



EAST-WEST CENTER
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EAST-WEST CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Ric Trimillos Interview Narrative

4-11-2006 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

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The **East-West Center Oral History Project** strives to capture the Center's first 50 years as seen through the eyes of staff, alumni, and supporters who have contributed to its growth.

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Ric Trimillos

4-11-06 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

Personal Background

My parents were immigrants from the Philippines. They came in 1934, when the Philippines was still a part of the Commonwealth of the United States. At that time, it was not a problem of immigration because they were American subjects but not citizens. So, they actually passed through Honolulu on their way to the Bay Area, where I grew up, and my father worked first as a stevedore, I guess, and my mother was a teacher. And then later he got into psychiatric training and worked at a mental hospital. He worked there. He wasn't there as a patient.

Anyway, our background in growing up in San Jose, California, was interesting in that being Filipino was kind of a positive experience. We already knew we were marked as not being regular Americans, but because my parents were both Protestant, they had both converted -- my mother was a Baptist and my father was Presbyterian -- in the Philippines, so there was a lot of interest by churches to have them come and speak about the missionary efforts in the Philippines.

So my introduction to being Filipino in an American setting was getting invited to all of these places to give talks, and my brother and myself were trained to do little dances and songs, so it was already a very positive experience of being Filipino and being performance-oriented, whereas, other people's experience of being Filipino in California was much more negative. So, in that way, I guess we were fortunate, that there was never, for me, a point of being ashamed of being Filipino or trying to play like you're Mexican, as often other people did.

Talking about the Spanish part of my upbringing -- my parents came from the Visayas, which is the central part of the Philippines, where the upper classes spoke Spanish, and not English, so that when we were growing up at home, we spoke Spanish because that was the language of the elite until my brother, who is older than I, went off to kindergarten, and he found out that the people who speak Spanish in California are not the elite. They're quite the opposite. They're all the laboring-class Mexicans. So, we immediately changed to being English speakers.

After about six or seven years old, all of our interactions in the family were in English, though there are still certain topics we still speak about in Spanish because it's easier.

The reason why I think it's relevant to what happened in the East-West Center, when I got here the idea of being able to speak more than one language or operate in more than one language was not something unusual, or insurmountable.

Also, as an undergraduate at San Jose, I went on an exchange program to Germany, also because of music. I spent one summer in Germany and really liked it, and this is, I guess, my second-best non-English language. I went to school at the University of Cologne in the Rhineland, and continued to go back there to do lecturing because they like me to come. They don't have to translate anything. I lecture in German. So, that connection still continues. So, there is a connection in many, many countries, both in Europe and Asia, because of really what the East-West Center sort of trained me for, and also gave me opportunities to have contact with.

I am currently the acting dean of the School for Hawaiian, Asian and Pacific Studies at the University of Hawai'i, and I am the chair of the Asian Studies program. I've been at

the school for the last 16 years now; and prior to that, I was at the music department here at Manoa.

I'm an ethnomusicologist by training, so I'm very interested in the way in which music and other performance are part of cultural construction. And at the moment, my research areas of interest include aspects of gender and the performing arts and identity. I'm also the consultant for a number of government agencies, such as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and the National Endowment of the Arts. I've also done work for the State Department and for UNESCO, so I do a lot of consulting outside of Hawai'i on issues of public policy and the arts, or education and the performing arts, those kinds of things. I came to the University of Hawai'i through the East-West Center. This was in 1962.

Life at the EWC

The Early '60s

I came as one of the first grantees, as we called ourselves then, to the East-West Center to do my master's degree in ethnomusicology. So, that was my introduction to the East-West Center. Really, at the very, very beginning, there had been, I guess, one class, one intake before us, the spring of 1961.

When we arrived, I guess we were the largest group they'd had. I think there were about 300 of us at the time. And we made the first impression on the community because there were so many of us. Previous to that, I had done my undergraduate work at what was then San Jose State College. But now it's San Jose State University. I was a double major in music performance and English lit. My main specialty then was as a pianist, so I did a lot of concert work with piano and also with duo-piano, two pianos, four hands.

And, it was at that time, when I was finishing a bachelor's degree in music, that the East-West Center began recruiting students for their program, and I thought that this would be much more interesting than going to Juilliard and sitting in some practice room. I was also very interested in the way in which ideas, or humanities ideas, cross over into performance.

So, the ethnomusicology approach seemed very much part of the things that I was interested in. And at the time, I didn't realize that there was a field like that, so I was really fascinated with it. Also, when the recruiter came through, he said, "And you get a free trip to Asia." So, that sparked my interest immediately.

