Interviewee: Bao-Long Chu
Interviewers: Daniel Ngo, Sara Davis
Date/Time of Interview: April 20, 2018, 9:00 AM
Transcribed by: Daniel Ngo and Sara Davis
Edited by: Daniel Ngo, Sara Davis, and Saniya Gayake (6/21/2018)
Audio Track Time: 58:22

Background: Bao-Long Chu was born in 1967 in Saigon, Vietnam. He, his parents, and his siblings left Vietnam just prior to the Fall of Saigon in April 1975. His family briefly lived in Miami before settling in Galveston in 1976. Since then, Mr. Chu attended college at Houston Baptist University, and received his Master of Fine Arts from the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program. After getting to know the city better while working as a visiting writer for Writer's in the Schools, Mr. Chu began working for Houston Endowment as a program director. In this interview, Mr. Chu discusses his memories of leaving Vietnam, his writing, and his thoughts on the dual identity of Vietnamese-Americans.

Setting: This interview was conducted on April 20, 2018 at 9:30am in Long Chu's office building.

Key:
LC: Long Chu
DN: Daniel Ngo
SD: Sara Davis
—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop
…: speech trails off; pause
Italics: emphasis
(?): preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview Transcript:
DN: Today is April 20, 2018. My name is Daniel Ngo and with me I have Sara Davis and we're interviewing Long Chu today. So, to start off, a simple question would be where were you born?

LC: Uh, I was born in, uh, Vietnam. In Saigon, Vietnam.

DN: And what year was that?

LC: Uh, 1975. [**DN**: Oh, okay] Oh, I'm sorry. Not 1975. 1967. [**DN**: Okay] 1975 was when we left Vietnam, so the…

DN: So, obviously you grew up, um… you lived there for a few years before the war started. What was your childhood like growing up during that time period?

LC: Sure. Um, I… let's see, I… remember clearly that I went to, uh, uh, a French, uh, uh, Catholic school. And, uh, I remember the nuns and how severe and harsh they were. Um, I got into some trouble as a kid. Probably, uh, talked too much or-or-or, um, wasn't listening too much, and the nuns would sort of float down in their habits or alongside and, uh, have the ruler to sort of whip you on your knuckles. So, that's a very clear memory, but, um, yeah.

DN: You lived in Saigon. Do you remember any, um, particularly bad days? Bombings and other things like that?

LC: You know, tho—it's interesting. Those… memories come in flashes and sound more than visual. We lived far away… enough from the main action of the war. Um, my… my father, uh, was, uh, the medical chief of this hospital in Saigon and so in the hospital compound… you know, was, um, our-our residence. So, it was – it felt

safe and there were walls and guards an-and so I didn't remember much of, uh, actually seeing anything, um, but I could recall hearing… bombings and thuds and sort of th-th-the distant sounds of the war.

DN: Okay. Did any of your family participate in the war?

LC: Well, my-my-my father, um, was in the army, uh, as an army physician. Um, but I think that-that-that, you know, i-it – in Vietnam it wasn't by choice. You just, you-you joined the army at-at some point. And so, he-he did and he-he, um, a-actually that, uh, allowed him to, um, finish his-his, um, his medical learning. Um, and, uh, so that, you know, I-I-I think that that's it. It wasn't until later when… when I was older that I realized that, um, my, uh, my uncle, for example, my-my mother's sister's husband, um, he was a, um, uh, lieutenant, uh, in the army before he became the mayor of Da Nang. Um, and my-my grandfather, my mother's, uh, father, uh, he was, uh, a general in the army. And, in fact, uh, after the war he was not able, um, to escape and was put in reeducation camp for [**DN**: Mmm] about twelve years.

DN: Okay, uh, did you have any siblings?

LC: Yes, seven. We come from a large family. Four boys, four girls. I am the, uh, third child but the oldest son. Um, and, uh, uh, yeah, large, large family.

DN: So, I'm guessing none of the… none of the children participated because they were too young?

LC: Yeah, we-we, yeah, yeah. W-we were… we were young.

DN: Okay, uh, last question about your, kind of, childhood. What did your mother do if your father was home?

LC: My mother… was being a mother. She [laughs] with eight, or seven kids. The last one was born in, uh, America actually. Um, with seven kids sh-she, she, she was, uh, um, you know, she took care of us an-and, uh, um, the cornerstone of our family, so to speak. Yeah.

DN: Okay, moving on to your, kind of, immigration. How – what route did you take to leave Vietnam and come here?

