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Interview with Gayle Isa

Gayle Isa

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Interviewee: Gayle Isa

Interviewers: Rimki Barua and Myra Harit

Date: 5th May 2021

Location: Zoom

Collection: Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Archive, SBS 322: Asian American Women's History, Spring 2021

Length of interview: 00:50:11

Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Bio: Gayle Isa is a fourth generation Japanese American woman who was born in Los Angeles. She has family roots in Hawaii, Japan, and Okinawa. She has previously worked in many non-profit organizations, including the Asian Arts Initiative. She is a care coordinator for the Auntie Sewing Squad.

Thematic Outline: (00:00) Gayle Isa discusses her life in Philadelphia, her family's immigration history and how she got involved in non-profit organizations through one summer experience in the Encampment for Citizenship. (10:52) She explains how her daughter initiated their involvement with the Auntie Sewing Squad. She explains why she identifies as Asian American more strongly than she does as Japanese American. (20:30) She describes the racial injustices she faced, including examples of racial microaggressions. (32:37) She shares why taiko drumming is an important tradition to her and some positive aspects she hopes will emerge in response to anti-Asian violence (39:28) Altogether, she offers advice to the younger generation on finding their own way to serve the community while ending on a note on how the Auntie Sewing Squad is shifting during the waxes and wanes of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gayle Isa Oral History Transcript

00:00

Rimki (R): OK. Hi, I'm Rimki. This is Myra and we are interviewing Gayle Isa today. Today's date is 5th of May, 2021 and it's currently 2:02 p.m. The location of this interview is on Zoom. And the purpose of this meeting is to know more about the Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Archive. Yeah.

00:33

Myra (M): I'm gonna start up with the questions. So firstly, could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

00:42

Gayle (G): Of course. Yes, sure. So my name is Gayle Isa, which you know, and I am here based in Los Angeles, California, where I was born and where I spent most of my childhood growing up. Then I actually spent a number of years, I went to the East Coast, to Philadelphia for college and then stayed there for over half my life. I lived in Philadelphia for over twenty-five years. And then there [I] was active doing different kinds of organizing and then also building and managing a nonprofit community art center called Asian Arts Initiative, which works with people in the Asian American community and also building bridges with people beyond the Asian American community as well. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the organization, I left that role and also moved back to California where I'm from. And I've been really grateful to be in Los Angeles, especially during the pandemic, and to be closer to family and also to have a chance to really enjoy and appreciate the work that other people are doing, especially around producing cultural events and activities and programs. So, yeah.

2:12

R: If you don't mind me asking what was the reason that you left the organization in Philadelphia?

2:20

G: Sure. Well, mostly it was time, you know, or maybe even past time for me to step away and to create space for other people to be able to shape the organization and take it wherever it is going to go next. And then also, I was just talking with my daughter, who's nine, about the fact that after the 2016 elections and the election of Donald Trump as the US president, I think all of us were very scared. And I remember her, she was five at the time and her saying, oh, we should move to California because he won't be our president there. And I remember explaining to her that he would still be president, but that she was right, that we probably would be somewhat safer from some of his policies if we moved back to a place like California that's a little bit, at least parts of it, you know, that are a little bit more liberal. And yeah, and kind of like not as bound to the same values that he used to govern. So, it was a combination of being ready to leave

the organization and then also being ready to be in a place that for us felt safer, and like I said before, also closer to family. Yeah.

3:56

R: So could you tell me about your family's immigration history?

4:02

G: Sure. So in brief, I guess I'm fourth-generation Japanese American. That's how I identified for most of my life. Although a few years ago when I was visiting an older uncle of mine in Hawaii, he told me that he's like, you know, you're hapa, you know that you're actually mixed race because you're only half Japanese and the other half of you is Okinawan. So for me, I laughed because, like, in the context of Hawaii, that might make sense. But I also said to him, like on the mainland, you know, or the continental US, you know, people would not be able to understand or appreciate that distinction, I think, between Okinawa and Japan. But basically, both sides of my family immigrated to Hawaii. So my mother's side from somewhere in Japan, it was my great grandparents who came, and then on my father's side, great grandparents came from Okinawa and they both settled in different parts of Hawaii. My mom's family was on the Big Island of Hawaii. And then my father's side yea was on Oahu. And I'm the first generation born mainland. And some people would say "katonk", but both sides of the family. I guess I moved when my parents were in high school to California in hopes of finding better opportunities for their education and so on both sides, my mother and my father are the first generation of college educated people in our families. So hopefully the sacrifice was at least somewhat worth it for my grandparents, their parents to leave, you know, what was familiar, and, you know, many of the friends that they had, to be able to create like a new life here in Los Angeles.

