Interview Transcription: VANESSA OCHS
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ANDREW KAUFMAN: Tell me about the community-engaged course you were teaching in the spring 2020 semester.

VANESSA OCHS: My class is about the Passover Haggadah, the text that's used for the Passover holiday Seder. It's a family meal with a ritual. The students learn the history of the Haggadah, how it's changed over the generations, and how it continues to change today. It is also a community engagement class, which means that while we're learning about the Haggadah, the students are also volunteering each week with a community partner and in Charlottesville. We learn how to make a connection between the theme of the Passover Haggadah story, which is, for our purposes in our class, for people who have been strangers at one time in their past now are obligated to reach out and care for others. So, our students are reaching out and caring for others in our community.

At the end of the class, the students are going to create a Haggadah, a text which reflects the mission of their community partner. In the past, we've also had a big Seder meal, which brings together community partners and family sometimes and students. That didn't happen this year. Our students are free to either continue to work with a community partner that they've worked with previously or with the help of Madison House or with my assistance to find a new community partner to work with, such as the Salvation Army or the SPCA, Adopt-a-Grandparent program. Students have worked with helping people do their taxes, help people in tutoring.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: The Haggadah that they create is inspired by the mission of the community partner or some of the concerns of the community partner. Did I understand that correctly?

VANESSA OCHS: Exactly. When they write their Haggadah, it's one that would be useful either to the community partner or to UVA students who are going to be volunteering with a community partner in the future. And it uses many of the set of pieces in the Haggadah, asking questions, expressing gratitude, talking about plagues—that is problems that one deals with.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: What we all went through this past semester, when we got the news in mid-March that we had a week to transition our courses entirely online, how did you first react to that news? How did your students react to that and how did your community partners react to it?

VANESSA OCHS: How did we react collectively to the change of March? My first thought was I can't do this and then I had a long hour session with Yitna, and he set me straight. He took me through all the steps, and it became clear to me that I could use the Zoom technology. I discovered, too, that this technology allowed us to do some truly incredible things. When my students were working on a project, they could share their screen. We could see exactly what they were working on in beautiful color and beautiful lighting and we can all comment together on it. That was quite wonderful.

In terms of the loss of community, that's what I mourned most of all. It's very important to me in my classes that we create a sense of connection with each other and I thought there's really no way that when we are little Brady family or in Jeopardy squares, there's no way that we could create that sense of community. What surprised me is that according to what my students have shared with me is we were able to continue our sense of a caring community, and perhaps that's because we had already established it. I don't know how it would be possible to begin a class and have that sense of community without a sense of being together before, sharing breaks, bringing in food for each other during our classes. So, we had a world already, a caring world already. We spent a lot of time early on, I and my wonderful TA Casey Burton (sp?), we spent a lot of time checking in and that was I believe important for the students. It was important for me to know that they were well, to know that their families were well, to know that they had what they needed. Initially, I felt that was more important than getting through another step of the history of Haggadah, but it was time really well spent just to hear how people were managing.

And then eventually, they were able to talk more and more about their sense of losses, their sense of regrets, their sense of challenges. And for the many students of mine who actually wrote about the pandemic in their Haggadah at the end of the semester, it seemed that our discussions, our online discussions or Zoom discussions helped them begin to create material for that Haggadah and it helped them to process, to put it all together to make it meaningful for the community partners. Because my students work with so many different community partners, it's not like my students all together pulled out of one organization and left them without resources. So, I don't believe that the community partners themselves were affected by my students needing to pull back. It was just that the community partners in general were in very difficult situations many of them.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: How did it change your thinking about your class, how did it change your approach to the class or your thinking about teaching the class?

VANESSA OCHS: I knew that discussing a particular period of the history of the Haggadah, even if I had lovely illustrations, was not going to be particularly engaging. So, I tried always to create some sort of a back and forth, a show-and-tell of projects, group work, teamwork, not just in this class but in my other classes as well. The more that students were doing with each other offline, the richer the texture of our class could be. In my class on spiritual writing, for instance, every student had for his or her project a student editor who worked with him or her. Students were meeting offline and then when they all came together, they could refer to those relationships that happened offline and they felt real in a way I think. Over this time, we've redefined what it means to have a real connection, and a meaningful conversation on Zoom or on FaceTime now is really real in a strange way.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: If it happens during real time is it more real or differently real?

