

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL CHIN

An Oral History Conducted by Jerwin Tiu

Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islander
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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Oral History Project

University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2020

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The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islanders Oral History Project.

Claytee D. White
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PREFACE



“It wasn’t until I got to college where I actually met a significant number of actually Chinese people—who were more biologically Chinese, or who were more involved in the culture, who spoke Chinese, so on and so forth that had not been parts of my background. I sort of became more fully, *Okay, this is just a small dimension of my identity; I’m half-Chinese.* I was making that kind of adjustment to how I saw myself.”

Having grown up in a largely Americanized household in Utica, New York, Michael Chin was aware of his Chinese identity, but upon entering higher education, he found himself struggling to connect with his Chinese ancestry. His paternal grandparents immigrated from China and ran a laundry business in Queens, where they raised his father. Michael describes his father as Chinese and his mother as “a European mutt, so a White woman.” His parents met in college and eventually had Michael’s sister and Michael, respectively.

In middle school, he began attending programs at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth, where he continued through high school. After graduating State University of

New York at Geneseo, he returned to Baltimore and the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth as a resident assistant before pursuing and obtaining his MFA. After marrying, he began his teaching career as a part-time professor at Georgia Gwinnett College and in 2019, came to UNLV, where he is heavily involved in the Honors College and active in the Faculty Senate.

In this interview, Chin recalls his childhood bonding with grandparents—especially his maternal grandmother—and wrestling with his identity. Living in a White community, having black hair and the last name Chin, he recalls, “I was basically Chinese.” He speaks about the ways geographical distance shapes family relationships, how identity infuses his readings and his fiction writing, about becoming a Las Vegas “local,” and about publishing new literature, expanding his archive of read literature, and dedicating his time to being a devoted husband and father.

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December 20, 2022
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Jerwin Tiu

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This is Jerwin Tiu, and today is December 20th, 2022. I am here today with Cecilia Winchell, Stefani Evans, and Michael Chin.

Michael, could you please start off by spelling out your first and last name?

Yes. It's Michael, M-I-C-H-A-E-L, and last name Chin, C-H-I-N.

Thank you so much. Let's first start off, could you tell me about your childhood? This can be anything from where you grew up, your family, early schooling, and what you did for fun.

Yes. I grew up in Upstate New York, in Utica, New York, more specifically. It's a small city. It's kind of right towards the middle of the state. My parents were both from New York. They both grew up in Queens. They had actually met in graduate school. They both went to Syracuse University and to work for General Electric, which had a plant there in Utica. They were both city kids, and so in my upbringing, I was led to believe that I was being raised in a really small town, and I only realized later on that it was a modestly sized city, actually. It just wasn't New York, New York.



Michael with stuffed animals, 1983

Michael with stuffed animals, 1983



In any event, I had one older sister, and both my parents. We grew up in a green, small, raised ranch house. I went to a local public school there. There was not a lot of diversity, and so I tend to exaggerate it, I think, in part because of the way my parents saw it at the time, but I think of myself as being one of the only people of color of any nature and, particularly, of Asian descent. My father is fully Chinese. My mother is sort of a European mutt, so a White woman. It was an interesting aspect to my identity that growing up I considered myself to be Chinese. My last name was Chin, and I had black hair, in a pretty homogeneously White community. I was basically Chinese.



Michael, Diane, and their mother in front of their family home, 1983

Michael, his sister (Diane), and their mother in front of their family home, 1983



It wasn't until I got to college where I actually met a significant number of actually Chinese people. Who were more biologically Chinese or who were more involved in the culture, who spoke Chinese, so on and so forth that had not been parts of my background; I sort of became more fully, *okay, this is just a small dimension of my identity; I'm half-Chinese*. I was making that kind of adjustment to how I saw myself.



Michael and Diane with their paternal grandparents outside their house, undated

Michael, Diane, and their maternal grandmother outside her house, undated



Michael and Diane with their paternal grandparents and maternal grandmother outside the grandparents' home, undated

Growing up, I had a best friend that I made when I was at the end of my fourth-grade year, at the end of his third-grade year. We lived just down the street from each other. Once we connected, we started hanging out almost every day. We kind of moved through our interests together, but we started out as pro wrestling fans together, and then we played a lot of basketball together, we played a lot of Super Nintendo games together. We watched the movie “The Breakfast Club” every day for about a year together. We were close, and we’re still close to this

day. We were the best man in each other's weddings a few years back. That's in a nutshell my childhood and some of the highlights.



Michael and his childhood best friend Mike, around 1993-1994

Michael's maternal grandmother Jean and Diane, Christmas 1983



Awesome. I wanted to ask: Do you recall any memories of your grandparents from either side?

Yes. On both sides, I got to know my grandparents a little bit. On my father's side, the Chinese grandparents, they were both immigrants from China directly. The history is a little bit fuzzy, but my grandfather came over when he was relatively young, still a child. My understanding is he had a rough relationship with his parents and got kicked out of the house at some point and had

to bounce around a lot to figure out his life. He ended up in the military for a period of years and then ultimately wound up going back to China and finding my grandmother.

They got married. The way that they told it was a very unromantic version of it; that it was largely just that she wanted to get out of China, and so kind of latched on. But they stayed married through the end of his life, and that was in 2001. They were together, and they had three sons who they raised together. They were both in laundry, especially my grandfather. He worked in a laundry and then owned a laundry for some period of time. My father and his brothers were actually raised in the back of the laundry business. They lived there early on in their childhood until they could afford a proper home.



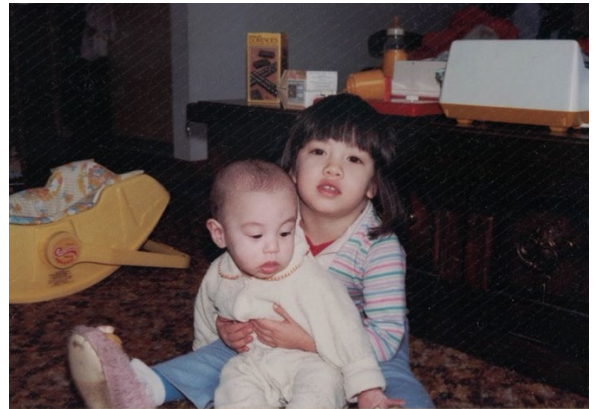
Michael's grandmother and grandfather, undated

My father had two brothers on that side who I saw when we used to go and visit my grandmother and grandfather and see the uncles three times a year. Usually, it was Easter, Memorial Day, and Labor Day that we would make the drive, which was a five-hour, or so, drive from where we lived. I got to know them to that extent. Neither of my Chinese grandparents spoke English very well, and so we never got that close, in part because there was always that language barrier, and I never learned to speak Cantonese, which was their primary language. I saw them three times a year and then occasionally other special occasions.



Michael and Diane, 1983

Michael and Diane, 1983



I had a grandmother who lived right in Utica, my mother's mother, and so we were much closer and had a really tight relationship until she passed in 2008. But we would see her. On Sunday afternoons, we always went to that house and played games or did arts projects and things like that.



Michael and his maternal grandmother in her kitchen, undated

I never met my grandfather on that side of the family. There is a muddy history where she was briefly married to someone, but then towards the end of her life, we found out through some records that that was not the father of the children. We believe it was her boss who she had worked with. At one point we had a name, but it was a very common name, and so we tried Googling it at the time, but never really made any headway in figuring out who this person was. We figured it was probably a family secret that he wouldn't necessarily want out anyway.

Thank you. What did your parents do after graduating from college?

Both my parents got hired by General Electric coming out of their undergrad. My dad was at the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, and my mom was at Columbia, New York, and so they both stayed at home to do their undergrad experiences, got hired by General Electric, and as part of that they got an opportunity to get their master's degrees through officially Syracuse University. It was at the Utica College campus, which was down the road from where I ended up growing up. During that time, my understanding is that my dad would drive my mom home for major holidays, and that's how they started talking and getting more personally connected to each other and wound up getting married and having my sister and I.



Michael, Diane, and their maternal Uncle John, his mother, and his maternal grandmother, Christmastime ca. 1994/1995

Could you walk me through your experiences in the education system, whichever ones you see fit?

Sure. I guess I'll just do it chronologically. I went through K through five elementary school. It was the same one that my sister had attended. She was an exceptionally bright student, and so she skipped a grade and everything. My parents' estimation, I was the slacker or the less bright of the two kids. I was always compared. But I did pretty well as a student. I was a solid A, A-minus kind of student.