6:34

M: So for the next question, how did you start to get involved in so many nonprofit organizations?

6:45

G: Yeah. So I think my mother, I mean, I know that my mother is or was a school teacher. She's retired from that profession or that job right now. And I think she always made it a priority to expose my sister and myself to lots of different kinds of educational and extracurricular opportunities. And I was active in a lot of different kinds of like school clubs and activities. And I think, though, that the experience that actually really shaped my life and my career was when my parents accidentally allowed me to enroll in a summer youth leadership development program that was run by socialists and so I had a chance to be away from home. I think it was a six week, might have been four, but I think it was six week program called the Encampment for Citizenship. And it still exists, actually, and brings together young people, high school aged, young people from all different ethnic, racial, and for me, especially class backgrounds was one

of the most significant sort of parts of the experience, you know, of being able to be in the same space and become friends with people who had grown up in the projects, in the Bronx, and people who, you know, had grown up on Native American Indian reservations in the Midwest. You know, and to really, yeah, sort of have a chance to be challenged to form our own community government. And then also to work on external internships exposing us to different aspects. It was in the San Francisco Bay Area. So exposing us to different aspects of the communities there and taking different kinds of workshops that encouraged us to analyze like how power in this country, in this world, works. And, you know, ways to try to build community and make a difference. And so I think that experience in high school definitely inspired me. Because it taught me like, oh, corporations are evil and the military does bad things, you know, even though I have, like, my father was upset because I came back and was like the military is evil and he's like, we are, you know, we have family members who have been in the military and many of them like not voluntarily, but, you know, were still serving, you know, or felt that they were serving our country. And so, you know, for him, it was I think, a point of pride. But I had learned these different values. So I knew that there were certain aspects of community and of career that, you know, that were closed off to me because of those values that I had been exposed to. I also knew that I couldn't be a teacher because I was just saying this to my daughter as well, because I could never wake up early enough every single day. And, and so I realized, like, oh, I guess there's this, like, you know, field, you know, or there's entities that are called nonprofits. And I figured that, you know, might and it turns out that nonprofits is very wide ranging and diverse field more so than I understood then. But, yeah, I thought that maybe that would be where I would end up. And it has turned out to be true.

10:52

R: I wanted to ask, so you know, how you mentioned your daughter was the one who first saw about this Auntie Sewing Squad and asked you if you could help. Is it because you told her about, you know, all these nonprofit organizations and like they just gave her insight of them? And is that why she likes it?

11:18

G: I think so. I mean, I think she's really, she's really fortunate because, you know, the first six years of her life, while we were still in Philadelphia, you know, I took her with me to almost every single cultural event and a lot of meetings, you know, that I went to. And so she had a chance to meet a lot of artists, be exposed to a lot of different viewpoints and ideas and hopefully understand like a sense of justice as well as injustice. And she had a chance to meet Auntie Kristina Wong, who's the founder and the overlord of the Auntie Sewing Squad. And I say to people that the Auntie Sewing Squad has changed my life in many ways. But well, one of the ways is that I used to spell the word "Auntie" as like a-u-n-t-y and I used to pronounce it "Aunty" as well. But then when I would tell people as part of this Auntie Sewing Squad, they would ask, why are you against sewing? Because [they] thought I meant "anti". And so I've

changed the way I spell and also the way that I pronounce “Auntie”. You know, because of the Auntie Sewing Squad. But Davina, my daughter had a chance to meet Kristina probably when she, when Davina was about one year old, you know, because Kristina is one of the artists who my organization had supported. And in terms of commissioning some of her past work and presenting her past work, and she was somebody who you know, was and, you know, obviously still is a friend. And so who we would see, you know, at conferences or on visits to California or when she was in town in Philadelphia. And so, also, after we moved to L.A., one of the projects that Kristina had done is called Radical Cram School, which is a web series, and so my daughter Davina was lucky, I think, to be an extra in one of the episodes of season two. And so, like, Kristina was very much an important part of our life in Cali, like she was part of our lives before coming home to California, but especially after, you know, getting resituated in California. She was somebody important you know in our lives. And so I think I had shown her one of the news clips of Kristina, the Auntie Sewing Squad and that's, you know, what she saw. And I was, do you wanna watch this? Auntie Kristina, you know, is like in this video. And, you know, of course, it's on a screen and Davina loves anything that's on a screen. So we watched it together. And then she asked after watching it, you know, can we help. And thus started the current era of our lives.

