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Oral History Interview with Whitley Watson

Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.091

Interview conducted by Jonathan Tarleton on May 18th, 2014 in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

JONATHAN TARLETON: All right. So it is May 18th. We're here in Bushwick, Brooklyn, with -- this is Jonathan Tarleton, an interviewer, and --

WHITLEY WATSON: Whitley Watson.

JONATHAN TARLETON: Great. So just to start, I guess can you just tell a little bit about when and where you were born, and your childhood?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. I was born in Allentown, Pennsylvania. And then pretty shortly after that, when I was, like, four or so, we moved to Atlanta for my mom's job. And I lived in sort of a suburb of Atlanta for most of my life. So it's kind of a bit north of Atlanta in a place called Alpharetta. And when we moved there, it was pretty, like, uninhabited. Not very populous, you know? And over time, like, as -- until I left for college, it really kind of blew up with a lot of immigrants from all over the place. Like, a lot of -- like, Chicago, and New York, but also a lot of Korean and Indian people moved in. So it was pretty multicultural. So that was pretty nice. Yeah, and I lived there until I was 18, and then I went to the University of Georgia in Athens, which is about an hour away. And then after I finished college, I went back to Alpharetta for like a year, and just worked some -- I worked at a Hobby Lobby, like, an art supply store. And then last year, I moved to New York, and I lived for a while in Queens in Flushing. And then I moved last October to Bushwick in Brooklyn. And so that's where I live now. (laughter)

JONATHAN TARLETON: Great. So, I'm sorry, when were you born? Just --
[date redacted for privacy]

JONATHAN TARLETON: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) Great. And so you mentioned moving to Atlanta for your mom's job.

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And so could you talk a little bit about just your parents? And --

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. So do you want me to talk about them, like, their ethnic background? Yeah. Or --

JONATHAN TARLETON: Sure. Yeah, their names, where they grew up, their background.

WHITLEY WATSON: My mom -- yeah. My mom's name is Suzanne, and she was born in New York, in Rockville Center. Her parents -- my grandpa, her dad -- is, like, German and English, and sort of just general, like, European mix. And then her mom's family was Czechoslovakian and Scottish, and they were pretty recent immigrants. Like, so my grandmother grew up speaking Czech, and they found out that she couldn't speak English when she went to school because she had just been at home with her grandma, and she didn't speak English. And anyway, so my mom grew up in Rockville Center in New York. And then when she was, like, 14, she moved to Memphis, which was, like, horrifying to her, because it was, like, really different culturally. But living in Memphis is where she met my dad. And my dad is from Arkansas, and he is black, and he has, like, a great-grandmother that's Cherokee. Which was verified, it's not just, like, a rumor, because his -- his -- his grandmother put together this really nice book about, like, our family heritage, and, like, tracing back as far as she could. And, like, had it published and bound and stuff. It was really nice. So he I guess was going to college, and then dropped out and was working at this bar, and he met my mom. And they were just together for, like, seven years or something, and then she got pregnant, so they decided to get married, and then they were together. And then they moved up to Pennsylvania, because, like, my grandma was living there, and her sister, and then they moved down to Atlanta. She worked in hotels, and she still does. So I guess it was something with hotels, and she moved down there. And then my parents got divorced when I was like -- they didn't get divorced, but my dad, like, moved out and went back to Arkansas, and, like, was all over Atlanta for a while, and I think they finally got divorced when I was, like, 11. But yeah, so that was that. That was pretty -- I don't know, they're a pretty interesting couple. My mom still works in hotels, and she's kind of very impressive person to me, because she sort of raised me a lot on her own, and then her parents -- her family was kind of kooky. Like, just volatile. And she didn't get to finish college because they just, like, were, like, "No, we're not going to pay for you to do that." But

