Closeted/Out in the Quadrangles:
A History of LGBTQ Life at the University of Chicago

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #16
MOHANRAJ, MARY ANNE (1971-) **AB 1993**

At U of C: 1989 -1993

Interviewed: March 5, 2013 (1 session)
Interviewer: Molly Liu
Transcript by: Molly Liu
Length: 01:15:23

Interview (March 5, 2013) with Mary Anne Mohanraj in Oak Park, IL.

[00:00:00]

ML: So, why don't we start off by telling me: how did you come to the University of Chicago?

MAM: I was at Miss Porter's school in Connecticut, and we had a great college advisor with us and went over what would be good schools for us. I hadn't heard of the U of C before, but given my strong interest in English Lit and general geekiness, I think she thought it would be a really good fit for me. So I applied and when I got in, I visited, and I loved it. That's basically it.

ML: I didn't know that you went to Miss Porter's! I went to Exeter, so we debated against your school sometimes. What did you study at the University of Chicago?

MAM: I knew that I was going to be an English major from the beginning. I finished in less than four years, because I was very focused on my degree. I did the Common Core; we had two years of pretty wide-ranging classes. Then I started doing my lit classes. That's most of what I did when I was there.

ML: Even though you finished before the four years were over, did you stay there for the entire four years?

MAM: I stayed in town, I stayed in Hyde Park. I was working at the university after that.

ML: Can you talk a bit more about the classes that you took at the U of C? What was your academic experience like?

MAM: Oh, it was great. I got to take Shakespeare with David Bevington, which was awesome. He very kindly let me sit in on a graduate class even though I was an undergraduate, and that was really interesting. I took Little Red Schoolhouse, which is the intensive

composition class. It was not necessarily fun at the time, but it was incredibly useful in making my papers much clearer and stronger. Now that I'm teaching English lit, it gave me the tools that I can use to help my students write clearer papers. That was very helpful. I took a really wonderful Arthurian lit class—it wasn't just Arthurian lit, it was that entire period—with Michael Murrin. He was so brilliant—I'd planned to be an Arthurian scholar, but he kind of scared me off. It seemed that he had read everything and had memorized it all and could just quote from it at need in class. That was slightly intimidating, and I ended up going into a different area. I also can't remember the professor's name: there was a professor emeritus who taught a class on *Gulliver's Travels.* That was all we read, and we did a very close, focused reading in class. It was great. I dunno, I had a terrific time. In every English class—I flunked calculus, I barely pulled Cs in my science classes.

ML: Where did you live when you were at the university?

MAM: I was in the Shoreland for as long as I was in the dorms. Two years, maybe three years. Three years? I think it might have been three years, actually. I was in the Shoreland, which I know isn't a dorm anymore.

ML: Yeah, it's really sad.

MAM: It was a great dorm. It was far away though, so commuting in by bus was a little bit of nuisance. But aside from that, it was good. Then I lived off-campus with some roommates. We lived at, I want to say, 54th and Woodlawn. 54Th Place and Woodlawn, I think.

ML: It's a good location. So many students. Besides your English classes, did you take any classes that involved gender or sexuality?

MAM: I took Feminist Theory. I got into a big—I don't remember a lot about this class, because the main thing I remember was that I got into big fights with the professor in class. Now looking back, I was at the time a liberal feminist and she was what I would call a radical feminist. So repeatedly she was presenting a point of view that was more confrontational than I was comfortable at the age of 19, so I was advocating for moderate change that wouldn't rock as many boats, and I think she got pretty impatient with me. Also I talk a lot in class, which I'm sure irritated her that I kept raising my hand.

ML: I'm pretty sure professors aren't irritated by people talking—who knows.

MAM: Well, when one student monopolizes the class, it's bad. I got kind of sensitized to that in grad school. In college, I was clueless.

ML: Could you talk a little more about the debates that you had with her?

MAM: Oh god, it was 20 years ago. I don't know if I can remember so much. I don't really remember. Sorry. I don't think I had any queer theory. I don't even remember if it was

offered at that point.

ML: It was probably only just starting. The '90s. You mentioned that you identify as bisexual. Did you identify as bi when you were at the college?

MAM: Yes. It came as something of a surprise to me. If you had asked my freshman year, I would have assumed that I was straight. Then somewhere that spring, there was a girl who hit on me. At first I was very startled. Then I went home and thought about it, and I realized that it sounded good. [laughs] So I ended up calling her up again and saying, "Well, actually..." So we went on a date—I think it went well, but she got a little impatient with my newbie-ness to it all. She wasn't really looking to educate. It didn't turn into anything long-term, though we're still friends.

ML: That's impressive.

MAM: Well, we were part of the theater community, UT. There was a lot of people dating within the community at UT. It was very incestuous. Most people tended to stay friends afterward. If you were working on shows together—otherwise it would get awkward.

[00:11:26]

ML: Right.

MAM: Yeah, and then later in my time...after that I had another boyfriend for a while. I think it was my senior year that I'd always been uncomfortable with monogamy. The guys I'd dated had wanted to be monogamous and I'd gone along with it, but I wasn't really thrilled with it. When I started dating again my senior year with Kevin, my current partner, I went into it saying that I wasn't really interested in monogamy, and he was fine with it. So we dated other people. I dated a lot in those days. It was a good thing that I wasn't finishing up my classes, because all the dating took up a lot of time.

ML: [laughs] It's like a part-time job: dating.