14:21

R: That’s amazing. I love that. So moving on to our next question. Do you see any similarities or differences that surprises you the most in American or Asian cultures?

14:40

G: Let's see, I guess I feel like that's a complex question. I think of culture as a combination of so many different factors, you know, the sort of like, again, like ethnic traditions as well as, you know, and sort of as well as like food and family and then the ways that we all interact or engage with each other. I think that there's also just a very big diversity of the kinds of cultures that comprise the Asian American community and definitely the broader Asian community as well. I think that I'm fortunate. I think that I've had a chance to observe and then also navigate like it's sort of different, maybe subcultures of kind of, like, within that. Usually I've identified more strongly as Asian American than I identify as Japanese American. And when I'm in Japanese American settings, though, even though this is like a tangent to your question, when I'm in Japanese American settings, I feel like there are definitely a set of unspoken rules around, like, you know, especially around like respect for elders and like things that we're just supposed to, like, inherently know to say or not say, you know, and that can be very challenging, I think, for me and I think for people who are kind of like brought up with like an American sense of either entitlement or empowerment, you know, and that idea of even though I tend to listen before speaking usually. But I feel like the environment I was raised in is very much that sense of like I should be able to say what I believe and what I want when I want to. I feel like that's actually very different in a lot of sort of more traditional, like sort of Asian cultures or environments.

Yeah. So that would be one distinction, I guess. I think in my past work, I had a lot of opportunities to also work with Asian Americans of different generations. So people who are first generation immigrants and oftentimes like who are older than me. And then also sometimes there are kids, some of whom were also first generation immigrants but, you know, from a younger generation. I guess I've also had a chance to just observe, you know, some of the differences in how people feel comfortable relating to each other kind of based on those perspectives. Yeah.

17:57

M: So I wanted to ask you if,

18:01

G: Can I can I interrupt? I know that you're supposed to be interviewing me, but I'm just curious, like, what prompted you to ask that question? And if there's observations that either of you have around the...

18:15

R: Go ahead.

18:19

M: Well what really prompted us was mostly because I think throughout the years we have been seeing a lot of cultural changes in America and in some Asian communities like for me. And then, yeah, we have adopted a lot of American cultures, just like being that way and but, like, still maintaining our traditional ways of being or like dressing or something. So, I just wanted to know if you find any similarities to that or that you find any differences that are like, really, like too different. Rimki, do you wanna add anything?

19:11

R: Yeah, I think what mainly prompted us to ask that question was, because, like you mentioned, when you are around those Japanese communities, you have to be like, be silent and listen before you interrupt them. And that's also a thing for us, like, and I say us, because I know me and Myra share kind of a similar culture. But for us to, we aren't allowed to speak above the adults. Like we are supposed to listen to them, obey them. And then obviously, when we went to America, we saw that, oh, no, that's not how it works all over the world, we have a right to speak too. So, we just wanted to know if that's how you feel too or yeah.

19:56

M: And also, like we noticed that you have been to a lot of places and you know a lot about like, for example, you mentioned that you have roots in Japan, and Okinawa, so we just wanted to see

like if any of that relates to it. So I also wanted to ask you, like being an Asian American, did you ever feel like an outsider at any point of your life?

