

**Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University**

Interviewee: Allen Gee

Interviewer: Ann Shi

Date of Interview: Nov 10, 2020

Transcribed by: Ann Shi

Reviewed by: Chelsea Li, Ann Shi

Audio Track Time: 1:33:26

Background:

Dr. Allen Gee, currently the Donald L. Jordan Endowed Professor of Creative Writing in Columbus State University, was born in 1962 in Astoria, a mixed ethnic neighborhood in Queens, New York. He grew up with a family background of restaurant owners (his grandfather) and laundry owners (his mother's side), which are stereotypical Asian immigrant jobs. However, on the contrary, Gee's father, who was an engineer, is not a stereotypical Asian in many ways. He founded the Gee Family Association and is a vocal, romantic, and unconventional person who doesn't hold himself back, and is a life explorer. The family bond and mindset became a major component in Gee's personal values.

As an athlete in high school, Gee later became a voracious reader and writer in college. Throughout his career, he had a number of mentors, among which most notably, the late James Alan McPherson, who Gee is now the designated biographer for. He earned a BA in Secondary English Teaching at the University of New Hampshire. He studied for his MFA at the Iowa Writers Workshop, where he met McPherson. Gee earned his PhD in Creative Writing and English Literature at the University of Houston. He is married to the novelist Renee Dodd, and has two daughters, Ashley and Willa.

He's the author of the essay collection, "My Chinese-America," for which he was awarded the Santa Fe Writers Project Literary Award. He is currently completing a novel, "The Iron Road" that chronicles the lives of Chinese railroad workers building the Central Pacific Line in 1866; as well as "That Little Marcella", a novel; and "Multicultural Americana," which is the working title for the upcoming collection of essays. Gee is planning to work for another 7 years until retirement at 65.

Setting: The interview was taken via Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic era.

Key:

AG: Allen Gee

AS: Ann Shi

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate

[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview transcript:

AS: Today is November 10 2020. My name is Ann Shi and I'm with the Houston Asian American Archive. Today we're interviewing Dr. Allen Gee, who is a professor at the Columbus State University. Thank you so much, Dr. Gee for joining us.

AG: I'm glad to be here.

AS: To start, can you share with us where and when were you born?

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AG: I was born in 1962, in Astoria in New York, in Queens, and I was actually one of three brothers. And my brothers were both born in Albany, but we happen to be in New York at the time, my parents, my father was working for an architectural and engineering firm. So I'm a city boy.

AS: Cool, can you share with us some of your childhood memories back in Astoria?

AG: Oh, sure— we started, my grandfather was a restaurant owner. And he owned two Chinese restaurants actually- one in the Bronx, and one one in Chinatown, and he had other business interests. And then my mother was from a laundry family. So— and she was also— had grown up in the Bronx, where she met my father, they went to Bronx High School of Science. And so, as a child, when we were in New York, and I would go around with my grandfather to the restaurants and businesses. And then even later on, when we moved up to Albany, New York, my parents wanted to raise us out of the city. I would take the train alone, as a kid, from Albany to New York City to Grand Central Station. And I'd walk through Manhattan, and I'd find my grandfather down in Manhattan or my uncle down on... he was a graphic designer. And so I kind of grew up walking around the city, and then also in the suburbs of Albany.

AG: at length, you know, it was— it was a great time to be a kid. I think we were one of only, you know, four families that moved in at the end of our suburban street and Albany, and, I think when I was in kindergarten. And we used to, I made the joke that nobody could tell us to leave because we were there first. You know, we said, we belong, like racial pioneers.

And in the city, in-in New York, that was a little different. I'm happy to bring some of that back. My grandfather tried to buy property elsewhere and live. But at that time, early 1900s, he was actually told "no," that- that he, "you can't, we're not selling to you." So he stayed in a Chinese and Jewish neighborhood in the Bronx, and pooled his money with other Chinese people through— through the Gee Family Association, to invest in businesses, you know, common stocks that weren't really available to him, I'd say. And he did register for the draft, of course, he paid his taxes, and some of my family were actually— served in the military we have for veterans.

AG: So, but New York City, you know, also my father tells me about, there were segregated swimming pools that Asian Americans couldn't go into. So aside from the housing, you had segregation in public places, in the same way that there was for African Americans, And. But— still my father talks about growing up there. And— playing stickball on the streets with all other kinds of kids, you know, all kinds of friends. And, you know, then he was actually Class President of Student Government at Bronx Science where he met my mother. So they were childhood sweethearts and married. And they're still alive. And they just had their 60 something anniversary. So we're counting each one gets a party now.

So my childhood there to give you a little more— I'm just— I'm being lengthy since we had 90 minutes. My childhood is this combination of being, I think we were one of only four Asian Americans at our elementary and junior and high school up in Albany, New York, and Guilderland. And so when I would come back to the city to visit our family restaurants and our relatives in New York, I always felt a lot safer in Chinatown. And that's the place where I love to be as a kid. So I think maybe that gives you a little bit of an idea. And also, a lot of Americanization was going on. I was raised, my grandfather told me that Chinatown is too small. Our New York, like, Chinese should be able to go everywhere in America. And so he approved, actually, of my father's moving us to Albany. And then also with "you should try or be anything you want." I was not at the channel door. I'm persuaded to be a major, you know, of any sort. I was free, always encouraged by my parents to do whatever I wanted. And that was a boldness that I appreciated very much and still appreciate to this day. So does that— does that help a little bit? [laughs]

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AS: Yeah, sure. That's so interesting to hear about 100 years ago, like the segregation of people of color with the White, and that was definitely... Yeah, like a time capsule, that is, yeah, going down in history.

AG: Yeah. Up until the 1950s. Even in New York, that was occurring. So yeah, it was, not too long. It feels like not too long ago. For me, it's only a, you know, a dozen years before. I was, I was born in 62, during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October. And so it doesn't feel that long ago to me. We used to say, we, I used to think, as a kid that because the Civil Rights Movement was occurring in the 60s while I was growing up, and I used to naively think, "Oh, this will all be, you know, over the years, this race- racial problems, they'll work themselves out in the United States." And then look at us now. there's more divisiveness now of a different sort. But I'm astonished or I had hoped for something a lot, a lot nicer by this point in time.

As far as a writer goes, though, I just, there's just more to write about. And so I'm still at work. I could say, you know, jokingly. [laughs]

AS: It's wonderful to hear you're working on, on this. And I'm wondering, with Astoria— I guess now it's a very mixed neighborhood— back then, what kind of ethnicity mix was there?