Michael's sister in front of his father's car, undated

But in any event, I know part of my learning experience was my father taught me how to read before I started school and was very proud of that. It was a brutal process as I remember it, him yelling at me until I knew the words correctly, and so it wasn't fun. But when I got to school, I knew how to read. He placed a big emphasis on getting me into at least the advanced reading groups in school and things along those lines. I do think it paved the way for me to eventually become an English professor because that was the part of school that I was good at from an early point in life.



Michael, Diane, and their parents, 1983

The next step in our school system was a middle school for sixth through eighth grade. During that time, I tested into a summer program called the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth, which became pretty important to my identity because I ended up working for them for over a decade after I graduated. I went to summer programs there where I stayed on a college campus and took some courses there, and then onto high school.

It was a sports heavy high school, and I was not a sports guy. I was never very coordinated. Not a special interest for me. Nonetheless, I made my share of friends and made it through fine.

I transitioned directly there from the State University of New York at Geneseo. That's a small school in western New York. It was about a two to three hours' drive from where I grew up. I attended there for four years. My primary claim to fame there was I was the editor of the newspaper at the college.

I was not directly involved in school for a couple of years. I applied for graduate school when I was finishing up my program there. I only got into one program, which when I visited the

campus, I did not like it anyway. I was like, “I’m going to go into debt over this program that I’m not actually that interested in, in a place where I don’t really want to be.” I ended up working at Syracuse University for a couple of years in Residential Life. I got to back door my way into taking a couple of classes in their graduate creative writing program while I was there, which was really an important experience for me because I always wanted to be a creative writer, and that showed me where I wanted to go and where I wasn’t yet in that process.

After that point, that’s when I moved to Baltimore for a job with the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth that I referenced earlier. When I was there, I completed a master’s degree in creative writing. I did night school, and so it was basically one class a semester over the course of four and a half years. While I was there, I met an important mentor figure to me, Harvey Grossinger who is an active writer, and he mentored me through the process of applying to other graduate programs in creative writing that were a little bit more selective. It led to a process where I applied to thirty-four graduate school programs. He was really adamant that if he was going to work with me, I had to apply to at least thirty, to which I said, “Do you have any idea what the application fees are to apply to thirty graduate schools?” But he talked me through it. A lot of creative writing graduate programs only take six people a year, or even fewer than that. His rationale was, even if you’re in the top ten at all these places that you apply to, that might not be good enough to get a spot, but if you apply to thirty places and none of them take you, then you probably really weren’t ready for this. By applying to thirty places, you’re giving yourself a chance, though.

I applied to that many. I think I was accepted at eighteen or nineteen by the time it was all said and done with varying degrees whether they offered me funding or they didn’t, what the funding entailed in terms of teaching or other responsibilities.

That all led me to Oregon State in Corvallis, Oregon, and so I moved across the country. The woman I was seeing at the time, my now wife, Heather, was living in San Diego at the time, and so she moved up to be with me. That was a two-year program. That's where I first started teaching, actually, was during that graduate program. They had a quarter system, so it was a one-two-one load. I taught one class in the fall, two in the winter term, and then one again in the spring. I loved it. I loved teaching, and I felt I grew a lot as a writer there. It was a really important experience for me as a person all around.

I graduated there with an MFA in creative writing. To date, that's the end of my time as a student, and I expect that that will be the end of it. I, here and there, toy with the idea of going back for a PhD. Basically, the only reason I think I would do it at this point would be to improve my prospects in teaching jobs. I'm both happy where I am and most of the jobs that I would consider at this point outside of the one I'm currently in, really teaching creative writing and English, I need the MFA, and my publications are the next biggest qualification. A PhD would certainly bolster things a little bit more, but it's not really necessary for where I want to be in my career. I'm probably done with school.

What was your major in your undergraduate degree?

I came in as an English major, and I did graduate with a BA in English. I also ended up a double major in sociology, too, though. Sociology was a little bit more left field for me. I took a class my first semester that I just really enjoyed, which led me to take a class with the same professor in my second semester, and I just sort of kept chipping away at it. Then by sophomore year, it was clear it was going to be a minor. Then by the time I got to junior year, I only needed two or three extra classes for it to become a major, one of which was statistics for a social science major, so that was the big obstacle. *Am I really going to do this? Do I really want another math*

class? I took AP Calculus in high school with a specific goal of never taking another math class. But I did it. I soldiered through. Fortunately, it was really pitched towards social science majors who did no math, and it worked out fine for me. But yes, I finished up with a double major in English and sociology there.

Awesome. Could you tell me more about your work with Johns Hopkins?

Yes. After being a student there, one of my big ambitions was to come back and be a resident assistant there. That came together in my first summer after my first year of undergrad; I was a resident assistant for that program. Then the next year I came back to do the same job and got, what they called, a battlefield promotion where someone left a job, and so I ended up the senior resident assistant that summer and continued in that round. Then eventually, I wound up the dean of Residential Life, for the program, a few years later, and then was hired full time to work as assistant program manager, and then I was promoted to program manager, which basically means I was overseeing two of the site locations. Now it's quite a bit fewer, but at their peak, they had about thirty different site locations, and so two of them were mine to manage. It varied which ones I had depending on the year, but the one in Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York was my homesite. That's where I was a student, and that's where I was a resident assistant, and that's the one I managed for a few years. The one at UC Santa Cruz was another one I managed for quite a few years.

That's actually where I met my wife in the first place, as an aside. We met because she was hired there for the program, too, and I ran trainings for her position, but we never really talked until she actually worked at a site that I managed, and we never really talked until the last couple of nights we were there wrapping up the summer stuff and realized, ah, this is a person I

really connect with. Then that led to us eventually going on our first date while I was in Southern California for summer work, and that led to our whole relationship.

But I worked for them all four years of undergrad and then a couple of summers after that, and then I was hired there full time and worked there for about six or seven years, and then I went back to them over summers when I was in graduate school. Most recently in 2019, I was back at UC Santa Cruz to be a site director for them for part of the summer, which is its own adventure, getting a little bit ahead of things. But we had our son who was at that point only a year and a half old, and so he came along with us. That was its own unique version of doing the camp job. Yes, I was definitely involved with them for quite some time.

During your whole higher education career, how did you occupy your free time? What did you do aside from education?

I was always a writer, and so I was always writing creatively. But then the other big project I had—this was actually with that childhood best friend I referenced earlier—we started a blog called The A Cappella Blog, which is all about a cappella music. This was a time when that was starting to blow up, so this was before the “Pitch Perfect” movies, but when it was gathering momentum in that direction. A woman who I was seeing for about four years was really seriously involved in that world and brought me to competitions, and I fell in love with it. We noticed at that point that there really wasn’t a lot of archiving of anything that was happening in that world on the internet. YouTube had just become a thing, and so people were starting to upload videos of stuff, but there was not a lot of recordkeeping around it. No one was really writing about what happened beyond just who won a competition. We started just traveling the country and just going to these shows and writing these five-thousand-word reviews of just everything that happened and what we thought about it.

That project ultimately lasted about a decade. There was about a five-, six-, seven-year period we were pretty serious and really traveling all over the place and posting stuff almost daily to the blog. It tapered off a lot in the last couple of years when we were both getting busier with other things. Also, a cappella had blown up enough that there was a lot of coverage of it, and so we were far from the only people doing it at that point.

But yes, that was one of my big pet projects that occupied my time. I'm trying to think. Not much else. Hanging out with friends. Those are some of the big things that my time went to.

[Recording abruptly ends]

Good afternoon. My name is Jerwin Tiu, and today is January 12th, 2023. I am here today with Cecilia Winchell, Stefani Evans, and Michael Chin. This is a continuation of the first part of Michael Chin's interview from December 20th, 2022.

Starting off where we left off, I would like to ask you, after you received your MFA, what did you do afterwards, and what was your course of action after receiving that?

After I finished the MFA, there was a little bit of bouncing around. I had applied to a couple of jobs that didn't pan out. What my wife and I ended up doing, we did a cross-country trip back towards the East Coast. We were getting married that October, and so we knew, at least for the short term, we wanted to be in the Southeast because we were getting married in Wilmington, North Carolina. While we were there, we were job searching and trying to enjoy some time after grad school and figure out what to do next. We ended up finding these month-long stays that we could do, Airbnb rentals or VRBOs, and so we were staying in just different places, in North and South Carolina mostly, for that few-month period throughout the fall.

We got married in Wilmington, and then we were in Myrtle Beach in South Carolina for about a month, and then we were bouncing around. We actually did a stopover in Las Vegas and

San Diego during that time as well. Then we went back to Asheville, North Carolina, and we were spending some time with my wife's family in Charlotte.