When I came here, of course, to the Center, I was really very much taken with the international aspect of the program and meeting all these different people from different places and also, as a Filipino-American growing up in California, it was a kind of revelation to me to see so many other Asians running around, and to also be in a community in which being Asian, or being Filipino more specifically, was not that big of a deal. Whereas, on the mainland, you are a minority, and it is very clear you are. Here, there are so many Filipinos, and so many other Asians, that it has a very different community feel. And I felt very comfortable, both in terms of interacting in so-called Asian ways, which, in California, they think is a little bit weird. And also the idea of just being in a comfortable space. And in fact, I guess that's why I stayed here.

The "Golden Age"

You'll probably get sick of hearing about the "Golden Age" of the East-West Center, which we always talk about. In many ways, I do think it was a "Golden Age." But in others, of course, part of it is just the romanticization and the nostalgia.

First of all, because it was just starting -- the Center had been someone's idea and the working out of it was just happening as we arrived -- there was a lot more flexibility in the programming, and that was one of the things I liked. At that time also, because the East-West Center buildings weren't built yet, it was literally an idea. And everybody was scurrying around to house the administrative part of the program -- it was sort of like a pioneer thing.

It was a lot of fun.

Students helped carry chairs around so it was much more informal than it is now, and the operation was not as big. I was lucky -- and this is sexist, I guess -- but they put the men down in Waikiki at a hotel because the dorms weren't built yet. It was on Lewers Street. The Tropicana. It's not there anymore. So, it was wonderful for me.

Every day after school, we hit the beach and we were out there, and because of the way the operation was, they had shuttle buses twice in the morning and twice in the afternoon to take us to the university and to take us home. So, I mean, it was like a paid vacation for the first semester.

That was the first semester they put the men in Waikiki. And at that time, Waikiki was just beginning its sort of like developmental phase. There were a lot of little cottages and, again, it was the Hawai'i of yesteryear.

And part of the fascination with the East-West Center was that the entire community was literally behind it and very much involved with it. Duke Kahanamoku had his big nightclub at the International Marketplace, so that year he invited all of us, all of the East-West Center kids, I think there were about 150 of us, down to see the show, gave us all aloha shirts, or the muumuus for the girls. It was really a big deal.

We got to go down there and meet him and get our picture taken with him and all this.

So there was a lot more community awareness, and community interaction with the Center, with the students. So, I remember that very vividly, because, anything you can get for free, a graduate student always appreciates.

It was really great. And speaking of good, that's the other thing I regret seeing the passing of. "In the old days," at the very beginning, we ate in a cafeteria, which was below Hemenway Hall. Anyway, it's the old student union, so we all ate there. We had all these little meal tickets and stuff. So, the eating was a time when all of the different people could get together. You just sat there and talked. And the nice thing is that you could also complain about the food.

There was a lot more interaction among different nationalities, and us, so that when the East-West Center finally got its own building, they had a cafeteria downstairs in Jefferson Hall. And so we also met there. When they started putting kitchens into the different living facilities [*dorms*], then what happened was that most of the groups began to coalesce into national groups. All the Thais cooked together. All the Vietnamese cooked together, so that kind of interaction, that informal interaction, sort of went by the boards. So, that's one of the things that I think was different about our era, in terms of actual interaction.

I think a second thing, from the so-called "Golden Years," is there were a lot of people from the Peace Corps. A lot of people who had never been to Asia, so that there was more of a feeling of discovery for the Americans because, even myself, I had never been to Asia before. Whereas the students that we now see coming into the East-West Center, many of the Americans are coming from Asia, or they've been three or four times

already, so that the discovery aspect is not so much part of the experience as it once was. And when we all were there in the '60s, you really did learn things from your Asian counterparts.

Beginnings of the East-West Festival

We started, or I started I guess, the first East-West Center-wide kind of cultural show, and we did the very first one in 1963, at Roosevelt High School. We went over and used their auditorium.

And, again, the artistic values weren't all that great, but the community loved it and everybody came. It was the idea that East-West Center students were sort of giving back to the community, somehow, but also the idea of the kind of interchange that goes on even now where people from "the wrong country" are doing the dance, doing somebody else's dance, so it isn't all just about Japanese doing Japanese stuff, and Filipinos doing Filipino stuff. So, we started that.

It was me and Itsuko [*Suzuki*]. She is a volunteer now for Gordon [*Ring*] in the Alumni Office. Anyway, we were both grantees at that time and so she was another one who is still here. And Benji [*Bennington*] who sort of put that program together. I have fond memories of rehearsals until two o'clock in the morning and everyone was going crazy. So that also, I think, was one of the first, I guess what you would call student initiatives, where the students took interest in something and carried it out.