AG: Yeah, Astoria was always mixed in ways. you know, and the neighborhoods changed. our neighborhood in, it's funny, I talk with people from the Bronx, I'm from Queens, and our neighborhood in the Bronx was Chinese and Jewish when I was a kid. And then it changed, it became Hispanic. And, there's the restaurant that we used to own on the corner; it's still a restaurant. But now it has a sign on it. Or it did, it said "Comidas Chinas y Latinas," and it was two subway stops away from the old Yankee Stadium. So, I've seen a lot occur, you know, And, a lot of changes, movements, ethnic patterns. And I don't, I guess you get used to that the older you see, the less things stay the same. So.

AS: Yeah, it's so interesting. And I remember you said you speak Spanish, like did you— during childhood as well in your neighborhood?

AG: I was during childhood. So I spoke a little bit of Cantonese taught by my grandfather. but when we moved out of the city, I lost it because— didn't have Chinese schools in Albany, New York. And, I've always missed it. And now I have a 10-year-old daughter and in Columbus, at least they have Mandarin schools. So I've been thinking of taking her and picking it up myself.

But Spanish, we had a pilot program in our own elementary school. So I actually had Spanish from 4th through 12th grade. And then in college, I took it also and, and did an independent study in Spanish for my doctorate. And of all things we were in Guatemala where I lead service trips abroad now. Two years ago, we were there in a remote village, and the kids had never met anyone Chinese before. And then when I started to speak Spanish to them, they thought that was the greatest thing. Without that's like, the, the world these days of how global everything is, of course. but I'm looking forward to heading back there when the pandemic is over, when it's safe to travel again.

AS: It's amazing, and like learning about your grandfather's history, like you said, they first moved here in 1908, can you share with us some of the stories they might be telling you about, like how it was back then?

AG: Sure, I know that he came here as a student on a student visa— it was called, not a visa back then, but a certificate of identity. And I've seen his and it's marked student. And then the ironic or the humorous thing is that he never went to school. He arrived here, and he just started working. so. And he might, he

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came through Angel Island in California, and worked his way across the country to New York City. and he started working as a waiter and worked his way up to cook and then to ownership.

AG: And one of the unique things I found out when I was older is that he was a founder of the Gee Family Association, in Chinatown. And we've actually been to the building, and we told them who my grandfather was. And they said, "Oh, you have to come here." And they showed us a plaque on a wall. And I didn't know but then it was- it was the history of the association. And he was at the top. They considered him one of their founders. And I'm, we're happy that... and it was a family association, called the Tong, but not in exactly that mafia type way, or Hollywood way.

But still, there was one story my father told me that, at one point, my grandfather went into business with some other restaurant investors in a— they invested in a restaurant in New Jersey. And my grandfather heard they were doing really well. And he didn't think— he thought they were cutting him out of the profits a little bit. So he did bring them back to the Gee Family Association for the ruling on this. And the ruling was, you have to give Frank Gee all of his money back. And then you can never do business in Chinatown again. So there were some, you know, a family association back then could be pretty tough. you know, whether they were mobsters or anything, I don't think. I would, my father would have known and I would have known about that I was that would have been difficult to hide.

But, he took me with him to businesses, we would go into restaurants into kitchens, we'd say, "hello." he owned properties, sometimes we would go and get rent. He was just showing me his life. And that- that he became a successful businessman, came here with nothing and it really is that stereotypical side of the "Asian American dream." You know, of the, the model minority side. And of course, there's the other side that I was made very aware of.

We had other members of our family who were not model— you know, success stories like that. even my mother's family, her father had a tough time as a laundry man. And, especially when he lost his wife, he had to take care of four, you know, four kids and struggled to do it. So yeah, I don't— I don't traffic in the model minority stereotype so I'm much more... Well, you know, we have to look out for all of Asian America and be very aware to not be misled by politicians who just point to the one side.

And I would think that, you know, many would classify me as the "Model Minority". You know— started out in my own field have- have been fairly successful in English. There are only four Chinese American males in the country who are full professors in English who write Creative Writing who write prose fiction or nonfiction like I do. So I'm very aware of how scarce we are. And so I don't think you know, it's a commonplace thing at all, for us to achieve I, you know, I would say, No, I should, you know, I should be the first of many, you know, if that's what people want to do. So, yeah.

AS: Yeah thank you for doing this groundbreaking work as Asian American in the Creative Writing field. And next, I was just wondering, with your father's side, you said he was a good student, he was a Class President, but decided to go back to the grandfather's business of- on restaurants. Like...

AG: Oh, well, that's— that's different. No, he didn't. this is a good story. I'm glad you're bringing it up. Thank you. It's— my father grew up cooking in his- in my grandfather's Chinese restaurants. And he thought that's what he was going to do for his entire life. And— but when my father was a junior in high school, my grandfather said to him, "You've earned your way to college from all the work you've done. I don't want you to be a cook in the restaurant. So why don't you apply to college?"

And my father had— was so surprised by it. He hadn't thought about what he would apply for. And so he simply went to a guidance counselor prog science. And they just told him, " Well I think you'd be a good

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engineer." And my father, not really, not having known freedom that way said, "Oh, okay." And so he applied to be... he went to RPI, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Detroit, and studied to be a civil engineer. And he, that's what he did for his whole life. He's designed bridges, and then some building work for the State of New York, Department of Transportation. And so when I was a child, sometimes he would take us for a drive and I'd say, "Where are we going?" And we drive like two, three hours out of Albany. And all sudden, he'd pull over to the side of the road and go, "This is my bridge." He'd show us, "This is the bridge I designed." We'd look at it and say, "Okay, that's- that's pretty cool."

But he— I asked him later on, this is the better part of the story. you know, "Is that really what you want it to be an engineer, like, if you could do it all over? What would you... What would you do?" He said, "Actually, what I really would have done— my dream job, I would have been to be an oceanographer or an astronomer." And I think of those two jobs. They're so— more romantic in ways, you know. Gazing at the stars, discovering, constantly, you know, planets or stars or-or exploring deep sea, you know, discovering species of fish, and plankton and things. And, but he was a practical engineer his whole life, he took care of the family.

So from my point of view, he was you know, very strong, like a breadwinner. not the stereotypical weak Asian American male, but very, very family oriented. And just a really great father and encouraged me in sports of all things, which I was a little Asian American kid, grown up in a White suburbs, but I still competed. I didn't, I didn't get beat up or anything.

One story that I could tell you about this makes me remember is that, my grandfather before he got married, he would take vacations; he would leave New York City. And I have pictures of him, like dressed up in a suit and tie and a fancy hat, carrying a suitcase; and he liked to go to Maine. And, you know, this is like in the 1930s, and 40s. And he would go to the beach in Maine, and eat lobster and stay in hotels. And I can't imagine being brave enough to do that in America at that time, but he did. And I think there are even some hints of— that he had some romances with white women in Maine during his vacations, And which surprises me even more, and it's the sort of thing that makes me want to, you know, write a story. But, he had met, he did meet my, my grandmother, who was Chinese, and married her. And she was from money from Mandarin, she was actually from wealth- more wealthier family. And the joke was that she drove him to be successful, much more successful than he was because she was accustomed to growing up in style. We have photographs of her, riding motorcycles, or going on airplane rides, which much more adventurous than you'd think.

