PL: Um okay, so we're here today at Fondren Library on January 30th, 2020 interviewing Wei-Huan Chen for the Houston Asian American Archive. My name is Priscilla Li.

SH: I am Sonia He.

PL: Okay. So the first question we'll ask is, where and when were you born?


PL: Okay. And how would you describe the household you grew up in?

WC: Suburban household. Middle class.

PL: Hmm, okay. And then how about your neighborhood that you grew up in?


PL: [laughs] Okay. Um do you have any siblings growing up?
WC: Yeah, I have a younger brother. He’s seven years younger than me.

PL: Okay. Awesome. And then, did you… were you always in Stony Brook where you… like during your childhood? Or did you move around?

WC: I moved. At the year— at the age of seven, I moved from Stony Brook, Long Island to Hsinchu, Taiwan. And I lived there for two years.

PL: Can you describe that process of moving? Like, you might— I don’t know if you remember much from that age.

WC: My mom got a job, as a professor of linguistics at the university over there Tsing-Tsinghua University. Um, and so she took the job and brought me. My brother was just born, he was like zero years old. Um but she didn’t have time to take care of him, so he-he lived with my father’s parents in Kaohsiung which is on the southern tip of Taiwan. Meanwhile my father couldn’t get a job in Taiwan so he stayed, he went to Philadelphia to pursue a postdoc at University of Pennsylvania.

PL: Oh okay. And what was he studying there?

WC: [sighs] I don’t know like bioinfo-informatics or something. [PL: Oh okay.] He switched from forestry to genetics to like bioinformatics to like data mining, so— but he’s in kind of like that genetics kind of… yeah evolutionary biology. [PL: Oh okay interesting.] kind of realm. Yeah, I actually don’t know [Both laughs] [PL: Oh okay.] what his postdoc was.

PL: So that was in 1997? [WC: Yeah.] When you moved to Taiwan. [WC: Mhm.] And then you stayed there from… until you were 9 years old, so [WC: Yes] did you attend like the local schools there?

WC: I started off attending what was called a… like a American English school, meaning they used English and it’s for people who—I don’t know, it’s for Americans, Brits, or whatever. And then my mom didn’t enjoy it. It was too similar, or, she didn’t like me being there, it was too similar to just being in America, so then I went to public school, just straight up, straight into public school.

PL: In Taiwan?

WC: Yeah, in Taiwan. And I was like way behind because you have to learn all the characters and everything. Yeah.

PL: So sh— Oh can you talk more about why she didn’t like you being in a like, educational situation that was similar to America?

WC: I guess I was in a bubble? [PL: Ok okay. Mhm.] I don’t know. Yeah.

PL: Okay. So what was that like, having to learn, the characters and the language?

WC: You know, I don’t know. [PL: Mhm.] Because I feel like I was so young and I got blocked out a lot of stuff— my mom said that apparently I would be crying and doing homework until like midnight and that I was so behind. I don’t remember that. She said she was really tough on me. She’s like regretful; I don’t remember that either. I just remember going to Taichung where my mom has four sisters and one brother, so it’s a big family and playing in the rice field with- with my cousins. [laughs] That’s mostly what I remember. [PL: Oh okay.] Yeah.
PL: Any your other experiences that you had there that you remember?

WC: Um… Yea, yeah, several— I mean several sure. [PL: You sh—] [laughs] what are you curious about that pertains to what the Asian Archive is interested in?

PL: Uh, I guess it’s just like whatever you’re willing— whatever you’re interested in sharing. Like what you want to be on the archive.

WC: Like something funny? Like a… well there’s this one time it was like 2 or 3 A.M. I woke up, and there was this dog barking. And, we couldn’t— we didn’t know where it was. So we walked outside of our apartment— which in Taiwan there a lot of 1st floor apartments where the sewer is right over there— it’s hard to explain. But the sewers are all kind of open and out in the open, but covered by these concrete kind of grates. And apparently there was like a tiny little baby dog, like a little puppy that was inside the sewer and so we rescued it. But it was trying to follow us home and my mom was like, “I can’t take care of it.” So we put a box on it. [laughs] [SH and PL gasp] [PL: Aw…] So we— so… ‘cause we didn’t want the puppy to know where our house was. [laughs] [PL: Mhm.] Otherwise it would be sitting out there, and I’m like, “You sure? I’ll take it from the back.” My mom was like, “No.” And so she walked it to the back of the— led it to the back of the apartment, put a box on top of it, left it, and we never saw it again. [laughs] [PL: Oh wow…] Sorry. [All laugh]

PL: Okay, so I guess going… where did you um—how was your, I guess, migration like after you moved away from Taiwan?

WC: My mom says that there was a moment where she saw, my brother. Every now and then during the weekends, you know, he’d drive up with my grandparents. And she didn’t really recognize him. And, she… and, and, and my brother had some mannerisms that were similar to my grandparents. And so she realized that she wasn’t raising her, her son. And so she decided to quit her job, and so she just quit her job. And moved, moved in with my dad. So we flew… at the age of nine, we flew from Hsinchu, back to Philadelphia. So went— so I want back to America after two years being a Taiwanese kid. [PL: Oh okay.] So yeah. My mom became a housewife.

PL: Oh okay. And during those two years, did your dad ever visit or like vice versa?

WC: Maybe once or twice— mainly, mainly, mainly we flew to, to Philly during the summer. [PL: Okay.] I just remember at the time, being a nine-year-old, I’d flown on more flights than most, most other nine-year-olds. Yeah [PL: Mhm.] Yeah, I was like very used to being on a plane. [PL: Oh okay.] Being back and forth, yeah.


WC: Yeah, well—well I was placed into ESL, English as a Second Language. Um, you know in two years… two years is a very long time in those formative years. I mean I was a Taiwanese kid. I didn't know anything. You know. It was— was a large, large, cultural gap. You know. Um, kids would make fun of me for not having heard of Britney Spears; I didn’t know what that was. Apparently, she was like a celebrity, but I said “Celebrity” I just couldn’t say words right. I just didn’t know English very well. Um, yeah so, I was kind of like a foreign kid. You know, from Taiwan. Um, you know I counted in Chinese Mandarin. I dreamed in Chinese Mandarin. It took me like two or three years for me to start counting, like if I was counting, like instead of like “一二三四五六七 (yī èr sān sì wǔ liù qī)”, I would be like “one two
three four five” you know. S-so for the English-ness to be laid in inherent in my bones rather than the Chinese-ness, in my dreams, you know. My dreams would all be in Chinese, and then eventually, as I assimilated—there’s something, kind of in your spirit, assimilation, you know. It’s not just culture, it’s who you are—so slowly over time, maybe sixth grade, seventh grade. It took many, many years for me to start dreaming in English. And so now I’m like fully English now. Yeah. [PL: Oh okay.] Yeah.

PL: Okay, and so your mom was—became a housewife and your dad was still studying and doing his postdoc?

WC: Yeah, he was getting his postdoc and then he got a job at the Medical College of Wisconsin? And so we lived in a suburb of Milwaukee. So we moved to Wisconsin.

PL: Okay. When was that?

WC: Second semester fifth grade. [PL: Oh. Okay.] So a year and a half after—so it must have been 2000.

PL: Okay. So what other… like how was it like to be moving around so much? I know you said like you were on airplanes more so than like other kids would be.

WC: Yeah, so. Like a lot of kids, they’ve gone to one elementary school, right? I went to six elementary schools. I don’t even know which six, but my mom said I went to six different elementary schools. You know from the one in Stony Brook, the—the two in Taiwan—the American one and the Chinese one; the one in Philly; Hills quarters, Wisconsin, and then Glen Park. Is that six?

Yeah, anyways so yeah. It’s like— it’s like part of who I am now. Just being the new kid, being in a new environment, is, is part of…what I assume is the status quo. And, whereas all my other friends assume the status quo which is there is a continuity of one year to the next. There is a continuity of culture, there’s a continuity of friends, of weather, of like who your people are, who you have at your birthday parties. But I didn’t have that sense of continuity. Yeah, um. It wasn't really jarring until I moved to South Carolina, so that, that was like a tough move, since I made a lot of friends in Wisconsin by then. [PL: Oh. Okay.] Yeah.

PL: And how long were you in Wisconsin until you moved again?

WC: I moved 9th grade. Uh, my dad’s department I think shut down, or-or lost its funding so, he was looking for a job all over the country. Then he found a job at Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina. And so, 9th grade we moved.

PL: Okay wow, so that was when you were just starting high school.

WC: Yes, yes, yes. So 8th grade was—was—was— was in Milwaukee and 9th grade was in Clemson, South Carolina. Which was very different. Um, kind of rural-ish, southern part of the U— U.S. Yeah.

PL: Um did you live… um or I guess going back to when you were in Wisconsin, I guess the formative years of going to elementary school, um do you know like what subjects you were drawn to the most?

WC: I don’t think I was really drawn to any particular subject. [PL: Mhm. Okay.] Um, I started playing the trumpet. Um, so I joined the band. And I enjoyed it. [PL: Oh. Okay, awesome.] Yeah, so it stayed with me my whole life. Up until you know skipping into college, I wanted to be a music major, so.
Anyways, but it, it definitely stuck with me throughout high school. [PL: Mhm ok.] Yeah so I guess music.