LC: Sure. It's a – that's an interesting story. You know, as-as a, uh, as a poet I-I-I write a lot about the V—the Vietnam-American experience. And, like I said, a lot of it a-are memories but not all mine, an-an-and so memories that I collect from hearing, uh, my family stories, an-and, um, and, uh, and all of that. But, um, my… my father's sister's husband, um, was a part of the, uh, South Vietnamese government. Uh, he was actually… his role was sort of like director of communications for, um, President Thieu, when, when, uh, when Thieu was in, was in power right be—you know, up until the, the, uh, loss of the war. Um, and so through my uncle, um, we were able to leave Vietnam, um, on a plane. I don't remember, uh, the details of, of that. It was a military plane, but it wasn't uncomfortable. Um, I, you know, I-I-I remember the… I remember the day of the leaving which was really, uh-uh-uh you know, it's – that day was clear in my head because my sister and I attended that French Catholic school. My sister that's just a year older than me. Um, I think the name of the school is La Saint Table. And, um, a-and it was during the middle of the day, maybe noon or so, an-an-and, um, and, uh, my, uh, mother had sent a car to retrieve us and, uh, my-my… so I – what I remember was that my sister running up to me. I was in the playground. My sister running up to me and saying "Hurry, w-we got to go. We got to go." What I realized later, and this is something that I – that I learned later, was that my sister was actually looking for me for-for a long while. Like thirty minutes or so she couldn't, she couldn't find me. An-and in fact, um, the driver said, "We have to leave. We have to leave." And she said, "I can't leave without my brother!" Right? And so, so, um, so, so that, that was the sort of recollected memory that's not mine, bu-but, uh, but at least I remember tha-that day was, it was, uh, it was cloudy. It wasn't a bright day an-and, uh, we got in the car, uh, went to the house. I really don't remember taking anything or carrying anything. An-and, um, my, you know, there were several cars and we, we all went to the airport. My, uh, my parents, my-my siblings, my grandparents, and my father's sister's family. So,

my aunt's family. Um, and there it was. We-we left. It was April 27, 1975. So, it was a few days before the fall of Saigon on the thirtieth.

DN: Do you remember how you felt? You were pretty young back then though.

LC: Uh, I… you know, and again this is interesting, th-the sort of memory tha-that we make, um, I'm not sure if I felt this way, but I-I-I could recall not knowing, and that feeling of-of-of… the feeling of not knowing. You know, the, sort of like this, this sense of… it wasn't dread, it was more excitement, right? Because young person sort of like on a plane, sort of going somewhere. But I could recall, um, you know, m-my parents' faces, worries, yeah, but, but again it—I was maybe six or so, a-an-and, you know, young enough to remember bu-but probably not, uh, remembering th-the depth of the feelings. Um, though now when I write about, about that day, or-or-or some of the, the memories the-they're much more expanded of course.

DN: Mhmm. So, you already mentioned someone was – one of your relatives was left behind and in reeducation camp for twelve years. Was anyone else and, uh, were you able to be reunited with any of them?

LC: Yes, um, so, so my, my, uh, what I learned later was that my uncle, my uncle who got us out had the ability or was given permission to take several family members out, but only immediate family members. And so, my mother's parents, you know, uh, um, didn't, um, didn't make the list. And, and, uh, and so, they were left behind. Most of my mother's family had already left before then. Many of them, actually, um, were in America in, in universities and colleges an-and just stayed. Um, my father, um, has two sisters, so, my two aunts on my father's side, one family left with us and the other one left, uh, soon after but through another route. Yeah. And so, immediate family members, I-I don't, I don't believe we had any except for my grandparents. And, yes, they were… I remember, growing up, my mother would send these shirts to my grandmother, uh, from America, and she would take the, th-th-the seams out fro—uh, from the bottom of the shirt and put – line it with dollar bills and fold it back up and mail it back. An-and send it to my grandmother. It wasn't until 1985 that they were able to reunite with us, and then after twelve years in a reeducation camp, um, my—the-the, the Communists, in their effort to reeducate, had broken my grandfather's legs, and so, I re—that re… that, um, reuniting, I remember very well. It was in LA, and, um, my, my mom, uh, also comes from a big family. Uh, I want to say about twenty-two, uh, half-sisters and brothers. Uh, full and half, um, so it was a big family. An-and, uh, so my, my, uh, so when my grandfather, uh, was wheeled out in a wheelchair I remember it was quite emotional. And, uh, but, yeah.