VANESSA OCHS: It's different. It's differently real. It was certainly peculiarly real when I saw my students in their childhood beds, in their childhood bedrooms with posters that no longer represented who they really were at this time, with brothers walking around in the background, and dogs jumping in their laps. So, it was real in the sense that these were their real messy lives, but when you're a college student, you don't bring that life to class. You bring a curated version of yourself to class. There's that difference. I think it was very hard for the students to let their families know that they needed time and privacy. They needed space to be themselves. I don't think all families understood that there's a difference between studying for homework and doing your homework in high school and studying for college.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: If you look back on this experience, what was the biggest challenge for you? What was the single most challenging aspect?

VANESSA OCHS: I think the biggest challenge was recognizing initially the students being just so sad and so bereft and seeing their difficulty in focusing. It got much better as the semester went on and we acknowledged that what we were doing was still learning and it was still being at UVA and we were still together, but I think the hardest part was initially when there was this layer of sadness, complicated for the many students who live in in New York or other metropolitan areas where they were feeling true anxiety for their parents, their grandparents. Some of our students were caring for elderly parents or grandparents, so there's this sense of being really distracted by fear right now.

After the pandemic has gone on for a while, I think we all have a much calmer understanding of what's happening and how to protect ourselves and what might happen next. Initially, there was this feeling of chaos and it was hard to focus on the Haggadah in the 19th century or why it even mattered at that time.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: How did the meaning of this class, the subject of the class change as a result of what we went through? How did the crisis affect your students' understanding of the subject itself that they were studying?

VANESSA OCHS: The crisis helped the students understand how flexible the Haggadah could be. One of the later units of our class was to speak about the Haggadah contemporary period, social action, feminist, ecological ones and I would have to communicate to the students that, my plan was to communicate to them, how in particular periods of modern Jewish history, Jews have used this format to address what's happening right now to make people aware, to raise consciousness, and to equip people to respond in some real way to a crisis. In the syllabus, this was a theoretical piece of learning, a historical piece of learning. And suddenly, we had a real crisis on our hands, and we were going to use the Haggadah, for the students who chose the changed assignment, they were going to use the pandemic as the topic of their Haggadah. The question of, for instance, why is this night different from all other nights? The Haggadah you are going to use for a Passover Seder during the pandemic was going to say why is it that we're home alone and without our families on this night? Why is it that we're washing with Purell? Why is it that when we talk about the plagues of Egypt, we're also talking about the real plague upon us right now? So, the existence of the pandemic made this shift into how to make a Haggadah truly relevant. It made it a very easy and obvious shift. It did not need much explaining once the students got to work on their project, they got it.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: You've spent many years thinking about religion, Jewish theology, the subject of the Haggadah, were there any particularly new insights that came to you about your discipline as a result of this experience or about the subject of the Haggadah? Maybe that was built into what you just said, but maybe you also had some additional personal insights?

VANESSA OCHS: There are certain themes in the Haggadah that are difficult to communicate and the fact that we were all working together through an existential crisis made these themes more accessible to the students. So, for instance, at the end of the Haggadah, there's a phrase, "Next year in Jerusalem." I have to teach the students that it doesn't mean let's make a trip next year. Let's go on a tour. Let's go on a pilgrimage. It's about the hope that in the future there will be a better world, something to hope for, and it's hard to teach students what does that religious hope look like and feel like because we were all experientially going through a crisis and we're still hoping for better times. I felt that that aspect of an ancient sacred text, it taught itself in a way that mere words couldn't. By having this experience

together, I was able to convey a religious experience to the students that they would have perceived only intellectually before.