MAM: Poly requires a lot of conversations. There's a lot of talking. More talking than most people realize, I think. At some point we met an Australian woman, Karina, who was visiting the U.S., and Kevin and I both started dating her. We were in a threesome with her for three years. She would come and live with us—she was a grad student—she'd live with us during their summer break, which is our winter, and she'd go back for school and we'd be long-distance. I think the long-distance part was most of what ended it in the end. It's very hard to do an international long-distance. But we're still good friends. In fact, I visited her just a couple months ago.

ML: You mentioned UT. Were you involved in any other organizations on campus?

MAM: Sci-Fy, the science fiction club. That was the main other one. That was getting together and playing board games. That was a pretty liberal group of people. There was some

dating in that group as well. And UCBU, University of Chicago Bisexual Union. I joined that group.

[00:15:47]

ML: We actually came across a newspaper article that was talking about that. Could you talk a little bit more about the Bisexual Union?

MAM: I'm trying to remember...it's very hard to think back. I don't even remember how I ended up joining. I think I had a gay friend who told me about it. I went to a meeting—there were these meetings in a little room in Ida Noyes. We'd get together monthly, maybe, and talk about just any sort of bi issues that may have come up. I got to be pretty good friends with the people there. There's a period where it got...hm, I don't quite know how to put this. We referred to it as "puppy piles," where people would be lounging on the couch, and more people would be coming in—we were all crammed into this little room, so we had fifteen people in a tiny room. There wouldn't be enough seating, so people kind of jammed on the couch, then some of these people would be dating, then they would be sort of making out during the meeting, and then...

ML: Oh no! The Bisexual Union just turns into a giant orgy! [laughs]

MAM: It kind of did. There were a couple of months where that was happening regularly. I don't know how it happened, but we had a series of conversations where we decided that this was inappropriate, we had to stop. Yes, we're all friends, and everyone who's been coming for months or years were comfortable with this. But there are new people who want to join, and we can't have them walking into a student group and going, "Whoa, I've walked into an orgy," you know? [laughs] I think we all decided that we had to cool it at meetings. It was a good crowd. Again, I'm still friends with a lot of people who were a part of that.

ML: Can you talk about the overall campus attitude towards gays, lesbians, bisexuals?

MAM: My sense of politics at the U of C back then is that we were really apathetic. Some universities have a really strong political culture, and I think Chicago didn't at that point. I don't know what it's like now. People were very focused on their studies and their hobbies, dating if they could, and that was it. There weren't any rallies or anything like that. There might have been one Take Back the Night march when I was there, I can't quite remember. The one incident—when I went on that first date with that woman—I'm not mentioning her name because I'm not sure she'd be comfortable with it—she and I went back to campus the next day holding hands, and I definitely was aware that I was walking across campus holding hands with a woman, but I don't think that anyone else cared. It was all in my head. During my time there I didn't experience any hostility. There was I think one incident of gay-bashing. I don't remember what year it was. It was off-campus, but affecting students. It was a male student who was attacked. The campus responded pretty strongly, with a series—there were speeches. One thing that I remember helping to do was cutting out pink triangles and handing them out to people to wear. You

saw a lot of them. Lots of the faculty were wearing pink triangles, lots of the students. That felt like a very supportive response. I think that the general attitude at the time was that we may not be interested in sexual politics in general, but this is unacceptable.

ML: So there was a lot of campus solidarity.

MAM: Yeah, I think so. When it was brought to their attention. It wasn't so much on the radar generally back then.

ML: You mentioned the Bisexual Union as being something distinct from the gay and lesbian students. Did you feel like there was a separation?

MAM: Yes. The bi group was its own group. I went to one or two gay or lesbian things. I think I went to a gay meeting, which was mostly guys. And I went to a lesbian potluck. Which I thought was interesting because it was all women, and all women who called themselves lesbians. But in the conversation over food, I was asking—I was the only person who came there labeled as bisexual, and I said that I was bi. It turned out that all the women there, and there were maybe a dozen, did also date and sleep with guys. But they felt that it was important to carry the political label of lesbian, and they saw bi as a little bit of a cop-out. As a way of avoiding stigma.

ML: So did you think that there was some hostility?

MAM: Not so much hostility...they were all a little bit older than me. Those women—I don't think that they were affiliated with an official campus group. I think it was just—I can't even remember how I got invited there. I think that group was a little more politically active, that's all. They weren't hostile at all. It was just...maybe educational, their responses to me.

[00:15:50]

ML: How political would you characterize yourself when you were at the university?

MAM: At the university? Almost not at all. Except in the personal sense, in being—my parents are very traditional, they had an arranged marriage, they expected that I would do the same. They didn't expect me to date. I had a lot of fights with them in college over the fact that I was dating. So there's this sense of personal politics and fighting for what I saw as bodily autonomy. But I didn't extend it beyond myself when I was in college.

ML: If you don't mind me asking, can you talk a little about the conflicts that you had with your parents? Were they mostly about—were they about your sexuality, or were they about you dating at all?

MAM: Just about dating. I didn't actually come out to my parents as bi. I actually don't know if I ever did, though I wrote enough about it that eventually I'm sure they figured it out. It was just about the fact that I was dating, that I was dating white boys, which they did not

approve of. They were worried if I would be able to make a good marriage. They didn't want me to have sex before marriage, which I was pretty committed to doing. I lied to them about my first boyfriend during my freshman year. I hated lying. That was so stressful, I was always afraid that I was going to get caught. When I started dating Paul, my second boyfriend, I just told them upfront. And then we had months of screaming fights on the phone.