Michael and Heather's first dance at their wedding reception in Wilmington, N.C., 2016

Anyway, I ultimately ended up going back to work for the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth. I was working remotely for them, which at that point was fresh and new because we weren't in pandemic times where a lot of people are working remotely. I was working virtually for them, just standard business hours but telecommuting in. I did that for an eight-month contract, I think it was, in the same role I had been in previous to going to grad school.

During that time, we were still on the job market and trying to figure things out, and we ended up in Georgia, just outside Atlanta. My wife got a job at a small college called Oxford College that's connected to Emory out there. I found some work as an adjunct instructor,

teaching composition courses at Georgia Gwinnett College during that time. Basically, I was teaching three classes a semester during that time. My wife is working full-time.

I should also, of course, mention that we got pregnant during that time when I was still working for Hopkins. We had our son that December when we first moved to Georgia and then settled into life as new parents without any extended family anywhere nearby, and so we were on our own in that way. It worked out nicely for us, though, because during that stretch, I was teaching, again, just a pretty compact schedule, and I was usually able to condense it to Monday, Wednesday, Friday and three back-to-back courses in the mornings. I would get up in the morning, drive to campus, teach three classes, come back home, tag out with my wife, and she would go to work for the rest of the business day and then some. We worked continuously in that cycle of managing new parenthood until it came time to apply for the job I currently hold at UNLV.

I previously discussed a little bit what that interview process was like. For most full-time teaching positions, it was an all-day on-campus interview. Basically, I taught my three classes in the morning, drove directly to the Atlanta airport, flew across the country to Las Vegas, spent the night, got up early, went to my interview here all day, caught a red-eye flight back to Georgia, and then was back to teaching the next day. It was quite the whirlwind. I wouldn't recommend it as a strategy for anyone, but the timeline and the way it played out had to happen that way. Fortunately, this job worked out, and so we all moved out here that following August.

Nice. Could you tell me your first impressions of Las Vegas, living here versus visiting as you had before?

Yes, yes. I had always told my wife and other people that I would be interested in living in this area just because I like the idea, not so much of being on the Strip constantly or living in a casino

or anything, but more so, just the idea of always having access to everything Las Vegas has to offer in terms of entertainment and good food and all that sort of stuff, and so it was exciting to get the opportunity to live in the area. We rented a house sight unseen. My wife did all the online research and found a three-bedroom home that fit our needs and was in an affordable area and all of that. We got the house sight unseen, but it worked out nicely. It had a playground right around the corner from it that worked out really well for our son.

The things that stood out when we first got here, first, just the heat. We had never lived in the desert before. I had actually visited Las Vegas a couple of times in summertime weather, so I had some idea of what it would be like. But I think it's like anything where you can tolerate something for a few days, but it's different than living in it and being in it continuously, so just getting used to it being still in the nineties when we got to October was like, wow, this is really what it's going to be like while we're here. I like to think we acclimated, but still, that was a little bit of a shock.

We've had some unusual encounters with our neighbors and in our neighborhood. Our first Fourth of July here, our neighbors accidentally set fire to their garage with some fireworks, and in a frenzy, trying to back his truck out of the garage so it wouldn't explode, the neighbor backed his truck directly into our garage, crashing through the garage door and damaging both of our cars. Fortunately, not setting our own house on fire. That was two in the morning just after the Fourth of July that that all happened. That following fall, though, there was an arsonist terrorizing our neighborhood, just setting fire to shrubbery outside a bunch of the houses, which was something I never thought to consider: what would I do in this scenario? Just a bizarre set of circumstances. We helped coordinate a small Neighborhood Watch to look over the neighborhood for a couple of weeks, but fortunately, it was undercover police who actually

scouted it out and saw someone with a prior record and figured out who it probably was and caught the person in the act the next time that they tried to do something. That's where that sleepy period of the pandemic remained not so sleepy in our neighborhood.

The pandemic, too, obviously shaped our experience in Las Vegas because we had only moved here fall of 2019, and so we were here six months or so before the pandemic took hold of everything and changed things up. Then we got used to a Las Vegas that was not so bustling with tourists and where so much was closed down. My wife took a bike ride down the Strip when it was all emptied out and you could do such a thing, which is absurd to think of in ordinary times. We all enjoyed that time, though, because we got to spend more time with each other because I was working from home. But that was our first year or so in Las Vegas in a nutshell.

All things considered, your experiences, can you explain what it was like raising children in Las Vegas, the pros and the cons, and how you handled that?

Yes. The pro that I was not expecting is there is actually quite a bit more for my son to do here than there was where we were in Georgia. Where we were living was kind of removed from everything. We had to drive an hour into Atlanta to access much of anything. But here, there is the stuff on the Strip. There was the dolphin habitat that's very recently closed down, but there is the Shark Reef at the Mandalay Bay, and there is Circus Circus and all that kind of stuff. But then also, things like the Springs Preserve that was never on our radar until we moved here that we go to quite often now and a lot of indoor play places and things like that. That's all been fun. There are certainly more playgrounds as well, nicer playgrounds than we were used to back east, and so that's all been good.

The heat, again I'll just make mention of it, I think that's one thing...I grew up in Upstate New York where six months out of the year it was snowing, and so you couldn't do too much

outside because it was too cold or too wet or whatnot. Now we're having the opposite problem with our son. We've got to get up at seven in the morning to get him outside if he's going to play outside that day, and none of us are really morning people, and so that is not our forte, getting him out there. But just adjusting to what that means in terms of keeping him cool, keeping him safe, keeping him hydrated and all that are considerations we didn't really expect until we moved here.

The school system we have not really broached. My wife has done some research and preliminary plans around, but my son is not there yet. He was two years old when the pandemic started, and that set him back socially a little bit getting to interact with people. We're still sorting out our best strategies around all of that. I know it's an uneven school system in this area. I know there are good schools around but also not-so-great schools around here as well. That's something we're still navigating and a little bit wary about in terms of raising a child here.

To go back to your experiences at UNLV specifically, can you elaborate more on your experience at UNLV, and what you've been able to get involved in during your time here, and things of that nature?

Most of my experience here has been very centralized on the Honors College itself. As a department, we teach a finite number of courses, and it's across disciplines of people in the Honors College with me. One of the things I didn't expect but I've come to understand is despite being an English professor, I have very little contact with the English faculty properly at UNLV, only when we're co-advising thesis projects or things along those lines have I really intersected with those people. I have gone to a couple of Black Mountain Institute events, some literary events on campus here.

I've been a part of a Faculty Senate Committee on General Education. That was something that I got involved in my second semester here. Basically, it's just a committee that reviews petitions and applications and whatnot both from individuals as well as academic departments. For individuals, it's usually students who are trying to get credit to place out of something, and so saying, "I didn't meet my international requirement, but I took this class, and it's pretty international in nature. Can that count?" We review the course and what they've done and see if we think it's a fit. From the department perspective, departments will change their courses, and so they'll say, "We want to make this class count for this aspect of our curriculum instead of this one we previously had." We review those sorts of things, the syllabi and what they're looking to do and why they're trying to make those changes. That's been a big part of me getting to know the community here a little bit more because it is basically one representative from a bunch of different departments across campus. That's been a good experience here. Otherwise, again, my experience has been pretty centralized to the Honors College, working with that faculty and that body of students.

Could you tell me about the courses that you teach, as well as your involvement in honors' thesis?

I'll just go in order that a student might take them. Honors 105, which is the first-year honors' seminar, which is introduction to college life. It's a one-credit course that meets once a week, so pretty low stakes. I really enjoy getting to teach that class just to meet students when they're new to college, and especially in a place where I think it's often the experience—I know I had this experience in college—where students are hesitant to admit what they don't know and what it's like to navigate college and register for classes and plan their future and all of that. To have a class where that's the purpose of it, where we're specifically asking those questions and talking

about those things, I think is a really healthy dynamic, and I've enjoyed getting to work with students in that kind of context.

I teach the Honors 100, Honors' Rhetoric class, basic fundamentals of essay writing kind of course and secondary literary analysis and research skills and things along those lines. I teach one section at least of that each semester.

Then Honors 110, which is World Thought and Experience, more of a sophomore-level English class. We do a wide spectrum of reading in there. I divide it into three pretty well defined units of education, identity, and then relationship, sex and love. We have readings geared towards those things, and then it culminates in students writing a five-page essay about each of those topics.