DN: Okay. Uh, we read abou—we read your, um, poem, *Dark Made Light*.

LC: Mhmm.

DN: And you were saying that you drew from other people's experiences. So, is that – most of that just family experiences that were told to you?

LC: Well, yeah. I think that th-the – I mean now you're – we're getting into th-the craft of-of-of writing and the craft of making which is, which is… you know, as a poet, th-th-there are things tha-that – memories that live in my head, but there are also memories that I have accumulated, and so, um… they're, they're my experiences. They're also… they're also not my experiences. They're, they're… the experience of the diaspora. They're the experiences of, um, of-of made up, uh, lives. Um, so, so bo—so all of that. Yeah. [**DN**: Okay] So, I mean, it's not an easy answer, I know, bu-but it-it's the making of it, an-and we write from what we know or feel, and, and so, yeah. Um…

DN: Okay. So, when you – you took the plane from Vietnam. Where did you end up landing?

LC: We – okay, so, the path was Vietnam to Guam. We – I remember, you know, w-w-we stopped a-at Guam because it was late at night an-and I was hungry and there was a military camp. Um, so I had milk for the first time, or at – or rather, uh, cow milk [laughs]. Um, uh, uh, and, uh, um, so-so-so from Guam we flew to San

Francisco. And in San Francisco, uh, uh, you know, this, again, the memories are vague. There's some clarity tha-that, that we were, um, uh, um, in a sort of military base, and was there for maybe about a night or two, and then, um, my father and my two aunts, so the three families and my grandparents… Um, oh, so my other aunt took another route but came to San Francisco at the same time. [**DN**: Okay.] Right. So, the three families, um, through the, uh, refugee program at that time, um, there had to be a sponsor family tha-tha-that take you in when you come to America. And so, the sponsor family that took us in, um, lived in Miami and so we flew to Miami. My, uh, one aunt went to Chicago and the other went to, um, Lafayette, Louisiana. So, from San Francisco we flew to Miami, and, um, we were there for a while, a year, a year, a year and a half or so?

DN: And where'd you go after that?

LC: Um, so, a year, a year and a half in Miami it was where – it was when my father, um, sort of, I forget the name of the actual qualification test, but retook the – or studied to retake the test to practice medicine here in America. And so, uh, all of that, and then he got, um, I guess an externship or something at, uh, UTMB in Galveston. So, we went to Galveston maybe '76 or so? Or toward the end of '76? Stayed there, you know, grew up in Galveston, and then moved to Houston in 1979.

DN: Okay. Um, can you talk about kind of the culture shock if you experienced any moving across the world?

LC: Uh, well yeah. So, growing – I-I remember in Miami, um, mainly, I think, mainly the Vietnamese families were-were-were in the same apartment complex an-and, uh, and my parents knew, uh, many of the, the families, um, you know, it was, it wasn't, wasn't terrible. Um, I remember, so then maybe I was in second grade or third grade or something? Third? Third grade. Um, I remember the feeling of not being able to speak English. [**DN**: Mhmm] So, that was, that was a, that was definitely a clear memory, because I remember not being able to know how to ask to go to the restroom in the class. My siblings and I an-and, and, uh, a few other Vietnamese, uh, uh, kids, we, we took, um, we took, uh, speech class. Maybe speech therapy? I-but-but – or ELA or something, but I-I remember the face of that teacher, but I can't remember, I can't recall her name. But, you know, the shock or the feeling of not being able to communicate, and then, really, I guess because I – I'm a verbal person, I re—I recall the slow accumulation of the, of the English language. Um, I, you know, I can't chart out the — a path but it's sort of like this sense of, uh, a growing, um, uh, expansion of one's self. Um, so being able to learn how to communicate an-and, and all that. So, yeah.

DN: Do you think that contributed to an interest in poetry and English?

LC: I think so. I think so. I think – I-I think that's a great, great point. I-I-I-I think that, um… I fell into reading very quickly, and I think it was through reading that-that-that-that allowed me to make a quick leap into, uh, uh, absorbing the language. Also, I'll, I'll note that my… my grandfather, um, an-and my father, uh, both spoke English, uh, but not, not very much. Um, but I do remember, my grandfather, um, so we would go to school and then after school we would go to his apartment and he would, sort of, drill us in, in English. The American, uh, um, alphabet and all of that. So, I remember just sitting on the kitchen floor with my siblings an-and he would have a tutorial for us. Uh, but…

DN: Where did you end up going to college?