ML: Oh, I'm sorry about that.

MAM: I kind of knew that it was coming. I was—my parents are stubborn, I'm also stubborn, it runs in the family. So it was kind of inevitable that it was going to go that way.

ML: You also mentioned before being polyamorous. How do you think that relates to being bisexual? Or—how do you see those two identities working together?

MAM: It's an interesting question. I have bisexual friends who are monogamous, right? For them, especially once they're partnered, there's sometimes a sense of—it's a deliberate turning away from an avenue. In a political sense, it can be hard if you are bi and you end up in a heterosexual pairing, your partner is opposite-sex, your queerness becomes invisible to the outside world, and you have to keep on deciding to what extent am I going to keep on going in the coming-out process. Am I going to wear a button to advertise to the world that I'm bi, especially if I've been with the same person for 20 years now? I think that's a huge issue. One thing that poly maybe makes a little easier is that I can talk about—at least in theory, if I had a girlfriend, I could talk about her. I don't at the moment, but if I had one, I could, even though I live with a man and have kids with him and look very straight to the outside world. And certainly I can talk about my ex-girlfriend, and the book I'm writing is in large part about her. That's also a way of claiming visibility. If I talk to people about being poly, which is also a coming-out process, that's a similar coming-out process to make that evident, usually the bi part comes out with that. That's part of the conversation.

ML: So in a way it's a little bit easier because there are more avenues for you to present your sexual identity?

MAM: Yeah...I actually think it's easier on the bisexual front. I would say it's harder to come out as poly than it is to come out as bi. Look, I don't really get any hostility about being bi, and I've gotten quite a bit about being poly. I've had women, typically women, who get very threatened and say, “Does this mean that you're going to steal my husband away from me?” Which I think is fascinating.

ML: Huh. That's a weird reaction.

MAM: I think what it's coming out of is a sense that men wouldn't be—I think they take as a base assumption that men wouldn't be monogamous if women didn't make them be monogamous, right? On the one hand, by me not being monogamous, that makes it harder for them to insist to their husband that he has to be. So there's that. And as a

secondary thing, there's this assumption that being poly means that you have no morals, essentially. So then of course it would be okay to go after other women's husbands. It takes me usually 45 minutes to talk them down from that. Eventually we get to a point where I can usually explain to them that look, because I'm poly I have a whole world of unattached people I could possibly date. I don't need the extra headache of going after someone who's already married or partnered or whatever else. On a purely practical level, I'm really not threatening. I'm less threatening to you than somebody who is monogamous, I think. Sometimes I convince them that way.

[00:22:30]

ML: It's true though that a polyamorous woman challenges a couple of gender stereotypes.

MAM: Yeah. If you have to keep saying to your spouse that "No, we have to be monogamous, because that's what women want, that's a societal norm," then obviously I undermine that argument. My existence undermines that argument. I don't necessarily that's maybe the best grounds for a relationship if you have to keep on using that argument to keep someone faithful to you, but...

ML: Was there a big poly community in Chicago?

MAM: There was at the U of C. I would say a good number of the bi people in UCBU were poly, which also made it easier to date around in the community. I dunno if there was in the larger Chicago community. Mostly I hung around at the University of Chicago back then.

ML: Did you experience of those odd reactions that you have now to being poly when you were in college?

MAM: Less so then. I think in college everyone was flexible. Most people weren't partnered or long-term partnered; certainly most people weren't married. We were all just figuring it out too. It was very fluid and confusing, I would say. I don't think I had a clear position on any of this at 19. I just knew that I didn't like being monogamous. I wasn't interested in that for myself or my partner.

ML: Do you see monogamy and bisexuality as being kind of in conflict?

MAM: No, not really. Yes, if you're monogamous, that means that you never get to date people of whatever gender it is, but you also don't get to date all the people of the same gender, right? I don't think so. At least for me, I don't see that.

ML: I was just curious, since you did mention--

MAM: I've heard that argument presented, but not typically by bisexual people. It's people going "Don't you miss breasts" or whatever. Not in the general--

ML: [laughing] "The idealized breast: do you miss it?"

MAM: The idealized breast, yes! Exactly! And I think that's interesting. It's as if sexual desire is about the body part. I guess that's why I don't really understand monosexuality, right? I have a little trouble grokking, getting on a fundamental level, what it would mean to only be attracted to people with a certain set of genitalia. I don't really understand that. I think I fall in love with people or I'm attracted to people, and whatever body parts they have are what they have.

ML: Yeah, I actually feel pretty similarly, so who knows.

MAM: It's actually really interesting from a gender essentialist sort of take. If you believe that, if you think that you're heterosexual because the body parts really matter to you, what would you do if your partner came out as transgender and wanted to change body parts? Does that mean that you're not attracted to them anymore? If you've been in love with them for two decades, does that mean that you're not in love with them anymore? That seems very strange to me. Obviously people do feel that way. I suppose the majority of the world feels that way. I just don't understand it though.

ML: On a different topic, can you talk about what you did after the University of Chicago? You've had quite the illustrious career, it seems like.

