

Joseph Colon: Director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs

“Housing Our Story” interview with Jack White

November 19, 2018

- Jack White: Today's date is November 19, 2018. My name is Jack White and I'll be interviewing today for the “Housing Our Story: Archival Justice for Black Baltimore” project. With me is Joseph Colon. Joseph, can you state your name and position under Hopkins?
- Joseph Colon: My name is Joseph Colon, I'm the Director for the Office of Multicultural Affairs [OMA] on the Homewood Campus.
- Jack White: Okay Joseph, and where did you grow up?
- Joseph Colon: I grew up in Brooklyn, New York in pre-gentrified Fort Green. I grew up in a pretty difficult neighborhood—in particular, during the crack era of the 80's and so it was pretty difficult to navigate as a young person, dealing with not only drugs but gangs and things of that nature. It was a part of my life, but it was also a different set of time; so, I grew up in an awesome community, very multicultural. We had Brownstones to my right and affordable housing to the left of me and we were sort of in the middle of it all, this equator-like, apartment-style building. So yeah, that's where I grew up.
- Jack White: That's really good. Was there any part of that experience that you find affecting how you think about people who maybe live in projects or people who live in Brownstones by projects or anything like that?
- Joseph Colon: Yeah, it definitely, I would say, going back to my neighborhood now, it definitely ... New York definitely has a different feel than it would have did 20, 25 years ago.
- Joseph Colon: For me, it's nostalgic for me when I go back. I always look to the neighborhoods as is just because I prefer that visual and that feel even though it was tumultuous time, very difficult time. It was during the Reaganomics and so that was a tough time to grow up but it was also a joyous time. Because we had, I just remember the community at large was very supportive and looking out for each other's kids, or even each other—you could see us out on the stoop. But when I think about the neighborhood at large, I think it's an interesting dynamic of how—like I say, I always reference the pre-gentrification point because there's something ... again something very special about that time that really connected with me; whether it was playing tag or hid and seek in an apartment building that had multiple floors and rooftops to jump from rooftop to rooftop, just to think about that even to this day is kind of funny. But, growing up in that

environment it was very freeing as a young person particularly called the concrete jungle. It was one of those things that I wouldn't give up.

Joseph Colon: I think one of the most dynamic things that happened to me or actually the most impactful things was actually having that innocence, but then also that innocence lost almost, ideal of, you know—just think about what our students currently ... or kids growing up now are dealing with. We always like to compare contrast generations, so there's always like who had it worse, or who had to walk the farthest to school and things of that nature.

Joseph Colon: But, when I think about race in particular ... I also I have to connect it to socioeconomics. When I grew up in that area it was, again we had folks who could afford Brownstones—that weren't ridiculously priced like they are now. But, those we middle class folks who actually did really well. Spike Lee lived two, three blocks away from me, across the street from the park. He was a normal person in our neighborhood that we could actually touch and talk to; he invested in the neighborhood. There was a lot of black pride. There was a lot of people of color pride. There was a specialized high school up the street from us called Brooklyn Tech, which I always fought to not go because it was too close to home. I was an adventurous kid.

Joseph Colon: When I looked at it, I definitely saw New York as an interesting hodgepodge of folks and just connection to each other. But, I could also see that there were a lot of differences particularly within the communities, even though we were very familiar with each other there was still a disparity regarding folks of color in particular—Black and Latino folks. And even the folks who decided to not have White Flight that decided to stick around, it was just a different time, a different place. Economically we were all struggling to some degree.

Joseph Colon: Now, not so much, people aren't struggling who held onto those Brownstones. But when I think about particularly where I grew up and race, I always connect it with socioeconomics; it's just interesting. My mom was a single parent mom. She brought me up. She had me when she was 15 and I remember being on welfare, standing in line to the church next door to us and getting government cheese and not knowing that that was not ... it felt like it was a norm for me. My mom didn't stay on public assistance for too long, but it was impactful even to this day to think about it as something that I grew up not knowing what poverty looked like because it was a norm. My mom, she really struggled and she also persevered so that we wouldn't have to do that for too long.

Joseph Colon: When I think about my childhood, when I think about that neighborhood and what it used to be or what it is still; it's all those things in particular.

Jack White: That's really powerful. What brought you to Baltimore then, and why Baltimore and was it the job that brought you or did you come here and then find a job? Was it Hopkins?