So again, not the stereotypical view of Chinese on one hand, from her side, and so— Oh, I have one more story, I'll tell you about history. So my- my paternal grandmother. At one point, we learned that she had had a brother who disappeared. And we didn't know why. and we just recently discovered through genealogical research, that, you know, my grandmother and her brother were together in California, and then he disappeared. He actually ended up in New York City also. And my grandmother did not know this. But he married an African American woman in 1940, and became a taxi driver. So we have African American relatives in our Chinese family. And we're just beginning to look into contacting them. But, that he disappeared, he might have been, thought the family wouldn't accept that. And, and that those were the times we grew up- grew up in. But we're gonna look forward to meeting with those family members. We find it, it's fascinating, so—

AS: Yeah, I trust back then, like multi-ethnic marriages or relationship, wasn't common at all?

AG: No, no. So, and my— even my mother used to joke with me, and she used to say, you know, "Are you gonna marry a nice Chinese girl?" And, all of us are, all my siblings. I have two brothers and an adopted sister now. We all have interracial marriages. So it's, you know, we got, we all had interracial

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relationships and so— mom loves all the grandchildren just fine now. You know, I could say. So she- she just jokes about it back then. She still jokes about it with us. I think I could show you for fun. Let's see how this comes through on the interview. [Showing photos] This is me and my daughter. So the family resemblance is very strong. [laughs] So yeah, she's 10 now. That's Willa.

So yeah, but what other questions do you have?

AS: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I have like lots of questions. I'm really curious about your childhood, upbringing and your, all your experiences. And you said, like you were a child and wandering around in New York. Was it safe to do so back then? Cuz I heard 60s 70s, there was— like gangsters?

AG: Yeah, there were rough— You know, you think about Time Square and everything wasn't cleaned up. And I think I was just fortunate. You know, I just had a sense of, you know. Obviously don't be walking around at night. And, but you know all those things about, you know. Make sure your wallets bury deep in your pocket. And I was fast I could— I was really fast I could run away from anybody. But no, I just— I managed to stay out of trouble. And I'd never let my child go alone, wal-walking around the city now. And I was doing this in junior high school. I think I was like 12 years old, riding the train down alone. And it amazes me now and I'd go to comic book conventions. I read all Marvel Comics, you know, and we'd love to go and I just find where the convention was in a hotel, and I'd go. And now those conventions are huge with all the Hollywood actors and everything, but back then really just focused on comics.

So yeah, I was a city kid with many... I loved basketball, comic books, and baseball, I pitched in the League and, and, you know, and then I was a runner. And I'd love to run and I actually still run. So I would say I'm with a younger daughter, now I have to stay in shape. So I keep running. But yeah, New York City was— I would go walk down from our apartment down to the restaurant. And even then, though, we were careful, like it was just down a block and then down downhill to the bottom, 167th Street under the subway line, but we would be careful. And then like I said, that's why I think I always felt safest in Chinatown.

But that was territory back then. There wasn't, you know, my grandfather was like, well, there aren't Chinese restaurants here in the Bronx. And now I remember, he had two. Two in the Bronx, and an interest in restaurants in Chinatown. And then he owned, noodle factory. that was down in Chinatown. He had some things. There's a photo actually, of that— a kneading machine for dough. and that was on Walker Street. And you can see, these are workmen folding sheets of noodles. And that- that business closed, but that was a fascinating time, I can show you the— Here's the storefront, a China noodle company.

So, yeah, he diversified his business interests, you know. And then, when we had a house in the suburbs up in Albany, he would come up. And he loved it that my father planted fruit trees, had some apple trees and a few peach trees. And that was a sign that-to my grandfather, who had been a farm from a farming family, and Toisan and Canton province originally, that we had made it. That he could, you know, come across the ocean. And then we had family land here where he could go pick an apple from a tree. So I think he really loved that.

Oh, the other thing is the work ethic. So he did not take vacations much at all, rarely. And in later life— he would work seven days a week— and then later in life when in retirement, we could get him to go to Cape Cod with us to the beach. And that was a return to the ocean for him from his young days in Maine. And so he enjoyed that. Eating lobster, having fried clams and just being on the ocean, I think. So we did finally get him to relax. And he loved— it was the typical patriarchal thing. He loved that there were three

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boys in the family. And my mother really wanted a girl so we adopted my younger sister from Korea. So okay, she- she wasn't going to take a chance by having a fourth child. So we adopted to make sure. So yeah.

AS: Yeah, that's amazing. And how are your brothers doing? Like, are they also— did they stay in New York, or did they move around?

AG: So I have an older brother, who's an opera conductor and a piano accompanist. And he teaches privately in Salt Lake City, Utah, And, has many students who win competitions and prizes. And then my younger brother stayed in Albany, New York and looks after my parents, and he's an accountant. He's an auditor with the State of New York. And then my sister works for a medical business in Buffalo, New York. So you have two artists, and then two more— I would say, grounded on siblings. And it's really— it's interesting to see how, now that we're older in our 50s and 40s, how we all want to keep close to family the way our parents raised us. And so I like that Chinese sentiment that family means everything or more than anything. Old- old fashioned, but we still abide by it. We think it's very important. Yeah.

AS: Absolutely and I felt like food— it's also really important in terms of family, and I'm curious, what do you grow up eating like, your grandfather owns a restaurant that must be really important.

AG: So, I think I had a really lucky childhood. what would happen is my mother would cook during the week when I was in school. And she would cook all kinds of Americanized things. So I got— that said, but then my father since he had been a cook in the restaurant, he would cook Chinese food all weekend. And then since we were always going back and forth between Albany and Chinatown, there, it's a three hour drive. Visiting my grandparents down there, we were always bringing back Chinese food from Chinatown— ducks, "char siu bao" (sweet pork bun), you know, "dan tat" (egg tart) all the things that you know, Dim Sum. And so it was all very— it's a rich childhood for me.

And you know, and, and those are the things I love— to the state. I eat everything and- and family banquets in Chinatown. You know, I think I went to one, the year before the virus hit for my cousin in Chinatown. I still have a cousin who lives in Chinatown, New York, in Confucius Towers— Confucius Plaza. And, so we, she keeps up with the restaurants there. We still like to all meet in New York.