MAM: Well, I wrote about sex for ten years. I wrote erotica. I sort of stumbled into writing erotica. My second boyfriend, Paul, was a computer guy and worked at USITE, the computer lab in Harper library. He worked late, he had the late shift, and I would sometimes come and keep him company, but he would always be on the computer. So I asked him what he was doing. This was 1991, I think, spring of '91. He said he was online; I didn't know what that meant. At that point, nobody had email. The university had assigned us email addresses, we all got it in our little info packet when you joined, but you never used it. He showed me how to use email and showed me the bulletin boards, the newsgroups. The ways the newsgroups—this was all pre-web, there was no web, it didn't exist. There were bulletin boards and there were newsgroups where there was text-only discussion going on. And when you joined the newsgroups you had to scroll through the complete set to decide which ones you wanted to joined. You had to say yes/no to every one in the list, and there were many hundreds in the list. So you sat there the first time you did it to go through the list, yes no yes no whatever.

I joined—I can't remember I joined at the time. There was a Sri Lankan newsgroup, rec.arts.sf.written, a science fiction newsgroup. You joined based on your interests. Then you'd hit alt.sex, and there would be all these sex newsgroups. Which I probably would not have sought out on my own, but when I was presented with all these groups I was like "Okay! I'll join some of these." There was alt.sex, which was for general discussions. And rec.arts.erotica was where people wrote stories and posted them. There was also rec.arts.prose which was a general fiction/nonfiction group. I wrote a few things for them and posted them, but they got no feedback. There was no positive mechanism for me to keep on doing them. Whereas when I wrote something and posted it to rec.arts.erotica, I got a ton of email and praise. As a writer, you like praise. I took to that and wrote around

20 stories that year—very short, all around 1000 words. They're mostly collected in my first book. Posted them there, got lots of great emails. It hadn't really occurred to me that I could be a writer. I was an English major, I'd sort of figured that I could be a professor one day. I sort of assumed that writers were like demi-gods. I loved literature, and I didn't think that I could aspire to that. But the newsgroups, the writing was so bad in these stories—the spelling, the grammar, the punctuation, some of them were almost unreadable. I was like, "I know I can do better than that." And that was what gave me the confidence to try writing a story. The first story I wrote was called "American Airlines Cockpit," and it was exactly what it sounds like. [laughs]

ML: [laughing] That's awesome.

MAM: It's still on my website, kind of buried, you have to search for it. So anyhow, I got a lot of praise for those. You know, I got interested. Sexuality was such a site of conflict in my life at that point, arguing with my parents and trying to figure out all of that poly stuff later, and writing was a great way to process all of that. Writers go where the conflict is, and we tend to write about things that are difficult and interesting to us in that way. It's interesting, my stories are really—even then, they were pretty character-based stories. Like it would be a sad break-up story, where they end up having sex for the last time as part of the break-up or whatever. They were often not very happy stories, but people liked them anyway. I guess around that time, as I was writing them, I was starting to become more politically aware. We had the sex ed people who came to the dorms—I can't remember, there was that comedy group that would come around on campus and do skits with the banana and the condom and all that.

ML: Yeah, I think they still have that. Orientation.

MAM: Yeah, so they go around to the freshmen and teach you how to use a condom with a banana. So that was going on, and then I guess also sort of weird thing that happened my freshman year: People confide in me fairly often, and one thing that happened freshman year was that four different girls, women, in my dorm at one point or another said that they'd been date-raped. Which seemed like a lot to me.

ML: Four? Oh god.

MAM: I don't know if it was a really bad year or what exactly. They all happened under very different circumstances. One was a long-term boyfriend, one was at a frat party, whatever. It was maybe random, but it sensitized me to some of the issues. From talking to them, it seemed to me like maybe one or two incidents could have been avoided if both parties had been better at talking about sex. If she had been more comfortable saying that she was really unhappy with what was going on rather than freezing up, for example. And if he had been taught that when a woman freezes up, that's a bad sign, dude, you should stop and ask what's going on. It seemed like there were some pretty big failures of communication there. So that was when I started thinking about how toxic our society is around sexuality, and how much damage it's done. Because we keep so much silence around it, so many secrets. All of that ended up combining so that eventually, in my

twenties, I became something of a sexuality activist. I would go around and do sex ed talks at schools and I wrote a lot of erotica and published it online and did readings and published it in print and talked about it. It got to a point where I really enjoyed being the person at the dinner who would go "and now let's talk about sex." What was really funny to me was that there was a really common pattern that once you start talking frankly about sex in a calm non-judgey non—as if it were a normal thing, it gives permission for other people to do the same, and the entire dinner party starts talking about it. People seem to really enjoy themselves. I think it's actually really easy to break down that wall, but someone just has to make that first move to say that it's okay. And then we have really interesting conversations. Much later, I was teaching in Utah, and I remember I was teaching a class. I think it was a composition class. I honestly cannot remember how this came up, I think we were doing a biotech segment, whatever, and I made some offhand comment like "Like all those people who think that you can't get pregnant if you have sex standing up," and one of my students raised her hand and said, "Wait, you mean you *can* get pregnant if you have sex standing up?" And I said, "What?"

ML: What? Were these college freshmen?

MAM: College freshmen, sophomores. They were in Utah, so a lot of them were 20, 21 since they'd a mission before starting school. But it turns out that there was no sex ed. None of them had had sex ed, basically. So the class kind of just turned into a sex ed class because I was so shocked. Some of them thought that you couldn't get pregnant the first time, which was just not true—all of these things. I was partly shocked because I grew up in a pretty conservative environment. I went to Catholic school. But even in Catholic school, the nuns—we had years of sex ed classes. They showed us the videos, they had uncomfortable conversations about it with us. When I was in high school, Dr. Ruth came to our class. Which was awesome. She is awesome! She gave a talk and she took questions from the audience, and people wrote questions on pieces of paper and handed them up. If I could have another career, I feel that Dr. Ruth has done amazing good for the country, for the world. Because she's just so calm and frank and cheerful about it all. I feel like all of that goes together in a soup, and now I'm rambling.