Joseph Colon: Yeah so, I actually, I was working at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut and I decided two years in, I was like, "Let me see what else is available" and I happened upon a position here within Residential Life. I just decided to see what would ... throw my hat in the ring. We ended up getting the position and I've been here ever since.

Joseph Colon: As many New Yorkers like to do, they like to compare-contrast; I was so upset that they didn't have the same amenities, like the subways and just the communities as far as being really ... I think in New York we do have those pockets of communities, but there's so many people there that it's almost a fusion. And so, what really was interesting about Baltimore was that it had a different feel. It was beautiful in many ways; it was pretty, and it was very familiar to me. At the same time, it also had this very city-like feel. Coming off ... the first time I came to Baltimore coming off of the highway, off of 95 when you past Raven Stadium, I just thought to myself, "Wow, this is a beautiful city." It filters out and opens up into probably one of the poorest areas. You kind of get to see the juxtaposition around that.

Joseph Colon: But, the reason I'm here in Baltimore is because of a job opening and I ended up calling it home for 18 years.

Jack White: Yeah, okay. And then where do you live now in the city, just generally or however specific you want to be?

Joseph Colon: I currently don't, I don't necessarily live in the city, I live on the outskirts of the city; I'm in Mount Washington right now.

Jack White: Oh, okay.

Joseph Colon: Before that I lived here in the Homewood Campus area and then I kind of moved around pretty much in the County [Baltimore County]. I've lived in the County; I've lived in the City. So yeah, that's where I typically live.

Jack White: Is there a reason why you moved out there or is it just you found something?

Joseph Colon: I think I moved out there because, one, taxes are a lot cheaper.

Jack White: Yeah.

Joseph Colon: Exponentially cheaper, which is sad to say but it's one of those things. And also rent was a lot cheaper, communities—I was looking for a diverse community so I was looking for a place I can actually get all those things all in one. I'm a big proponent of community, so for me it's important. One of the big tellers for me is going to a grocery store and seeing where the grocery stores are and kind of seeing who frequents it.

Joseph Colon: I live in a pretty diverse area right off of Reisterstown Road which is the borderline of the county and the city. But, yeah, that's why I moved out there. Plus, my wife was out there as well, so we ended up looking out there.

Jack White: Right. Okay. Now you're at the Office of Multicultural Affairs and you said you started at Res life. What were the jobs that you've had and how did that progress, I guess?

Joseph Colon: Yeah, so my position in Multicultural Affairs was Assistant Director for Residential Life. I was basically in charge of a whole area of ... cluster of residence halls. And then I was actually looking for another position and then I got a position in New York—which would've been phenomenal—but we had some negotiation issues, particularly my living situation. So, I actually was going to be a Director for Residential Life for a school out there. That didn't pan out, so I decided to stick around for a little bit longer. And so, this position in Multicultural Affairs, for Assistant Director popped up open and there was a need particularly for us to diversify the staff in particular.

Joseph Colon: I applied for the position stayed in it and I've been in there since 2008, 2007 and I've kind of moved up within the department, the office from assistant to associate and then finally director. That's kind of been my trajectory here at Hopkins.

Jack White: Right.

Jack White: This is just a little tangent that I want to take. You talked a lot about multiculturalism and how that's an important part to you and you're working in the office for it. Do you have any origins of how that came to be an important thing for you or can you describe how it's important to you or the value that it has to you as an effector on one's life?

Joseph Colon: I have to go back a little way back. Growing up in Brooklyn particularly during that time, I noticed that there was a lot of assaults and things of that nature within my community, particularly interracial and inter-group. While I was in middle school, I ended up getting jumped about seven times within a span of probably two months.

Jack White: Wow.

Joseph Colon: I had navigated some areas. I kind of knew some folks that I could lean into that could help me alleviate my situation. So it was kind of interesting to actually talk to folks, particularly in my community and be like, "I need help because I'm getting jumped." And even wasn't getting any help with the police. I wasn't getting help with my teachers.

Joseph Colon: I went to a specialized junior high school for students who did really well in school, but we were smack in the middle of the projects and so they had to let us out ten minutes before because it was such a difficult area in particular with other schools—neighborhood schools coming to harass us or jump us or however inflicting any type of assaults. Some people were getting bus passes stolen or even money, shoes. ABC which is A Better Chance is a non-profit group that basically comes into schools—public schools in particular—for high achieving students and I actually got a scholarship to go to a boarding school in North Andover, Massachusetts. Which was a whole different—

Jack White: Did you go to Andover or?