Then I teach a few different Honors 410 upperclassmen seminars. I teach one that's called Based on a True Story, or Is It? which is about the intersections and fuzzy line between fiction and nonfiction. When we say something is based on a true story, what does that really mean, and what are the ethical lines where we can fudge that? Things along those lines. I teach an Alien, Ghosts, and Wizards class, which is based on genre fiction and science fiction and fantasy and things along those lines, and talking about why there has traditionally been an academic stigma around those things, and they're not taken quite as seriously as literature, and where that is legitimate and where that is wrongheaded, outdated as thinking. We read a lot of stuff that walks the line between what would traditionally be considered genre work and more literary.

Then I teach a Literature of Violence course that I've only actually done once so far, and I'm still reimagining because I want to change up some pieces of it. Similar to those other ones, it's both a literature and creative writing element to it. Then I'm teaching a new one this spring

on Contemporary Asian American Literature that is the first one that I've done at the four-hundred level that's really more literature based solely. There is not really a creative writing component to it. But I'm pretty excited for it. It's going to teach a lot of authors who I think are underexposed in academia. Also, I'm going to have a point where I'm going to actually invite students to find their own authors we haven't discussed in class to bring into the class for the class to read. That in a nutshell is the courses I've taught here.

Thank you so much. To shift gears a little bit back to Las Vegas as a greater whole, what have you found to be something that you enjoy the most about living in Las Vegas?

I think I'll go back to, as much as I think the pandemic hampered it, just the access to so much stuff at any given time. I have a couple of favorite restaurants here, and I enjoy the buffets a lot in Las Vegas. I had friends that came into town this past February or March, but when they came into town, there was no shortage of things to do. In fact, it was more that we had this list of stuff we would like to do, but we're never going to get through the whole list, so what do we want to prioritize, or what is practical, and so on and so forth. I really enjoy those elements of it.

I'm a big professional wrestling fan, and so I've been able to go to seven or eight shows at this point since I've moved here, and that's including the pandemic when I couldn't go to very many shows. It speaks to how much it is happening here at any given time.

Thank you so much. On the topic of things that you enjoy outside of academia, what are the things that you do in your free time?

Free time feels like a novel concept in this stage of life of teaching and parenting. I am an active creative writer, and so I do try to write pretty much every day in some way or another.

Sometimes that's drafting new work. Sometimes it's revising or editing or things along those lines. Between the writing and planning courses and grading and trying to be an active father and

husband and part of our family, that tends to eat up most of the time. I mentioned I do enjoy professional wrestling. I do try to keep up on movies and TV. We have the typical streaming services. I try to squeeze in at least a couple of hours a week to watch something or other and keep current on things, watch things that I enjoy.

I'm a pretty avid reader as well, and so I usually have at least one book I'm reading at a given time. During the pandemic, that was actually one of my projects, was I had several enormous boxes of books that we made all these cross-country moves with that I never actually even read. I decided, I'm going to whittle down this pile. It took closer to three full years in a concerted effort, but I actually got to the end of that list and read every book that I own. That was an ongoing project, and I don't intend to stop. On the one hand, it was fun and functional. I'm going to get through all these books so I can finally donate the ones that I don't even like or I'm not going to read again, and also I know the ones I might review or that I might teach from one day and all that. Also, it frees me up where I don't feel guilty buying more books, and I can use the library a little more liberally to access more books.

Those are the big things that consume my time nowadays.

Can you elaborate more on what types of literature you like to write and what types of literature you like to read?

In terms of writing, the only overarching, and I would say consistent thing is I do consider myself a literary writer. What that means is not a pop sensibility where it's more story driven or more driven by what's going to sell. It's more driven, especially my fiction, by characters and choices the characters are making. I tend to default more to realistic scenarios, but I also dabble in the more fantastical stuff. I have a collection of short stories right now out to different publishers and editors that is more focused on what I'll call speculative literature, so the kind of

stuff that I cover in my Aliens, Ghosts, and Wizards class. I do dabble in that area as well. I more and more embrace other kinds of genres of writing. My next book is a book of essays, and so it's all nonfiction. I've dabbled in poetry. I may someday assemble a book out of all of that.

More and more—it's kind of a cliché that people go to graduate programs in creative writing thinking you're going to do one thing, and then you end up doing everything because you're just exposed to all these other talented people who are doing cool things. It makes you think, oh, if they're doing that, I could probably experiment with that, too. I think now more than ever I do a little bit of everything, and I have a laundry list of things I still want to get to. I always say ideas are never the problem. If someone suggests a story idea to me, it's like, well, no, I have a fifty-page document full of story ideas that I'm never going to exhaust and that I'm going to keep adding to. It's just finding which ones I can actually get to and execute well.

Again, it's a little bit all over the place in that vein. Similarly, my reading is the same way. One piece of guidance that I've heard from a number of people that I took to heart early in my writing career, and it still holds true, is the importance of reading broadly. I do read a fair bit of literary fiction that is mostly what I want to do professionally because I think it is important just to digest that sort of material and see how I can infuse it in my own work. But I also tend to read a bunch of other stuff, like celebrity biographies or poetry collections. It runs the gamut. I think you run a risk if you're only reading what you like to write that it becomes an echo chamber of you're hearing the same ideas bounce back at you, and you start to do the same things other people are doing. Again, if I'm reading the memoir of this professional wrestler right after I read the collected stories of John Cheever, those things are going to intersect with each other in my mind in a way that's probably not going to happen for any other author because

they're not reading the same things as I am. I do pride myself on reading just all over the place and not ruling anything out on the face of it.

Thank you. Moving on, I know you haven't been here for too long, but can you explain how you've seen Las Vegas change whether that be going through the pandemic and slowly inching out of the pandemic, or any aspect that you see?

It was fascinating to see the Las Vegas I knew when I moved here and then seeing the polar opposite with the pandemic where everything is closed down in a way that I never encountered in Las Vegas before and then to see it reopen by degrees. Vegas is open, but everyone is wearing masks, and there are glass partitions everywhere around things. This past semester especially, I noticed the continual slide towards normalcy. The previous semester, it was midway through the previous semester where there was no longer a mask mandate in place. But this past semester, I would say more than half my students right from the start of the semester were not wearing masks, which is fine. I think it's a choice at this point that people can make individually. But by the end of the semester especially, it was me and one student in the room wearing a mask. Those sort of changes. Now when we go back to the Strip or the Springs Preserve or any space in Las Vegas, it is feeling a lot more like it did before. I'm sure there are subtle changes. I know a number of businesses closed down or had to adjust their business model slightly, things like that. There are more curbside pickup options, which I appreciate, especially with a small child. It's often easier than trying to get a kid out of the car and going inside to pick something up. I will say more and more it feels pretty much to me like it did prior to the pandemic stuff. Ironically, the more time passes, the less it feels like it's changed in some ways.

Thank you. Shifting gears a little bit, we're going to go into your identity. Can you first start off by explaining where everybody is in your family, like your sister, your parents, and if you have any family relatives in Las Vegas?

We're out on our own here in Las Vegas, so no family out here. My immediate family is all in Upstate New York. My sister and her husband and their daughter live in Schenectady, New York. My mom moved there to be close to them a couple of years back. My father still lives in my childhood home in Utica, New York. He has been there basically my entire life. I have some other family scattered throughout New York state. My grandmother and uncle who lives with her are still living in Queens. I have another uncle who is estranged from the family, but we know he is still somewhere in that Northeast area, as far as we know. I have an uncle on my mother's side who actually recently moved to the Albany area near Schenectady. He owned a condo in New York and realized that just the property taxes were way more than he would pay for rent in Schenectady, and so he might as well just cash out and live the rest of his life comfortably in Upstate. They are all over there.

Michael's sister, Diane; their maternal uncle John, and maternal grandmother Jean in her house, undated



My wife's family is pretty concentrated in North Carolina. They're all in Charlotte and surrounding areas of Concord and Lincolnton, North Carolina, in particular.

Our families are in these two pockets on the East Coast. That's part of why it's been hard to see them very much since we moved out here, especially with the pandemic. My mom came out here once, and then my mother-in-law and my grandmother-in-law have each come out to visit us a couple of times now.

Thank you so much. To dive into your relationship with your sister, can you explain what that was like growing up, and how you've navigated your relationship with your sister, now?

When we were little kids, my sister and I were really close. I think we had an insular family, and so we spent a lot of time together and played a lot. We had our stuffed animals that we created whole personalities for and worlds. We were both storytellers from a pretty early age. I'll get into this more in a moment, but we both ended up writers in different areas. We were really close at that point. She had a tough relationship with my father in particular, and so as she got a little bit older, she spent less and less time around the house and got more invested in her social circles and friends, and before too long, I did as well. By the time she got to high school, we were still fairly close, but we didn't spend that much time together anymore. Once she went to college, she very rarely came back home. She is three years older than me, but four academic years ahead of me. During my high school years, I didn't see her anymore for a while. She came for Christmastime most of those years, and that's the only time I would see her.