[00:36:22]

ML: No, it's really interesting! It's not a problem.

MAM: Yeah. So I feel like these silences are dangerous and pervasive, so I spent a decade of my life, while working temp jobs and trying to figure out what I was doing for a career, doing a lot of sexuality activism, both writing and speaking. Those early stories were collected along with some poems in a book called *Torn Shapes of Desire.* Actually the publication of that was interesting. I was going to self-publish them, just to put them together into a book, and a guy named Dale Larson who worked for a company that published computer books for the Amiga, which is a computer that nobody has anymore, he had found me online and thought that what I was doing was really interesting. This was around the time of the Telecommunications Decency Act, where there were all these debates about "How much should we censor the internet? How much sex should there be on the internet?"

Nowadays it's amazing to think that we thought that was possible. But Congress was having hearings about this. I had a webpage by '95 or '96, and it was unclear whether my webpage would be illegal. Would I have to take it down or risk going to jail? The Telecommunications Decency Act, in the end, didn't pass. But I was interviewed by the Philadelphia Inquirer about all of this. Anyway, Dale Larson was interested in all of this, and he found me. I had a blog, this was the very early days of blogging, my blog is one of the first three still going on the Internet.

ML: Wait, really? That's amazing!

MAM: Right place and right time. And I just kept going, some of the other people stopped. The blog that inspired me, Coffee Shakes, stopped a long time ago. There's a thing, the Online Diary History Project, that went around at some point and gathered all of this, so you can google that and find the other early pioneers, I think that's what they called it, they have around 20 of us there. So I was thinking about publishing this content and Dale contacted me and said, "I'd like to publish it." He got Tracy Lee, who was also blogging at the time and did these nude self-photos, self-portraits, and so we put a book together, *Torn Shapes of Desire,* and published it. After that, oh, I can't even remember. Sometime after that I started *Clean Sheets*, which is an online erotica magazine. That would be...I should remember when I started this. 1996? '98? '98, I think. Wow, I really can't remember. Somewhere around here is when I went to grad school. I started grad school in '98—wait, no, in '96. '96 to '98. Sorry, all the dates are sort of starting to blur. I did an MFA, and I think it was during the MFA that I started *Clean Sheets.* I ran it for two years before handing it off to somebody else. After that, a New York packaging company contacted me to edit Aquaerotica, which is this collection of waterproof erotica. Which was fun to do. I did that, and I did a follow-up book with Random House, and later they had me write two choose-your-own-adventure erotica books with Penguin. That was also a lot of fun—*The Classics Professor* and *Kathryn in the City*. I wrote erotica for about ten years. I was still writing short stories and publishing them in various publications. There was a nice period where there were a lot of erotica magazines you could publish in. I put out another collection, *Silence of the Word*, which I think was mostly erotica. In 2000, I ended up in Utah. I was still dating Kevin, he was doing a post-doc there, and I followed him out there. I adjuncted for a year at the University of Utah. I audited a theory class and really liked it, so I decided that I'd go back and do the PhD.

ML: Theory of what?

MAM: Just general theory, covering lit theory. In 2000 I started the PhD.

ML: Sorry, which university did you do your PhD at?

MAM: University of Utah. I did my MFA at Mills College, then went to the University of Utah. At that point, the urgency of writing about sex had gone away. There were a couple of factors. One was that I'd done it for a long time, and I felt that I'd said what I wanted to say. Another was that the world had changed around me. At the time I first published *Torn Shapes of Desire*, you couldn't walk into an ordinary store and buy erotica. The only

stores that sold it were skanky stores. By 2000, Borders, Barnes & Noble had huge shelves of erotica. You could just walk in and buy whatever you wanted. That was a huge shift, and it's hard to cast your mind back to a time when it was taboo, but it really was. Just strange. With that boom in erotica there were a lot of new young writers who were working in this area, including women, including people of color, so I didn't feel as much like I needed to represent anymore. It felt like there were other people able and willing to do the work, so I could go onto other interests. Around the time I turned 30 I got more interested in the intersection of sexuality with race and ethnicity. *Bodies in Motion*, the book I worked on for my PhD, is really centered on that: the political history in Sri Lanka and how that affects people's lives. In my 30s, that was most of what I was working on. Sorry, that was long.

ML: No, that was great. Did you think you felt a lot of pushback, being an Asian woman writing erotica?

MAM: Sometimes. It's sort of random, it comes and goes. I wrote one story, "Season of Marriage," I think was the story, which is a very short, sweet arranged marriage story. It gives you an erotic wedding night, it gives you the details of the wedding night. From my point of view, this is a very respectable sort of story: they're married, the marriage is arranged, they're both South Asian, there's no white people—what is there to object to? It was published on suleika.com, which is sort of a magazine, sort of a broader site, and I got hate mail from men in India who were really upset that one of their women were writing about sex. Wait, let me just see this...