Joseph Colon: I went to Brooks School which is the sister school to Andover. So I didn't know what I was getting myself into and I wasn't an only child. My mom had a younger sibling but I'd always been that one kid who just, I mean, I did everything and anything so my mom asked me, she said, "Do you want to do this?" And I said, "Absolutely." Because my neighborhood had gotten a little rough.

Joseph Colon: Fast forward, I ended up going to boarding school, having a great time, really fit in. But, as many folks who walk into some of those predominately white institutions, we tend to assimilate—almost to a fault and to a point—and as youngster I never really got ... I understood the dynamics of race and class and so on and so forth. I was a kid who only had three blazers for six days of class of school days, days of school. I never noticed it but I was hiding that by kind of trying to be a fashion mogul by switching out different clothing styles, different pants just to make it look somewhat as if I had some means to really represent in this boarding school environment. I couldn't even afford the patch to put on my blazer so that didn't happen until I graduated. Which was embarrassing at the time, but whatever.

Joseph Colon: I really grew into this space until the first time someone used an ethnic slur towards me, and we had an issue on the campus with the confederate flag being basically outside the window and so people could see. That really affected me big time. And so I did something courageous during that time which transforms my experience past that. Which is, I basically got in front of the student body and told them my story what had happened and how I felt as if I belonged nowhere, and this is the one place that I felt like I could actually

be free and be safe. Whereas back home I didn't feel safe and now I felt unsafe in the two places that I call home.

Joseph Colon: I just remember the audience kind of like hushed and even telling my store was really difficult at the time to make some proclamations that I would not tolerate X, Y, and Z. It was a life changing experience for me.

Jack White: Definitely.

Joseph Colon: People treated me differently afterwards, even some of my friends because they didn't know how to approach me or how to connect with me. Some folks just didn't bother to engage with me, but the thing that it taught me was that I had to create and cut out my own space. Being Puerto Rican is important to me, but I also had to dive deep into the cultural aspects of what makes a Puerto Rican a person of color, in particular with my lineage. I did some of that stuff and I got into the Afro-Caribbean; I got into as what they call now the "colonizer roots." Those were important things to me that kind of really engaged with my ethnicity and my culture.

Joseph Colon: In particular, finding my place and no longer living in limbo cultural and also race and ethnic-wise. Those were some things that really transformed my experience and then in college I took some courses that furthered my education. I went to Temple University in Philadelphia which is 18 thousand students. I went from 500 high school students to 18 thousand and I'm like, "Oh, what's going on here?" And even though I was a city kid, it was Philly, it was different so I had to get used to that as well. And so I started to do a lot of social engagement and politics within Philadelphia really getting involved in the community and it somehow led me into student affairs and as many student affairs professionals will tell you, you got to just fall into it; it's something awesome, that I'm good at, I'm like, "Great, I'll try it for a year or two," and then you end up, it becomes a career.

Joseph Colon: There's been a lot of key points in my life that kind of transformed my direction as the multicultural affairs. I've kind of veered more to the equity piece. For me I think the conversation is less ... we always talk about race and ethnicity, but I think people are afraid to talk about race and ethnicity—it's a difficult subject, but you can always enter that conversation through the point of equity. I think for some people that's much more of an entry point, a pretty great entry point for folks to kind of get into the deep, deep issues.

Jack White: Right. I guess I do want to touch on what it's like to work specifically for Hopkins. Two questions together are ... what are the responsibilities of your job and what is the average day like for you working for Hopkins?

Joseph Colon:

Wow. Okay. That's a lot (laughs). Our office, we have about five total folks who actually work within the office. I manage pretty much the day to day operations of our office. We do everything ... we have a three-prong approach about how we engage all types of conversations particularly about diversity and inclusion. We're under the umbrella of Diversity and Inclusion, which includes us OMA for short, Women and Gender Resources, we have LGBTQ life, and then Campus Ministries. We kind of work in tandem.

Joseph Colon: Our office historically actually did all of that stuff and so we noticed that we were doing, it was way too much work for just one office so I'm glad to have my brothers and sisters in those offices. But we actually put on programming; pretty intense programming. We've graduated from 'culture months' to celebrating full-year so we call it 365, "Heritage 365." Which is a different take on cultural celebrations so Black Heritage month, Black Heritage celebration, Latinx Heritage celebration and so on and so forth and we also have Asian-Pacific Heritage, and also Indigenous.