Diane with paternal grandparents outside their home, with their dog, undated



Diane (age 3) holding Michael in her lap, 1983

When I was in college, I hardly saw her again, just major holidays, here and there. I got to go to her wedding, and that was my senior year of college. For a few years, we scarcely saw each other much at all until it was 2009 where I was living in Baltimore and she was living in Charlotte, North Carolina, and she had started hosting my mom and her in-laws for Thanksgiving each year. I was coming back to Utica for Thanksgiving and Christmas each year. It was getting a little bit old, and I would appreciate seeing my sister more and something different for a little while. I started making an annual road trip down to North Carolina to see them for the holiday. Then they moved to Schenectady, New York, which was pretty equidistant, just going in the opposite direction driving up North, and so I started seeing them every year then.



Diane on a carousel, undated

Michael and Diane, Halloween
1984



It wasn't until I went to grad school in Oregon that that severed. We stopped making that trip each year just because the cross-country flight was a lot more substantial than making a six- or seven-hour road trip to see people. We've seen her a few times since then. But I think life just happened to us. Just a couple of weeks before my wedding, my sister had her child, and so she wasn't able to make it to my wedding. She's been raising a small child, and then we had our son just a year and change after she had her daughter. We've barely had the chance to actually see each other in person since then. We try to do video calls here and there. I think we have the best intentions of trying to see each other especially as life renormalizes after the pandemic. They were actually planning a family trip out here to Las Vegas that was going to be that March before the pandemic hit, and that was off the table after that. We were planning to come that summer, but obviously we didn't make that trip at the height of the pandemic, either. But we are planning this summer to go back to New York and see her and see everybody.



Michael's sister Diane (age 3) holding him in her lap, 1983

We're hoping over time, especially because we both have only children, and none of us are planning to have more children, and because they're around a similar age and only children, they'll have a chance to connect and be friendly cousins in a way that me and my sister didn't have any cousins growing up, and so that's a novel relationship for us. We're fostering that for the next generation.



Michael holding son, Riley, and Diane, holding her daughter, Molly, January 2018

Thank you so much. Going onto your personal identity, do you consider yourself religious by any chance?

I do not consider myself religious, no. I do have a general broader sense of faith and a higher power. I grew up in a community that was very Catholic, and so I think some of that is infused in me just by osmosis because it was all around me, but we were never a church-going family. We never actively practiced in any meaningful way. I do have a general belief. I do a mix of meditation and prayer on a fairly regular basis, not very intensely or for long periods of time, but just in service of that, but that's the extent to which I'm a spiritual person.

Do you practice any cultural or traditional celebrations?

No, not really. I don't shy away from my Chinese ancestry by any means, but it is something that I wasn't brought up with, in part intentionally. I think my father had a perspective that—even in his own upbringing, he had one foot in his Chinese background because his parents only spoke Chinese and cooked Chinese food and so on and so forth. Meanwhile, he was in fully English-speaking schools, and all his friends were English-speaking. He has never explicitly said it, but I've always intuited that part of it was that he wanted us to have both feet in the English-speaking world and more mainstream American culture. I really didn't have any of it growing up. I try to keep track of, at least, when Chinese New Year is coming up and things like that, but we don't have much tradition in terms of celebrating it.

Have you or anybody in your family or anybody you're close to, have they ever experienced any discrimination for being Asian or belonging to the AAPI community?

Not in a very powerful sense, I would say. It's one of those things when you're growing up, there's a lot of stuff you don't even notice it's happening, or you take it for granted. I would hear Chinese slurs here and there and people making slanty eyes with their fingers on their face, that



Michael, Diane, and their father, Christmas 1983

sort of thing, a little bit growing up, but very little of those super overt or aggressive in that way, at least. I did have some strange experiences. I had one friend in high school who told me that he never spoke to me when we were much younger because he didn't know if I could speak English, which was bizarre because we were both in an English-speaking school, and I was quiet, but I wasn't silent. I spoke up in class here and there. It's sort of strange that someone would think that. But it bespeaks the homogeneously White community. Someone who looked sort of Chinese and had the last name Chin, *maybe he doesn't even speak English. I'm not going to try to connect with this person.* I think that was the attitude there. There were little bits and pieces like that, but nothing too over the top in my personal experience.

We talked about it last interview, and so I just want to make sure we touch upon it again. Can you explain how you were able to navigate communicating with your grandparents since they spoke mostly Chinese?

I will say that's one spot where we never fully solved that puzzle. I remember my grandmother always wanting to communicate especially, and so she would call our house maybe once a week,

at least a couple of times a month, and she would always want to talk to each of us on the phone. I remember, especially as I got a little older, I was just sort of annoyed by the whole process because we can't understand what each other are saying. We spend the whole time saying, "What?" to each other over and over again. I'm like, why am I even bothering with this? In my older years now, I appreciate that she was trying to have a connection, and she was trying to get to know me to the extent that she could. I remember when we went to visit the house, her house in Queens, she always wanted to watch us play, things like that. I thought that was strange at the time, but again, I think she was just trying to understand us a little bit to the extent that she could.

I think she expressed her affection through food primarily. She always cooked these big elaborate meals of Chinese food for us when we came. That was a big part of our relationship, still, even as an adult. I haven't seen her very often as an adult, but anytime we come into New York City, I usually try to make an effort to see her. Especially seeing her without my dad has been strange because he was always an intermediary who could translate things. But still, the food has been the centerpiece of it. I remember one time I went there, and it was this strange, awkward encounter with just the two of us, but she had cooked all this food, all that she remembered being my favorites when I was a kid, like this beef and broccoli dish that she made really well. We just did our best to have conversation for an hour or so. We had that little connection.

With my grandfather, I think it comes back to the whole professional wrestling thing. I always remember that when I would come in, he would ask me who won the matches at a more recent show and things like that. I remember as a really little kid, I was really diligent about writing down all the results because I would give an oral report to him, what happened. Then as I

grew older, it was kind of annoying because it's like, you're watching the TV show, and so you know more or less what's happened, and I can tell you who won these things, but are you really still that into it, as a man in his sixties or seventies, whatever he was at that point? I came to understand that more especially later on in life after he had passed that that was his gateway to communicate with me. He didn't know what I was doing at school. I didn't really know much of anything about his life. But that was something that we actually were both watching and understood, and so that's something we could talk about albeit on pretty limited terms.

I never had great communication with either of them, but they each had their own way of trying to interact and build a relationship.

You talked about the beef and broccoli dish that your grandmother made. What were some of your other favorite foods that your grandmother made?

I remember she made that. She made this spareribs and mushroom dish. I hate mushrooms. I never liked them. I always found them disgusting. But the spareribs were really good in there. I



Michael's mother, Michael, Diane, and their paternal grandparents, undated



Michael's father, Michael, Diane, and their paternal grandparents, undated

remember my sister and I used to go to town on that because she really liked the mushrooms, but over time she ate less and less meat and eventually became a vegetarian. I was still like, yes, give me that cow meat; I'll go ahead and eat that. We each had our part in that.

She made this elaborate lobster dish. One of my distinct memories from childhood was just opening her refrigerator, and there would be a lobster crawling around in there because she would just have it there. She would kill it right before she cooked it for us. I never especially liked lobster, but she made it with this ground beef and egg sauce with all these vegetables in it that was really good. I remember I liked the sauce a lot as opposed to the lobster, which I was supposed to appreciate more.

Those were the big ones. She always insisted on taking us out to Chinatown for dinner while we were there, and then we would try all sorts of other stuff as well when we were out there.

Thank you. Could you talk about your ethnic background as it comes from your mother's side?

There are actually a lot of question marks there. My grandmother is of English ancestry, so we know that part of it. We came to find out later in life...She had always told my mom that her father had passed away when she was really young from a heart attack, and that's why she didn't remember him. She was married to someone, but from what we could decipher from records towards the end of her life, they had been married, but it did not last very long at all. Instead, she had actually had an affair with her boss, and that's what yielded both my mother and my uncle. She raised them as a single mom, and she had help from her brother and from some other family connections. My mom was always worried about a heart condition potentially, but actually, it turned out that was all just mythology because we don't actually know what happened to my actual biological grandfather on my mother's side. We briefly tried to find him because we had a name, but I forget what the name even was. It was a really common name, though. That name in New York City around that era when the internet was fledgling, there was no chance of finding this person. It was a needle in a haystack. We don't know. Our best assumption is some sort of Western European mix, but we don't know the heritage beyond that.