Dorm Life, the '60s

After that first semester, all of the guys who were down in Waikiki moved first into -- I think it's called Hale Kuahine, because it was the first one done. We used to call it the Low Rise. As opposed to Hale Manoa, which is the High Rise.

So, we all stayed in there for a while, and once we were on campus, in a way, the community, the East-West Center community began to coalesce even more because before, the women were put in the apartments up and down University Avenue, so they were all in apartments. So, it was somewhat separated, but with all of us running around what is now Hale Kuahine, Hale Manoa, there was much more a feeling of community for the East-West Center group.

One of the things that I noticed then, and that still pertains today, is that the East-West Center group, as a kind of primary social group, was very strong, as it is now.

In those early years, all we were expected to do was study, and sort of live together, and then you found out how to do the interchange and all of those other things on your own.

Of course, because it was just a beginning concern, people who were interested in or had experience with, for example, student government, which I had had, and other of the Americans, found things to do and did them.

So there was a lot of service going on for the East-West Center, and it didn't seem to be so much a problem of ask-not-what-you-can-do-for-us that kind of thing. And I think part of that is also that it was so new, that there were all these intricacies for students to help each other out, and that kind of thing.

Ties that Last

I must say, the East-West Center in those days, and I guess it still continues to be kind of like the meeting ground -- I was going to say breeding ground, which it was then too -- but the meeting group of a lot of international and interracial couples. Most of which, interestingly, have stayed together.

Most of my friends who are alumni here are married to people they met at the East-West Center. I would say that my primary group of friends here in Hawai‘i are still East-West Center kids. Kids? We’re not kids anymore.

But the group that I really feel are very close to me, and are my primary social group, are mostly East-West Center. So, we call ourselves the Hawai‘i Theater Group, and, it depends, we’re about 8 to 12, who always take out subscription series to the symphony together, or like, one year, we did the Hawaiian series out at the Hawai‘i Theater. That’s how we came to be known as the Hawai‘i Theater Group. This year, we’re all at the Honolulu Symphony Pops subscription series.

It’s people you really like getting together with. It’s not like, “Oh, we have to,” or something like that.

There’s nothing having to do with business or, you know, it’s good PR to be with these people that you just like to be with. Benji [*Bennington*] is part of that group. Let’s see who else you might know – Gordon [*Ring*]. Bill Feltz, from the Arts Program. They’re the ones who are still here on the staff of the Center, but there are others who are not on the staff.

Life After EWC

Teaching at UH

Now, the reason I actually came back to teach at the music department in 1968 -- after I finished my degree in ethnomusicology at UCLA -- and in those days, there were lots of different jobs. People were offering you jobs as opposed to now where you have to really find something. One of the offers came from the University of Hawai‘i, and I, of course, liked it here, and I stopped on my way back from the Philippines where I had

been doing research, and I decided that, yeah, I'd like to be here for a couple of years.

This was 1968 and it is now 2006, and I am still here.

What is unusual about it, I guess, in academe, what you are supposed to do is shop around and threaten to leave so people will give you more money, and for me, it was more the idea that I was some place where I felt very comfortable and I saw no reason to shop around, and I found that being in Hawai'i, the proximity, both psychologically and geographically, to the area of my interest -- which is Asia and the Pacific -- couldn't be beat. So, that's, I guess, one of the many reasons why I stayed.

Alumni/Research Ties

When I came back to teach at the University music department in 1968, I think it was 1969, I was the first president of the Hawai'i chapter of the Alumni Association. It was under Jai-Ho Yoo. We organized it and started working on the alumni thing. He was the first Alumni Officer, I think, or whatever they called it. So, the chapter began then, and I guess you're aware that the Honolulu chapter continues to be a fairly active group. So, there was that content.

I should have brought my vita because I can't remember the dates exactly, but there were two separate occasions in which I was brought back as a visiting researcher, I think the term they used then, or a visiting research specialist, in the arts. And I think it was sometime in the '80s, on two different times -- one for a year and one for six months, so that on those occasions, I was looking at the ways in which expressive culture was part of interchange and public policy and that kind of thing. We had a couple of conferences, et cetera. So, yeah. There were two other occasions when I had institutional appointments with the East-West Center.

In general, I've always been around and been active with the Alumni Association. I served as advisor for a couple of the presidents, Victor Li who was, gosh, I think he was in the '80s, and a number of others who were looking for, I guess, input from the University side. So, I was often over as an advisor or to just discuss with him because I come from the Center but I was working at the University. So, yeah. I've been pretty active, I think, pretty active interaction, both formal and informal with the East-West Center, ever since I came back in 1968.