PL: And then, well I guess how did you discover the trumpet?

WC: Uh there is a sheet of paper that the band sign-up sheet had and said, “Write three instruments you’d like to play”. One, two, three. I think number one I was trumpet — I don’t know why, I don’t know how kids think. I was like, “Oh sure, I’ll play the trumpet.” [PL laughs] And that was it. [PL: Oh. Okay.] It was completely arbitrary, completely trivial. And I ended up playing it, playing it for like ten something years. Yeah.

PL: That’s awesome. And then while you were moving, do you remember like what kind of values your parents emphasized to you?

WC: Traditional Taiwanese… I don’t know. Well first of all, we weren’t religious. So, there wasn’t a lot of—there was no Jesus, hell, that kind of stuff that’s really rampant in South Carolina. Um, I don’t know, studying… [whispers] values. Like, can you be more specific? I-I-I don’t know [PL: I don’t know.] it’s just so encompassing.

PL: Yeah, I know it is very vague. Um, I guess...

WC: Being cheap, I guess. [SH and PL laugh] We’re kind of cheap.

PL: Can you just kind of say more about what kind of traditional Taiwanese values are? Or is that… yeah.

WC: Um… I mean there are like tiny things. I guess you can like say are metaphorical of other things. So, so like, I would get yelled at… Okay, here are the things. I know—know what I would get yelled at for. I would get yelled at if I didn’t finish my food. So it’s like, I’m very into like finishing my food. Uh, it’s like every speck of rice on your place is like a mole on your future wife’s face. Do you know that saying? I guess.

PL: Yeah there’s something similar. [SH: Yeah, I’ve heard of it.]

WC: Yeah, thank you. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Don’t eat until the oldest person at the table has eaten. You know. Um, yeah I mean. Similar to pretty much every other Asian-American kid. There’s this divide between the world I exist within the home and like the world outside. So whenever I had friends coming over, it’s always like… “Hey, welcome to my house. This is what we eat, this is how we do things.” You know it’s, yeah it was kind of… I was always nervous. Yeah.

PL: Did they usually accept—or I guess how did they receive—?

WC: Yeah, I mean yeah, yeah generally it was… hm, maybe I was drawn to— and the people who were drawn to me— were kind of outsiders or like nerdy people. I don’t know. Like, the cool kids would never be like, “Hey, let’s be friends with like the weird FOB-y…” At the time I guess I was FOB — I don’t know if I was FOB-y, but like you know this foreign-ish kid from Taiwan. You know who’s quiet and never said anything. I don’t know, just just… a little odd. I was pretty odd. I was an odd kid; I had like odd, weird man–mannerisms. So, I didn’t really fit in. [PL: Oh. Okay.] Yeah.

PL: Okay. And then going to when you moved from Wisconsin to South Carolina, what year was that?

PL: Okay, and then, can you describe like I guess kind of going to high school in South Carolina, and that move as well?

WC: Uh, yeah. I, I started off joining the marching band before school and then entered the school. And yeah, they say South Carolina is the “Buckle of the Bible Belt”. So, yeah pretty racist, pretty Christian, Evan–Evangelical. Um, I, I, I remember there was this one time. I was talking to one of my friends about like Jesus, and, and, and it came out that I didn’t believe in Jesus Christ, and I was completely ostracized so I had to sit, sit by myself. Uh, during lunch. So yeah I, I, I found it very tough actually. I… it was very difficult for me to fit into a more kind of a rural society. My family, my parents, kind of my culture, generally more east coast-ish. More liberal, more kind of intellectual. So it’s kind of harder to fit into whatever culture South Carolina had. I guess we had some cool, cool kids, which was kind of like rich, white, somewhat attractive kind of people. Yeah so I think definitely instilled in me was this sense of mm, not being seen, not being worthy necessarily. You know, and you could tell my mannerisms that I was not a very confident person. [PL: Oh. Okay.] I guess it’s kind of changed. I’ve come—my personality has kind of… I’ve come out of my shell since then but, yeah.

PL: Oh okay… and then, did you have any mentors in high school, like any teachers you really looked up to?

WC: Um, I had an English teacher who I liked, and she got me writing poetry. I think that’s where I started enjoying writing. She said I was talented, she said I had a natural flow in writing, which is very strange. I guess it took me until college—it took me until high school, until I somewhat had a grasp over English. Um, my physics teacher was really good, and I really liked physics. So I chose to major in physics in-in-in college before switching to music, before switching to English Literature. So I had three. [PL: Oh. Okay.] Yeah.

PL: So I guess like this move to South Caroline and I guess like the culture shock, did you like, [WC: Absolutely.] did you experience—did your younger brother experience the same—did you guys like…?

WC: Yeah dude, he was bullied. He would come home crying sometimes. Yeah. ‘Cause he, he didn’t… he didn’t even go to just DW Daniel my high school, he went to RC Edwards my middle school and apparently like stuff was rough. It was rough. You know. We don’t really know, we don’t really know. He just mentioned it later in life, and my parents apparently didn’t really know. So. Um, yeah. I, so we don’t really know what kind of names he was called, or if he was beaten, if he was kicked… He was definitely kicked. Um, like a freshman, as a sixth grader in middle school, so not a freshman, but like a sixth grader in middle school gets bullied by the eighth graders a lot. Yeah, so, so we hear some stories you know, I came into South Carolina in high school, so I was somewhat formulated, and I just would—did not fit in. He came in seven years younger than a ninth grader, so second grade. Yeah, yeah he—he went through a lot.

Yeah, he was an outstanding English student. But because he filled out a form that he spoke Mandarin as a second language, because there was a language other than English, he was auto— for some reason— he was automatically forced to take ESL for many years. So he was taken out of class into ESL with a German student who was also in Honors English, and wasn’t allowed to pass ESL. Yeah. To me, I think it was racism. Yeah but, makes no sense, makes no sense.

Um, yeah for me it was just about finding, finding the other kids who didn’t fit in. Um so my best friend’s a homeschooled kid, my other friend was kind of a nerdy kid. Uh, and just sticking to them and keeping your head down. You know, yeah.
**PL:** Hmm o kay. Um and then I know you said you really stuck with like trumpet, and like music in that way. Was music also like an avenue of like safe— safe place or safe space for you?

**WC:** Yeah, yeah. Got along with the band geeks. And I ended up being band captain in senior year so yeah, I was the trumpet section leader and everything. So I was in concert band, jazz band, uh, marching band. So that was fun. Yeah. Music was fun.

**PL:** [to SH] Did you have any questions?

**SH:** No.

**PL:** Okay, I guess we can move on to like your college years. And you said you wanted to do physics first. So how was that like? I guess, I assume you wanted to move out of South Carolina, so like applying to like colleges and stuff...

**WC:** Yeah, my mind was focused more on the life experience of college. Not necessarily the academic pursuit. That’s why I wasn’t really interested in any nice school. I mean, my dad made me apply to Yale, Emory, Rice. I think those were the top ranked schools, wasn’t very interested in those schools. Rice and Emory was too in the south. Um, Yale, I was just like not interested in high achieve— it just wasn’t something I was interested in. I just wanted to be somewhere that was a big city, with culture, and music, and diversity. So, I landed in Boston. Yeah.

**PL:** Um, and at what university?

**WC:** Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, which is just a skip and a hop from Boston. **PL:** Oh. Okay.] Yep.

**PL:** So would you like on weekends— would you like go to Boston?

**WC:** Yeah, I probably went into the city more than most other students I knew. Yeah, yeah just take a shuttle there.

**PL:** And what kind of things you like to do in Boston?

**WC:** At first it was just outings and just being completely amazed at what a large city offers. You know I was definitely a country kid in a big city. So I was like, I just had this amazement at everything which led to curiosity, which led to this drive that perhaps that led to-to become a good journalist later in my college years. And so later as an arts journalist, working for the college newspaper, I would go into Boston, I would cover concerts, performances, almost every weekend, and write about them. Yeah.

**PL:** Okay. And then can you describe more of, I guess your academic journey at Brandeis?

**WC:** Yeah, I was a physics major. Um, my first class was electricity and magnetism. And I got a C minus. And I don’t think that was high enough to count— i t’s high enough to count for a credit but not enough to count for a credit to go towards the physics major. Uh and so I was like, “I’m not going to hack it. I’m not good at E&M. I’m not doing modern. I’m not doing, you know Einstein, Hawking, that kind of stuff. I’m not doing particle stuff.” It’s just too much studying, there’s too many like friends to play music, and drink and smoke with; and girls to like, invite over to watch movies, you know. There’s, there’s like too much stuff to do that I—I didn’t want to spend too much time in
academics. I felt like a waste of college so... yeah. No, no, no physics for me, it was onto music 'cause it was the only other thing that I knew I was interested in.

Um, and then I decided I was probably never going to be a musician, not professionally, so I quit that and then I landed in English Literature which is a nice little default, which, you know, which means you haven’t really mean, you’ve made a decision on anything. Just studying literature and just studying words that doesn’t really mean, it doesn’t really mean anything. You know, it’s just like being any you know anthro, sociolo— sociology you know. Yeah. It’s a nice little default major, and I grew to love the written word. Yeah.

PL: So what was the— what year in college was that when you finally like switched to English Literature?

