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Partners in Research and in Life

By Sarah Asp Olson

Married Communication Studies professors team up to understand race, expression and what it means to belong.

Chris Brown and Sachi Sekimoto come from different worlds.

Brown grew up in inner city Chicago, Sekimoto in Tokyo, Japan. They met at the University of New Mexico while working toward doctoral degrees in Intercultural Communication, fell in love and began life together as spouses. Now, as professors in Minnesota State Mankato's Department of Communication Studies, they're partners in life and in work.

Sekimoto arrived at Minnesota State Mankato in 2010; she is currently an associate professor. Brown followed a year later and is now an associate professor and the department's director of graduate studies.

Both focus their research, in part, on race and cultural identity—though as expected, they come at the topics from different angles. “I take more of an empirical approach,” says Brown, “where Sachi might take more of a philosophical approach.”

“In how,” Sekimoto explains, “the external world interacts with the internal self.”

Exploring Common Ground

Although their cultural identities were formed on different continents, Brown and Sekimoto began to see similarities in the way they related to speaking Standard American English and found common ground in the way they both learned to approach speaking and communicating as “outsiders.”

“For him as an African-American person there is that history that says, Black English or Ebonics is not an educated form of English expression,” says Sekimoto. “And for me as a foreigner, the marker of my foreignness comes down not only to my physical appearance as an Asian person, but also my accent. So for both of us, speaking English is always an experience of race at the same time.”

In their recent paper titled “A Phenomenology of the Racialized Tongue: Embodiment, Language, and the Bodies that Speak,” Brown and Sekimoto use their own personal experiences to explore the “performative effects of disciplining our bodies to speak Standard American English as a second language and dialect.”

“It’s based on a phenomenology of speaking,” says Brown. “It has to do not just with the act of speaking and the use of words, but how we physically engage the process of speaking: how we use our tongues, how wide we open our mouths, how we use our lips.”

“Not only just speaking English, but in that struggle to speak ‘properly,’ we kind of experience how we are viewed as racial minorities,” Sekimoto adds. “We had those kinds of mutual experiences of struggling to adapt to the dominant culture.”

Expanding the Research

Brown and Sekimoto will spend the 2017-2018 academic year on sabbatical in Tokyo pursuing individual research interests and collaborating to expand their paper into a book based on their own personal narratives.

“This project is very much informed by what we do,” says Brown. “We want to write a book that focuses on race as a sensory experience—race in terms of how we touch, feel, see and hear.”

The couple will build off the work they’ve already done, and include an exploration of autobiographical writings and film.

“So tapping into cross-disciplinary discussions on race, but really focusing on how racial identity gets constructed through various sensory experiences,” says Brown.

“I think it is about how we feel race and how we feel about race,” says Sekimoto.

The concept is still in its early stages, but Brown and Sekimoto are used to developing things in tandem, through conversations at work (“our offices are next to each other,” Brown says) or amid the busyness of home life, which now includes their two-year-old son, Taisei.

“In our case, as partners we can fill in each other’s gaps in knowledge,” Brown says.

“As colleagues in the same field, you are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of your partner, and we can point out things and contribute to each other,” Sekimoto adds. “That way we gain way more than what we would if we worked individually.”