An Asia-Pacific Network

I guess the major influence of the Center really was network, that is, the meeting of all these different people from either the Asia-Pacific area, or people like myself, Americans who were going to get involved in the Asia-Pacific area.

Most of us at the time, in the '60s, most of us were sort of beginning career people. With some of the Asians, there were some mid-career people, but most of them were not. So that we are now the senior citizens -- those of us still in academia or in government. So, I must say that many of us are in positions of power and authority, much more so, I think, on the Asian and Pacific side than on the American side.

We've had no president, and we have no ministers to come out of the East-West Center experience for the Americans, but if you look at Micronesia, and certainly Indonesia and Malaysia, a lot of the people who are high up in the government, came out of the East-West Center experience, so, in a way, I often trade on that, on those contacts, when I'm doing work in Asia. I call them up and I can say, "Hi. Let's go out and talk about the old days and by the way -- do you have any money for this particular project?" So, I think the network has been probably the most, I guess, important, for my career.

And the network is also not just the personal network of the people I went to school with or the people I met consequently, but East-West Center, the name has much cachet in Asia and in the Pacific. If you say, you're from the East-West Center, you'll get, "Oh yeah. My cousin went there." Or something. There's some connection, and it does open doors so that I do think it's been an incredibly positive experience, both in the long-term and also in the short-term.

Regrets, in Hindsight

Well, you always have some regrets, I guess. It sounds sort of petty now, looking back on the long road, but what I really regret -- when I was young and irresponsible in Asia, as part of the East-West Center, is not having visited more countries on the way back home. Because, in the old days, you had this field study.

The Americans go to field study in Asia, and I did mine in the southern part of the Philippines, which is sort of the Abu Sayyaf area. And, on the way back, I was with another friend, [*Robert Youngblood*] who, we had worked in the same area -- he was a political scientist and I was in music, and we were going to work our way back gradually, through Asia, looking at things, and somewhere -- it was around Nam, but we got tired and decided not to visit Angkor Wat. We said, "Oh, we can do it next time." And there were a couple of other places like that. Oh, let's not go to Angkor this time.

And then, of course, the war came, and things were changed, so that, again, I sort of regret not being more "irresponsible." So, the lesson learned then, which I have essentially maintained for myself, is never put off anything that you think you're going to come back to because usually you never do. So, you grab it then. You do it then. You

take the time to do it then. And so, in that regard, I have had no regrets because after that experience, that's what I've done.

EWC's Impact

The EWC Experience

I know there are some people for whom the East-West Center experience -- and I'm talking about our group -- was an interesting two years of our lives, and they can leave it alone and that's it. That's fine. But the greater majority, are ones who, I guess, feel like I do -- that it was really a life-changing experience.

I mean really. It sounds sort of corny, but it's really true, that the qualities of experiences that you had -- like Lady Bird Johnson coming, and who else came? We had all these movie stars who came [*Frances Nguyen, Martha Hyer*] -- all these things that would have never happened to me if I had stayed in California.

But, it put us again, as East-West Center students, in a kind of rather rarefied atmosphere, in which, if you talk about these things to other people, they have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. That's in a way why this cohort as you called it, has stayed together -- because there's kind of shared experience of us sort of having been together, and I think also, a part of it, is that temperamentally, we were all fitted to one another, because some of this group doesn't live in Honolulu. There is one in Thailand and one is in France, but when we get together, it's sort of like you're picking up where you left off. And it's because of the kind of people they are.

So, I think that if you look at my cohorts, we were all really changed by the East-West Center in ways, which I think, are really profound. I don't think any of us would be doing what we're doing now if it hadn't been for that "East-West Center Experience."

I'm just thinking about all of the ones like me who came back to Hawai'i. You know, Hawai'i was never really on my radar. I knew it was out here, but I really wasn't interested in Hawai'i until the East-West Center. And then a number of others that I know, who are now in Asia, who serve as technocrat types, thought they were coming here so they could get a job in America, and then they would just stay here. Part of what they sort of appreciated and learned, and came to the realization that, there was a job to be done in their own country -- and in some cases, not even in their own country but another country in Asia. So, they went back, and some of them are now these international, these trans-national, types. They are working in their country, but they are working all over the world.

The idea is that assimilation into America is not the only solution for somebody coming from a third world country. So, yes. That's the long answer to just saying that the East-West Center has had a profound influence on all of us.