later, she, like, worked her way up in her company by saying, like, “Oh, I’ll take these night shifts,” because it’s international, and they were having these problems that people would call in from Asia or something and not be able to talk to anyone about the computer system. So she was working in, like, the data center. And so she said, “Oh, I’ll do that.” So she would take me to her office at, like, you know, 4:00 a.m., 3:00 a.m., or something, and I would sleep under her desk, and then she would work, and then she would take me to, like, a daycare or something, [00:05:00] like, in the morning, or go to school. And then she was -- started working so early, that by the time I was out of school, she was off, and so we’d go home. But, like, doing that, she took a lot of initiative, and now she’s, like, pretty high up. And then she went back to college, like, while I was in high school. And so now she has, like, a master’s and stuff, so it’s pretty awesome. And then my dad, like -- my dad had, like, alcohol abuse problems. It was all over the place, and he went back to Arkansas. But eventually, he got into AA, and he’s, like, very active in it. So he’s, like, become very Zen about everything, which is really funny, because he’s always -- he’s got this really big personality, but he also gets, like, real serious. Like, he’ll go, like, you know, he’ll tell you something and then there’s just like, “A-ha-ha-ha-ha,” laugh. But right now, he and -- like, over that time, he invented this plant watering system. It’s really cool, because it’s not battery powered, and you basically fill it up, and you leave it for a few months, and it’s this drip system. But, like, no moving parts, no computers, but just the level of water. It’s like, air bubbles and pressure. It will only water when the plant is dry, so it’s not, like, root rot and all this stuff. But he developed it, and he said, like, he was the one to -- or not the one to develop it, but it just came from, like, watching how the chicken feeders, because he lived on, like, a farm in Arkansas. Like, how the chicken feeder works is the same sort of thing. And so now, he -- so he was in Arkansas. And when I was in high school, like, the last year I was in high school, he moved to Atlanta. And so now he’s working with some guys there, and they’re, like, about to launch it. And it’s been, like, years and years and years of, like, going through development, and trying to get it done. So I don’t know. It’s really nice that he, like, has this thing. It’s really cool.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And his living in Atlanta is -- wasn't connected with you and your mom living there? Or --

WHITLEY WATSON: Well, I think -- well, he -- I mean, he wanted to be around us, I think.

JONATHAN TARLETON: Sure.

WHITLEY WATSON: But it was just a matter of getting, sort of, stuff together so he could leave and live on his own. Or not live on his own, but get to Atlanta. And so he did, and yeah, I think he just wanted to be near us. And so he was selling cars at first, because that's what he did in Arkansas. And so he was selling the cars and stuff, and eventually, he put more energy into this, like, pot project, and he met up with some guys who were doing, like -- I guess they do industrial design. And so now he's working for them on, like -- they have, like, a pallet business. So they take pallets and dismantle them, and then turn them into furniture that you can self-assemble or something. So he's working with them, and then they're helping him work on the pot. Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And what age did you move from Allentown down to Atlanta?

WHITLEY WATSON: Like, when I was, like, four, or two, or three or something. Yeah. So I don't really remember it.

JONATHAN TARLETON: So still early on?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: So you say you don't remember Allentown very much?

WHITLEY WATSON: Mm-mm. Not at all. The, like, furthest back I remember is we lived in an apartment, Champions Green in Atlanta. That's it. And then we lived there for a couple years, and then we moved to the house that I lived in for, like, the rest of my -- until I was 18, when I was, like, first grade. So...

JONATHAN TARLETON: And so tell me a little bit about -- you said from when you moved to Alpharetta to over the course of your time there, that it really became sort of an immigrant center. So what do you sort of --

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: -- remember about growing up, and that change, and how that interacted with your family.

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. Well, I just remember when I was growing up, driving through Alpharetta is, like, all forest, or mostly forest. And then the high school I went to was just sort of like -- I guess, or originally, it was just a high school for, like, people living around this sort of farm area, and it was an unincorporated city, just -- right, OK. So I'm from Alpharetta, and I say that, but right now, the place where I actually live is called John's Creek, because they finally incorporated as a city, like, the last two years I lived there or something and became John's Creek. And it's kind of this weird town. It's just, like -- it's in North Atlanta, which is very affluent. But, I mean, we didn't live really in that part of it, so there's, like, country club of the South is in that area, and that's, like, where all the baseball guys live, and Usher lives, and, like, Whitney Houston lives. And I worked at this movie theater, and, like, Usher would come in, and Whitney Houston's daughter would come in. And, like, they -- Whitney Houston got arrested, I think, with Bobby Brown at, like, this seafood place that we had been to. But, like, it's a very -- so it's like, we didn't -- we didn't -- we weren't part of that, like, affluent part of it. But we're in this part that existed before, which is just kind of like some houses, and horse farms and stuff. But I just remember, like, as I got older, more and more of it [00:10:00] gets, like, developed. So, like, they're [like, demolishing a lot of the forests and wooded areas that were around, and it's a lot more, like, strip -- like, I don't know, strip malls --

JONATHAN TARLETON: Yeah.