LC: Um, I went to Houston Baptist University. I majored in English and-and-and psychology. Um, and, um, it's interesting, I-I… I wanted to go somewhere else. I wanted to go somewhere far away. In fact, um… you know, I-I was… considering and ve—ac-actually was accepted to-to Amherst, and-and I didn't go. There's this fear, I think, an-and it's something that I grew up with and I think it's part of the experience of being a refugee is the fear of leaving. Some can overcome that easily, but-but leaving means going away… forever. And so, at least that-that's my feeling about it. And so, very afraid of – not wanting to go, but wanting to go. And, anyway, ended up at Houston Baptist University, which was great. Um, uh, and, uh, an-and that was where I-I sort of really dug into poetry and writing, and then applied and was accepted to the UH creative writing program. The University of

Houston's creative writing program. Um, you know, I say growing up I-I, uh, I was always an artistic person. I-I-I drew and painted a lot in high school, and visual art is still a space that I-I-I enter, um, very easily. Um, but, uh, but, but, uh, the shift into using words, uh, tha-that-that happened in-in college. [**DN**: Okay] It blossomed.

DN: Was there any – ever any pressure to kind of do what your dad did and pursue medicine?

LC: Of course! Of course! And y'all would know that. I mean, I mean [laughs] this sense of, uh, of, uh, of, uh, um, you know… I wouldn't say that I had the thought of wanting to be a poet, or a writer. I think that for a long while, through college and even through graduate school, I-I-I-I, um, uh, you know, made efforts to-to do something practical. Study medicine would have been a practical thing, and I thought the next step maybe would be to be a lawyer because I'm good at writing, and I took the LSAT. I-I did fine, but, um, I don't know, I rea—I-I-I knew I wanted to, uh, uh, have a creative, uh, sort of life. And so, so, I-I don't know. I just pursued it, uh, an-and went through with it, and did, did writing. But yeah, the – that was not easy trying to have a sense of self versus what your parents, um, want for you.

DN: Okay, and how did you end up, uh, working here?

LC: Um, so after the creative writing program, um, at UH, I-I, um, joined, uh, a – an organization called Writers in the Schools. First, to teach writing in the classroom as a visiting writer, um, and, uh, um, was there for a long time, for eighteen years. So, so, a resident writer, and then I-I just did more work, became, uh, a, uh, uh, program associate, program director, and, uh, and, uh, became an associate director. Was there for eighteen years. So, all, all that time, really expanding my horizon about how to connect writing and poetry to other art forms and working with many arts organizations in Houston. Many arts institutions to do collaborative, uh, efforts that-that-that would marry, uh, other genres with writing and poetry, and to get them to be, um, understandable and exciting, uh, for children because the focus of Writers in the Schools is K-12. Um, so I was there for a while an-and the-the-the job opportunity, uh, came up here, um, you know, the-the-the, uh, the role of-of-of-of… being a program officer for, um, a historic foundation for Houston, um, was never something that I-I-I sort of aimed for, but-but after a long time sort of working in the art sector, thought that maybe this opportunity to look at the art sector from, uh, an upstream, uh, kind of effort an-an-and thinking about, uh, uh, making impact on the ecosystem in that way, um, was very tantalizing. I threw my hat in the ring. I really didn't think I was going to get it, but I got the offer June 2015 and started then.

DN: So, we already talked a little bit off camera about it, but could you kind of briefly summarize what you do as program officer for Houston Endowment?

LC: Sure! Ab-absolutely. Absolutely. Um, so Houston Endowment is a private foundation. Was, uh, uh, f—created – founded in 1937 by, uh, Jesse H. and Mary Gibbs, uh, Jones. And, um, the foundation supports, um, uh, uh, uh, many sectors. Uh, arts and culture, education, environment, human services, and-and, um, uh… I'm missing something. Um… health! And health, sorry. Um, so those sectors are encapsulated in, uh, four focus areas. I am the program officer for the arts and culture portfolio. And what I do is I review, uh, uh, applications, uh, grant applications. Uh, I also work with the community to find entry points for, uh, right timing issues in the arts and culture sector, and then I make recommendations for our board to make their decisions. So, um, it-it-it's grant making, it's, uh, uh, I don—you know, it's not something that, um, you sort of go to school for. Um, but it-it's wonderful work, and-and, uh, I-I am, uh, excited and humbled by the, uh, way that artists have such passion, an-and how they want to do their work. So.

DN: Okay. Kind of jumping around, what [**LC**: Sure] did you think of Houston when you first came here?