[MAM has to take a phone call, 00:45:00 – 00:46:00]

MAM: And then...occasionally I'd get a little hostility along those lines, typically from men. I would get—people would ask me often what my parents thought of this. Especially when I did readings with other Asians in the audience. Whether they were South Asian or East Asian or whatever, I'd get people asking. I would tell them that my parents were not happy with this at all. Often, people would come up to me afterward and go "I have a white boyfriend and I haven't told my parents. How do I tell them? What would you recommend?" And I'd be like, "I don't know! It didn't go so well for me! Good luck! I have no magic bullet for this." I thought the work was important, and I thought it was important enough that that sustained me through the occasional hostilities and difficulties.

ML: How connected do you feel to the Asian community?

MAM: Now very connected. I would say I sort of avoided South Asians for most of my 20s while I was doing this sort of thing. Also, I wasn't living in places where there were many Asians—Salt Lake City, where there weren't any, or very few. When I moved back to Chicago, I joined SAPAC, which is the South Asian Progressive Action Coalition, which turns out to be an awesome group of people. Mostly women, a few guys. They're politically active, they're progressive, they do stuff. They were the core of my friends for the first few years I was here, and I'm still close to a lot of them. As I started writing more about race and ethnicity, it became important to me to connect with other people from a

South Asian background and get some feedback. I didn't want to be writing in a vacuum.

ML: And how connected do you feel to the LGBT community?

MAM: Hm. That's kind of interesting. Somewhat. When I was living in Philly, I ran a poly support group for a few years. Poly is not the same thing as LGBT, but there was some overlap there. When I was in Oakland in grad school, I hosted some meetings and I went to a lot of gatherings for poly folks. There were a lot of poly folks in the Bay Area. When I was living there I'd say that most of my friends were poly, and that was a lot of people. In Utah, I know there was a big queer community, but I was really busy with grad school, I didn't really seek it out. I didn't have a car, it would have been hard to get around to events. I've been interviewed by Trikone, which is the South Asian queer organization, and they're great. I have an interview in their magazine, I may have submitted some stuff, I can't remember. I've made some friends there, like Minal Hajratwala, who is a great writer. Then there's a branch of Trikone here. I hosted a potluck for the queer women of Trikone—I mean, guys were welcome, it was focused on women—maybe a year ago, and that was fun. Seven or eight women came out, mostly younger. We had a nice meal. As I can, I try to support queer Desi activities in the city. The larger queer community, there's a lot in Chicago, and I generally don't have time to get out to things so much.

ML: You've been to quite a few places. Like, Utah is pretty far out. Why did you decide to come back to Chicago?

MAM: Oh, I just followed Kevin, really. He had a job here. At that point, he'd started at UIC, he had a tenure-track job. I just came out to join him. I had a job as a visiting professor at Roosevelt, I taught there for two years. I taught at Northwestern for a little while, visiting, and I started at UIC five years ago. It's a good place. As academics, it's hard to get jobs in the same place, so Chicago was a good option for us because there are so many universities here.

ML: This actually goes back to a much earlier point, but: I know you were talking about silence about sexuality in our culture. I was wondering, can you talk about the campus attitude towards sexuality at the University of Chicago when you were there? Like, was it very silent about sexuality, or was it a little bit more open?

MAM: I wouldn't say that it was deliberately silent, but it was generally compatible with the general culture at the time. Silent compared to today, I think. Twenty years ago there was less open conversation except within, like, the bi group and areas that were devoted to it.

ML: Besides sexuality, you also do a ton of stuff with sci-fi. Could you talk about your interest in sci-fi?

MAM: I grew up reading science fiction and fantasy, and I love it. I always hoped on some level to write some. When I was in the middle of my MFA, I did six weeks over in Clarion, which is the science fiction and fantasy workshop. I went to Clarion West in Seattle. It was great, it was intensive, and I think I wrote some pretty interesting things. But I met

with some editors when I was there, and they said that they thought that my heart was with mainstream fiction. That I did better when I did mainstream fiction. I was crushed. I went back to my room and cried. But then I thought about it and thought, "Oh, maybe they're right," and went back to my MFA and tried to write mainstream fiction. I do like it, I think I was very pleased with how *Bodies in Motion* came out. But the book I'm writing now is science fiction. I think now, in my 40s, I'm less...I'm working on a bunch of different things, and one of them is science fiction. I've always loved it. After *Clean Sheets*, I started and ran *Strange Horizons*, which is an online science fiction and fantasy magazine. I ran it for two years and am really glad that it's still going strong, eleven years now I think they've been publishing. And I ran the Speculative Fiction Literature Foundation. We don't do a lot right now—with the kids, I'm really busy—but we have some grants, a travel grant for writers and older writers, and we have a class-based grant, which I'm really excited about, which is for people from a working-class background to help support their writing. I'm teaching a course right now about writers of color in science fiction and fantasy, and it's awesome. The students love it, I love it, we're having some really interesting conversation.

ML: That's really great. I feel like I haven't read any...

MAM: I could give you a copy of my syllabus! And then you could read it in your free time this summer. [laughs] There's a lot of really interesting work being done right now. And it's winning awards. Right now they're reading *Who Fears Death* by Nnedi Okorafor, who actually did her PhD at UIC a few years ago. She finished, but it actually won the World Fantasy Award last year. And it's an awesome book.

ML: Yeah. I feel like I need to read more sci-fi in general. The different genre conventions of sci-fi vs. mainstream are interesting.

MAM: I think sci-fi is particularly useful for looking at gender and sexuality. We have the Tiptree award, which is for work that explores and expands our ideas of gender; we have a ton of queer stuff: Nicola Griffith, she's a queer author. She does *Bending the Landscape*, which are queer science fiction and fantasy anthologies. I think there's one of science fiction and one of fantasy. There's also an organization on this. When you're looking at alien cultures or looking at the future, it gives you the possibility of imagining different social structures. I think it works really well.