I think there's another part of the Passover Seder, the one called Dayenu, in which people speak about their gratitude. If only God had taken us out of Egypt, if only God had brought us out of the desert, etc., it would have been enough. And it's a hard theme to communicate, steps of gratitude, but once the students, my students began to talk about their own feelings of gratitude, they understood the text much better. So, for instance, if only I was able to leave Charlottesville and bring the books that I needed for the rest of the semester, it would have been enough. If only I had a safe house with my parents, it would have been enough. If only we had enough food, it would have been enough. There aren't that many UVA students who experience regularly food insecurity during the academic year, and this year students did experience that. They experienced levels of anxiety that they normally would not experience and those are all feelings that religions acknowledge and cope with and give shape to. And so these experiences of the students, the real experiences that the students were having helped them to understand how a traditional religion is relevant now for real people. Judaism, it wasn't the religion for a majority of our students, but that didn't matter. The students got to understand how religion works and they understood it in real time.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: It's a really powerful framing of the way in which your students gained an insight into the subject that they simply wouldn't have gained in any other way. Does it take a crisis for students or for any of us to have those kinds of insights?

VANESSA OCHS: I don't think so. I think our day-to-day lives are incredibly stressful. Students have difficult lives. They deal with eating disorders. They deal with chronic illnesses, parents who are divorcing, anxieties about the future, many students do deal with financial insecurity. They are dealing with racism. They're dealing with prejudice. So everyday life provides lots of opportunities to experience stress. I think what was different this past semester is that we were all experiencing something together, which is the unusual part. We were all on the same page in terms of our fears. We were on the same page in terms of our fears, our vulnerabilities, our hopes.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: As you think about your role specifically as a teacher and going through this moment, has this moment of living in the age of COVID given rise to any paradigm shifts and your thinking about your role or your purpose as a teacher? Or maybe it's reinforced insights that you had prior?

VANESSA OCHS: I would say that this period has reinforced my commitment to respecting the individual experience of the student and connecting their real life to what they're learning. I feel that learning is not something that's out there if it's to matter. It can't be something that's out there and there are our lives over here. My pedagogy is based on a notion of finding what matters, finding what has meaning, what can be either meaningful to you now or what kind of learning can be enduring, but if there isn't a sense of, to use that old 1960s word, if there isn't relevance to your own experience, then it's harder for us to justify the time, attention, and care we give to learning.

I also believe that every students' learning experience is private. Each student is on his or her own journey and when I have students coming into my office all the time I can discuss that with them more appropriately, more frequently. It's easier for me to help the student make the connection. Without that face-to-face contact with my students, I did find it harder to create a bond with a student, which would allow me to help them find a way to personalize their learning, but I'm still committed to it and I

presume that as I become more comfortable with online learning that I will also learn to be able to facilitate connections that are virtual.

There's something, Andy, that I forgot to mention, which is the fact that the students did leave their volunteer work six weeks early, that they went through the phase of adjusting and feeling competent, but they never achieved a sense of understanding really how they fit into the organization or understanding the organization's mission or figuring out what kinds of growth and opportunity does that organization have, something that they can perhaps work towards to facilitate in the future. So, there was, I think they lost something. They definitely lost half a semester's worth of growth as community partners and the loss was greater for my students than for the community partner because I always feel that in community engagement courses, my students are always getting a lot more than the community partner is getting. They're so generous to us, to let us come and be there and learn from with them.

You just feel a lot of frustration. Why am I doing this? There was a really bad day, I'm not making much of a difference. There are other things I could be doing now. And part of being a community volunteer is you work through that. After a while you figure out, how can I do it differently or how can I realize that service means showing up? It's not coming back with a chart of lots of stars of the differences you made in people's lives. It's showing up and building relationships. Our students didn't get to do that.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: In light of that, do you have ideas in your mind about what makes for a successful class or an unsuccessful class? That may or may not be the way that you frame it, but how did your definition of teaching success change as a result of this crisis? Did your vision of what a successful class looks like shift as a result of what you went through?

VANESSA OCHS: I think the students should feel a certain amount of love and passion for the material. I think they should make friends. That's really important to me. That my students should leave the class with at least one friend. Those goals have not changed.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: Are there any insights that you gained as a result of this traumatic experience, of this critical experience that you would like to bring with you into a post-quarantined world of teaching? Any insights that you gained as a result of this experience that you in fact would like to take with you to a post-quarantined world? And maybe those are insights you already had.

VANESSA OCHS: I'm thinking of insights that this period has given me that I'll take into the future and the primary one is belief in my own capacity to have resilience. I had always thought that I would be flustered by changes, even small changes, and I can look back and see that while I was truly anxious that first Zoom day in Zoom school, I got really good at it and I figured out little tricks. I figured out that if I made a student in charge of the chat room and another student in charge of sharing, so I didn't have to multitask quite as much, I figured out that things could move really smoothly and I could help myself and I could help my students move on together by sharing what was happening.