Perfect. Thank you so much. I have one more question, but I'll turn it over to Cecilia and Stefani for whatever questions they may have.

CW: What are some of your favorite restaurants in Las Vegas?

The two that I always come back to are Hugo's Cellar, which is located in the Four Queens on Fremont Street. I went on a trip to Las Vegas with my best friend and his father back in 2008, and that's where I first encountered that place, and I was dazzled by it because it's this combination of old school and fancy steakhouse sort of place. It's super overpriced. When my friends came here last year, we all went out there and got steak dinners, and I was expecting it to be fifty dollars a head or so, and instead it was over a hundred dollars a head. Usually, we have

the kind of friendship where one of us will just pick up the tab and say, “You get me next time,” and that sort of thing. We all just looked at the prices, and we go, “So, we’re all going Dutch on this, right? We’re all going to pay our own way.” But great food, great ambience. I can’t afford to do it very often, but that’s a great once-a-year kind of place.

The other place I always refer people to is Battista’s Hole in the Wall, which is a little Italian place just off the Strip, really good Italian food, fun ambience as well. They had a wandering accordion player who used to stop by the tables and play requests. I believe he has now officially retired. I hope he hasn’t died, but I don’t actually have a point of reference to know. Those are probably my two favorite places here.

What are you currently reading?

I’m currently reading a novel called *The Last Chairlift* by John Irving. Irving was an important writer to me. I first read him when I was in high school. I think the first book I read by him was *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, which was a mind-blowing novel for me at the time. It’s a sprawling life story book. I’ve read just about everything that he’s written at this point, and this, he says, is his last novel. I’m always skeptical when people say that because if you’re a career long writer, it’s like, okay, you’re probably going to write another book. But he is getting up there in years. I think he is in his seventies, if not eighties, at this point, and he made a big deal on social media saying that every time he’s written a book before, he’s had the next book in mind or already in process, and this is the first time that he has not. He’s saying, “The last train has left the station.” That was his big quote around it. It’s a cool book to read from that perspective. I’m about seven hundred pages in, and it’s about a nine-hundred-page book, and so I still have a little way to go in it. But I do enjoy it. It has a lot of the signatures of Irving because he has a lot of themes he returns to and stylistic things he does that are not the way that I write. There was a point in time

where I wanted to be more of a writer like Irving, and I've come to see that we're just very different writers in what we value and the way we tell stories. It has some of the weaknesses as some of his later books where he goes on these sprawling tangents about things that don't have much to do with the story at hand, but when you're John Irving, no one is going to tell you that you have to cut that part, right? They're going to say, "No, make it a nine-hundred-page book; that's fine." It's not my favorite book of his for sure, but it's certainly not my least favorite either. I am enjoying it a fair bit. That's a long answer to that, but that's the book that I'm reading now.

I have one last question. How do you choose which books you want to teach in class?

That's a great question. When I'm thinking of books to teach for class, it's a few things. One is I prefer if I really like it, which is not that high of a threshold to pass because I like a lot of books. I read pretty broadly. But if I don't personally enjoy it and I'm asking other people to read it, that just seems unfair to me. I think a lot of people have that experience in high school where they're reading the Nathaniel Hawthorne or Herman Melville that they don't actually enjoy, and it's clear the teacher themselves only sort of understands or sort of enjoys. I never want to teach that kind of stuff where I'm not personally invested in it at least on some level, and so there is that piece of it.

Accessibility is part of it, too. With my Honors 110 class in particular, we're all over the place because we do have a textbook, but it's an anthology that has a bunch of different authors, and I tend to assign a lot of PDFs that are just individual stories or essays that I've excerpted from other places. A big piece, when I'm approaching it that way, is I want it to be something that I think students can actually sink their teeth into and understand it and get a lot out of. My first semester here I taught several essays that I really love and that I read a lot of in grad school

and authors that I admired. Then I realized while teaching the students that they weren't getting anything out of them because it was too dense or just not interesting to them. The diligent students had done the reading, but they had done it on a literal level. They read the words on the page, but they didn't walk away with anything from it. It became more of a lecture of me just explaining the text, which is okay at times. I think there is a place for that. But I also feel like it's a much richer learning experience if students can read it, understand it on their own terms, and then hear my version of it, and then engage in discussion with the rest of their classmates. I think that enriches and it all feeds itself. I want to make sure that it's something, again, they can read on their own and maybe not get every single aspect of, maybe miss some significant portions of, but at least have their own baseline understanding of going into. That's the accessibility piece.

Finally, I'll just say being on topic and on theme for what we're doing in that class. This Contemporary Asian American Literature course that I'm teaching for the first time this semester has been particularly interesting planning for this one because, A, there is a constraint in terms of the authors I'm picking. I'm only teaching fairly contemporary, so last fifty years or so, Asian American authors, which there is a ton of. I'm not scraping the surface, maybe five percent of those authors in this class. But still, when I look at my own reading, like most Americans, I do have a schism where I have read mostly dead White men. They're all off the list, and I'm not going to teach any of them. It is recalibrating and figuring out how I can find just those authors and still also meet those other parameters and not be redundant about things. I don't want it to be a class where we're reading basically the same themes, the same lesson ten times over. I want it to be each text bringing its own stuff in there that students can potentially pull from it.

It's anything but a scientific process. I think that's another part of why I feel it's so important to always be reading and always consuming new stuff so that I always have a menu of

stuff I can go back to and think, oh, that was totally teachable; that's something that students could really get a lot out of; let me go back to that, even if it wasn't my favorite. As long as I was able to engage and sort of liked it and I think it would be accessible to students, then absolutely that's something that I can use.

SE: Who are some of these authors that you're teaching in this Contemporary Asian American class?

I'm teaching Michelle Zauner, who wrote the essay collection called *Crying in H Mart*. It's just a really cool collection of essays that is so much about Korean food, but using it as a lens to mourn her mother who she had a really close relationship but also a complicated relationship with.

We're working with her. Thi Bui's graphic memoir: *The Best We Could Do*, I believe, his name is. We're reading a Don Lee novella. Don Lee is a writer out of Philadelphia. He has a lot of really interesting work around race. He is always telling stories that are very literary and have a lot going on, but almost always some element of it is Asian heritage, and he comes back to that in really interesting ways. And we're reading Leland Cheuk's novel, *No Good Very Bad Asian*.

I'll mention some other poets. Ocean Vuong and Todd Kaneko, we're reading some of their poetry in this class. Soramimi Hanarejima, I'm probably getting that pronunciation wrong, but a Japanese short story writer who we're reading in there. We would touch on Yiyun Li, the Chinese American fiction writer.

It runs the gamut. It's a lot of different folks. Again, one thing I discovered—I sort of already knew this, but I was researching for a culminating assignment that's going to involve students finding their own authors that we haven't talked about in class and presenting some stuff to the class. When I was doing that, I was like, let me just compile a list of ten representative, like these are the kinds of authors you could choose from who would meet the

standard, and trying to whittle it down to ten after I started brainstorming and researching. It was like, no, I can think of a list of a hundred people long, and I still wouldn't have an exhaustive list. There is just so much out there, and so I'm excited to get students reading. For many of them, I suspect a different direction in that way.

Has your sense of personal identity changed since you started preparing for this class?

Interesting question. Yes. On one hand—actually, I'll say it has at least to a small degree, yes. Even though the new book I have coming out and the most recent book both pretty exclusively deal with my own heritage. The previous book was about a narrator and protagonist who was half-Chinese, and in many ways it was autobiographical. The essays are largely about myself and men in my family that speaks directly to that matter of identity, and so I've been thinking about these things. But once you narrow the frame to "I'm only going to teach these authors in this class," that did challenge me to think about, what are the overlying factors here? There are some things that we're doing that really don't deal with race very specifically. I think you can read between the lines and intuit some connections, but they're not super explicitly about race in any sort of meaningful way, and there are some that are super about race, Don Lee in particular. The novella is called Yellow, and it's at least double and probably triple entendre about the stereotype of Asian people being yellow people, about being scared, and arguably about some other things.

Thinking about the ways that identity infuses someone's work intentionally or not, consciously or not, I think my more recent work has skewed more towards consciously addressing my own identity. But even work that didn't do so, I think that's still a part of me. That's still my own point of view on the world. I think it's challenged me to think a little bit more about the ways that it infuses how I look at the world, how I write, how I operate just

because of what my last name is, just because of who my grandparents were, and everything down the line from that.