ML: It's also remarkable the role that emerging technology has played in your life—being one of the first three blogs that's still going on, the newsgroups. Can you talk about what it's been like to see the internet take off, and being a part of the group of people who were in that first wave?

MAM: One of the things I find really great about the internet is that it makes people feel less alone. If you were someone who in your small town or in your city who feels that "oh, I'm weird, I'm different, I'm not like everyone around me," and of course general society is going to try to normalize you and homogenize you. That's part of what societies do, they try to make people like everybody else. And so now you can go online and put in a

search for whatever your kink might be. “Likes furry stuffed toys,” you know? And there is not just one other person, there are ten thousand people who share this interest and have conventions about it. You can go! So I think that's really wonderful. If we go back to this idea about sex being something that was silenced for a really long time, it's much harder for that to be true with the internet. When I was in Utah, one of the things that I thought was really interesting about the Church is that the LDS Church—our students weren't allowed to watch R-rated movies. They weren't supposed to go online except in a strictly controlled way. There was acknowledgment that they had to—it was 2000, 2001—but they weren't supposed to wander over the web. I think that speaks to the tension that you have between—if you have a community that is trying to enforce social norms, free flow of information makes that harder. You look at Google in China and how the government tries to control how much access its citizens have. And if you remember, I can't remember the details, how they turned off people's cell phones?

ML: Oh yeah, in the Arab Spring.

MAM: Yeah. It feels like a lot of the ways in which the world is changing has to do with this access to information. I'm not going to say that it's all necessarily good. I can totally understand the position of the parent who's looking at the 12-year-old who's taking naked photos of herself and texting them to her friends. That's concerning. I understand why people would find that concerning. I don't know—I'm not sure how we're going to navigate that. It's going to be harder to put down rules, like how this is unacceptable. I think you're going to have to sit down and talk to your children about how why choosing to do this now might have consequences you don't want down the road. And they might not understand that. Often when I talk to people from the previous generation, there's a real bewilderment about why we would want to this open about our lives. Especially when I first started blogging, I would have these conversations, and one person said, “You must be such a narcissist, that you want to put your entire life online. What makes you think that people are interested?” I said, “Well, people are. I have a lot of readers.” My site was five years old and at that point had a million hits, so clearly people are interested. But that's a little bit of a superficial answer. The real answer is that we can see now that people want to share themselves with the world. They want to be known. I think it's a real human need to want to be known, and especially in this world of mass information, you don't want to disappear. I think there are interesting conversations coming about privacy, about the right to privacy from our government—you think about wiretapping and so on. If I walk into the street, Google Earth is taking pictures of me. If they can see me through the window, they can take photos of me and anyone can watch them. That's kind of fascinating and terrifying at the same time.

[01:00:48]

ML: Like we used to be so afraid when Sputnik was launched that the Russians would take pictures of us, and now it's like, oh, Google is doing that all the time. “It's cool”

MAM: And you know, if you have a cell phone, right? Gazillion people will know where you are at any moment if they want to. There are all these things coming. What is it called?--The

total information society? Total surveillance society? I actually think that's coming, I don't see a good way to avoid it. It's going to have some dangers, it's going to have some issues. I don't know that I would turn the clock back, because I think there are pluses as well, but there are concerns. I think it's fair to have concerns.

ML: Looking back at the University of Chicago, how do think that experience has fit into the rest of your life?

MAM: I loved the U of C. I had a great time there. It was such...It was an awesome place to be a geek. I'll give you one example. When I first came there freshman year, I was in my dorm room, had just met my new roommates, and various people—we had our door open, and various people had wandered in. So there were six or seven of us there. Somehow Chaucer came up, and me, being the geek that I am, I started reciting, "Whan that aprill with his shoures soote," because my high school teacher has us memorize the first fourteen lines. And the awesome thing about the U of C is that, like, four people in the room joined in. And we just recited the whole fourteen lines together! Anywhere else that would have been incredibly embarrassing. But here—I just had a big grin on my face—this was awesome! I love that. I love that we stayed up until 2am arguing about Nietzsche and Wittgenstein—we didn't really understand a lot about what we were reading, but we got caught up in the ideas, and it was okay to be caught up in the ideas.

My high school was a lot like that, Porter's encouraged the same sort of thing too. So the U of C for me was kind of a continuation on a larger scale on what was happening at Porter's. But you were just immersed in it. At Porter's I was one of a set of people who were kind of geeky and intellectual, and at the U of C everyone was. Which was intimidating in some ways. You become a small fish in a very large pool of very smart people. There are the people there who are going to go on to win Nobel Prizes. They can be a little intimidating. But it was still awesome, I don't know.