And Atlanta, there's Chinatowns. And then when I lived in Houston, we'll have to talk about the Houston part. I went, you know, the old Chinatown in downtown— much smaller but. So I would actually go to the Houston out in Bellaire a lot. So Mike Kong (?) and other restaurants. And then there was a restaurant a friend of mine had a restaurant called "Canton Seafood" on Richmond, at about Montrose Way, closer to Montrose, in Richmond and Kirby it was on. And that's no longer in business. But we would go there for seafood all the time. And a place I can't remember, this wonderful woman had a restaurant, Vietnamese down downtown near the... where the Rockets play...

AS: Is it NRG, the National Stadium?

AG: Yeah, I— it's actually probably gone. I mean, she was at the end of her, her years and so. I haven't looked to see. I'd have to ask old friends and see "Oh, is this the restaurant?" Get the name back. But, I thought the strip mall culture of Chinatown in Houston was a wonderful thing. It was- it was, I was fascinated by it and cheered up by it because it was- community all the same. You know, the dim sum and everything. I would bring American friends, I would say Caucasian American friends and Latinos, everybody, they would ask me, "Where can we go?" And we would meet in Chinatown on Sundays [laughs] in Houston. So, yeah.

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AS: Yeah. I'm curious as to how you would compare the Chinatown in New York and here in Houston.

AG: I just, I think that the food is equally good. And, I was able to go to a lot of family banquets in New York, for weddings for-for my family. And so I didn't go to that many, I think I went to the Gee Family Association dinners in Houston. And those were, I felt so grateful to be able to meet other Gee family members, even if it was in name. But you know, I just think the food is equally good, that's part of the fun of it, is going and— and finding restaurants and, and also the Chinese markets, to have things to cook at home. I cook some— and need to cook more. [laughs]

So my father's videotapes his recipes, some— some of his dishes, cooking things, he's videotaped for us and given us the ingredient lists, so that we can continue to do that. But here's the thing. He's a restaurant cook. They don't write things down. A lot of times, he just knew in his head, how to make lobster, kidneys, or, you know, and then Chinese American "Lo mein" (egg noodles) or just... he could just do it in his head so easily. But we said, "Please write down some of the things you use, some of the secret things." And he's done that for us. Yeah.

AS: Yeah, those are amazing. And I wonder if you're willing, we'd love to archive some of your family recipes in the— in our box.

AG: I'll ask. He'll be happy to.

AS: That'd be great. Thank you.

AG: Yeah, I think he's 83 now, but he's still very sharp. Still does volunteer work. So sure, I'd be happy to do that. I'll ask him. Yeah.

AS: Yeah. Thank you. I guess. I'm also really curious about Chinatown back then in New York, like in the 60s and 70s. Would you be able to like memorize and take us through a trip, like a walking tour on-on-on Chinatown. Just quickly, like what you remember the smell while you were here back then, like when you were walking on the street of Chinatown, what route you would take. And...

AG: That the three key streets in New York's Chinatown are Mott, Doyer and Pell. And everything. You know, at one point Chinatown expanded and most of the businesses that we went to are gone, they've changed. Now there are a lot, you know, still Cantonese, but more Mandarin businesses and Szechuan, other other provinces have come in. And then now there's all this development, this gentrification going on, where they're taking the buildings and buying them up. And I think there are some limits, fortunately, that have been restrictions have been put in place, but you really can't—

Oh, I know a story, I'll tell you. So back then, community was so strong. For my parents wedding, and so they're in their 80s. And they were married in their 20s. So this is 60 years ago. so we're talking in 19- you know, well 1950s we're talking late 1950s. their wedding— last- reception lasted several days. And because they were from a lot— restaurant and laundry families, even for the night they were married, they couldn't fit everybody into one restaurant. So, ah, there would be like, one restaurant was where the immediate family from bride and groom were. Another restaurant were from out of town family who had come in for the wedding. And so my parents would go back and forth during the evening and greet the guests. That large.

And then so another night was for a celebration for all restaurant families who knew my grandfather. Another night was from laundry business families from my mother's side. And so just a lot more celebration. And I think now they said it can't do it because it's too expensive. And they would also have

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many courses on the di- on the menu. You know, we're talking a ten-course meal. And now you go, and some still do it. But now some can be a little smaller— six, seven courses. Still very nice. And I grew up in the age of when people had shark's fin soup, which has now been banned for- to help preserve the shark population. Although I hear that they might do some restricted slot fishing or something, and then keep that going somehow, but—

So yeah, the Chinatown back then, you had a Little Italy to the North. And of course, rents were cheap back then. This is the other part is that it was an undesirable area of Manhattan, so you could afford to open a business. Now, if you look at the price to buy an apartment in Chinatown, New York, things are— I think— I looked the other day, I think the cheapest thing is like \$600,000. You know, and the typical one, that's a— that's a rundown place where the nice, nice things are \$750,000 to a million. And that's even with the pandemic occurring.

So, yeah, Chinatown had its heyday. And then, you know, we'll see about how it comes back from the pandemic. That's a very interesting thing, too. And I hope to be as soon as it's alright, I'll go. Okay. Yeah, you know, we have a vaccine, oh, I'll fly to New York and meet family and have a meal and support some Chinatown businesses. So that's how that's my love for Chinese community, I would say. I hope that answers— I hope that answers the question.

AS: Yeah, absolutely. They are so like, vivid, and I'm really grateful for that. And I'm also curious were any cultural traits in your upbringing that you realize that were Asian, and not until you, like grew up older than you realize they were Asian traits?

AG: Sure. I write about this, in my book essays. I think we were really raised to do, to be obedient towards our parents, and a lot of things, although I've said that, you know, we were encouraged to do anything, become anything we wanted. I think still as immigrants, children of immigrants, you have that expectation. It's almost unspoken to do well, yeah. At the same time, I'll tell you, that was— funny story when I- when I got into graduate school. My, you know, MFA in Creative Writing in Iowa. My father, he didn't know much about it. And he did some research. And he just said to me, "I don't know how you got into that school. It's really competitive." Because I had been an athlete in high school. I wasn't— I didn't have super A grades. This is the other thing I was like a B student at— high 80 average, I was not your typical, overachieving stereotypical Asian student. And so he said, "How did you get, I don't know how you got into that school. But if you need money, I'll make sure you can afford to go."

And I loved to tell that story about how supportive of that he was even though it was an English and Creative Writing that my degree was for. And then I think later in the week, I told them, "No, it's okay. I got offered a graduate assistantship, I don't need money. They're going to take care of— I earned my way." Which he was even more pleased by or- and he celebrated. So, so now we've never had, you know, my parents never said, "Oh, I wish you'd been a doctor." Or "I wish..." you know, they did tell us they were very realistic with us, they said, "You need to always be able to grow up and support yourself and take care of yourself." which, of course, is just good parenting.