How are you raising your son in terms of identity?

I'll be honest. We have not really broached his Chinese identity very much yet with him. He recently turned five. Some of that is just a function of where he is at mentally. He is starting to recognize more differences between people. He recognized an administrative assistant who works in my office. He remembered her because he said, "No, she's the brown woman." He can see the differences now. I remember we had a conversation relatively recently because he's looking at pictures of my family and then a picture of my grandfather, and he said something like, "Why does he look like that?" I said, "Because he's Chinese." And he's like, "What's Chinese?" We're starting to have that conversation. I was telling him, "You're part Chinese." And he was like, "No, I'm Riley." That's his name. He is very stuck on his identity as his name, but it's starting to come up a little bit.

One interesting thing about how he looks is he does not overtly look very Chinese in any recognizable way, and so he's going to have the last name Chin. Personally, as I discussed earlier on, I grew up in a pretty White community, so having black hair and anything less than white skin placed me in that Chinese bucket whereas when I grew up older, I lost that part of my identity as I was surrounded by more people who are fully Chinese or who embrace the culture in meaningful ways and so on and so forth. I think for my son it's going to be even more so. That's a quarter of your heritage, and that's your last name, but you're not growing up in China, and you're not growing up with a lot of overt Chinese culture. What's that going to mean for you? Like I say, we're still navigating what that means for us and how to introduce that in meaningful ways. I'm constantly in a state of flux around wanting him to be his own person,

whatever that might mean for him, but also wanting to recognize where he came from and all these composite pieces that for a lot of us aren't super interesting for us as kids that become super interesting to us as we get older and we have more questions about who we are. I think it's going to be an ongoing process with us.



(From L to R) Michael's son, Riley; Michael; his paternal grandmother Chung, and his father outside a restaurant in Queens, N.Y., June 2023

Going way back, do you know how your grandparents came to the U.S.? Do you know that story?

I don't know all the details by any stretch. I know my grandfather came much younger. I believe his father and his siblings immigrated first. I know that my grandfather had a falling out with the family, and so he ended up being kicked out of the house or choosing to leave. I'm not sure exactly how that broke down. But he ended up living on his own, and I think he lived with different friends and whatnot for a little stretch there. Then he entered the military. I know he ended up going back to China and finding my grandmother. I think I mentioned this earlier on in our talk, but basically, she came with him back to the U.S. to get to the U.S. was my understanding. I don't think they had a negative relationship, but I never got the impression they

had an overly romantic courtship. I got the impression it was more he wanted to be married and she wanted to get out of China, and so they decided that's how they were going to do it. She came a little bit later on in life, I would guess in her twenties, but I couldn't say very specifically on that. That's how they each came over here.



Michael's grandfather, Bock Wong, in the army, undated

They're both from the same area in China?

I believe so. I know my grandmother is from the Canton area of China, and I believe that my grandfather is from that general area, and that's why he was back there when he met her.

Are they both still living?

No. My grandfather passed in 2001. I remember very specifically because I was in high school, my senior year, and I was preparing for the AP chemistry exam, specifically. I took the AP chemistry strictly with the mind that I hated science classes, and so I was going to take this now



Michael's paternal great grandmother (his grandfather's mother); name unknown, undated

so I never have to take science classes again. Then it was days before that exam that he passed. It became a decision of I couldn't do both; I could either take the AP exam, or I could go to the funeral. I ended up staying back and taking the exam and did well enough on it so I got what I was going for out of it. But it's always been a regret that I wasn't able to actually be at that funeral, and so that's always been a tricky piece. That's a long way of saying that he passed on a good twenty years ago now.

My grandmother is still alive and kicking, though. She is actually the caretaker for my uncle who is in very poor health. He moved back in with her five or six years ago now. She is still in good enough health to be taking care of both of them, being quite old herself at this point.

Does she live in an area of Queens where she doesn't have to speak English?

Yes. She's always been able to function pretty well, is my understanding. From what I gather, she had a relatively insular life for a number of years, especially when my grandfather was still alive. They were each other's primary social outlets. They ran a laundry business, and my grandmother worked as a seamstress for a little while, and so there was that level of counteracting with people. But they were not interacting with a lot of English-speaking people, at

least not beyond just basic transactional sort of stuff. I know since then she's become really involved in the Jehovah Witness community. They both signed up. I don't know how much of it was them understanding what they were signing up for and actually having faith versus just someone came to their door and recruited them, and they've just been on it. But now my grandmother is actually pretty invested in that community, and so she goes to regular services with them and whatnot. But still, not English speaking, but I think she's found her degree of community through that.

When you came to Las Vegas and ate at Hugo's Cellar, was it the first time you were here?

No. The very first time I was here, I was still a kid. I want to say I was roughly eleven or twelve years old, somewhere in that ballpark. My father has always been an avid gambler. I distinctly remember us having this conversation. It's ironic because he's an avid gambler but also a cheapskate, and so he never wants to spend money on anything unless it's gambling. I remember having this conversation where we had some frequent flier miles because my mom used to travel for work, and we were going to take a family vacation somewhere, and I'm asking everybody where they wanted to go. I started knowing that we're not going to go to Disney World or something that's going to cost too much money and all these things we initially didn't want to do or didn't think we would realistically agree to. I remember him just saying, "Okay, we're going to go to Las Vegas, then." The whole family carted off to Las Vegas where he could gamble a lot, but we could all eat some good food and all of that. I still remember that trip when we all came out here. We stayed at the MGM Grand when it was still a relatively new hotel and happening. I remember we went somewhere, I still can't remember the name of the place, where they had the million dollars on display, and so we took some pictures with that. But I remember it also being that experience of people flipping those cards, giving them out for strippers on the

Strip. I was not totally naïve. I had a sense of what Las Vegas was going into it, but it was something else experiencing it at that age for the first time.



Michael, Diane, and their mother outside the Excalibur on family trip to Las Vegas, ~1996

Michael's parents outside the Excalibur on family trip to Las Vegas, ~1996



Do you remember looking out the window of the plane and seeing it?

I don't have very specific memories, at least not ones I can separate from when I was looking at it when I was much older and went. I did go to Las Vegas not a ton of times but probably ten or so times for vacation purposes as an adult, and so I think I conflate the memories of seeing it in those times versus when I was a kid. It all kind of runs together.

Do you remember what other places you stayed at?

The adult trips, I remember, we stayed at the Polo Towers a couple of times. I remember we stayed at the Palms once. I remember staying particularly at the Luxor and Excalibur more recently just because they were often cheaper rooms. Part of me coming to Vegas, especially the last few times before we moved here, was that my wife lived in San Diego and I lived in Baltimore, and we could often find a relatively cheap flight and cheap hotel room to come together in Vegas, and so we did that a couple of times, and we nostalgically did a couple of times after that together. Staying at those sorts of places. I think we hit a fair bit of the Strip at this point between visitors coming in and stopping into their rooms. I've seen the inside of the Venetian as well and...I don't know. But we've stopped through a bunch of them in that way.

Do you remember the first time you felt like a local?

The first time I felt like a local...That's a good question. On one hand, I would say somewhere towards the middle of that first semester that I was here. I think it just settled in. I remember when I first got here, every time I went to a different building and I could see the Strip from it, I would take a picture of it and send it to my friends just to be like, "Can you believe that I live here?" I'm in the gym right now, and I can see the back of all these casinos. But then there came a point where I remember driving into work and just being, "This is where I live." Specifically, there is this one view when I'm driving back towards my house where I always pass, and on the left-hand side I can see the Strip. They're building a new housing complex that might start blocking that view before too long, but for now, I can still see it. I remember always looking at it and being like, "Huh, this is where I live," not in wonder, not in despair, but just sort of like, this is surreal; I didn't expect to live in a place like this. But I remember there coming a point where I took it for granted where it no longer was like, "Wow, I live in this place." I think that's part of it.

The other piece of it is when we have visitors. I think each time we have visitors here, I feel more and more like a local. My grandmother-in-law, I remember her being so taken by being able to see mountains because she has never had a view like that anywhere that she's lived. Just being like, "Oh, yes, we see that every day. That's the backdrop to the playground that we go to all the time."

My best friend, who came and visited last year, when he was here...He still has that gleam in his eyes when he gets to Vegas where it's like, "We're going to eat at this place. We're going to see this show." So on and so forth. We'll be like, "Okay, yes, we can do all this stuff." I have access to this all of the time, and so it's not special in that way. A lot of times I'm saying, "No, let's not go to a show. I want to talk to you. You're only here for these few days. Let's hang out and actually interact with each other." Whereas, I always have to keep in mind for visitors, it's like, but no, you don't have access to this stuff all the time, and so, yes, they want to talk to me, but they also want to be able to see a show while they're here and all that stuff that goes with it.