WHITLEY WATSON: -- and grocery stores, and developments. And it's really sad, because a lot of them get put up. And then I don't know if it's recession-related, but get put up, and then are empty, or get half-built, so they're just, like, demolish all the forests, and it's just, like, these empty shopping centers. But yeah, I remember going to school, always having a lot of people from different places around. Like, Greek people, Russian people, a lot of -- a lot of Korean people, because there's a town called Duluth, which is a little farther to the east. And it's, like, a Koreatown, but it's different than here, because, I don't know, in here, it's, like, a city, and it's a pocket of the city. But here, it's just, like, a neighborhood, like a suburban thing. And there's a certain point, like, you're driving, I think there's a train track. And there used to be a big billboard of this Korean, like, real estate agent lady, and that was kind of where it was, like, the beginning of it. But then

suddenly, like, all the stores are in Korean, and just there's a giant Super H Mart, that's a Korean grocery store. And so that was really cool. And then a lot of, like, Indian kids and stuff. But it was very, like, all from the time I was growing up. So it was very natural to me to have people with different names, or people from different places. And then when I went to Athens, it was kind of, like, jarring for me, because Athens is a lot more just, like, black and white. And I don't know, it's weird. They have, like, those -- the fraternity sorority system, which I wasn't a part of, but that's very, like, black and white. So it's a lot different. And I didn't really enjoy it as much. In Alpharetta, too, they have, like, in the area, there's, like, Korean H Mart, there's a, like, Middle Eastern grocery. You can get a lo-- and, like, Asian -- other Asian food stores, so you can get a lot of different things. And then being in Athens, it was kind of like they just didn't have that. Because they didn't have the, like, population types of people to support it. I don't know.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And you said -- I mean, you were very used to having a lot of people with lots of different names and backgrounds.

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: Did you -- were a lot of your friends from a lot of varied backgrounds as well? Or --

WHITLEY WATSON: I mean, yeah. Like, I don't know, I -- I didn't have, like, a lot of friends. But I did have, like, you know, Indian friends, Korean friends, you know? Chinese. And that was really nice. I always enjoyed, like -- I remember when I was in Girl Scouts, and we would do stuff about different countries and stuff, and it was nice to have their parents come in and talk to us, you know, very authentically about different cultures.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And so you said when your mom moved to Memphis --

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: -- when she met your dad, she found it very jarring?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: Could you talk a little bit about what you've heard about that transition?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. Well, it's like, it was in the '70s, so I think even more so, they're a little bit behind, like, with the styles and stuff. So she comes down, and it seems kind of backwards. And I guess people -- you know, they're from New York City. I think one time -- they went to the grocery store, and they put all their stuff, and it gets bagged, and then this guy, like, walks off with it. And they're like, "He's -- he's stealing our groceries." And so they don't realize he's, like, taking it to their car. So they're following him, he's trying to follow them, and, like, they don't understand. And too, something was like, they asked him, like, "Do you want it in a sack?" And they're like, "No, they just -- just put it in a bag, that'll be fine. (laughter) Like, we don't need it in a sack." And I guess she got in some trouble in school or something. Just not a big deal. And the principal was like, "OK, what do you have to say for yourself?" And she's like, "I'll never do it again." He's like, "'I'll never do it again' what?" And she's like, "I'll never do it again...ever?" And like, "'I'll never do it again ever' what?" "Ever-ever?" And so she -- the principal got really pissed off and called her mom, and the whole thing was that she wasn't saying, like, "Yes sir," like, that part of it. And so he called her mom, was all upset, and then my grandma was just like, "You're -- that's ridiculous. Like, you're being stupid. She doesn't -- she's not being disrespectful, it's just not as much of a thing." So I think that was -- and too, you know, being -- I think she's maybe 14 or something, and all your friends are gone, and you have to go to a new place. So I think there's that.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And what was -- you said that your grandparents on that side were Czech and, like, Scottish-German?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: So what -- what were your interactions with your grandparents like? And did you [00:15:00] know them very well? Or --

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. So when I was growing up, my mom's grandpa, he -- trying to think. He ended up having another family. And so my gra-- him and my grandmother were not together. And he went and lived in Kansas with his new wife, my step-grandmother, and he has a son. So my uncle. And so we used to go -- a few summers in a row, we went to like Camp Kansas. And all my cousins would go, and it was really

nice, and just spend time with them, and hang out. And I don't -- like, I think it's partially because it's something I'm used to, but I don't -- there wasn't any, like, cultural things so much as just, you know, normal, hanging out stuff. And then my grandmother, I guess after they got divorced, she lived with herself for wha-- by hers-- like, you know, alone for a while. And she met this guy named Carl, and he was really great. And they deci-- they're both from Pennsylvania, but they decided what they wanted to do was move to the South and be pig farmers. And so they did. They moved to Loris, South Carolina, and they had a trailer. Which they ended up, like, souping out. So it was, like, beautiful inside. But -- and, like, bricked the bottom. So it's, like, just a little house, but it was a trailer. And they had this pig farm, but the pigs ended up being really smelly, so they got rid of them. And they ended up doing goats and kiwi, and then one, like, cow for a little while. But yeah, so that was really cool. I'd go and see them, and be on this farm, and feed the goats, and, like, eventually she would, like, sell goats to these Brazilian guys, and they would eat them. But that was really -- it was, like, a really nice place, and really cool to do that. And she never -- I think when they started teaching her English, they wouldn't let her speak Czech so that she would learn, and so I think she lost a lot of the Czech so she couldn't really do it. And so he didn't -- I mean, I think a few times, they did, like, this pierogi. Like, they made pierogies and stuff. But kind of sadly, like, lost a lot of that.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And do you find any of that sort of filtering down into your mom's customs, or yours? Or --