LC: Um… interesting, I—so I started middle school, um, an-an-and we went to, uh, we were in the Clear Creek **ISD**. Um, and, uh, you know, I-I mean I don't know what I thought of Houston. What I thought of-of-of-of-of school was this sense of not belonging, but-but wanting to belong, but also worked hard at belonging. Um, I didn't have a sense of the city, really. Um, it wasn't until college, and it wasn't until there was this moment.

My… so my-my father's medical office is at St. – or was at St. Joseph's medical plaza. At that time, uh, you know, the-the-the-the Vietnamese community was just, was just, uh, was just burgeoning. Um, I remember the growth and development of the Vietnamese community along Milam and Travis. Midtown before Midtown is Midtown now. Um, and I remember the-the sort of, uh, constant mushrooming of-of-of-of-of Vietnamese, um, stores and-and-and businesses and, um, you know, I just remember my… my, uh, father and mother sort of becoming more comfortable, uh, and that made me more-more comfortable. There was one moment, um, I think, uh, I was walking to the, uh, I—the grocery store – was the first Vietnamese grocery store. It's where Reef restaurant is at now. It's on McAllen. Um, and, uh, um, I remember walking into the-the market, coming out, and there was this-this truck that sort of sped by and-and this guy, uh, kind of spat out the window and said, "Gouk go home." And, uh, uh, so, you know, I remember that moment, that-that-that-that-that-that definitely filtered into my-my writing. Um, it's not until, you know, college and after college, and it's especially working at Writers in the Schools that I really have the – a sense of the city, the sense of Houston as a sort of – this-this-this expansiveness. And I knew Houston because of which through school campuses that I visited and school campuses that we worked with. So, I k-kind of got a sense of Houston through the-the, uh, through the eyes of the students in these campuses.

DN: Okay, so you were, you were mentioning the person that kind of drove by and said whatever. Uh, did you ever face any other soft of discrimination that you can think of? Maybe in education or in your work.

LC: Um, not in my work, never in my work. I think that's – I don't – th-the joy of working maybe in a nonprofit sector. Um, I would say that-that-that I became more and more a-aware of microaggressions or moments of-of-of not understanding or purposeful not understanding. I don't know if I, you know, if it was ever direct. Well, I don't know, I could, I could recall some moments. I think the difficulty is mostly, um, you know, having a foreign name, right? It's Bao Long Chu. I-I-I remember the sense of every time, um, in school, I mean this is a-as early as possible, um, you know, teachers s-s-s-sort of the first day going-going down the roll call, and I-I can always tell when it's my name because there's a-a stumbling, there's a pause, there's a looking around, there's a sense of making, you know, making sense of Bao Long, what to say, sometimes the "o" looks like a "d" and they would say, "Who's bad?" And, you know, so there's this fear and reticence of-of-of-of those moments, um, but, uh, yeah, yeah. I-I could talk for a long time about that [**DN** coughs] sense of the-the bifurcated self, the-the-the-the-the Vietnamese hyphen American, uh, I-I do remember in high school wa—dropping the "g" in Long so that it's Lon, so that it is more understandable or-or western. Um, I remember that because I-I love watching late night movies and I would stay up watching these old black and white movies, and there was one, these horror films with Lon Chaney Jr., and so, you know, his name was L-O-N, and I thought, "Oh, I can make that my name." But anyway, that-that didn't stay very long, I'm-I'm pretty stubborn about being who I am.

DN: Okay, how have you seen Houston change over the years, both culturally and physically and however?

LC: Well, again, through work, through the world of work, and especially now, in this role where we actually, as program officers and as a foundation, have this very wide and, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, top view perspective of the city, right, um, that-that, yes, the-the-the city has changed, I-I-I-I have a sense of that. Um, 45 will always be under construction. I—uh—you know. So, you know, growing up the-the-the-the Clear Lake area and sort of going-going, south into downtown, that-that stretch of 45 has-has always been under construction, will always be under construction. That part won't change, but the city has changed. The city has become much wider in its view. Food, for example, is much more representative, well not representative, very diverse, and, you know, I remember the-the-the early Vietnamese restaurants and-and-and-and just Vietnamese going and-and-and, um, but yeah, the-the city, Houston is amazing in that it makes… it seems to want to make room for-for everything and anything, and-and I-I like that about the city.

DN: Okay, so you were, you were talking earlier about how there was that kind of older area for where the Vietnamese people kind of settled. [**LC**: Yes] How has that changed overtime? Obviously more Vietnamese people have come.