Enriching the EWC Experience: Advice

Before I go into my: "To Thine Own Self Be True" bit, I should say that in the last five or six years, I've seen the Center, the student population at the Center, return to the kind of spirit that we had. I mean, I think this has been partly attributed to the new programs, like the Freeman *[Foundation]* things, and what is it, the APLP *[Asia Pacific Leadership Program]*. There is just a lot more excitement and more of a kind of social conscious responsibility.

But, that being said, I think that in terms of advice, one is to make the most of this experience, and that means not just doing the class work and the stuff that you're supposed to do, but all of the informal things. A lot of times things will happen, or you'll

have experiences just because you go out of your way or ask somebody if they need a ride some place, or something like that. I think that the East-West Center has the capacity of making the extremely personal interconnection, but people have to reach out to do it. So, that's one.

The second is, don't hang around with your own national group too much. And I think that that's also part of the magic of the Center in the '60s. Some of the students that I work with now, because they're in our Asian Studies program, the ones who have been adventuresome and who have not hung around with their own group all of the time, I think have had the broader educational experience here in Hawai'i.

There's one in particular I'm thinking about. He's Indonesian, but he's Catholic, so he hangs around with all of the Filipinos over at the Newman Club, and the immediate advantage is that his English is so much better. He's always over there, you know, running around with Filipinos, and they're all speaking English. So, his English, and I guess this is his third semester now, is really fantastic.

It's just, because, if you force yourself to go outside your group, then you learn a lot more; there's a lot more things like that.

The third thing I guess I would tell, and for the Americans, they don't need to be told this, but for the Asians and Pacific Islanders -- they have to figure out how to be aggressive without being disrespectful. Again, being disrespectful is often a concern of the Asians and Pacific Islanders, but to somehow reassure Asians and Pacific Islanders that you can be proactive without appearing that you're being disrespectful to your teacher or something. Because, part of the educational, the learning experience, is that being able to question, feeling free to question, including the administration here.

The ones who did it in our year, and I see some occasionally here -- mostly Pacific Islanders -- I think there is a kind of richer experience because you come up against people who may not agree with everything you want or everything you feel, and then there's this kind of interaction or this dialogue. But if you're always being polite, or if you don't want to make waves and all that kind of thing, then you never learn from the joys of confrontation, as it were.

I think that's one of the things which in our years, and again, because it was more of a pioneer time, there was more of that feeling that you could confront or you could question and even the Asian students felt more empowered to do this. I notice, when I hang around here, when I'm over here, or like at the picnic or something like that, that the Asian students tend not to want to be confrontational. It's not like you have to, but there's not that questioning.

I think that you learn through that, so that would be a second thing that I would, I guess, tell, or give advice to. And I guess a fourth would be to also always see this experience as part of your long-term commitment. It doesn't mean your commitment to the East-West Center, but a long-term commitment to why you are here and what are you going to do next so that the experience doesn't become one more notch in your grantsmanship vita or something like that, but that it really is a space for you to build onto something that's really going to help you in your overall trajectory.

Or, in some cases, to help you find your trajectory because I know people who come here aren't quite sure what they're going to do next, and I think that's the beauty of the Center because there are so many things going on that you see there are possibilities beyond academe, because that's the other thing too -- even in our graduate programs, everyone

thinks: Oh, the only thing I can do is become another professor, sort of recycle ourselves. But actually, with the East-West Center, and a lot of the NGO programs that come in, it's quite clear that there are other things you can do with your knowledge of Asia, the Pacific, or if you're an Asian or Pacific Islander, your knowledge of how the U.S. operates, that there are other things you can do, and there are many more opportunities than just the regular, the path of academe.

So, I guess those are some of the things that I would sort of encourage people to do. And, don't always eat in your group. I guess that's the last one. Go and eat in other people's groups.

The EWC Mission

I think that the Center mission has to continually confront the issues that are relevant to us today, and not just the kind of issues LBJ set up in 1962, so that the constant, I guess, reconstructing of what the Center is, without changing the idea of interchange from my point of view, an interchange that is more equitable, I think, is what the mission of the Center could, and should, continue to be.

I sort of like the engagement the East-West Center has with security issues. So, the idea that the East-West Center is looking at security issues, and they don't have to look at it in the same way that the Security Center downtown [*Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies*] does, or the Pentagon -- but that they're engaging in it -- I think, is a really positive thing.

Another thing, which the Center has started doing more of, which, I approve of ... there are a lot of very good publications coming out of the East-West Center. And the East-

West Center is also much more in -- high profile, like the Asian Studies meeting I just came back from.