Joseph Colon: It's a great first year run. We've been very busy. We also do diversity education so that we work with SEED: Students Educate and Empower for Diversity—it's a student group and initiative train students. They do trainings they also do professional presentations. They also do programming; they really engage the community in difficult conversations. They go beyond the surface level stuff. Those are some areas and then we also do leadership development with our student groups and organizations. We have almost 40 student groups and organizations that we support and we strive to support; that's kind of the crux of it all.

Joseph Colon: Me personally, I am currently, if I'm not in a meeting—which is a meeting culture here at Hopkins—I'm typically out supporting our students as an advisor or I'm specifically working with advocacy stuff or I'm sitting in boards and chairs. I actually chair a regional non-profit of schools and organizations and stuff. That's been kind of on my radar for years as an add on to my job. The Washington Regional Task Force; so, we have a conglomerate group of colleges, universities. And so just creating new ways in which we actually engage our students to race, gender, ethnicity—we really do try to strive to make sure that we're supporting our student with organizations whether they're protesting, providing demands, or even getting students into the conversation. I've noticed that we've gotten a pretty diverse group of students interested in diversity work, inclusion work and that to me says a lot about the generation that's coming in. I'm really excited about that.

Joseph Colon: So, my work has been more about informational—we're looking to work with other offices as well, and so we're really engaging in some of those relationship building. Building more relationships with Center for Africana Studies, East Asian Studies, and also the program at Land American Studies as well, because they connect and they dovetail with our student groups and organizations.

Joseph Colon: So yeah, we do a lot. I probably haven't covered everything but a day in my world is typically just making sure that we've managed 35 plus groups well through the Multicultural Leadership Council which is a whole other group; SEED; there's also a mentoring program involved, so that has over 180 folks participating in it. So it's a lot. It's a pretty big endeavor. And then we're adding more stuff onto our plate. So, we're launching a podcast to talk about a counter-narrative about some of the things that are being put out there, giving people a platform. We've been really looking at other teaching tools and areas in which we can actually do online and dovetail it with like actually in class curriculum work, so we will be venturing into that arena as well. We're just interested in really developing our students holistically but also to be proud of who they are, wherever they come from.

Jack White: Right. What is it like working for Hopkins? Do you feel, I don't want to say appreciated, do you feel like the administration values the work that the office is doing or do you think that they kind of just did it because they felt that they had to? I guess, how do you feel about the relationship between your work, OMA and Hopkins as an entire institution, I guess?

Joseph Colon: Yeah. So, I think we're at that interesting transition period, that's transitioning from the preliminary kind of fact-finding stuff. I also know that our office has been doing that work for over 25 years, so we have a different take on what diversity and inclusion has been like on this campus. I think the rise of student protests over the past three years over social issues, particularly Freddie Gray is really ... for it to be so close to home has really given a different perspective of what we should be doing as an institution.

Joseph Colon: I think one of the things that probably plagues us is our decentralization as an institution. So, there are pockets of folks doing several things around diversity and inclusion with no real pull to kind of pool the resources and connect the dots. I think that when we talk about doing the work, I think we're in a transition where we're veering ourselves from the building blocks and actual written documentation, and so the road map for diversity and inclusion, what does that look like? How do we make sure that we're holding ourselves accountable to a lot of those things that are put in there but that we're also evaluating that document. And what are we doing internally as a universe at large; is everyone doing the work? I think it's just so easy to pawn off that work to a certain area because that's what their function is. I've never worked that way, particularly when it comes to students because if a student comes to me and they need my help, I need to be not just conduit, or liaison, or a referral, but I have to know what's happening I have to know the inner workings.

Joseph Colon: I'm not sure campus wide if we're there yet. I think people want to learn more. I think professionally, it is frustrating at times because there are

so many entities that need to go beyond just a policy; they kind of have to go a little bit deeper than we've been able to. But I also know that folks are on a different strata, when it comes to diversity an inclusion. I really would love, if I had to envision a Hopkins where we were kind of more centralized in this arena, it would go beyond just documents and actually having each area have a plan of action.

Jack White: Right.

Joseph Colon: A full engagement plan in which we all are at the table; people are not ... their egos are checked at the door and there's no issue with asking for assistance if you don't know where to start. But at the same time, there's an accountability piece and that we're all supporting each other as individuals.

Joseph Colon: I've had frustrations over the years as you can imagine being a part of social justice, just being entrenched in a lot of this work. And also going outside into the city; I put a lot of value in that work in particular: going out to the Latinx community and going out into the LGBTQ community and being an ally for everyone and anyone in the city. Noticing that there's been an influx of community organizations happening and propping up by folks who have been supported for years have been here.