LC: Well, it's interesting you said that. The – that – okay so, that area of Midtown was really Vietnamese Town, right? I mean it was, it was Vietnamese Town and at some point I remember maybe it was in the '90s or something, where the city put Vietnamese, um, language or, uh, Vietnamese street signs, um, and, and, uh, in fact I-I have an essay that-that sort of explored that. And-and so, and so there was this-this sense of a community, a very spec-specific location of-of-of-of-of what it means to be a Vietnamese, right, and-and-and-and living there. And I remember the-the, uh, migration as well of-of these Vietnamese businesses moving down to the Bellaire corridor. Um, and because the city was-was-was changing, that area was changing, um, i-it, uh, you know, became a sort of hot spot to-to develop and-and live. And so now there's really nothing there. The-the-the-the-the sense of Vietnamese local, [**SD** sneezes] [**DN**: Bless you] um, is more spread out, uh, with—from 59 past the beltway. Um, so-so there's really not – that-that-that moment has passed, that moment of-of this Vietnamese enclave, that has passed. Um, but-but it's a bigger city now so-so th-the sense of it being a part of the-the-the – enmeshed in the city in a bigger way I think that's a good thing.

DN: Mhmm. Okay, so it sounds like a lot of your – both your jobs have been kind of community oriented, but are you involved in any other community organizations?

LC: Ah… no, not really, not really. [**DN**: That's fine] I mean I-I, you know, my-my family's my community. I-I mean I-I-I, uh, I attend a lot of art functions for my job but also for my-my-my liking. Um, also, um, I care for the LGBTQ community. As a-a gay Vietnamese there's a sense of-of-of, uh, you know, of being on the edge, uh, as-as well, um, but-but yeah, I – there's – yeah. So, I-I-I belong to a lot of communities, but not necessarily an official kind of organizations.

DN: That's fine. So, going back to that Vietnamese hyphen American [**LC**: Mhmm] how do you personally identify? What does that mean to you?

LC: Yeah, li—you know, I don't know, that's an interesting question, right? Um, we should be able to name who we are. Vietnamese-American is a fine, uh, um, uh, label, I-I-I don't know if it… says enough, you know? I'm-I'm-I'm not exactly sure. I feel that I am firmly planted in two worlds. That I'm able, and lucky me actually, um, I'm able to navigate both worlds easily. I speak Vietnamese fluently, um, I-I-I-I go to Vietnamese temples, I, you know, I-I feel very much a part of that, of being a Vietnamese. But, also, I can switch code and be very American. I think it is a bit of switching code. Um, you know, and-and, uh, so yeah, I am, I'm lucky that I'm able to navigate both worlds with ease.

DN: So, you go to Vietnamese temple. Are you religious?

LC: I a—that's a, that's a good question. I am a spiritual person. Grew up Buddhist, but remember I went to a French Catholic school and was sort of mesmerized by-by all the beauty of – the trappings of the Catholic churches. Um, I converted to Catholicism in high school. I remember telling my parents an-and they were very upset, not because I am converting, but the question was, "Who will set up the temple to honor – the alter to honor us? Who will remember us?" Right? Um, uh, so the role the eldest son I think, I think that that-that is my role, um, and then I went to a Baptist school and was sort of – I-I-I dug into what that means, went to many Baptist churches with friends in colleges. And then – and here I am, you know, just sort of have all these-these experiences, these religious spaces and loving them all, but-but knowing that, um, that they don't provide all the answers, and just a spiritual person. I-I-I do believe in something, I'm not exactly sure what.

DN: Okay. Have you been back to visit Vietnam?

LC: I actually have, I went early. I got a, um, in, uh, um, when I graduated from the creative writing program I-I-I-I received this-this, uh, this grant. It was, uh, it was a wonderful grant. It-it-it allowed me to, um, do some traveling to feed my writing, feed my poetry, um, and so it was in 1994, which was a long, long time ago, in the sort of world of Vietnam now. Um, and I went in 1994, I went with my younger sister, um, the – and-and-and I remember because in July 1994 this – I was there during the summer – in July 1994 at some point President

Clinton declared that there is normalization of relationships, um, between Vietnam and America. And I was in Hanoi at the time and they were going to make this announcement at the old American embassy in Hanoi. I remember that my sister and I went and there was this sort of moment that I thought was really, really interesting that I left and-and here I am back in the place where my parents grew up, my parents came from that I had never visited and then there was this moment of-of America and Vietnam being friendly again.

DN: An—was that the only time you've even been back?