20:30

G: Yeah, I think I once was joking with another friend of mine who is actually I would call her Asian American, but she's from Korea and she came to the US when she, I think, was either in high school or maybe she came for college or, yeah, so she came as a young adult to the US. And so she was complaining to me about how she doesn't feel like an Asian American or like the other Asian Americans. And I laughed and I told her that actually I think that feeling of not belonging is what makes you Asian American. Because I think that's the one thing that almost all Asian Americans have in common is that like we each feel like we don't belong either within the Asian American community or within the broader context of, you know, of U.S. society or the world. Like, there's this sense that you never quite belong, you know, and yeah, that's it in a nutshell. I'm sure I could share many, many stories. And then also there's, you know, like a lot of very tragic, you know, like history that's still happening in terms of the ways that Asian Americans are treated. But overall, yes, I would say it's easy to feel like we don't belong.

22:00

R: Did you ever face racial injustice? You in person, like yeah?

22:06

G: ...Within the context of the Auntie Sewing Squad and into other work that I've done in my life, I guess I feel like, you know, that's part of what we're trying to address, right, is to find ways to help more people to acknowledge, like the inequities and the injustices and then on a structural level, as well as on an interpersonal level to try to break down some of those barriers and make things more fair and also hopefully more kind. Yeah. And so I feel like I've been really fortunate within the Auntie Sewing Squad, you know, to have a role as a care coordinator, to be able to be thoughtful about ways of supporting the different Aunties you know, and encouraging people to have value in and of themselves. But especially after the most recent wave of anti-Asian violence that's been affecting so many of us, I think I mean, emotionally as well as, you know, physically affecting us. I think it's been like an important way for me to, I don't know, I guess contribute or to feel like I'm contributing. But to be able to organize things like a self-defense workshop that we just had for for Asian Aunties and allies within the Auntie Sewing Squad or to offer small things like, you know, I don't know if you've seen some of the stickers that say, like, I am not a virus, you know, or masks that one of the other Auntie is making that that say like STOP AAPI HATE and, you know, being able to kind of offer these as like small salves to help people feel a little bit better, you know, as as they continue to fight the larger fights that we need to fight.

29:17

M: Ok, since you grew up in Los Angeles, but you have family roots in Hawaii, Japan and Okinawa, do you ever feel like you don't belong to either of those communities completely?

29:37

G: Um I guess so. I actually have never been to Japan so definitely don't belong there. And then we have like lots of cousins and aunties and uncles and extended family still in Hawaii and there's definitely a way that I identify with the local culture in Hawaii and also understand that I am not part of it, you know. And so that used to make me feel especially sad when I was younger, like, I actually felt sad when I think because I didn't get to grow up with a lot of extended family, like I mean, some people, they grow up on the same block or in the same household as their cousins or at least, you know, seeing each other, you know, frequently, and yeah, we only would see, you know, sort of our Hawaii family, maybe every few years. So, yeah. So I felt sad that we didn't have that kind of closeness and then also a little bit sad and maybe envious that I wasn't part of that kind of local culture. And even when I go to visit, like, I stopped, my voice and the lilt of my voice changes and I take on a little bit more of a pidgin accent. But, you know, that's not like who I am you know, sort of, yeah, in the rest of my life. Like, I feel like I'm like local culture adjacent, but not necessarily part of it yeah. And then in terms of like broader I guess American culture, I feel like, you know there's lots of things like the examples I shared of like, you know, ways that we can feel like we're not part of it. But then I also agree with folks who talk about, like the history of racism and, you know, exclusion and discrimination as part of the history and as part of the culture of this country. And in that way, then we are definitely part of it. Definitely so. Yeah. So I think it's a combination of both not belonging and belonging at the same time. And I'm a natural born Gemini, so I'm very familiar with that idea of being able to exist with contradiction and see two sides or feel two sides at once. So that I think that helps in negotiating the life in the U.S.

32:37

R: OK, so next question I would ask is, did your cultural background or specific traditions that you follow ever make you feel empowered or stand out in a crowd or stand out in a crowd?