Closeness between siblings. Very much so. We were raised that way. And I think also to maintain. So I have three uncles, on my mother's side. And we were always raised to be close. And we do, we keep in contact with them and my cousins. So just the notion of family being important. And now as my parents get older, I, you know, we will take care of them. And my wife's mother-in-law lives with our family now and she's 80. And my wife is thrilled that I'm okay with that. And I said, "Well, I grew up with a Chinese family. So I was programmed to take care of my elders," you know like to be good to them. And so we laughed about that. But it really is like, I have no problem with an elderly relative living under the same roof and taking care of them. And if at some point, one of my parents needs to be taken care of, we- we'd

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do the same for them. So that's the traditional part. Do you have the same upbringing or some of the same things?

AS: Yeah, like the family value about like respecting the elders for sure. And like, taking care of them as well as... Yeah, that very... Yeah, like, family bonding is so close and so important in the culture. Yeah, moving on. Oh, you have a question?

AG: Oh, we were told not to get into trouble. [**AS:** Yeah. That too.] Yeah, to be well behaved. Not to, you know, my, my mother was so nice. I remember saying once, "If anybody ever wants to fight you, she'd say run like H-E- double toothpicks." She couldn't even say, "run like hell". But I learned to be older to not back down. I am actually probably more aggressive than some Asian Americans that I've known. So I, you know, you know, I drive a truck. I'm not, you know, I go fishing all the time, I actually have been hunting with friends. So I do many things, whatever I want to do, I do it. Is— there's no limits to what we should do if we want, you know, if it is playing rock and roll, electric guitar or whatever, you know, beyond other things, too. So [laughs].

AS: Yeah, that's really encouraging. And the way to do it, like as Asian, we shouldn't be held back, and we should do whatever we want to do. And, I guess moving on, can you share with us some of your college experience at Iowa, and what kind of clubs, social activities you were involved with?

AG: Sure. I went for my Bachelor of Arts in English teaching to the University of New Hampshire, of all places. And I was at the time one of only 20 minority students on a campus of over 10,000 students. And so, that was different. [laughs] but, I just got along- I did, I had a lot of friends. I would say, I even joined a fraternity in my last two years to- to see and I really wondered about that if it would be possible, but I was actually accepted. And then the next year, two African Americans joined the fraternity so our fraternity was not, you know, ha-, we didn't haze and we— not in any of the cool ways, we drank a lot and- and had parties. But we are not racist, which was really surprising. And this was 1982, 1983. and, but, and that's, I know, I'm not supposed to be part of that as a professor almost, it's anti- but it was a good actually all the people that I went to school with they're now doctors, you know, in the fraternity; lawyers, accountants, they run companies, they're really respected people. That was just a silly fun time in life more than anything. And nobody— we joke around, nobody got hurt which is very true. Nobody, you know, and so.

But I- I took a class with a writer named Thomas Williams and he was a National Book Award winner, he published 10 books. And that was as a junior, and then I knew, I said, "I want to do this for a career. I really want to write." And, you know, maybe not be a high school teacher. Because this is what I love to do is the writing. And I've pursued it and managed to make my living at it ever since I wanted to be a creative writing professor. So he encouraged me and another writer named John Yount. During my senior year, they said, "You should apply to college. And we went to Iowa. And if you want, we'll write recommendation letters for you." And that's what I ended up doing. I went to the University of Iowa in 1987. And I studied with the writer James Alan McPherson, who was the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize in fiction. And he passed away a few years ago, and I'm actually now his designated biographer, he became my mentor. And so I'm working on his biography now. And that will probably be another three years of writing. It's a— it's a serious, documented book.

And from there, '87 to '89. I taught high school after that, and then I moved, I wanted to come back and get a doctorate. And that's how I ended up in Houston in 1994. Came down to study the Creative Writing Program at U of H. The people I studied with were Chitra Divakaruni, who's still there; and Rosellen Brown was a novelist, who's there, moved to Chicago. Wonderful poet were there, Edward Hirsch. and also, on the African American theorist Lawrence Hogue, who is still there, who I still— he's a mentor

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figure to me, and I still look still communicate with him, and he's going to retire this year. So Houston, the educational part of Houston, for me was a wonderful experience. I edited while I was a grad student for the literary journal, Gulf- "Gulf Coast," and worked my way up from reader, to assistant editor to editor, to associate editor to editor of the whole magazine; then went on to the board. And now I'm on the National Advisory Board, I joked, "put out to pasture." But, but that was a great learning experience about publishing for me.

And I think I use those editing skills to this day in my job now, because I edit two imprints we publish novels and essay collections. So one imprint is called "2040 Books"; the other is "DLJ Books". It keeps me busy, I'd say. And the- my dissertation at UH was a novel about rail- Chinese railroad workers. And I have— I am- actually came back to that book and finished it. So that's about to go off to editors to see if we can find a home for it. And at the— at the time, that's a historical novel. In 1866, there were over 15,000 Chinese workers on the railroad in the Central Pacific Railroad in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California. And there are history books on it, there are three history books; but nobody's written a novel about it. So I hope to be first to market. And I would love to— a pipe dream is to bring Chinese actors, acting jobs for film version, you know, or TV series or whatever. And I have a screenwriter who's- who wants to look at the book already. So we'll see what happens. I don't know. Those are, you know. And you don't like, don't count. I don't count chickens before they're hatched in publishing. Publishing is tough business.

Houston, also, I should say, I work with Dr. Yali Zou, And, who's still at UH. And we founded an Asian American studies minor at UH. And I helped her with the curriculum from that- for that. She had the position and I knew the curriculum and we had a nice partnership. When I taught— so I got to teach graduate classes, actually, while I was a graduate student, and it was mainly to undergrads. But that was a great opportunity for me. UH was, how can I say this? So I had never lived in a city as an adult before. So coming to Houston to work on a doctorate was a challenge for me, but a welcomed challenge. And I came thinking I'd stay from 1994 to 1999. But I stayed a decade from 1994 to 2004. I loved Houston. And what I say now is that I miss Houston all the time. The friendships, the artistic community of Houston, that's a treasure. Meaning the whole- the literary scene with Inprint, the music scene, and just the art scene. It's so rich.

Inprint, I have to mention. So the people I remember, Rich Levy, and Marilyn Jones and Krupa Parikh, were there. I taught adult workshops for them. And one of the ones was a memoir workshop and one of the wards with elderly African American ladies. And that workshop still exists. And so I had started that also I started the novel workshop for Inprint and Richard said, "Do you think it can be done?" I said, "We'll give it a try." And that was the wonderful thing about Houston. It's so supportive of its artists. And now that- that working, you know, those workshops were great for me as a graduate student, some extra income, because of the vibrant Houston restaurant scene. You want to be able to afford to eat out. And- and then just to make contacts. The supportive inprint was wonderful— what they do for students at UH, there is scholarship money; and fun- fun reading, run beautiful public reading series downtown and now online for this year. But I definitely wanted to mention Inprint.