It was okay to argue about anything, which is a good foundation for engaging with the world, with politics. I have some friends, Ken and Sheila, who can—Sheila Ralston, I think is her full name—who I knew from Sci-fy, the science fiction club, but they were also editors of—and I hope I can get these details right—The Chicago Maroon. They were editors of opposing columns. Sheila was the editor of the liberal column and he was the editor of the conservative column. They ended up dating and getting married. They're a great couple, they're wonderful together, even though they have some very strongly divergent political views. I always think of that as kind of a classic U of C story, because it says that it's okay to have fierce intellectual debates about the value of these ideas, and we can still be friends afterwards. I wish the US government could learn this lesson. Maybe then we wouldn't have the sequester right now, if they did better at actually talking to each other. I tend to really enjoy running into U of C people afterward. I was actually just playing board games up in Skokie, and there were a couple of people I hadn't met before. They had the right feel. I was instantly comfortable, like "I know these people." And in science fiction circles, there's this writer, John Scalzi runs a blog "Whatever." And after reading his blog, I realized that he was a U of C person. We might have overlapped when I was there, but I didn't know him. You can see it in the style of

argumentation that he uses. It didn't surprise me at all when I'd found that he'd gone to the U of C. There's a certain approach. I think this is the best of what the U of C offers, that there is a respectful engagement with the ideas. We used to say, "What do you get out of the U of C education? The ability to bullshit your way through any topic you're talking about." There is some truth to that. But we learn to do our research, to have an intellectual honesty about what we're doing. At the core of it, maybe yes, I have a tendency to take a position and stick to it through hell or high water just because I took it initially. I have a hard time backing down. But in the end, I can change my mind if you present sufficient evidence, and maybe give me a break to go off and think about it.

ML: And it seems that you had a pretty rich social life at the U of C too.

MAM: I did. I know that some people didn't, and I don't know if the university has gotten better about it. At least for me, the clubs were great for that. They gave you people with shared interests. My parents would probably have rather had that I'd had a less rich social life and focused on my studies, but, you know. [laughs]

ML: Why did you decide to be interviewed for this project?

MAM: Oh, I don't know. I think it's important that stories be told. I think it's really interesting, tracing how things were shaped, how things develop over time. I'm happy to contribute to that. Be a little piece in the puzzle.

ML: It's really great. I was really excited when you came up the list of interview subjects, since so many of the people we have are, like, old white guys who were really into Gay Lib in the 1970s.

MAM: Yeah...I'm trying to think of other good people that you could interview. [Redacted], is she on your list? She was part of the UC bi group and still lives in Hyde Park with her partner [redacted]. [redacted] was too, but [redacted] was poly and was involved in online discussions at the time. I would imagine that she'd be willing to be interviewed. I'm trying to think of who else would be around here who would be interested. That's what's trickier. There are a lot of people who have moved elsewhere. [Redacted] would be great people to talk to. He wasn't at U of C, but he was the moderator of rec.arts.erotica in those days. She is a U of C person and was part of UCBU and Sci-fy and so on. There are others I'm not going to say on the record, but I can write down some names for you, put you in touch. There weren't a lot of people of color involved in UCBU at the time. I'm trying to remember and I'm having trouble coming up with names. But there were a lot of women. It wasn't all white guys.

ML: Actually, what was the gender composition of UCBU? I feel that—just observation—that it's easier for women to be bisexual than for men to be bisexual in some ways.

MAM: 60-40 female-male, I'd say? At the time the university had 60-40 male-female ratio in the other direction, so there were more men on campus generally. UCBU tilted female. There weren't a lot of people of color. There was a South Asian group, but it was small. Now,

teaching at the University of Illinois, I think 24% of our population is Asian-American. I'm actually still—five years in, walking around campus, I'm still startled to see so many Asian-American students. You definitely didn't feel that way at UChicago 20 years ago. I don't know whether it's changed since then.

ML: About your background: Are you a first-generation immigrant? Or did your parents come over first?

MAM: I came here when I was two. So technically I'm an immigrant and not first-generation; on the other hand, I was two. So there's not much difference from me and someone who was born here. I was two and a half, my parents say that I was fluent in Tamil when I came, but they wanted me to learn English and they focused on that, so I forgot most of my Tamil. So there are little things like that.

ML: Do you think it was pretty difficult to be a person of color and also in the LGBT community in the university back then?

MAM: No, I don't remember that ever being an issue. It could have been, but I don't think it was.

[01:11:53]

ML: Sure. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

MAM: No, I think it's been good. I feel like I've told you my whole life at this point.

ML: It's been awesome!

MAM: Yep. If I think of anything else, I'll send you a note.

ML: Yeah! You know my email. So...this is a community project, so if you have any feedback on how we're doing these interviews. Or if you have any objects—we're always scavenging around for memorabilia from back then.

MAM: Wow, any memorabilia...I don't think so. If I have anything from UCBU...yeah, I don't think so. I wish I had one of those pink triangle things that we handed out. Someone might have one though, there were a lot of them. I might have photos. I can look. I will look and see if I have any photos.

ML: Photos would be great!

MAM: The only thing I can think of for feedback is getting in touch with some of the core people. [Redacted] would probably know a bunch of people that I don't. It would be better to do that targeted outreach. I happened to see this—I can't even remember. It crossed my Facebook stream or something? It was very random. So it might help you find people if you do slightly more targeted outreach.

ML: How typical do you think your experience at U of C was?

MAM: I think I was not typical. A whole complex of things came together to give me a kind of unusual path. But I think my experiences in the bi group are probably fairly representative.

ML: Since you are in academia now, what are the differences that you see between the people on campus now and the people at UChicago?

MAM: It's hard to say because it was 20 years ago. UIC has had recently a lot of Asian-American activism. We have an Asian-American Studies minor, and that basically came from students agitating for it. I feel like UIC has at this moment a stronger activist consciousness in the student body than there was at U of C twenty years ago, but I don't know what it's like now.

ML: That's pretty much all I have. Are there any questions you have for me?

MAM: No, it's good.

ML: Great!

[01:15:23]

End of Interview