LC: That-that's the only time, I-I-I do need to plan a trip soon. Th—friends that have gone, my parents have been back, and-and they said, uh, things have just changed so, so quickly and-and I'm excited to see what that, what those changes look like.

DN: Do you think there were noticeable changes when you went in '94 between '75 and '94?

LC: Ah, I-I-I-I can't, I really couldn't tell you that just because I-I-I don't, uh, you know, I had never been to Hanoi that was the first time and-and-and that – at that trip I did not make it down into Saigon, so really just had no way t—in-in-into Hue, um, and, uh, and so no, I-I had sense of the physical changes of the landscape, but I did have a sense of… of being other than Vietnamese in Vietnam. There's a term Viet Que, which means overseas Vietnamese, and I was called that and so when I spoke Vietnamese, because my parents left Hanoi in 1952 when they, uh, you know, um, closed Hanoi, uh, off and split Vietnam into North and South, the way that they spoke Vietnamese was, uh, uh, clearly an old way of speaking and so I had adopted that, and so when I was speaking Vietnamese in Hanoi a lot of people said, "Why do you speak in this old accent?" You know, it was very interesting because some of the words that I use, that I learn from my parents, they don't exist anymore or that they have changed and-and so, there was this sense of-of being Vietnamese, speaking Vietnamese, but not exactly being Vietnamese, and so that – I thought that that was very interesting. Again, um, a great moment that-that sort of filtered through in my writing.

DN: Um, so a previous interviewee said that they think of Houston as home and Vietnam as their homeland, how do you feel?

LC: Hm… that's-that's an interesting question, I'm not sure if I feel that Vietnam is homeland. I- I feel that… I feel like my-my homeland is here. Though I know, I know what, I know what that means, I know what the term means. I know that-that there is a, there's a, there-there's an easy rootedness and I felt this when I was in Vietnam. I felt this when I visited, that there's a sense of being in this space that's sort of n—the space that knows you before you know it. Um, there was a natural sense of belonging… but when, you know, when I dug a little deeper into it, um, you know, again I told you this sense of speaking Vietnamese that's not a-a—the-the current Vietnamese, um, you know, there-there's-there's-there's a sense of being other, too. I think… I think for my parent's generation, for example, perhaps Vietnam as a homeland makes sense. For us, that were young, I would say, uh, you know, between-between, uh, uh, five and ten when we left Vietnam, I would say, I would say and-and I-I-I'm not speaking for the collective, but I would say that, in general, my thinking is that we live in both worlds and we are stuck in both worlds and that we are divided. And-and I don't think that that division, um, is-is-is, um, I don't think there's a desire to unite the two halves. I think that living as two separate entities is actually something that-that-that-that specific generation, and I know Vietnamese-American writers, poets, that-that, you know, we all speak the same – we speak in the same tone. Uh, Viet Thanh Nguyen, who wrote The Sympathizer that won the 2016 Pulitzer, um, his book is all about that, and I know Viet and-and-and-and other poets and other writers, we speak in this split tongue. And I don't think Vietnamese-Americans that are born here or-or that were much older when they left, I don't think that that divided s—the divided selves, I don't think that that notion is as strong. My brother who was born in Galveston does not think of himself as Vietnamese, I don't think, I don't think. I mean he knows – he-he speak Vietnamese really well, I mean that's one – that's the greatest gift of my parents, that my parents gave us was the enforcement of speaking Vietnamese at home and-and how we sort of lived in that language, um, uh, so-so-so-so yeah, that yeah.

DN: Uh, I just thought of another question [**LC**: Yeah] regarding your poetry. Who do you – who do you write for? Who's your main audience do you think?

LC: Very good question, very good question. Now, who do I write for? I think I write for me. I think I – I think I write for me. I think I write… I write about… the earlier desire of wanting to heal the two selves, the separation… I think I write about, um… you know, what it means to sort of li-live in the here and now. Um, I also write – I write for my parents. I write also primarily for my mother. I, you know, she-she, um, she speaks English, but-but broken and it's easy for someone to say, "Oh you've lived here for forty years you should speak English very well," but, you know, her-her role as a mother was to-to sort of be a mother and-and-and the… the space or the difficulty of negotiating, uh, living in America for my parents – I remember my mother, um, she was about, uh, twenty nine when she left, very young, very young. She had her – my-my, uh, youngest brother, Kiet, her last baby, uh, you know, when she was thirty. Um, and-and-and-and so I also remember my mother having to work these odd jobs, um, peeling shrimp on the floor of the Hotel Galvez kitchen, you know. Um, and, you know, it's interesting it's not like we-we-we grew up not without means, but-but the-the living of becoming American, I think that was harder for my mom and-and-and-and-and-and it-i-it was safe for her to sort of live in the Vietnamese space. I think for her, um, you know, thi-this-this sense of me communicating her stories and-and-and-and all that, I think, I think that I-I do write for my mom as well.