WC: Uh sophomore-sophomore year, I think. [sighs] I ended up taking up three English classes first semester. Like fou— three-four English classes second semester. So I really just cranked, cranked those English classes out and caught up. Yeah.

PL: Can you describe your like your most enjoyable, or like the class that you took that you remember the most?

WC: Hm. Well “Intro to English” was interesting. You know. Usually “Intro to English” is kind of, old white guy teaching you about other old white guys. This was a Caribbean professor teaching us literature, a lot from the Caribbean. Um and almost most of our syllabus was women, or women of color. And this was before I think, universities were really like heightened about, you know, diversity of English departments or different departments. That kind of stuff. It just so happened that “Intro to English” was taught and it—it was lot of world literature. So I ended up taking a lot of world literature, Latin American, Revolutionary Era— um you know, Revolutionary Era, magical realism, or post-colonial British, post-colonial Indian literature. I took a class that was just called “Salman Rushdie”, so the whole class was about Salman Rushdie; it was awesome. So uh, definitely always drawn to things out-outside of “The Can…”, I don’t know— “The Canterbury Tales” or whatever. You know I never read that kind of stuff, I—I was always drawn to more modern things, more global texts. Yeah.

PL: Oh okay. Awesome. And then can you describe how you got involved with the… you said, student newspaper or the… ?

WC: How did — freshman year. Freshman year. [PL: Freshman year] I was really bad. I was so bad. I was writing about videogames and restaurants. Was it mostly videogames and restaurants? Just whatever I was interested in which is a random thing— I’m kind of like, just like a… you know. I don’t think physics would have worked for me. I was kind of just interested in whatever that weekend. You know, I’m very interested in a different thing every week. So I think journalism really worked out for me. So I’d write something about the Indian restaurant, I would write something about this video— Oh! The first article was about Spore, do you know Spore, the video game? You know by Will Wright, the creator of, I think, “the Sims”, and SimCity. So yeah, my first article was writing about this not very good, weird video game. But I was so bad, I was so bad with deadlines, I would miss the deadline so many times that the newspaper came up with a new policy that allowed them to ban writers from working for the newspaper. And they did it for me and I think, Alex de Silva— Oops name drop— Alex de Silva who was also really bad with— I think, I think, I think so. I think it was him. But yeah, so—so—so I was threatened to be banned from writing.
Um, also I think it was either freshman year or sophomore year, I reviewed a graduate music concert, so a concert performed by the musicology, graduate music degree uh, people at Brandeis. So they were older than undergrad. And I wrote something and, it was liked mixed or kind of negative, and so the graduate music department wrote an entire letter chastising me. And— so this was my first hate mail— and it said I was unprofessional, and they were very snarky and pointed out several mistakes I made. And—and then the editors sat me down and asked me if I was upset. And, but—but then they just said, “We’re going to have to publish this uh, article publicly chastising you.” And I was really scarred, and I was very afraid to set foot in the music department and I, I decided to never write an article every again. So, so I stopped writing for the newspaper.

PL: And, sorry— what year was this again? Was this sophomore year?

WC: No I think it was still freshman year. [PL: Oh so freshman year.] I think it was second semester freshman year. So I decided to quit. I was like, “This is too much. I’ve upset too many people. Um it’s not worth it. I don’t even like writing too much. I hate writing. I’m going to quit.” And I—I just dropped out and the newspaper didn’t really like me anyways, so I just—so I just didn’t, I never wrote again. I mean until later. Yeah.

PL: Oh okay. I guess thinking about like, that piece that you wrote, now as like a professional like journalist, do you — are there any things you wouldn’t have said? Or do you still like stand by publishing that [WC: I think, I think… ] or like how would you reply?

WC: What they… what they— they got really offended when I said that they were first and foremost scholars of music and not performers of music; ‘cause they weren’t performance majors. I don’t know, I just didn’t think they were very good. Um yeah, so I had to realize that writing kind of negative or mixed reviews makes people really mad. You know, and that’s something I'm kind of realizing now too, here. Um. Yeah, I—I ended up writing for the newspaper again. And I ended up being the arts editor. Like, very unlikely—like me? I was like one of the worst writers. I ended up being the arts editor.

Um, and I was, I think it was senior year, I was still a senior arts editor. And I ran into that same woman who penned this letter with like 10 signees. I was like, “Hi…!” She was like “Hi…!” And I was like, “Oh, I don’t know if you know, but I work for the— you know— the Justice Newspaper.” And she was like, “Yeah, I know.” And she looked at me, and then she gave me this cold stare. And I remember ‘cause she was a French horn player, and she hated me but this is freshman year— this is three years. Like imagine meeting someone freshmen year, and then not meeting them until senior year. It’s like, kind of crazy, would you still remember. And she gave me this glare, “Yeah I know. You’ve gotten better.”

PL: Wait so can you describe how you got back into journalism? Since you said you were scarred by that first— by that woman?

WC: Uh this guy Brian, he was the arts editor at the time. And I guess they were really desperate looking for arts writers, and he liked my writing. Um, yeah I feel like my journey generally wasn’t me deciding to do something, it was always someone else who saw a glimmer of, maybe, talent or hope or different kind of energy in my writing, deciding to lift me up and give me an opportunity. So this, yeah, the assistant arts editor Brian was like, “Hey, the two editors are retiring; they’re tapped out. Would you like to come be assistant arts editor?” I so was like, “Okay, sure. I’ll come in.” And then yeah.

PL: This is senior year?

WC: Sophomore— end of sophomore year, [PL: End of sophomore year.] junior year. And it was really tough deciding because I knew being an arts editor would take up almost all my time— like most people
who do newspaper, they don’t do any other curricular activities. You can’t really join another club. Um, you just don’t have time. Otherwise you’re just going to be failing out of school. So I knew that I couldn’t do that and also study for the LSAT, ‘cause that was my plan. “I’m going to be an English major, ‘cause math, science I can’t hack that. I’m going—I’m going to be a lawyer.” That’s—that’s my PR strategy for the Asian people asking me, [SH laughs] including the two Asian people who gave birth to me, you know. [laughs]

Um, yeah so I was—I was pre-law; I was studying for the LSAT, and I wanted to be very very good at law and become a successful lawyer. Um, but I was—was also offered this opportunity to become an arts editor. So I was like, “Well, am I going to be an arts journalist or am I going to be a lawyer?” And I just, it took me like a whole— it took me whole several months of me just thinking, “Lawyer. Journalist. Lawyer. Journalist. Lawyer. Journalist.” you know, “Money. No money. Money. No money. Money. No money.” and I chose—I chose to be a journalist. I—I—I chose to not study for the LSAT. So I sold all my LSAT books, I just—I just dropped it. Yeah. After taking like a couple law classes, studying for the LSAT, looking up all the rankings and the T-14. Reading the “Above the Law” blog, I was like fairly immersed in law and then I just left it, yeah.

PL: What made that decision to leave it?

WC: I guess it was just too freaking fun to get free tickets to a new experience and go, and you know, see some famous African trumpet player or see some strange avant-garde ballet, you know or see… what did I see? I saw some interesting art; I saw—I saw “Spring Awakening” you know, I saw “Spring Awakening” you know; I saw “Rock of Ages” you know… I got these free tickets and, I got to interview really cool famous people. You know, and it just sucked me in. It just sucked me in. Like you know, I was like some college kid, interning for the local newspaper company, ‘cause I applied for an internship by then, and I was able to interview you know, who are the two— Oh! I was able to interview Wynton Marsalis and I was like, “Oh my god, wow, Wynton Marsalis, wow!” You know I’m a trumpet player, this is amazing. A couple months later I was able to interview Lang Lang, the piano. I was like, “Oh my god, Lang Lang— wow! Wow wow wow!” You know, I used to play piano.

And you know, again and again I would go into these musical rooms, and if I was a musician, I’d just be some chump who wasn’t very good. But I was a journalist so I would go into the back room and interview the famous musician, and the access was just amazing. You know. Um, it was just so much fun. Just so much fun. I loved it. Yeah, yeah. [PL: Okay, awesome.] I was like, yeah if I can—I’m obsessed with this. If I can do what I love, you know I won’t have… is—isn’t that better than making a lot of money? You know. Like if you make a lot of money, you’re going to have to spend a lot of money to enjoy life. Well, why not just do something that—that, that is enjoyable, you know. So. That was like my rationale. Yeah, it took my parents a lot— many years to get behind that, yeah.

PL: So, at first they were not happy with that decision?

WC: Mm-mm. Nope. Yeah.

PL: And then I guess we can like, keep going with, like that— at what point did they, were they, I guess, come to terms with your decision?

WC: [sighs] Just, when I started being successful. I was very clear about telling them every time, I had a success in my career—every time, every award, every, every promotion, every raise, I would tell them. They’d be happy, they’d be happy. And like, “Oh my god! Okay! I guess he’s successful.” You know so. Yeah. It took a while— the first couple years was uh, was very tough. Yeah.
PL: And then, uh what was the name of the local newspaper you got an internship at?