Do you explore the areas outside Las Vegas, like Red Rock or Mount Charleston?

We have dabbled, yes. We've been to Mount Charleston, and we've been to Red Rock. We've traveled to some of the surrounding areas. We've made a couple of drives into Utah. We've explored a little bit. The pandemic, in some ways, hampered it. In a couple of cases, it actually helped in that because it is less populated during some of those times. But yes, we've dabbled a little bit. There is certainly quite a bit more for us to see. I think where we've become creatures of habit, because having a five-year-old, when we do have time to make a trip, we often want to make sure it's going to be a good trip, and so we're more prone to, "We know this will be fun," as opposed to, "This might be fun, or this might be miserable." We're going to go back to

Disneyland because we know that he's going to have fun, and we're not going to have a bad time there. But yes, I think that's something we'll have quite a bit more exploring to do.



Michael, his wife, Heather, and their son, Riley, Disneyland, October 2021

Thank you.

JT: There are some points that I want to touch upon that we talked about last time that I don't think were recorded, and so I'm just going to go over a few of them. What does your wife do now?

My wife stays at home with my son at this point. She is his primary caretaker. She has a background as a therapist and counseling and all sorts of administrative work as well. I think in time she will likely go back to that, especially when he starts school, but for now, she is staying at home with him.

Can you talk about some of the works that you've published?

My bread and butter is fiction. I've published quite a few short stories, but also, I've published across genres, in poetry and essays as well. My first three books were all short story collections. The first one was the most sprawling in terms of just different topics, unconnected stories, a few that did link up with overlapping characters, but all kinds of realistic fiction, as I would term it.

My second book was a collection about circus performers. Some of it was gritty and realistic, and some of it was very magical realism and exploring all of that. I have that series of short vignettes embedded throughout it. For example, of this ringmaster trying to train a lion without any prior experience, and so basically taking advice from different people and reading a book about it and all these different things that were, pretty much, failures in trying to tame this lion. It's sort of comedic and has some relatively dark moments. There is an evil clown in there. It's all over the place, too. The third is a wrestling book, and so it's all fiction related to wrestling.

The fourth book was my first novel. It's called *My Grandfather is an Immigrant and So is Yours*. It's interesting, one of the most recent reviews of that book tried to pitch it as a memoir and as basically my story. I'm like, did you not notice that this person has a different name than me and is twenty years younger than me? I didn't necessarily know the age part, but nonetheless, there were enough discrepancies where it's pretty clearly not me. But there are also a lot of biographical elements woven in there, and so I get where someone could make that mistake. That one deals a lot with identity and a lot of stuff we've been talking about, questioning who you are. It's set mostly during the 2016 presidential election campaign and aftermath of that, and so there is a lot of conversation around politics, immigration politics and things along those lines, filtered through a coming-of-age novel, so someone processing this all as a teenager.

The new book is a mix of the previous two, and so it's essays. It's all nonfiction and all connected to wrestling. I frame it as a conversation about the men in my family, and so there is a lot about my grandfather and a lot about my father and my relationship with them, a lot about me, obviously, pieces about my son, all through this filter of watching us and being fans of wrestling. My son doesn't really follow it and isn't really interested in watching it at this point, but he does have his wrestling figures that my mother-in-law gave him that were relics from cousins and sons who outgrew these things. She had this huge box of them, and he loves those things. He doesn't even play with them as wrestlers. He plays with them more as people and has them interacting. His latest thing is he makes Disney rides in his imagination, and so they all sit on a pillow, and he ferries them over like they're on one of the carts, and then he says, "Oh, look at that thing. Look at that thing." But that's his way of having some access to this world now.

But yes, I'm all over the place as a writer, but those are some of the bigger things that I've done.

Thank you. Could you explain your writing process, that creative process?

I'm always thinking about writing. I always have ideas. I'm a pretty prolific first draft writer.

Especially when I'm in the process of creating new work, I often will write every day.

Depending on what time of year we're in and how busy we are with other things, I'm going to do five hundred words in a day or a thousand words a day and just churn out these pieces. I often will churn out a whole draft. Historically what I've always dragged my feet on is the revision process. A lot of times I'll say, "I know I have to revise this, and I don't want to revise it, and so I'm just going to write another book in the meantime." Then I'll write something completely different for a while and hopefully find my way back to the first thing. I think I've gotten a little

bit better about it, and so I have another new book project in the works that I have a full draft written of that I sent to a couple of readers.

Oftentimes that's a big step in my process, is I have a handful of people, particularly who I know from graduate school, who I'll send them my work and ask them to read it for me, and I often do that for them as well. Then we'll either have a Google Meets conversation, or they'll email back notes. One of my friends still insists on longhand notes, so he'll write all over the manuscript and send it back in hard copy. Taking their feedback is usually super valuable to me because I always say that a first draft is like doing anything. If you try making lasagna for the first time, you're not going to say, "This is the only lasagna I'm ever going to make." You're not going to say, "This is the perfect lasagna. I can't imagine doing it better." You'll say, "Well, no, I didn't know what I was doing the first time, and so I tried a bunch of stuff and maybe it worked out okay, but next time I should do this instead of that," and so on and so forth. It's like that with drafting a book or a story where you realize after the first time that you have a lot of what you want out on the page now, but that's not going to be the perfect form of it. It's going to need a lot of work.

I've really embraced with this new project that each of the stories I've given myself a mandate: You have to change at least one major factor; you have to write a new scene; you have to add a new character; you have to change the setting for it; change the timeline of it. Something has to change, and I might not keep the change, but I'm in that mode that I can't just line edit and fix the punctuation and just call it a day. I have to do something substantial. Once I'm in there doing something substantial, then I'm probably going to do more in that process. That's where I am on revising at this point.

I'm always sending stuff out for publication as well whether it's short stuff or a whole book manuscript. A lot of times that's my gage. When something gets published, especially a place where I'm happy to have it, that's a good sign that, okay, it was ready; it was done; I can move on with things. When something gets a lot of rejections, a lot of times that's a sign to me that this wasn't really ready yet, but I rushed the process, and I need one more round of revisions on it, and so I'm going to take it back before it's seen through that full process of submitting it, and now I'm going to make some more changes. A lot of times, letting it cool in between those processes is really helpful, too, to have a more neutral perspective and not be so personally invested in the work that I don't want to change anything. Now I'm just eager to change stuff in order to get it to a publishable place.

Thank you. Last time you talked about your favorite food from your father versus your grandmother. I wanted to make sure that we included that as well. Can you elaborate?

Yes. I mentioned that beef and broccoli dish earlier. I remember growing up with my grandmother's version of that dish, I always thought the beef was great, and the broccoli was okay. My dad's version of the dish, I always thought the broccoli was great, and the beef was okay. I always talked to them, "You should put your recipes together, whatever you're doing." In hindsight, the main difference was my dad used more of the floret of the broccoli, and my grandmother used more of the stalk, and the floret is better, and that was the main difference better. I think my grandmother just got a nicer cut of meat, and so it was better tasting for that reason. Pretty fixable things, but things I can understand neither one of them...They were set in their ways in how they did it, and so they each did it their own way.

Just two more. Do you have any plans of ever visiting China and exploring your identity in that way?

Abstractly, for sure. I'll say I don't have any current immediate plans on doing it just for practical considerations on how much it costs and finding the time to do it. I'm certainly not in a place at this point where I would feel comfortable traveling internationally with my son, but that's something I would like us to experience together when he's appropriate age to safely do it, but also, just to appreciate that kind of trip. I call it a bucket list item where I would like to do it at some point in my life, but also, it's not on the immediate horizon.

Thank you. If nobody else has any more questions...

SE: Just to follow up on that, would you consider going with your sister and her daughter?

I would certainly consider it, yes. Part of what's hard about imagining it is we have trouble just managing even a domestic visit to each other and figuring out when and how we can do that, and so the idea of an international trip together like that seems like, yes, maybe in twenty years. But maybe it would be in twenty years. Maybe that's how that would work out. I certainly wouldn't rule it out. That's all the more so not an immediate plan or something clearly that I want to do, but yes, it sounds like something that would be cool to experience together for sure.

JT: My last question is, is there anything that we haven't touched upon that you would like us to talk about?

I think we've done a nice job of covering everything we talked about last time, and I think we went a few different directions as well. No, thank you, I think that's all.

ALL: Thank you so much.

[End of recorded interview]