Joseph Colon: I think that disconnect, I think we do several projects that have Hopkins's name. I think we just need to look at it from perspective of what's already here and how do we support those pieces and not just legitimizing non-profit, but actually being partners instead of ... being a good practitioner stems from humbling yourself and kind of being in the mix, without actually feeling like you're a savior; you're an influencer, you're a connector, you're a liaison.

Jack White: So, you talked about the protests and specifically with regards to the police force that Hopkins has been talking about getting. Is there any ... when you look at that sort of proposal and you look at the response to them, you even have a piece of paper on your desk right now about it. Do you feel like, does that interplay with your role in the office at all? Do you feel like it's, in terms of the functions of the office or even with your role and the goals of the multiculturalism, do you feel like having a police force or the way that the university is going about the police force, do you think that that ... I guess, what are your thoughts on that in regards to everything?

Joseph Colon: I think that ... So, I went to a university—Temple University—who had a police force it was I think the second largest police force in like the state or ... I might be misquoting but I know it was one of the largest, if not second to Philadelphia police.

Joseph Colon: We had some issues in that area—particularly, they had to adapt because we were in the city, specifically North Philly, which was infested with a lot of crime and a lot of poverty to have to navigate some of those culturally sensitive pieces to the puzzle as a police force and also supporting students on campus. That's tricky; that's very tricky. My experiences have been, when you talk about safety versus policing—those are things that I think on the table we kind of have to kind of contend what we have to talk about how we approach some of those methods. Are we actually including The neighborhoods in the conversation. What would that do? What is the buy-in strategy and how do we get true statistics to be able to explain the necessity for it?

Joseph Colon: For me, when I think about my students. I know our students have been opposed to it as well. I support them as an advocate of the Office; in particular, we want them to have a voice and to be able to really engage in that social justice conversation. I think it's an important piece to the puzzle that I wish I was a little bit more involved in when I was a young person, a young college student throughout my time. But I think the policing part is a difficult conversation. I see the pros and cons to it, but I also know that it takes a long time to kind of build up the rapport that you need, particularly in the community and also ... maintain safety on campus. It's just a tricky position.

Joseph Colon: I think it's doable. I also think language is important so when people hear police force, they think of Baltimore Police Force; they think about the corruption they'd be bringing in. What do we currently have, what's the system? Does privatizing quell any issues or fears, does a training certification quell any ... I have no idea what that looks like. But, I support my students and I think that with all those things put forth, they've done a lot of homework; we've done our homework. I think we just need to get together and figure out, what does this look like?

Joseph Colon: We also don't know if this legislation is going to go through or if it's going to be uplifted, but I definitely think that it's one of those things that it's just a difficult topic. Again, as I said, as someone who came from an institution with a strong police force, but then looking at other institutions; we're not a large school, so for us it's going to be a lot of bridge building. It has to take time and I don't want us to also live in a fear based or fear mongering environment either; and things could happen on this campus and things could not happen on this campus. I think we have to really concentrate on multiple factors of what makes our students safe; particularly mental health, we can talk about that piece. And we can also talk about racial disparities, trauma, and things like that. Those are things that I think have to connect with the safety of our campus.

Joseph Colon: I'm 100 percent behind our students in the fact that we want to support them, as an entity; we also want to make sure that are students are safe and how that plays out, whether it's an official police force or ... [inaudible] those political landmines and then making sure that we are communicating with

the community is I think utmost. I'm not sure if ... I'm not particularly sure about the timing of the mass push to kind of put this through the legislation, but what I do know is that I think we are in the process of kind of laying the foundation of having conversations around that. What does that look like? I have no idea, because I think the forms after a certain point will provide us some context and in going to the communities will provide us some resolution and some context.

Joseph Colon: But I think there's always going to be—particularly from our students ... We're not an activist campus, our students are not heavily into activism, but I've been very motivated and really touched by the students who are looking at multiple angles and social justice within our systems and how broken our systems are and how we need to really contend with that and really ask some tough questions about who we are as an institution. I think this is one of them, that hopefully we can kind of find a compromise in between.

Jack White: That's all I have. I really appreciate your time and I appreciate you being candid and responding to the interview questions.

Joseph Colon: Yeah, I appreciate it. Made me think a lot about my own experiences as a student and living in the city as well so I appreciate that, that was really cool.

Jack White: Thank you.