WC: Well I was interning for two places, the first one was the Boston Phoenix, which has shut down now like almost all—all weeklys. Um “Gatehouse Media” was a company that owned a local suburban. It was like a group of suburban newspapers. So I was writing for the arts section, the syndicated arts section that would run in these local suburban newspapers. Local suburbs as in Needham, Waltham, Summerville, Cambridge, Dedham, Brookline, Newton. Greater Boston area. So that was the—that was the company I ended up getting hired at. So that was my first job, working for a [laughs] local suburban newspaper company. [PL: Oh okay.] Earning $26,000 a year, in-in Massachusetts, which is a lot more expensive than—so that’s probably earning like $20,000 in—in Texas, you know? I don’t know, maybe 19 in Texas. But 26 in Massachusetts is really tough, yeah really tough.

PL: And so, in what ways would you, like, get by? Do you remember those days?

WC: Um uh. I, I would eat a lot of chicken legs. Just microwave chicken legs. Very tasty. Potatoes. Um, I had five roommates. Yeah. Killed a lot of mice [laughs]. Yeah, god our landlord—landlord was such a creep. There would be like, drug dealers upstairs, like actual drug dealers, yeah. Yeah, our landlord always wanted to uh—we had a female roommate, and he always wanted to try to get dinner with her. Yeah it was pretty shady. It was pretty shady. Me and my girlfriend would, come home after a date uh, uh, uh and—and this one time, there was this man, this old man in nothing but a diaper standing on our porch. And, and a couple seconds later the police came and detained him, and everything, but it was just kind of a weird part of the neighborhood. You know.

PL: What neighborhood was this?

WC: It was in— in Waltham but it was like the weird part of Waltham. [PL: Okay] The part that the students never went to. Yeah. Kind of past Main— on, on the other end of Main Street. Yeah. Um, but I got good at being poor…. really, really well. And I knew that if I can sort of sustain myself on $26k then I can… I don’t really need more money than that. You know, maybe I can like, I’d like to maybe make 10 grand more but anything more than that is a luxury so, I definitely, um… I definitely embraced the frugality that comes with being a writer. Uh because you care about other things. That it’s not comforts, that’s not something you care about as much as the mission of being a writer, you know. Yeah. Does that make sense? [PL: Yeah.] Sometimes it doesn’t make sense to a lot of people. I talk to like a lot of people and they’re like, “That doesn’t make sense. Why would you want a job— Why did you want— Why would you want to get paid $26K?” And I’m like “It’s hard to explain. But it makes sense.” It’s just hard to explain.

PL: So, you mention you’re doing it for the mission of a writer. Can you describe that mission in your terms?

WC: Yeah. I don’t know. I guess it’s kind of a reaction to this—well I—I definitely, I—I needed to make a decision. And I felt like if I did law, it was like not making a decision, it was just kind of like following in the footsteps of what other people wanted me to do, which is a lot of what the other Asian kids did. They always kind of did this version, of what they think their parents, of what they think this world wanted them to do. Which was generally um… I don’t know like John Yu, you know went to Stanford. Ended up working for NASA right? Eric, Eric Pan went to — Oh! He went to Rice, did consulting and now he’s at Accenture. Um, and you know they had, like their—they’re always very successful. And I had to like carve my own path that, you know that—that… I have my own NASA, or I have my own, you know, investment banking, or I have my own, you know… get being accepted to be an intern at Massachusetts General Hospital or, something like that you know. Or saying something like, “Death is real,” you
know. Something like just the other paths and seeing, especially on Facebook, people posting really wonderful things happening to their careers… I had to figure out what exactly was the thing that I want to do. Am I able to take my fate within my own hands? And live life as if it's an adventure and perhaps not like a passive kind of ticking off of duties that kind of stuff. Yeah.

PL: Um, I guess how would you describe success in writing and in journalism? Is it like based off of how others react to your articles or the feeling you get when you… you know…?

WC: Well… yeah, definitely in, in a small town, knowing when your journalism makes an impact feels great. Uh, winning an award feels great. The industry is very-very based around winning awards. Winning contests. Writing the best piece of thing and having, you know, well known editors judge it and saying, “This is the best feature writing… This is the best piece of feature writing in the New England Area.” Etcetera, etcetera. To me I definitely had my eye set on the kind of mainstream elite establishment. So somewhere like NPR, New York Times, New Yorker, New York Magazine, LA Times, Washington Post. But–but at the time I didn’t even care about that, I just wanted to be in a larger city than Needham, Massachusetts. And then I went to Lafayette, Indiana and in year 2014, so two years after I graduated. So I was in a small town in Indiana and then, you know, kept on moving up, kept on moving up, kept on moving up. Within the world of newspapers, generally the larger the newspaper is in the—the larger the city and the higher your salary and the higher your prestige is. Yeah. Yeah.

PL: Uh, how would you describe how you learned how to— I don’t know if this is the right term— but like learn how you learned how to write these cultural articles? Did you take like a journalism class at Brandeis?

WC: Yeah, I took classes. It, it’s probably… I think writing is different than something like cello. I think cello, there’s a basic path to learning how to do cello, because there’s— there’s mechanics around it. The mechanics of writing is very different because writing is kind of, [sighs] kind of like a reflection of who you are. And how your brain works. Right someone with a brilliant brain—it’s like a professor, how do you become a brilliant professor? Well it’s a reflection of who they are, it’s not— you can’t really learn to become brilliant. And so it’s a combination of cultural enrichment, reading, studying, analysis. I think for me the, the key, like the thing that I did that other writers didn’t do was really, really analyze the writing of the piece, rather than just, you know um… Let’s say, I did a big story about a witness in the impeachment hearing with Donald Trump, right. I feel like because it's so news-y that I would just be focused on getting the facts. But like when that piece of story comes out, what is the structure, what is the poetry, what is the rhythm? Like, how are the commas laid out? Um, what’s like the arc? You know. What are the kind of like inherent symbols that are interlaid with—within the characters and everything? This is— I mean… I kind of… [SH & PL laugh] If I taught a journalism course, I would probably spend a whole semester trying to get at like, how do you— how do you become a good writer?

I mean I don’t know. I had these old notebooks that um… so this is what I do, essentially I would work my 40— I mean it was really a 50-hour work week, but I get paid for 40 hours—and then I would on the weekends and at night, I would read David Sedaris, Malcolm Gladwell, Roxane Gay, Westley Morris, um Pauline Kael, Roger Ebert, Nora Ephron… Uh, I would really read people, who really had something going with their writing; and I would try and figure out what it was, try to figure out what it was. I would analyze the commas. I would analyze the tone. So I actually found this sheet of paper where I took this passage from Malcolm Gladwell and I completely analyzed every single element that you can. You know, um. There was this young writer, I think, who is at the Washington Post now. I really admired her writing, so I would try to copy her writing. But, but, there was this piece that she wrote about Waffle House closing down and it was a beautiful, beautiful piece of writing. And so every time I had a piece that had nothing to do with Waffle House, I would be like “I want to write that piece. But like transpose it.” Right? I want to transpose it. And so, I would mimic her rhythms. I would mimic the way she used sound,
the way she used smell, the way she used action, the way she painted a picture, you know. Like really get into the craft of the writing and just kind of imitate. You know. So, yeah, yeah I took this very seriously, I would— anything that was great, I don’t want to read good stuff, I want to read great stuff. I would print it out and I would underline every single element, I would outline it. It-it’s intense study. You have to assign yourself a lot of homework that no one assigns you. Yeah. Yeah. [PL: And did you—] And it took me five years, maybe seven years to get good. Yeah. It took me a long time to get good.

PL: And since that, you’ve developed your own rhythm, and—?

WC: Yeah, which is kind of like a composite of everyone else you’ve learned from. You can’t really come up with it by yourself. It’s kind of like this synthesis. You know, yeah kind of like a music composer or a poet. You know I, I always viewed it as an art form rather than kind of like a mechanical craft of reporting facts and everything. Yeah.

PL: And then, I guess going back to your Brandeis career, your Brandeis experience. What was like your favorite article or like the article that you remember most to this day [WC: That I wrote?] at Brandeis?

WC: Hm… I wrote a profile of this guy Mohammed Kundos . I loved him, he was wonderful. I joined sophomore year, I joined an Arabic fusion band called Mochila, and it was based on the foundation of peace and coexistence between Arabic and Jewish people. And so it was started the year before amongst some Arabs and some Jews playing a combination of music that they knew: jazz, classical, traditional music from Palestine. Mohammed was from Palestine. And so I was recruited into this group, and we played, and it was fantastic, and I loved it. So I did a profile on him. And um I, I, I wrote about his nose, I think? I started writing about his nose, the way his nose looked. And it didn’t work. And-and my professor said it didn’t really work. I think I got a B minus on that paper, and I worked so hard on it, harder than any other paper, and I got a B minus. And there were papers I really BS’d in English and I would get an A. So it was quite frustrating. But I think I remember because that was like the not-good piece that led like to the piece after. You know, it's like the...it’s like the piece where you’re–where you’re still trying to figure things out, trying things out that don’t work.

So I definitely tried a lot of things with that piece that didn’t work. And I really liked that. That piece that didn’t turn out so great, because I was trying things, you know. Um, yeah. I… something about Mohammed with his statuesque nose… I don’t know something . Maybe it was too artsy? “It carves the air like a piece of stone.” You know it’s something that’s just like, “What?!” [PL & SH laugh] You know, you know, like who is this guy? Tell us about who this guy is, you know? It didn’t really work, but I really liked what I was going for, you know? [PL: Okay.] Which is like Hemmingway, or some— something, I don’t know [laughs]. I don’t know what I was going for.