And then when I graduated, I wasn't ready to leave. I still loved Houston. I was the Director of Development for "Writers in the Schools". And at the time, the executive director was Robin Reagler, who recently resigned from the position. She just was ready for a change. And she was wonderful to work with. And Long Chu, who— he I think works for one of the foundations in Houston. He oversees grants. But Long Chu. This is who that is. And I used to joke that he was my cousin, even though he's Vietnamese. And, yeah, we— that was an education on writing grants. And we went, we took brothers in schools and grants from over 750 grand to up to about a million and a quarter while I was there. And I use that even on my- my job now, I just- I love to write grants, sometimes for worthy causes.

And I taught at Tomball College, and there was a community college. Now it's, I think, Lone Star College. It's evolved. So I did all the— all those things before leaving Houston. And then there was one other job. I worked in venture capital. And this is while I was the director of development. I was like, I had two jobs. I don't know how I did it, is— like a job and a half. But I wrote business plans for emerging and mid- mid growth businesses. One person I should remember who I worked with at "Gulf Coast" literary journal was Marion Bartholomae, who has passed away since, but she became our board president. And she used to joke with me that, when she first met me in Houston, I was like a boy, but then I left like a man. 'Cause she saw how much I grew while I was in Houston. And- and I still think like that for anybody who moves there. That's what Houston is. It's this rich community where you can find— be welcomed in, people are so generous and you— you can make it, you know, you can find a job. And I'm sharing things and it's so diverse. What was it, the second most diversity in the country?

AS: Probably the most- the most diverse...

AG: The most now? Yeah. See, when I was there was a second. I knew it was like, one or two. Yeah, with over it... when I left there were like over 4 million people. And is it still up at like four and a half, or is it gone to— Yeah, you know, just this, this scene of... I think it's over four and a half million people now. So that's when I think of Houston. The multicultural nature of it— I loved Houston compared to Dallas. You know, you'd be in Texas. And Houston is like an oasis in Texas. And of course, I explored the rest of Texas, I went fishing down along the Gulf Coast, all the way down in the Mexico border. And I went up into West Texas and Austin and went hiking there and— and visited friends. Austin was a wonderful city. But for me, my favorite remains Houston. Yeah. Yeah. That's- that's like how I like to put it.

AS: That's amazing to hear how involved and invested you are with the Houston community. I was wondering when you first moved here in 1994, was there anything that's new and surprising to you? Like the southern culture scene, and southern food?

AG: I was so naive. You know, I had a uncon-, a vehicle without air conditioning. And I say, "oh, I'll be alright, I'll just drive with the windows down. And I'll be frugal." And I quickly learned that wasn't possible within about a week, because I arrived in like August. And so I had never lived in the South like that before. And, but Houston at that time... oh, I, I lived on— on... Oh, apartments, the Bank Street apartment. Wait a minute, I'd have to remember. Most of the time, for the longest part in Houston, I lived in an apartment on Hawthorne Street. So and it's, down on, across from— pass the Starbucks on Hawthorne and Kirby, heading toward UH; so that would be, I think, heading... Let me do geographically, whether that's East or West.

But, the neighborhood was a lot cheaper then. there wasn't, you know, it was up and coming. But it was still there was rumor and things were affordable. Rent was like 300 a month, you know, 300. And now you couldn't. And my regret was having stayed 10 years that I didn't buy a place when I arrived. Because now of course, I've seen what's happened to real estate in Houston since I left. And I left 16 years ago. And things seemed much more crowded to me. When I- when I come back to Houston about every other year. And so, but a lot of the places as much as they've changed, some of them, you know, are still there, some of the things.

And I think the culture was— I don't know, with creative writing, I think it's the same scene. It's as welcoming and it's as supportive because all you know, writers from Houston will friend me on Facebook or something, and I read about them doing the same things that I did. You know, they'll read in the graduate reading series at Brazos Bookstore. Oh, that's, that's another person I should mention. So when I

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was in Houston, Carl Killian, the Killian zone Brazos Bookstore, and they were really wonderful people. And I think Carl retired and took a position working for the Menil Collection.

There was one year I had a Menil house, I rented a Menil house across from the Rothko Chapel. And that was again special, like more of the uniqueness of— to be in Houston. And just you know, where else could you be a graduate student and go and walk into free museums and free- free exhibits and see the Cy Twombly Gallery, or the Rothko Chapel or, and just now, or go over the MFAH. And even the Houston Symphony had free tickets, you know, at the end of the evening for grad students, and I would go get those. So, yeah, that would just, I think those things are— remain the same, or I hope they do.

AS: It's wonderful to hear that you had such a vibrant life here in Houston back then. And going back a little bit, like, how did you get into creative writing?

AG: Yeah, I think— it was from taking a college course, but I'd always read. Once I got to college, I became a voracious reader, I was an athlete before high school and everything. I really didn't read so much. And so when I got to college, and I took lit courses, I found that I loved to read bo- novels. And I would go to the library, and just read for hours, and I felt like I was catching up. And I still feel like I'm catching up, like, even now at 50. I still like— was to show you in the back of the room here. There's stacks of books that I have, that I haven't read that I've ordered, or you know, and then sent to me and— So I think it is, artistically, there's still a great satisfaction from completing an essay or a story. And having felt like I've said, or done what I wanted to. Like I said, I, you know, I reach a level where the language is good enough, and the plot is unique enough; or have explored the subject enough. And, for me, that's what I want to keep doing, you know, till I retire. Really, I've never tired of that. That feeling has never gotten old, the finishing something.

And it's rare with a long book. So I'm always working on something, you know, also short while I work on longer pieces, so that you have that satisfaction of finishing something. If you go on too long without it- it's not good. It's, it's like one of those things like passions in life, like if— I love to fish, so if I don't go fishing for too long, I don't feel right. You know, or I guess it'd be like going without ice cream or something like that, you know? So I hope that I hope that answers the question.

So I'm one of those rare, happy people. Where in college, I realized what I wanted to do, and I've been doing it ever since. But I have met writers who I knew they say, one up, from the time I was a kid, I wanted to be a writer. And I'm envious for that. You know, I knew as a freshman in college that I wanted to work in the field of English. So I just-just loved language or the sounds of words or how they, you know— putting them together. I don't know if I'm a natural. Like, a lot of times, there's a lot of work and a lot of revision that gets to be done. I- I also, I think I would have been happy being like a forest ranger. A little bit of a romantic occupation like my father. but on the other hand, I needed to make sure I could pay bills. So as like, I thought I'd go into teaching.