And at the end of the semester, I look back, my gosh, we learned what we were supposed to learn. We did it and we were so, at least I know that I felt so sad to say goodbye to everybody. And at the end of the semester, I felt lonely for everyone and for that world we had created and there was a sense of we did it. We did it, and that made me feel great pride, also a sense of confidence that if I along with my students could pull this off, I and they had more resources than we thought possible.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: A lot of other faculty are now going to be this summer and next fall and next year developing community-engaged courses in the current environment, either online or some hybrid version, but either way it's in this age of COVID, before coronavirus and after coronavirus. Having gone through this experience yourself, what advice would you have for other community-engaged faculty who are developing or teaching courses in this moment in the age of COVID?

VANESSA OCHS: If I or a colleague were developing a community engagement course in the era after COVID, it would be totally different because face-to-face engagements wouldn't be possible. It wouldn't be possible for the student to have the experience of leaving their UVA bubble and going physically someplace else. Virtually virtual engagements are possible, but I've had no experience in an engagement that's only virtual. I suppose if someone came to me say as a rabbi and said rabbi can you counsel me and I had never met them, I'm sure I could counsel them and we could build up a relationship, but I'm still sitting in my own study, and I'm not really entering their own world, and helping them, but I don't know that I'm engaging with them in their world on their terms. I'm still tethered to my own identity, my own safe space and so if there were a way to make changes in the future, it requires a certain amount of creativity in terms of online show-and-tell. I would ask, say I were volunteering in tutoring a child in reading. I might ask them, can you make a little video of your house, of your family? Show me something, some tricks that your pet can do so I can better understand their world. And I might have to ask myself, should I be reciprocating? Do I want them to see my world? Is that only fair or is that unfair? How do we share who we are in new terms when we don't have the safe generic space of an organization to go to?

When a student can share something that he or she is proud of, and they're not put on the spot, but they can think about it beforehand and they can think about what they want to share in a safe way, that's a way for people to be more fully who they are, perhaps more fully who they are than they would be in a classroom where they're put on the spot. Actually, some of my students said something that was a surprise to me is that they felt safer talking on Zoom than they felt talking in the class. And this was not all students because some students just can talk anywhere at any time, but some students felt that there was a sense of distance and they could be a little bit more risky in saying their peace.

I also tried to figure out which students were more vulnerable either because of their situation before because I knew that there were certain mental health issues that they were going through or just the stress. I made phone dates with them just to chat, not necessarily to chat about the subjects, to chat like what's going on, what are you doing today and just have a very casual conversation, much more casual than I probably would have with my students. I found they cheered me up on darker days, but I'm hoping that it was a sense of relationship building with my students that helped them to feel less far away and maybe a little bit less vulnerable.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: What does it mean to you to be a community-engaged teacher in this moment?

VANESSA OCHS: I'm very proud to be a community-engaged teacher at this moment and in all moments. I feel that as we learn, we need to figure out how our learning can be useful to us and how we equipped with this learning can be useful in the world, to fix the world, to help others, to enrich the world. I feel there needs to always be a rippling out and there's a Jewish phrase which many Jews understand, and it's called tikkun olam, "repairing the world." And I believe that our learning should be reparative, that it should help heal us, heal the world, hold up the world, build the world, make the world more beautiful. And at this point, we need to put tikkun olam on steroids. We need to emphasize

the needs of the world, the needs of others, the need for more beauty. We are called forth in this era to dig deep, to recognize that we have more resources than we thought we had.

I've got all these books behind me. Well, I can reread them all. If they mattered to me once, I should dig back into them and see them in a new light. It's exciting. Of course, this is a terribly scary time, but it's exciting too, because our lives become more intense. I think I always remember hearing people talk about oh, I remember the Depression or World War 2 or oh back in the 60s, so all these tie-ins felt like, oh yeah, in the olden days when there was history. We are in history right now. We're going to be telling stories about this period for the rest of our lives and what we do now is heightened a bit. So, in a sense, it's a precious time. It's beautiful.