PL: And so was that a student organization on campus or like—an outside—?

WC: It was a student organization. The year before they were really successful. They went to New York and played, they recorded an album. I think they got some grants to… Yeah, yeah. I mean, yeah. They were quite good. So, it was so much fun you know improvising on my trumpet with Mohammed’s tabla and his oud. You know, yeah.

PL: Okay, awesome. What other activities were you able to like participate in at Brandeis?

WC: Um, I was part of the executive board of this organization called the BC 3 , the Brandeis Chinese Culture Connection. So the Brandeis Chinese Student Association. And this is at the time before that group was taken over by international Chinese. This was— at the time it was kind of at the cusp of more Asian-Am— like kids who grew up in America, rather than kids who grew up in China. At the time
I think the international Chinese population was starting to surge. So this was kind of like that cusp year. And so that was a lot of fun. Um yeah, Travis, my best friend, I just talked to him just now. Tina ended up being my girlfriend for—three years. Um, Karen I lived with for many years. So we were a very tight group of... of Asian kids hosting Jackie Chan movie nights, or asking our Chinese professor to teach us how to make dumplings. Boba tea night is really easy, we had a lot of Boba tea night, yeah it’s very popular.

Um, yeah so that was really fun. Um, what else did I do... yeah, mostly music, Asian stuff, film— I love films, so watching a lot of movies, taking film classes. Um, yeah it was really a lot, like being an English major really — I-I mean no offense to English majors, but it really gave you so much time to do everything else, because you really don’t need to spend that much time on it. [laughs] It—it’s really like maybe the 10% of the time it took to be a physics major, you know, anyways. I spent all my time studying for physics, and got a C--; and I didn’t spend that much time, and I still got A’s in my English classes. I don’t know, maybe I’m more talented with writing? Or-or it’s just easier. But I just spent so much time doing so many things. Oh, I miss college. [PL & SH laughs] Oh it was definitely better than after college, yeah.

**PL:** Better than, oh when you after—

**WC:** Yeah, it was definitely like the best part of my life. [**PL:** Oh, okay] Yeah, yeah. All the time after graduating college has not been as nice. Still, still good, but life is—life definitely gets worse after college. Yeah. I don’t know. That’s not bad —it’s just college is better than after college. [**PL:** Yeah, mhm.] After college, worse.

**PL:** Oh okay. [laughs]

**WC:** [laughs] Sorry, sorry, are you a senior?

**PL:** Yeah. I’m a senior.

**WC:** Oh no, [**PL** laughs] oh no.

**PL:** That’s okay.

**WC:** Oh no.

**PL:** [to SH] Did you have any questions? Oh okay.

**WC:** I think for English majors. I think if you’re a computer science major, life after is easier, because you get a job and all that kind of stuff, you know.

**PL:** Oh.

**WC:** So.

**PL:** Oh okay. Um, let’s see, and so you—after graduating college, you stayed in Boston, or stayed in that—

**WC:** Yeah, yeah, Boston area.
PL: Boston area for two years.

WC: Yes.

PL: Working on the two intern–internships? Or was that during college?

WC: Yeah during college. After college, I needed a full-time job [PL: Okay.] and so I ended up getting the job at “Gate House Media”. So I was at our local newspaper, yep, reporter for two years. Yeah, until res… applying to jobs all over the country, in all corners— West, Florida, Wyoming, Colorado, you know, Montana, Missouri. You know, all the kind of less appealing parts of the country, definitely had more opportunities for jobs, because it was harder to attract people there. Most of the young, bright journalists, journalism students want to be in DC, New York or LA; or maybe San Francisco, Boston. You know kind of like a sexier coastal city. So I—my—the opportunities were greater for places like Lafayette, Indiana, which is where I ended up. Hm y eah.

PL: And what uh, I guess newspaper agency did you—

WC: Lafayette Journal and Courier owned by Gannett Corporation. Gannett owns USA Today, and a lot of different papers and stuff. Yeah I was hired as an arts and food reporter.

PL: Oh, okay. And how was that like? Moving from Boston, with such a rich culture as you described, to like Lafayette? Um, how would you describe that move?

WC: It was terrifying. It was terrifying. I was like… I made this big decision in life to escape the south, go to Boston. I loved Boston, this is where I want to be. You know, people are progressive here. People are very— they, they just share values that I share. Very intellectual. And to move to Indiana, felt like, I don’t know, kind of a step back or something like that. Yeah so definitely took a lot of courage to do something like that. You know, yeah. So I would say it’s like one of the harder decisions I’ve made, and I think that’s the thing with being a writer or journalist, you have to make like tough decisions. Like I feel like moving to New York to be an intern for the New York Times, not a hard decision. You just say “yes”, you know? Like accepting something shiny and fancy is not really hard at all, you know; but going to like Indiana, yeah, definitely, definitely scary. Didn’t know anyone. You know, I had fostered so many friends, and we kind of— and you know a lot of people stay in Boston because you have your friends, and you don’t have to have a roommate you don’t know, and be in a city you don’t know and just feel lonely every day. So, thankfully I was equipped with six elementary schools, you know, the fact that I went to six different elementary schools, and the fact that I was also used to being the new kid. So completely new environments actually I do very well in. So I was very happy in Lafayette. I loved it. Yeah.

PL: Um so, you—

WC: It was probably my favorite job.

PL: Oh, okay awesome. [WC: Yeah.] So you said it was a hard decision. Were you considering other options that were available?

WC: No. Options were not avail— no other, not really any other options were available. This was really the only job that called me back for an interview. [laughs] I really couldn’t—I applied to many, many jobs, I just did not hear back from anything—anyone else. I was definitely very struggling with my career. I definitely felt frustrated. Yeah.
PL: Okay. So you said, when you went to—

WC: Um, I wouldn’t have gone to Indiana if I didn’t have to. Like if the Washington Post called me, I would’ve been, “Okay, I’ll got to Washington Post.” Like, it was definitely like, this was the best opportunity for me. [PL: Mhm. Okay.] Yeah.

PL: Can you describe your , like your experience there? You said it was like your, your favorite job?

WC: I did a lot of wacky things; I think I grew the most there and I wrote some of the best stuff there. I really challenged myself. I was just fully invested in being a writer. And yeah, like I, I’m not a guy with a really good work ethic. I just tend to like to do things that I like to do. But I really liked my job. You know, I didn’t really have any hobbies—that was just I like to do what I like—writing. And so yeah, I would stay at my job until like 10PM sometimes, just chilling out, reading, writing, just that was what I liked to do. You know…nothing else really mattered to me, you know. It was great.

PL: How would you describe, like, the demographics of like the journalists—journalism like, field?

WC: In general?

PL: Mhm, in general. And then when you went to Indiana.

WC: Hmm, hm. Demographics, demographics. I’m generally the only Asian person in the newsroom, although newsrooms like—like me being Asian. You know, newsrooms tend to be more progressive. Um, definitely leans—I would say Houston Chronicle is a better example of very male, very old, more conservative. Gannett is—was different. Gannett had this obsession with—I—I would say an unspoken obsession with Buzzfeed, and what Buzzfeed represented, which was more revenue, and kind of young people and people of color. And so definitely, they were—Gannett was beginning to hire kind of young, sexy people. Um, women, women of color, people of color, queer people, Asian people with high Twitter follower accounts, or something like that. Or, or, good online brand. And so I came at a time where newsrooms were kind of—had this dichotomy—dichotomy of old, white male copy editors, and editors and crime reporters. And this new—influx of new digital natives, or whatever, you know.

PL: What—what year was that?

WC: Well, 2004 was when Gannett really started doing everything. I ended up being promoted or hired to the Indianapolis Star, and the Indianapolis Star under Gannett definitely was very interested and innovation and new young voices, and personality. I think they were trying to—do you guys know “The Try Guys”? I think they were Try Guys. [PL: Oh okay.] They tried real hard but never did such a great job, because you’re still working for a newspaper. And a newspaper has fairly traditional ethics, and that’s kind of how a newspaper functions. So, I don’t think Gannett really turned into Buzzfeed, you know. Um, yeah so that was always an interesting time in my career, when I was pushed to innovate and kind of put my diverse face everywhere.

PL: What—Can you describe what ways you innovated in your career?

WC: Well, I just did wacky things I guess. In…like in Lafayette, I—one of the news stories I did was me and a friend—my friend would eat Chipotle for a week, and I would cook at home for a week. We would track our calories, and our prices, because I was all about home cooking, and he—he said, he wasn’t, he—he wasn’t for home cooking. He said there’s not enough time and Chipotle is healthy—healthy and good enough. And so yeah—and so, our—our designer drew a comic of us bantering about food. And so it was

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like this multimedia spreadsheet project with videos, and comics, and— and uh and us. You know, cooking food and tracking our calories and everything.

Yeah, I did pretty wacky stories in general. You know, how else did I innovate? Yeah, I don’t know, I was never that interested in innovation, I think if I was interested in innovation, maybe I could’ve been an MBA and gone to Silicon Valley. But I just, I just really wanted to write. That—that’s what I wanted to be, I didn’t want to be an innovator, I just wanted to be a writer. You know and maybe innovate within writing. But I didn’t want innovation, as in the way I feel a lot of people define innovation, as create a pro—a new product that… that drives a new source of revenue from an untapped market. I think generally that’s kind of what innovation kind of means. But, it’s masked as in, as, with this idea of being creative and doing something new, and kind of daring and exciting. But under the guise of corporations, it’s really—really about making money, it’s really about numbers, yeah.

