory and in my experience so I feel like if you went to like even we can bring on another identity, [LAUGHTER] I identify as a queer woman of color as well. [LAUGHTER] The comfort level that I have expressing myself as a queer woman of color in these places can vary greatly. Norman is a college town so tends to skew a bit more liberal so I feel comfortable being out in Norman whereas when I lived in OKC depending on the area that I was in, I might not be so comfortable and in Tulsa as well. Downtown is a little more hip walking around. I would feel comfortable but South Tulsa against skews conservative. I think not only Oklahoma's, as you know a unique place but places within Oklahoma had their own little unique.

Davis-Undiano: Oklahoma's not monolithic either.

Brooks: Yeah.

Davis-Undiano: Lots of different cultures here. Now, I understand you also do research on the histories of different peoples in Oklahoma. Could you tell us a little bit about that research and maybe some interesting events that you've discovered and that have clarified something about culture in Oklahoma to you?

Brooks: Yeah, absolutely. For the historical novel that I'm working on, my research mainly centers around late 60s, early 70s, Oklahoma. Part of the research that I did was reading Dr. Henderson's book. In that book I read I found out about a riot that actually happened at OU that was related to, it was a Vietnam War protest that escalated and specifically in response to the Kent State Massacre. [LAUGHTER] I went to OU for my undergrad and now for my masters and it's like I didn't learn anything about that. Understanding the history of activism, I guess on the campus and in Oklahoma that was really interesting as well. During my research, I found out about there was a lesbian bar in Tulsa and I believe it was the 40s through the 60s but that kind of subject is really under-researched so I've only been able to find a couple of references to it. But there's been an uncovering of the history of I consider myself in Oklahoma and I grew up here. But it seems like every time I sit down on my laptop to do more research for this book, I find out something new, I uncover some new complexity.

Davis-Undiano: How many different identifications are you doing research about in Oklahoma or do you break it down that way?

Brooks: I don't quite break it down. There's the history of Black Liberation that the Black Panthers come into play a little bit. The history of LGBTQ people. But then also, to an extent, on the periphery, just like leftist activism, anti-war protest, stuff like that.

Davis-Undiano: There's that saying the victors write the histories, and that'll always be true. But I'm gathering from the work you're doing and the things you're uncovering, there's an imbalance, that maybe the victors or mainstream culture have written too much of the history and you're recovering history that could be lost altogether if you don't recover it and document it and let it be known. There's a sense in which you're mining our historical reality and putting us in touch with what we need to know.

Brooks: Yeah, definitely. That's part of growing up in Oklahoma. I feel like there's already not many books that are written about Oklahoma now, there's been a resurgence with this being the centennial of Greenwood mass grave and everything. There's a resurgence of interest in Oklahoma, but yeah, largely, if it's about Oklahoma, it's about either indigenous people, the land runs or the Tulsa Massacre. Finding the intersections of those different histories, finding histories that include people that I can see myself in, those are definitely driving factors in my research and my writing.

Davis-Undiano: This is all historical. You're looking backwards and trying to recover these histories that could otherwise be lost. What impact, as far as you can see so far, did these

histories have on people today? How does it play out that these histories existed and maybe haven't really been focused on?

Brooks: Yeah. I think, well, the first thing that comes to mind, the most direct historical influence on me has been Dr. Henderson and he's a living member of history, and so his story has influenced my story, which has influenced the stuff that I'm writing and stuff that I will write in the future. But, I guess in a more concrete sense, going back to Tulsa, you look at the history of the massacre and you can still walk around Greenwood and you can still see some of the effects. You look at the map of Tulsa, look at very white South Tulsa, very black North Tulsa. Really understanding still how segregated the city is, even 100 years on, we're still being really affected, physically affected, anyone in cities like Tulsa, by the events of the past.

Davis-Undiano: Is this, in some way, a moment of opportunity right now? The Tulsa race massacre, for example, 1921, 300 plus people killed by the white community, people in Greenwood, as you mentioned in that, we're only now really focusing on it in a big way. Somehow or another, has a window opened? Is this a moment of opportunity? Are we living in the wake of Black Lives Matter and there's a better focus because of them? How do you read the moment we're in?

Brooks: Yes, I think there's definitely with the opportunity, like you said, of the mass graves, there's 300 people, some people that we know of. There's the ongoing project of uncovering mass graves and I'm sure there's dozens of people that we don't know about. But yeah, I feel like this is definitely a reckoning. Even you mentioned Black Lives Matter as well. Picking up the pieces after the Trump administration as well and all of the harmful policies that were implemented then. Yes, I feel like this is really a reckoning moment, not only for Oklahoma, but for the whole country. I think it's important to be looking at the past, looking at how people handled important moments like this and mourning from that.

Davis-Undiano: Well, and you're un-covering a lot of important moments like that and you'll probably discover more as you go forward.

Brooks: Yeah, hopefully. [LAUGHTER]

Davis-Undiano: Somebody watching this segment, they're going to be very alive to the details, the big picture of what you're doing. It's a lot to process if they don't know the things you're talking about already. Give us two or three takeaways that will be valuable for somebody to keep in mind as they try to, maybe in their own lives, be open to more of what's actually happened instead of just the over restrictive stories they may have heard all their lives.

Brooks: I think one thing that's really important that I'm trying to do is listening to people where they're still, like we still have people like I keep mentioning Dr. Henderson, he's such a great resource, he's such a great person. But he was there, and learning from him, I think the Tulsa Massacre is a great example. For a century, we had people who had survived that had first-hand accounts, but we really failed to learn from that, weren't learned from them directly, and so now

we're trying to pick up the pieces, trying to uncover the skeletons in the closet of Tulsa. I say elders, but learning from people who are willing to share their experiences for one. Then, there's the openness as well that's required of that. Like I said, I grew up in South Tulsa around a lot of white people, so I understand there's a large hesitancy to reckon with privilege that you're given, whether you ask for it or not. I had to reckon with it. It's important to approach these conversations that you have with an open mindset and to learn, you don't know what you don't know. Yeah, approach it with an open mindset and really an attitude that's open to learning.

Davis-Undiano: Is that what you would say to a white member of mainstream culture? To just try to be more open to experience outside of your own, get interested in the people around you?

Brooks: Yeah, absolutely, and another thing with intersectionality and reckoning with, we're all talking about white privilege, about straight privilege, stuff like that. Having white privilege, having straight privilege, doesn't mean that your life hasn't been hard. It's just that one aspect of your identity hasn't been summoned, it's been contributing to that. Let's say you're someone who has had that aspect of their identity influencing their life greatly, I think that, again, you don't know what you don't know. Learning from someone with an identity, with an experience that's different from yours is something that I think everyone can learn from.

Davis-Undiano: Bailey Brooks, thank you so much for being our guest today. This is really wonderful.

Brooks: Thank you for having me.

Davis-Undiano: Thank you for joining us. Please watch other segments of Understanding Oklahoma. You take care. [MUSIC]