32:51

G: I don't know about that latter part, but definitely I think one of the, I guess, cultural traditions that I feel like it has been important for me to claim and look to is like the Japanese and Japanese American drumming like taiko drumming. And I still remember the first time actually going, it might not have been the first time I saw or heard Taiko being performed, but I remember going to a concert with my Aunt in San Jose and waiting outside of the performance hall maybe not in line, but just being outside and then having like two kids on a bicycle who were probably like Chicano boys riding past and shouting "ching chong" noises at us and feeling like especially hurt and ashamed in that moment. But then going inside for the performance and then seeing like all

of these like Asian people, you know, making loud noise on the drums and jumping like and dancing really gleefully and like feeling, I mean, that was the happiest I had ever seen, like, Asian American people looking and, you know, and I feel like that same kind of joy then like, infused me and didn't completely erase, but, you know, took away the sting of, you know, of the insults that the kids had thrown at us. So I guess that would be one example and I guess that's also, I guess that experience and others like it are reasons why for me also, I think the arts has been such an important way, you know, to do, sort of do social justice work in the world, because I feel like, you know, the arts and the idea of, you know, having our stories told and, you know, being able to be seen, it just makes such a big difference in terms of how we can feel about ourselves and also how other people perceive us too.

35:25

M: So recently there has been a lot of hate on Asians. Um so how do you feel about this? Yeah.

35:36

G: So I feel like I've spoken a little bit about it already. You know, and it sucks. Yeah. I think. Yeah. Yeah, it's just, it's bad.

35:55

M: Did you expect this to change, like, overtime, because we are like, in 2021 and it has been going on for a long time. So what did you, what were your expectations like?

36:10

G: Yeah, definitely. I think the kind of the frequency and viciousness of the attacks that have been happening are definitely very frightening, you know, and then also like understanding like, kind of, the history of like anti-immigrant sentiment and the tendency of, you know, for folks to be blamed. You know, when things are hard is yeah, I feel like that's not surprising, but that's something that, you know, has been shown in U.S. history and in other contexts as well to happen again and again. Yeah. So I feel like it's not surprising, but it is definitely scary. Yeah. And I think I guess one other thing I guess that I would add is that I think. Well, especially within the Auntie Sewing Squad, but in other parts of my life, too, I feel some of the positive aspects, not of the violence itself, but some of the positive trends is that I think there is more attention and awareness to the fact that it is happening, you know, both within the Asian community and then also like among allies as well. I think that kind of increased awareness and increased media coverage is probably a positive thing. And then I also think that or I'm hoping that within the Asian community in particular, that there are ways that folks are more so than before, able to begin to draw parallels and gain a deeper understanding of how, what our community may be experiencing now is similar to like what Black communities are dealing with every single day you know, even when there's not a pandemic and yeah, and it has surprised me even from, you know, progressive friends, you know, ways that I don't think everyone in our

community has had a chance to to realize or empathize maybe with what other communities of color face on an ongoing basis. So I am hopeful that out of this moment, you know, maybe will come back again, that deeper understanding and maybe more solidarity as well.

39:15

R: So you've been such an inspiration for us. You are so you, serve all these non profit organizations and just the community. How would you encourage the younger generations to serve the community?

39:28

G: I mean, I think each person, whether it's younger or older or whatever I think each person obviously needs to find sort of the ways that it makes sense for them. I think that's one of the things that has been really great within the Auntie Sewing Squad is that, you know, there are people who and for me, like I actually learned to sew after the pandemic started and then I sewed like it was a great way for me to focus my energy and to feel like I was doing something tangible that could actually make a difference in people's lives and communities that are connected to mine, you know? And then I, you know, I've sewed a thousand masks. And then the the 2020 election was coming up and I started like, you know, text banking and phone banking and, you know, feeling like there were other things that I needed to do in order to keep making a difference. So I actually stopped sewing and so even though I'm an active member of the Squad, I haven't been making masks for the past few months and I've been trying to encourage other Aunties also to sort of feel like, you know, if making masks is something that, you know, feels like right and good for you, then make masks, you know, and if you are tired of it or, you know, like you don't enjoy it. You know, then there are other ways, you know, that you can still be part of our community you know, you can be part of giving care and encouragement to other Aunties or sometimes I was just sharing a quote from the writer, Audre Lorde, that maybe I should look up so I don't actually misquote it. But basically, I'm going to try to find it. Trying to remember who I sent it to. Was is this Auntie? Yeah, that. "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is an act of self-preservation. And that is an act of political warfare." And so I guess you know, I would encourage people to definitely like sort of find your own way of feeling like you can make a difference, you know and then also to make sure and I feel like I mean, in all of my years of working as a director of a nonprofit, I was not good at taking care of myself. And I, you know, definitely worked way more hours, and expected way more of myself than I think was fair and... You know, there's all kinds of reasons for that, and it's hard to resist in a capitalist context, it's hard to step away from that. But I do think that the importance of creating self care and allowing ourselves like the right to rest is really important in all of the work that we do. So I hope that, I hope that all generations, including younger generations, will be able to remember and figure out how to make that real.