PL: Um, so can you describe what your favorite article was that you wrote while in Indiana, and then also a little bit about the culture there?

WC: My favorite. Um. I really enjoyed , I reviewed Yo- Yo Ma, that was fun. And I interviewed him. That was fun too. I did a lot of interviews, and I had a lot of fun times doing those interviews. My favorite story that I did. I did a profile on this writer named Roxanne Gay who’s a professor at Purdue University. And this was right before she published this book, called Bad Feminist. Ended up being very, very popular. Um, about being a feminist, but being okay with not being a great feminist. Being a bad feminist, which is enjoying things that are problematic. And maybe that’s okay, you know let women enjoy the things they want to enjoy, you know. Even if those things are rooted in patriarchal norms or something like that. These were all ideas that I was very, very new to.

And so I got to sit down and interview her and really—I had to write about the experience of you know, an overweight African American, Haitian woman, you know, who had a history of you know abuse. And so, for like a straight guy from the suburbs to write about that, like to really write from her perspective, it was extremely challenging. It was extremely, extremely challenging. But it really prepared me for this wave of social awareness and wokeness that was to come, you know that was—it was like we were on the precipice. And I think Bad Feminist came out at the first like, at the perfect time, around 2016, this is before “Me Too”, before “Oscar So White”. This was, I think, the same year as Ferguson, or around—around the years of “Black Lives Matter”. And so I was able to position myself to start thinking of journalism in a completely different way. Um, and write—start writing, and thinking about identity, and yeah. Yeah, identity, class, gender, power, you know.

PL: Would you describe that as like, one of your, like intentions in writing, like topics that you are interested in now in writing about?

WC: [sighs] I don’t know, man. I’ve gotten so much hate mail. I’ve gotten so much flack for writing about identity, that I kind of don’t want to do it anymore. It’s just not worth it, you know. Um, yeah I’ve been threatened to be sued. Someone made an allegation that I like did some shady things with an actress or something like that. It was very strange. It wasn’t like a straight-up, straight-up fabrication of a story; it was like an implication that I was a nasty person. Lots of, lots of hate mail talking about me, personally attacking me. Um, being ostracized. Being ostracized by large organizations. You know, like large organizations making—big organizational decisions. That was um… against me. You know these include the Alley Theatre, Houston Grand Opera, and the Asia Society. Um, even the Houston Chronicle. You know, so I felt like battling organizations, battling people you’re friends with, battling who you write about, battling powerful people. It’s just taken such a toll on me. Especially the Alley Theatre stuff, the “Me Too” stuff that I did. And also just writing about race, I was definitely like very, very interested in writing about like being an Asian, and now I kind of don’t want to be Asian. I
feel like the cost is too great. I feel like it’s better to just blend in the background, yeah. I—I, I’ve definitely, the past two years, I’ve definitely prioritized mental health over social justice. Yeah. [PL: Mhm.]

Yeah, the years before, I didn’t care about myself. I wanted to put myself out there and definitely spoke truth to power. But now I don’t do that so much. Yeah. It’s too much, the trauma’s not worth it for me. Yeah, yeah. The Houston community does really, does a good job at beating, beating people down, and kind of silencing people who—who try to speak out. I think it’s too rough—it’s like, it’s like in South Carolina. Like I couldn’t have really changed what South Carolina was. I couldn’t convince anyone about race or religion, that kind of stuff. I think Houston has been fairly similar. So I’ve—I’ve somewhat given up, yeah—yeah resigned myself.

PL: That’s actually kind of surprising to me. Um, since like Houston’s like one of the most diverse cities in the U.S., and you would think that that would equal like being able to voice your own unique opinions and stuff. But I guess it doesn’t translate to that. Um…

WC: Yeah, definitely in the world of working for the Houston Chronicle, writing about theatre, writing about classical music and opera. The people who hold the power, definitely have very, very conservative values, definitely. And—and there’s not really a culture of being raw, speaking out or challenging , challenging organizations or institutions, that kind of stuff. It’s definitely more a culture of silence, culture of complacency perhaps. A—a culture of maintaining the status quo. Culture of money? Culture of money, yeah. Catering to people with money, catering to oil and gas, you know. So yeah, I think I’ve realized I don’t really fit in. And I don’t want to be like a lone wolf. Anymore. It’s not—it’s not really like my jam anymore, you know. Yeah, yeah. I’m not like angry enough of an activist, or an activist enough to really, you know, to fight every day like a battle.

PL: So, have you found any—like with your fellow colleagues who’ve also experienced this like ostracizing based on what you’ve written, and tried to speak to—speak your opinions, but then having pushback?

WC: I don’t know. I mean I don’t really talk to that many people at the Chronicle. [PL: Mhm.] So. Every now and then, I’ll—I’ll come across someone I kind of relate to, you know. I, I, I’m still dealing with the hurt and the fear. So you know. Yeah. But yeah no. I—I guess part of it is I haven’t found like that—that group you know if I was part of a group, maybe it would be a little different. You know, but because a writer is individualized , you have to kind of take the full brunt force. You know, if I was part of like this—if there was this organization called like the “Asian American Activism and Arts Coalition of Houston…” or whatever, which doesn’t exist. There’s no organization like this in Houston. I don’t think Houston wants that kind of organization. Maybe, I don’t know. But, if there was like an organization that would do the calling out, and you know, “hey, screw you, Alley Theatre, hey screw you—” kind of be a little bit of a trouble maker, and call truth to power. I could be part of the organization and the organization could get flack and that’d be okay. But because I’m like this siloed entity, it’s just—it’s just too hard, to be a siloed entity. You know? Yeah.

PL: So can you describe how you usually like know, what to write about? I guess like do you—does your, do you have a boss who like tells you to write about this like showing, performance? Or do you seek them out yourself?

WC: Well, I started out with a different boss. Now I have—now I have a second boss. The first boss definitely gave more assignments. He was definitely more opinionated. Uh, Robert would generally have me do assignments that, that kind of fell within the realm of being a theater critic, and, and also write about classical opera. Carrie kind of gives—gives me a lot more leeway now, so I can write stories about
you know like, you know *Crazy Rich Asians*, or, different kind of cultural things, *Watchmen*, movies, TV, bars. So I definitely have a lot more leeway now.

Generally, I think if a writer comes up with an idea, and the editors hear it and it fits into the conception of what editors think will be good content for what they think will be good for the *Houston Chronicle*, for their conception of the Chronicle. So you’re working under the constructs of a lot of what makes a good story. Well, depends on what your editor thinks is a good story, and then you have to pitch this and the editor talks with the other editors about what makes a good story; and then, then the story materializes, and— and doesn’t get edited into something else, you know. So you really have to—for me at a paper like the *Houston Chronicle*, with such a history and such an identity, you really have to kind of fit the mold of what the journalism is. Yeah. So it’s—it’s me being aware of what the Chronicle would accept, and me kind of pitching stories that I’m interested in that I feel like would have a high chance of them accepting it.

**PL:** Okay. So how would describe the Chronicle’s—what fits their story?

**WC:** I would— I would say it’s not too different from other newspapers. [PL: Mhm.] You know so there should be a news element. Um I think sometimes I think a little too creatively, so that, that Chipotle comic book thing would not have— would not fly because it doesn’t really seem like journalism, you know. Chronicle is— is generally, all the editors are generally come from more traditional news backgrounds. So like good investigative reporting, right now, is— is— is what the Chronicle specializes right now. Yeah, yeah at Gannett, I would do things like, start a storytelling. Like a *Moth*, do you guys know *The Moth*? Do you? [PL: Is it a podcast?] Yeah.

**PL:** Is it a podcast?

**WC:** It’s also a podcast, it’s a live storytelling event.

**PL:** Okay. Yeah. Mhm.

**WC:** Um, so yeah, Gannett started a *Moth* competitor. Called *Gannett Storytellers*, and I was brought on to start that thing. And you know, yeah, Gannett has a much more corporate structure, that I think is trying to yeah, trying to be *Buzzfeed*, or some kind of, I don’t know, something hip like *Vice* or *Vox*. Or something like you know, *Jezebel*. I really don’t know, but there’s more of a taste with that kind of stuff. *Houston Chronicle* is more about traditional news. So you really, you can get away with doing just good journalism. At Gannett, you need to do more than just good journalism, you have to do something funkier, you know? Um, so yeah there’s pros and cons for both. Yeah.

**PL:** Mhm. Oh, I don’t think we ever got to how you went from uh, *Gannett* to *Houston Chronicle*, and—

**WC:** I—I just applied, I just applied. Uh, it was a job up for theater, music, and classical music critic. I happen to have a classical background; I play the piano. I have good clips. Clips are you know, like the pieces of writing that you submit. That’s what clips are. I have good clips, and yeah, they hired me. Yeah.