So I did have one teacher say to me when I was college, like you better get serious or, you know, I don't know if you're gonna make it, you know. And I kind of laugh about that, you know, I was like, "No, I'm a darn professor now! I think I've made it." you know. But I did get serious, you know, much more in graduate school. So, you know, if anything to tell other writers is like, you know, I work with these undergraduate writers, and they want to know whether they'll make it. And I'm like, "Well, if you think you can, like, bu- but you're too young to like, call it right now. Keep going, you know.

I'm only peeking now I think in my 50s. I sit down with an essay. And I would say, you know, most of the time I know what I'm doing. Right, I have a sense of it or confidence that I never had in my 30s. But essay writing became easier when I turned 50, I realized I'd had all these experiences, and I hadn't written them

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down, and they were just there. And then novel writing is going to stay difficult forever. You know, imagination making things work out. So, I think I hope that— Yeah, hope that answers it.

AS: Yeah, for sure. And let's talk a little bit more about your-your works. The, you said the novel, which include the "Iron Road," about the Chinese railroad workers; and "Far from the beautiful country," which is your dissertation; and the, more recently, the-the award winning, that you won the Santa Fe Writers Project Literary Award, the work- the book, "My Chinese-America," like, all these books that that. How has some, like your Asian identity, and like, why did you choose to, like tackle this, like kind of angle, as well as the creative process? Can you tell us a bit about those?

AG: I'm happy to, "My Chinese-America". I noticed that there hadn't been a Chinese American male who had published a book of essays for over a decade. And the last one was a writer named Frank Chin. And so, as like, there's obviously something needs to be said, you know things— there are things that can be said, from this perspective. So I named the book "My Chinese-America," and just as- cuz my version, of course is going to be— I'm only going to speak for me, you know, from my experiences— my Chinese-American experiences. And I don't presume to speak for anyone else. So yeah, I ended the book on the contest. And I was really fortunate, the editor said he wanted to publish the book. And I was lucky, I had got nice reviews from Publishers Weekly and Kirkus Reviews and the book is still in print.

Then the railroad novel, yeah, the, the dissertation, it was called "Far From the Beautiful Country," when I was in graduate school. Now, the title is the "Laborers". So I retitled it, that just happens over time during the evolution of working on a piece. And, you know, that's, that's, like I said, in the process of going to editors.

And then now, I'm working on two books. One is called "At Little Monticello". And that's a biography of my mentor. James Alan McPherson. And that's under contract with UGA press already. And then there's a foundation, the Hodge Foundation, from Savannah is going to support the printing of the book. And I'm excited to work with UGA press, the editor Lisa Bayer is wonderful. And no more so chipping away at another book of essays.

And I don't quite know what the title would- will be. It might be something like "Multicultural Americana." But it's bigger, like "My Chinese-American" were personal essays. And this next book of essays takes on larger subjects. so that's kind of everything from as varied as going and visiting Lincoln's home- Abraham Lincoln's home; to— I've been working on an essay about racial remarks that every president throughout history is made. You know, that-that's a list essay of sorts, but— 46 presidents leads to 46 paragraphs and little commentary in between. So that book will be you know, you- you might have the personal territory. But then you want to branch out and do more commentary. But there'll be a few personal essays in there. You know, if the— if they fit.

Well, one of them. It's funny. One of them is about eating oysters. I want to do an essay called "Oyster Road" where I drive, I started up in Maine, and I worked my way down the Atlantic coast, swing around Florida, and— and go along the South- Southern Coast and end up in Texas at an oyster bar. And I really don't know what I'm going to find, but I want to write about a great oyster eating trip. And my mother loves to eat oysters. So I'll have her like, come meet me at some point along the trip. You know, that kind of silly stuff, but adventurous. You know, and I'm sure there'll be some Asian restaurants that prepare oysters along the way. Yeah, some Asian chefs to talk with.

But that'll be for when the pandemic improves, I think, otherwise, I'd have to have an RV or a motorhome to be safe for a trip like that. Does that, you know, you know, I have, 58. I have seven years till retirement. Could go longer. But if I think in terms of books, you know, I want to have at least five books

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when I'm done. I do have another novel in me or two. And, you know, one that was a— I've drafted about a restaurant in Chinatown, New York, where I grew up. And it's about the lives of the, the cooks and the waiters and the owner, and so hopefully, that'll see the light of day. You know, but like most writers, we have certain books that will never see the light of day and then some that I managed to make it out. So it's, it's not, it's not a sure thing. But- but I like that. Yeah. You have to keep proving yourself.

AS: Yeah, absolutely. It's a journey, right?

AG: Yeah. Yeah, very much so.

AS: And I'm also curious about your friendship, and mentorship with James Alan McPherson, who you spoke about. And I'm curious, like, like, what did you guys talk about during your, like, decades of friendship and how it nurtured your writing, and I guess, both as people of color and minorities in this country, how has that, I guess, enlightened about the identity and the recognition?

AG: Sure, James, took me under his wing. He said that since I wrote about working class people, that we work the same side of the street, he liked that I wasn't snotty or arrogant, I guess. And the first year of mentorship he would give me a book every other week or so. And I'd read the book, and we would go back to this house and talk about it. And in a nutshell, I think that the thing is that he taught me to be a voracious reader. He read everything from the Greeks to current— through up through American history, constitutional history, and then current cultural criticism. And he would ask me, "What are you reading?" He was so wonderful in that way. I mentioned, at one point, the French theorist Jean Baudrillard; and the next thing I knew James had quoted Baudrillard in the essay, like six months later— he was phenomenal.

He was also an "Omni-American". And that's a book by Albert Murray¹. And in the best sense of the word, James never used it as a weapon, the theory; but the theory is that, we don't have to think of ourselves as minorities, as becoming Americanized or anything because our contributions are- are already part of the culture. You know, whether it's Asian American, Asian cuisine, or African American cuisine or African American music, you know. So, we don't have to, like, constantly feel like we have to belong because we already do as much as anyone. And I think that's the gist of that theory. and I've always liked that, you know. It- it's a way of looking at the country, that, no, this isn't certainly not only a white nation, but it's a nation for everybody in it. Of course, you know, writing a novel about the building of the Central Pacific Railroad, I know that-that how long Asian Americans have been here and- and how long Asians have contributed to, you know, the country's history. So, whether anyone decides to teach it or not, you know, that's always the struggle. But for those of us who know better, you know, we're not; we will continue to teach, as we see fit, you know, as-as we should, so.

AS: Yeah, absolutely. And thank you for teaching and sharing the story to more people to learn about our history. And I...