DN: Okay, I just have a couple more questions. Uh, what do you do for fun? You said you like to obviously par-partake in [**LC**: Yeah] various arts [**LC**: Yeah, yeah], but what else?

LC: I-I-I said before that I-I, uh, I paint and I draw, so I paint for fun. I-I-I, you know, I'm not, I'm not like this, uh, formally trained artist, but-but that's the p—the space where I go to-to to sort of, uh, be out of my head. It's less so with writing, that's much more difficult because it's so much, for me, thinking and editing. But, um, but what do I do for fun? I-I hang out with my family, I-I, you know, my-my siblings, half of them are here, half of them are scattered elsewhere. I have a great group of friends, um, my, you know, when you grow up gay you also make another family and-and so there, again, this sort of divided selves. I have two families, um, and-and-and so, you know, there-there's, there's that, there's that, um, but, yeah, um… simple things. I-I-I, uh, I have two dogs, love my dogs, love walking, um, so.

DN: Okay, and the last question I have is what would you say your greatest accomplishment is? So far?

LC: Huh. I don't, I-I don't know if you, I don't know if both of you feel this, but-but-but, um… I don't know, I've read, I read this-this-this, uh, research recently that said a-a lot of minorities feel the sense of, um… this fake identity tha—this-this faking that one has to do to sort of achieve something, um, I don't know, I it-it's-it's kind of interesting. That question actually is much more difficult than you would imagine. I would say that probably my greatest accomplishment thus far is to know that I have two selves and to love that fact. [**DN**: Okay] And-and-and the two selves are separated in-in many areas, but, um, but yeah, I think, I think that that, um, that that is true. You know, I-I-I haven't published a full book of poetry that has, that has sat for so long, um, you know, I'm – but a lot of my poems are anthologized in-in these various, um, Vietnamese-American sort of war anthologies or experiences anthologies and, um, I'm proud of that. I'm proud of – I'm proud that-that-that-that my – some-some of my sense of the world is-is out there for people to read and understand. Um, and I'm proud of being here. I'm-I'm proud of doing the work that I'm doing. It's, again, it's quite humbling and-and, um, uh, to be woven into this historic fabric of Houston I think is-is really interesting.

DN: Okay, so if Sara has any other questions.

SD: Um, yeah, I was wondering who, um, some of your favorite poets or authors were.

LC: Um, that's always a hard question for writers to answer. This vast array of poets and writers. You know, um, kind of classic poets, I love W.H. Auden. [**LC** laughs] Um, I-I love Li-Young Lee. Mark Doty was, uh, teaching in the creative writing program. Um, I didn't study under him though I knew of his poetry. I love, I love his

poetry. Um, Ed Hirsch was-was my mentor at-at-at U of H, love his. Um, writers, you know, I try to read, uh, uh, um, current publications as much as-as possible. Um, love Juno Diaz, I-I-I Viet Thanh Nguyen I mentioned, um, uh, but yeah, a huge list, I could sit here and think of-of a long list.

SD: And I don't know if Daniel already asked you, um, where did you get your MFA?

LC: At the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program.

SD: And, um, one last question I have is, um, how would you like to see Houston change or develop in the future?

LC: Um, you know, I think, I think Houston has changed, clearly demographics have changed. Um, the city's nearly fifty percent, uh, Latino. Um, the Vietnamese population here is the, what, the second largest in the country as far as an expatriate community, second or third. Um, the-the city has changed, and I think it's going in a great direction. You know, I-I-I-I don't, I don't envision anything else. Uh, I don't envision Oz or anything. I think the city is what it is. I-I-I I think that there could always be more access to resources that-that-that some of us, including me, take, um, for granted. Um, I think, I think Houston, um, loves its neighbors. I mean, I think, I think that that is true. We saw that in hurricane Harvey, what happened after Harvey, um, but I think we could do better to understand and l-love each other's stories maybe. Um, there could always be room for improvement in that, in that area.

SD: Thank you.

DN: Okay, thank you very much for your time.

LC: You're very welcome.

[58:22] Interview Ends