**PL:** And what year was this?

**WC:** 2016. Summer.

**PL:** Okay. Okay. Um, and then how was that again, moving into a new space, and the differences in culture?
WC: Mm. Definitely lonely, definitely lonely. Um, yeah. I think just graduating college, it’s just, it’s just loneliness is fairly dominant part of life for—for most people. I think at least in America, you know. Maybe in more traditional… you know. Maybe I don’t know, other countries, there’s more of an emphasis on community, and family. But I think, definitely here, I realize people value their own career. They really value their journey, their mission, and so it’s really hard for a new person to come in and insert themselves.

So it took— took me a while, to feel not so lonely anymore, so. Probably until I met Maddie, my— my girlfriend. Um, about like two years ago. Yeah, yeah. Culture, definitely different, definitely different. More conservative than I expected. I thought—I thought—I thought Houston would be kind of a liberal bastion. You know, and because it’d be so diverse or something like that. So definitely an adjustment you know. Yeah, I think there’s less of a—I think maybe you guys don’t really feel this because you’re at Rice, but out—if you, if you weren’t like a Rice student, you definitely feel like it’s harder to find like this kind of intellectual community of intellectually curious people, who—who are kind of like the sort of people who live in Boston. This is—the culture of Boston is very different than the culture in Houston. Very, very different. Yeah.

PL: Um, was it—and this kind of refers I guess to your whole career, as a, writer, but how do you generally approach a film or performance, and how do you go about writing about it, and what angle do you approach it at?

WC: Hm. Like how do I do it now, or I used to do it Indianapolis? Or how I used to do it in college? Because I think, I think there’s four or five different approaches. Like, it’s all about the approach. [PL: Okay. Yeah.] It morphs. The whole, the whole art is the approach, I guess. You know I used to like, I used to be more knowledge-based. So, let’s say I saw, let’s say I’m going to see The Irishman. I would watch a lot of other Martin Scorsese movies, you know. Go see The Irishman, take a bunch of notes. And like stress over all my notes, and I have all this information turned down to a piece of review you know. Under the approach of identity, I would find some sort of angle about you know, how cinema mythologizes, you know, white men or something like that. One of those approaches. Another approach for me, would sometimes, would just be not a lot of thought. Not a lot of thought, mostly—mostly intuition and emotion. So I would just drink, have friends over, I’d be kind of distracted, and I’d just watch a movie. And, when like 30 minutes before a deadline, I’d just would force myself to write something. It would pour out of me, because, because in 30 minutes, if I don’t turn it in, I’m in trouble. So like—like this deadline kind of forces all of the pretense and illusion and—and kind of fanciness out of writing, and just turns into pure emotion and intuition. So I’ve kind of been using that that method, you know. So it’s like, if we’re talking and it’s like you’re kind of getting to a point, getting to a point. Let’s say we’re talking about something kind of sensitive, and then all of a sudden, you—you started on a rant, and it’s just pure—and you don’t even—you’re not even aware of how long you’re talking, what you’re talking about. It’s just pure rant that spills out. It’s like this rawness to it, right. So I try it in my writing like that. And then you edit it. You know , because it needs to be edited.

So I think that’s kind of my approach now, kind of like emotion, and intuition over thinking and knowledge, yeah. Very hard to describe. Writing is extremely cerebral, it’s very hard to really describe how one approaches writing, because you’re kind of thinking, you’re kind of asking—how does my brain work, right? That’s kind of my question—your question, how does your brain work? You know, or how do you approach? Like in this interview, the way I’m talking, I have a very specific way of talking. While if we interview you or you—you’d talk in a different way than I do, because I have a different personality and my brain is different, right? The way I talk, the rhythm, the words I choose to use… I’m— I’m generally not thinking—I’m just thinking not to use the f-word. But like, every other word, I—every other word in the entire English language—is there for me to choose. You know, and so
How do I choose those? I don’t. Do I really specifically choose it? Or does it come out of me in some kind of organic kind of process, right? Like there are some questions that you are now asking me that you kind of just—I don’t know—I think you didn’t write down. It came out of it because it had to do with Taiwan. You didn’t write anything not about Taiwan, because you didn’t know. So, how did you come up with that? Well, I don’t know. How did you come up? You just have to learn conversation. [PL: Yeah, for sure.]

Like for me and writing, it’s like learning this process of having a brain, having a brain, that’s expansive, and curious and—and—and really well educated on all the different ways to think about art, and movies. And the only way you figure out is you, you just read all of the great critics, and great writers. And you always challenge yourself. And then when you write that piece of writing as a reflection of the kind of critic you are, of the kind of writing—writer you are. You know, it’s really not so, you know, it’s not so scientific in a way. You know I could be like, “well first of all, you should…” you know. I think from a basic level, I could be like, “Well, I would say who the director is, and I’d tell the audience why. Why we’re writing about it, and I’ll describe some of the important scenes; and I’ll think about, and talk about—about how I kind of related to it. I’ll give it in cont—” You know, I’ll tell you I think I’m past thinking about that because I already know all the things I need to do for a review. So for a, for a less experienced writer, you need to say things like, you need to approach it from a perspective of like well, mention the director, talk about the director’s form—previous work, and contrast it with his current work and how this work says—what this work says about society or something like that. But because I already know I’m supposed to do that, I don’t think about it. When you ask me this question, I’m giving you an answer that is reflective of what I think about which is, which may not necessarily be the full truth of what I’m doing, because there’s a lot of things that I’ve completely put inside my bones. Does that make sense?

PL: Mhm, yeah. Definitely.

WC: Yeah I know it’s like a long answer, but it’s very hard for me to explain. It’s like a cello, it’s like—there are things about playing the cello that the cellist has already put inside his brain. Like Yo—Yo Ma is not thinking about a lot of the mechanics, because it is in his bones already. So I think the key to being a writer is getting certain habits and getting certain reflexes inside your bones, so you don’t really think about it anymore. You know, but when I’m talking to you right now, I have okay grammar, not perfect grammar, but when you transcribe it’ll, you know, it’ll have run on sentences and fragments, and um’s, and if’s. But mostly the sentences end, so the way I talk is also an expression of what is in my bones in how I learned to talk and the grammar I use. Yeah. Although, I think if you transcribe that whole sentence, I don’t think it’ll be great writing. It’ll be a bit ranty. [PL laughs] It’ll be too long; I would definitely edit that down. [laughs]

PL: Oh. Okay. Um, let’s see.

WC: Did that—does that…? That didn’t make sense.

PL: That made sense. [SH: It made a lot of sense. Yeah.] I mean it’s asking like about an art and it’s hard to describe how you approach something like that.

WC: I mean there’s some writer they were asked how they, how they write poems, and they say, “oh, I wait for the tornado to appear. And the tornado has all the words, but they’re all back, they’re all backwards, so I have to grab the tornado and look at my entire poem in backwards; and I write down backwards poem, and then I have to flip the poem.” And I’m like, “What? That’s your process, how, how is that helpful?” But that’s their process, you know. It’s like, it’s so special and mysterious, you know; it’s like having sex, right? How do you have sex? Well there’s certain things that you need to do,
but it’s like there’s something, that’s purely about intuition. Between two people, or something like that. You know, I guess the metaphor is you and the piece. There’s an intuition that you have to feel between you and *The Irishman*. How do I feel about *The Irishman*, you know? What speaks to you about *The Irishman*, or—or *Last Christmas*? Or—or whatever you’re writing about, yeah.

Yeah. Criticism is so fun. [PL laughs]

**PL:** Okay, let’s see. Um, I guess we can move onto like identity. So, how do you identify yourself, as in like, Asian, Chinese, Chinese American, Taiwanese or etcetera? You don’t have to have an answer, as well.

**WC:** I mean okay, okay. So I think the political thing here is, me and my family used to always say we’re Chinese; but now, we like, don’t say we’re Chinese anymore. That’s like a popular thing for Taiwanese people now. So we say we’re Taiwanese; and we’re like not Chinese. So I guess I’m like, you know, definitely after the Hong Kong thing, I’m kind of very like, Taiwanese. Not Chinese. You know. Apparently, this was very big in the recent election in Taiwan. Chinese-ness versus Taiwanese-ness. So, you know, growing up, Chinese, Taiwanese. It’s—it’s just I come from this place. I eat Chinese food; I speak Chinese, the language; we’re Chinese folk. And we originally are from China, and now we’re in America. So that’s like the main thing we bring to us. Like, which country we came from if it’s Malaysia or Singapore or Hong Kong. It doesn’t matter because we’re all Chinese people. And now I think it’s like a little more politicized. I don’t really think too much about—about it. But I have been talking to my other Taiwanese friends. I guess yeah, it’s like Taiwanese. Taiwanese American.

**PL:** Okay.

**WC:** Yeah.

**PL:** Um, let’s see and how does identity like, intersect with your work at the *Houston Chronicle*?

**WC:** Um, my identity as someone with more progressive values informs the way I approach criticism. My identity as a POC, definitely places me in a certain world of journalists, of POC journalists. Of, being part of the Asian American Journalists Association, or being part of people who, you know… We had a conversation about, “oh hey, the *Houston Chronicle* had a white writer interviewing a bunch of other white Americans about Chinese New Year. Maybe it would be nice to have some Chinese people involved in like the writing of Chinese New Year. So it’s—it’s not this weird explanation of some white lady explaining to us, explaining to people what Chinese New Year.” You know, having this awareness of identity you know, in—within journalism. I mean this is a very popular, very common conversation in journalism, which is how we cover communities. What communities do we cover? Do we not cover you know?