AG: James's books I really want to mention, so he had a short story collection called "Human Cry". And then he won a Pulitzer in '78, for a book of stories called "Elbow Room". And it's just a wonderful story. And I wanted to read his biography to bring more attention to him as a writer— he's- should be read more. And he is beginning to get more attention, not just because of me, because of his daughter, and because of the efforts of other writers. He also published a book of essays called "A Region Not Home", and a memoir called "Crabcakes". So in a book of essays called— history book, called "Railroad". That

¹ The original name of the book is "The omni-Americans".

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was his editor was the famous writer, Toni Morrison. So, James has a lot of work that needs to be read, and deserves to be read. So I'm happy to say that. Oh, did you want to talk about the election before we, you know?

AS: Ah, yeah, that's what I'm going for next, like you were talking about the elections in recording. Like, I am really excited to, like, ask you about like, we are precisely one week after Election Day, like, how are you feeling? And we also have our-our first minority, Vice President and woman in the White House now, like, what are your thoughts?

AG: Everybody knows that. I'm- I'm not, I- I was not a Trump supporter. So, my thinking is that, I do think it was time for a change that— well— Yes. And I have friends who are Republicans. So I and as a teacher, I teach Republicans and Democrats. So it's really— I really listen, I have to listen to and I enjoy listening to both sides more than the average person. And, you know, I listened to Republicans who say, "the economy was going great, you know, and- and there'll be a, you know, a virus vaccine soon." And then I listened to the Democrats who, "the-the virus response was inadequate, too many people died. And it was a deregulation economy, which wasn't the best thing for the land, and the air and the water."

I tend to be on the Democratic side on this one. I'm looking forward to a much stronger virus response. I hope that we follow the practices of South Korea or Japan, or even China in getting the virus under control, so that the economy can be more successful for everyone. more importantly, too you know, when I hear the backlash, people saying, well, Democrats protested and rioted for four years. And so we're not gonna, we're gonna protest for four years with Biden. But I do think that Biden will speak to everybody more, whereas I think Trump mainly spoke to his base, you know, and so, I think that's- that's why he lost the election.

And with all the protests going on now, I don't think there will be any finding by any US Attorney of widespread voter fraud. This is typical Trump. He is a battler in business and— and I actually understand that that's how he made a success. That's how he runs his business, he fights things. And, if he loses, he loses, but he'll go down hard fighting. And that's, I can understand that, actually. And, you know, I'm not gonna mock it, or it's not my style, but I understand it.

We are in— since I am in Georgia, and Georgia did go blue by I think about 10,000 votes. and so we're about to get an election blitz for the two Senate positions that are up. My phone is not going to stop ringing in the evening now, from- from- from people campaigning for either side; and my phone is not going to stop receiving text asking me if I want to contribute to either, you know, contribute my time or make phone calls or give money to other causes. So for us, in Georgia politics continues. We are still the center.

And it's going to be quite the race, there were 60% of voters 65% turnout in the state. And the parties are going to struggle to get the rest of that 35% out. And we're really going to see a dog fight here. And I'm of a mind I just— I hope that everybody votes. And I don't know. So I think it's an achievement enough to have turned Georgia in the— in the presidential election, but I actually hope, yeah, I hope we flipped the Senate seats, so that it's easier for Biden to accomplish an agenda without resistance.

You know, we've had a— we've seen, you know, division so long for so long. One last thing. So the election, as close as it was, maybe a 5 million vote difference now. Still I think like, you know, the majority of this country is predicted to be multiracial by 2042. And so we really are going to struggle at-at this, like- 50-50 gap for the next 20 years. You know, so we have to learn to get along. And I think it's too exhausting to fight for another 20 years. and— and so— I- I am of a mind to find like-minded individuals of either party who want to get along and spend my time with them. And I'm older, and I really don't have

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time to be fighting. I need to be getting work done. So that's kind of how I view the election in life right now.

AS: And how do you see this election could impact the future of representation of Asian in, like the power in politics and humanities in this country?

AG: Yeah, you saw the candidate Jeff Yang, being nationally prominent for the first time this year. And Kamala Harris as a Vice President with an Indian mother. So there it is, an Asian American is of— is in, somebody of Asian American descent is in the White House now, in one of the major offices. So, I've read the articles that talk about how, as that slim margin, you know, 50-50, the Asian American population in the country becomes even more crucial to swing the vote one way or another. Now, and by and large, we all, I think 75% of Asians are democratic, with maybe the largest veering towards Republicans are the Vietnamese Americans.

So, you know, yeah, I think just the Asian American vote just becomes all the more important. Just like everybody else's vote. And the communities need to do everything they can, to get all of the vote out, to get the vote out. There's some wonderful— there's a wonderful organization in Atlanta that does that for Asian Americans. And Jeff Yang is actually moving down to Georgia to help with the Senate races, he announced. I read the other day. So you can tell, I'm up, I'm up on all these issues and that's the pandemic. We're in our homes, become news junkies and follow the news. That's a side benefit, I think, if anything, I'm more informed than ever before.

AS: So how have you been since March, like the pandemic unraveled?

AG: We're really in confinement. Georgia was one of the first states to open. And I understood why the governor did it. He wanted the economy up and running the Georgia budget has to balance every year, there can't be debt. and, it's sad. I mean, this governor before the Coronavirus, had pledged raises to educators in the state, which, I was pleased by that, Republican governor would— saw the need for that. but I still think we opened too soon, we've been in the top six now in terms of case loads and deaths in the country, for our state, and we haven't improved. Whereas I've seen New York, lower their percentages down to 1%. I own a second home in New York. And I went there this summer for a brief time and— and got to see how different the culture is with mask wearing insisted everywhere versus not being insisted upon.

And I'm- I'm an advocate for human life. I value human life more than the dollar. Good if you can have both but my business experience tells me that businesses can be rebuilt, but lives can't- lives can't. So we will see. You know, I would have rooted for Trump with a— if he had a strong response, you know; and I root for Biden to have a strong response. I just want success for the country. So, you know, this is, you know, I gave Trump his chance. You know, and for me, it wasn't enough. and I'll call out Biden the same if it's not enough if things stay bad. So that, that's part of, you know, being fair.

AS: The process of democracy, right?

AG: Yeah.

AS: Yeah, I guess that's all of my questions. Thank you so much for bearing with me, and answering all these very thoughtful and inspiring (questions). And do you have anything you would like to add before we close?

**Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
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AG: No, I'm just so grateful to have been able to talk with you. And I hope I answered everything with enough thoroughness. And, yeah, I just say, I loved my time in Houston. And I look forward to my visit back to Houston every year when I'm scheduled to fly in. So thank you very much for the opportunity to interview.

AS: Yeah, thank you. And don't forget to swing by Rice at some point on your visit.

AG: I will. Okay, we'll have to say hello. Yeah.

AS: Thank you. Okay.

AG: All right. It would be great to meet you in person.

[Interview ends.]