43:13

M: I was actually, I wanted to ask you something about your reaction. So since Auntie Sewing Squad started out with just making masks and the Aunties were like contributing and but like over the year we saw it growing and like you mentioned, self-defense classes were like being given to the Aunties. So like how was your reaction when you saw it expand into like such a large community with so many types of people contributing?

43:47

G: Yeah, I mean, I feel like in the world of the arts, I've seen like, so many different, like creative projects or collectives, you know, form, grow, change, sometimes fall apart. And so it's been really interesting to watch and also to wonder, you know, about the sort of the trajectory of the Auntie Sewing Squad. I think that it has definitely for me and I know for so many of the other Aunties it's been like a lifeline, you know, over the course of the past year. I think that as so many things start reopening or, you know, in terms of like for me, again, my daughter, like her school, is back to a hybrid model so she's going into class a couple of times per week, you know, and other businesses and things like that are opening as well. So I feel like the role that the Auntie Sewing Squad has played, you know, in our lives is shifting. I hope that we'll be able to kind of also like let it go, you know, instead of like kind of forcing ourselves to, you know, keep sewing or keep finding, you know, ways I think that a lot of true friendships have actually formed, you know, with for me, like with people I've met through the Auntie Sewing Squad and people who I expect I will, you know, sort of keep in touch with, you know, even after the pandemic and after the active, you know, sort of phase of the Auntie Sewing Squad maybe culminates. I do remember, like, you know, in the early days when there was like, I don't know, like 30 or 50 Aunties or something like that when I first started doing, like the care coordination, there was a different kind of intimacy, you know, that I sometimes miss, you know, and back in that day, I was like literally driving around Los Angeles, delivering care packages or care items and then there was like this, just a handful of Aunties in the in the Northern California Bay Area who, you know, were envious of all of the care and like treats, you know, that the L.A. Aunties got to enjoy. But now, like you know, the Bay Area has its own huge system of care and, you know, and mutual support for each other and, you know, there's Aunties in other parts of the country who, you know, are kind of more isolated, who were, you know, trying to find ways to support and stay connected to. I think that Sewing Squad has also shifted, as I think the racial composition of the group has changed, you know, because initially it was predominantly Asian women and I feel like that has shifted. I'm grateful that sort of the political perspective has kind of been retained even as the group has grown. But I also feel like there's definitely like, it's not a tension. I don't think it's a bad thing. So but I'll use the word tension between people or maybe it's a spectrum, but between sort of people who, you know, are in it kind of for the politics and then other people who are kind of more in it for the sewing, and you know and you can see, like even in that working group, the there are some people who are like interested in sharing like sewing techniques and, you know, like what's wrong with my machine? Like, why is it doing this? Or, you know, like, where can I get, like, this other tool or pattern? And then there are folks

who, you know, are sort of posting about like the next rally that's coming up and, you know, articles about like what CDC guidelines are going to mean for, you know, marginalized communities or things like that. So, I mean, so there is definitely a spectrum and I think inherent tension that, like I said, I don't think is an unhealthy thing, but it's definitely something that I think as any group grows, you know, there will be like these different, I guess, like different and sometimes disparate emphases kind of within the group and so I'm not sure, you know, sort of what will happen in in terms of you know, like as the pandemic and as the urgency and of the need for masks, you know, kind of tapers down, you know, sort of like what will be the focus, I guess for those of us who continue to be part of the Auntie Sewing Squad.

49:07

R: Okay, do you have something more, Myra?

49:10

M: Um, no.

49:13

R: Okay, well, thank you. That's all our questions. And thank you for your time. Thank you for all the advices and all of the information that you shared with us about yourself and just about everything. Thanks a lot for your time.

49:30

G: Thank you both. It is great to meet you. Can I do a screenshot with you guys?

49:35

M :Yeah

R: Yeah.

49:39

G: OK. OK, ready? I don't know what happened. OK, now, no, it's not working. What's going on? Hmm. OK, now. Okay, I'll email it to you.

50:11

R: Thank you.