For a while, I considered being Frank Shyong. Frank Shyong is like the Chinatown reporter for, for, the *LA Times*. So, I think every Asian has, like, this decision, like how Asian—how Asian will my work be? Frank Shyong writes about Asian people you know. He’s— he’s fully—he writes about his story, restaurants and the whole culture. And there’s some—some reporters where that’s not so important. And I think I’m somewhat in the middle. Every now and then, I’ll feel like, “yes it’s an important part. I want to bring a part of who I am to the table.” But then again, I’m pretty fatigued. Because I’ve been writing about [sighs] racist practices, exclusionary practices, in the theater world. And it’s been very tiring. I think I’ve been pushing the conversation towards acknowledging, you know, discrepancies. In terms of casting, in terms of who gets their story told, but it’s just really tiring to be that guy, like that Asian guy, or that person of color guy all the time. So it definitely changes every day. It depends on how I’m feeling. If—like a lot of times, I’ll see something happen. I’ll be like, “am I going to say something, or am
I not?” A lot of times it’s not worth it, pick your battles. You know, just let it slide; you know, let someone else be angry; you know, culture of silence. Right. Culture of complacency. I’ll play into the culture of silence and complacency. Um and other times, I’ll be like, “okay, this is my moment.” You know, this is what I’m—you know, when I saw this opera, it was called “Nixon in China”. And I just felt it was very off, almost to the point of offensive. I was like, “okay, I’m going to be angry.” You know, I don’t think opera can just be racist and get away with it. I think it’s okay for people to get called out and so I did it. And it caused a bunch of ruckuses. And yeah other parts of my identity. Yeah, but definitely, yeah.

PL: Um, let’s see, and earlier you said as a POC, as in like, mean “people of color”?

WC: Yes.

PL: Just so we have it on the record.

WC: Yes.

PL: Okay, cool. Um, and then, I guess, what is, besides the “Nixon…”, “Nixon in China” article, what other article examples where you’ve said like, “oh I’m ready.” Or “I’m comfortable with using my identity in this article”?

WC: Mhm. probably like 5 or 6. There was a play, a play called “Dialogue on Race”, that was about fostering dialogue on racism. That was done at 14 Pews. Um so, rather than approach it as a review, I wanted to write about myself. So I wrote about this experience, at a Frank’s Pizza one night, where this woman, this white woman, came in and was very drunk and ended up yelling at me, and said, “You’re a dirty Communist. You have a tiny penis.” And so, it was very embarrassing for me to be called a “Communist with a tiny penis”, and so it made me very aware of my Asian-ness. I was like, “okay that’s how some people see you.” Like you know, it takes some alcohol to get out of the system. But I think sometimes when a white person sees you, they think that because it’s been spoken out loud before; and you know, it’s not just Trump, I think it’s polite people. They really think that, and they just hold it in. And they’re like, “hi Priscilla, how are you”— And you know so, so that, that piece, “Dialogue on Race” was about kind of, how people interact, and how people greet each other.

And so I decided to write about my experience, my brush with kind of realizing how certain kinds of people think of me. So you know because I’m a “dirty Communist with a tiny penis”. And she went like this. She went like this, [wagging his pinky in the air] “you have a tiny penis, a tiny penis. Screw you, you dirty Communist.” And so very jarring, very jarring, and I think writing helped me heal. Writing helped me reclaim the narrative, helped me understand what happened and contextualize it. And so, without writing, without this gift of the written word, it would just been a crappy thing that happened. Now, it’s not such a crappy thing that happened. It was a thing that happened to me, that I learned and that is part of a larger conversation. So it wasn’t so crappy anymore. I’m not–not like glad that happened, but it was, you know, it was part of my story. You know. If it was a movie, I would not edit that out; that’s an important part. So there was that element where I used my identity— identity in the literal form of using first person and writing about myself.

You know … yeah covering the gala scene, I talked about how I was eating very expensive food, and drinking wine; and I mentioned at the end about this piece about the gala, that I drove home in my hand-me-down Honda Accord. [laughs] And so it was this awareness that I really don’t fit into this arts and culture scene, because I’m not rich; I don’t come from an extremely rich family; and so there’s a height— heightened awareness of like my, my middle-class-ness. Um, and my middle-class-ness as a journalist and not someone working in oil and gas, someone who’s not an engineer. So yeah, I
think class sometimes gets into it, especially when you’re talking about opera, you know. Yeah, there was a production of “Madame Butterfly”, that was at the Opera In the Heights. And I wrote about that and “Miss Saigon” and other pieces that were commonly used as examples of Orientalism, in—in culture. And so, you know I did use who I was, as I used first person; and I used my brain the way my brain worked, which has thought about the way Asians have been portrayed in society. You know so in “Miss Saigon”, there’s— there’s a scene where people speak Vietnamese, but none of the people had ever really talked to Vietnamese people. So they just came up with gibberish. Right, so that, that there was a time in culture where Asians are represented in the way they speak. The white writers come up with gibberish, or what they think sounds like an Asian language. You know, and so that’s an example of Asians being very far from the center of the conversation, right. And so I think knowing that history is very important. You know. And knowing kind of like what it really means historically to have like the… There’s this new show called “Nora…”, “Nora from… [PL: Awkwafina.] …from Brooklyn”, “Nora from Brooklyn” that stars Awkwafina, and co-stars Bowen Yang, as like her second sassy gay brother or friend or something like that.

PL: He’s her cousin.

WC: They’re cousins. Okay. I just feel like it— it— it really takes a lot for a culture to go from Vietnamese people saying gobity gook. And also “Miss Saigon” and “Madame But…” based off of “Madame Butterfly”, about Asian women because she can’t be American, she kills herself. So there’s like this mythology of like American superiority over a third world, Asia. Right and— and— and kind of what Asia has to offer are kind of, beautiful timid submissive kind of prostitutes, essentially, female prostitutes. So to go from that to a Golden Globe winner kind of fashion, rapper, being in a funny comedy, taking bong rips, is—is the everyday normalness of the TV shows that Awkwafina is going to be offered now, probably for the next 20 years, she’s going to be— well depends on how her career goes— but for the next several years, her and Bowen Yang, and maybe some other people, maybe John Cho, you know, all these other people will perhaps will perhaps show, just how far things have come. And I think for a long time I—that’s what was a really big part of my mission as a writer—was just to document and chronicle what’s going on in culture. I think if I fully recover psychically, from the trauma I’ve incurred from the hate mail and the backlash. I can go back to being fully invested in what’s going on in American culture, which is extremely, extremely exciting.

Um, to bring it back to kind of the personal nature of this interview. Um, but, right now I see Awkwafina, and I’m excited for her, good for her. But I’m not fully engaged in culture right now, because I think my spirit needs to take a break, because of a lot of things that we don’t have enough time to get into that involves different organizations, different interpersonal— interpersonal kind of dynamics that have really screwed my relationship with writing, and my relationship with being a public Asian figure. And right now, I think my psyche really associates trauma and pain with, being publicly Asian. And so my psyche wants to protect me and say, “don’t be publicly Asian.” Uh, not necessarily hide, but kind of brush it by. The same way most other— well, yeah, I would say maybe most other Asians do. You know, you know, maybe not Anne Chao, maybe, maybe not Asian activists. But the majority of us, we’re not loudly making other people angry all the time. You know, that’s just not a good way to carry out with life, so I think perhaps one day, I will find a good balance where I can, where I can belong in this culture and without hurting myself all the time, or having other people hurt me, you know. Yeah.

PL: Um, yeah. Thank you so much for sharing your stories. Can I ask, what your future plans are?

WC: [sighs & laughs] Not really, I’m really thinking hard. I can’t really say because I’m just, I’m just, I’m pretty tired. [PL: Mhm.] Honestly so I just can’t really say. Um if you ask me like, maybe two years ago, before all the backlash, I would’ve said, I want to keep on doing what I want to do. Maybe I’ll
do it at the *New York Times*, or the *LA Times*, or–or still the *Houston Chronicle*; and I want to continue writing about culture because that’s what I love. But that’s not my answer, the answer right now is— I don’t know, you know. Yeah, it’s really too bad I know people keep saying, “don’t let–don’t let the haters win, you’re letting the haters win. If you stop doing this stuff, you’re letting the haters win.” I’m like, “dude just let them win for one second, I just need to recover.” You know. So I think my future plan is to recover a little bit, to regain my edge, and regain the fire that’s burned out a little bit.

**PL**: Okay. Um, last question uh, because, ‘cause we’re kind of running overtime. But um—

**WC**: I definitely feel like it’s been an hour and a half.

**PL**: Yeah, yeah it’s an hour and a half, you’re exactly right. [laughs]

**WC**: See, I have a good, I have a good interviewer sense. [**PL**: Wow.] [PL laughs]

**PL**: Um, I guess our last question, it’s been an hour and a half, is there anything that we haven’t discussed, or we didn’t ask about during the interview?

**WC**: [shakes head] Yeah .

**PL**: Okay great. Thank you so much [**SH**: Thank you.] for coming in and letting us interview you.

**WC**: Yeah! Thank you, thank you.

[Interview concludes.]