WHITLEY WATSON: No, I don't know if it's really -- like -- like, I don't -- we don't have as many, like, traditions or stuff from any of, like, her heritage background stuff. But maybe. I rem-- maybe it's where we lived in Georgia, too, but I always remember, like, or talking to people about, like, what they ate as kids and stuff. I feel like my mom always made a lot more, like, international food, or very healthy food, or light food. Not, like -- like, typical American, like, meatloaf, mashed potato food. So I don't know if that's, like, coming from New York and being exposed to a lot of foods and then going somewhere where there's a lot of people or something. But it was, I guess, that kind of

difference, that sort of, like, Americana thing, like, I didn't really grow up with. So I don't know.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And you said your dad grew up on a farm?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. On a farm. And he says, like, "I have two styles: country and western." And he, like, wears the boots and stuff. And so I think people are surprised by that, you know? Because it's like, "Oh, your dad's black," and I think they imagine, like -- you know, he's from a city or whatever, listened to, you know, R&B. But he's not. He's, like -- he really loves the Cars, that was, like, his favorite band as a kid. And, like, Western boots and country stuff. And yeah, they have, like, this -- so it's in Arkansas outside of Little Rock, which he hates. (laughter) But yeah, they just have this big plot of land. And I think they used to have, like, cows when I was a baby. They have this picture of me with, like, this big, black, like, steer or something. And yeah, they lived on this big land. And I guess their dad worked as a hospital administrator. And, like, never missed a day of work ever. And then their mom, I think, was a teacher for a little while. But yeah, they had this farm, and they built, like, a big baseball complex on it. And, like, basketball that he said, like, all these other kids would come and play, and they would have to be, like, working on stuff, and he'd get really frustrated. But it's in a place where, like, a lot of my family live. So there's, like, a Watson cemetery there, which was really cool, and, like, a lot of cousins live all around. It was really neat.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And you said that side of the family is really interested in sort of their heritage, so --

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. She -- yeah. She wrote that book. And I guess just because it's called *Shug, Tashi, and Me*, so her and her two siblings, and it starts off with their, like, great-grandfather. And it has pictures, too, which his really cool to see everybody, and then it does, like -- it has, like, a picture family web sort of thing. And -- [00:20:00] and, like, a tree, and so I'm in there. And it's really neat. But I don't -- I haven't, like, spent as much time with them, which is really a shame, because my dad was, like, away, I think. So I've been there. You know, like, I know my cousins and stuff, and I -- I spent, like, sometimes a couple summers there, but I don't -- I'm not -- I don't know them as well. So I don't -- like, I went one time and looked at some really cool photos of my

grandpa. And he was in World War II, and they sent him, like, to France, I think. So that was really neat. But --

JONATHAN TARLETON: And did you know your grandparents on that side?

WHITLEY WATSON: My dad's grandparents?

JONATHAN TARLETON: Mm-hmm.

WHITLEY WATSON: No. I mean, yeah, I met them; I spent some time with them, but just not as much as, like, my mom's family, who I see, like, a lot.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And you know -- you mentioned having Cherokee ancestry.

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: Is that -- is that a point of sort of pride in the family? Or --

WHITLEY WATSON: No. I don't -- I think it's just -- yeah, it's not like a "Oh, whatever." It's just sort of a thing, because they know, like, who it was, and they have a picture of her. And so it's just, like, an interesting thing. And I think when you look at my dad and stuff, you can see a little bit too. It's only, like, one eighth, so it's not a lot, but I don't know. And my grandmother, too. You can kind of -- the way she looks a little bit. So --

JONATHAN TARLETON: And so you mentioned going to Athens being sort of this break, going from, like, a community that was --

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: -- fairly diverse to one that was more --

WHITLEY WATSON: Pretty sectioned off.

JONATHAN TARLETON: Sectioned off. So could you talk a little bit about that?

WHITLEY WATSON: So, like, I -- I don't know, like, what I was doing in high school, but I think I was just very dreamy, or just not thinking about stuff. But I -- I had never heard of the University of Georgia, which is crazy in Georgia, because it's like -- like, people who have never gone to UGA are, like, diehard bulldog fans, and everyone knows -- and, like, I guess because we had just moved there, and we're not really Georgian, like, no idea what it was. But I applied, because it was in-state early. And I got in early, so I was like, that's all I'm going to do. Like, I don't want to bother doing other college stuff. And I don't know why. I was, like, not interested at all, because I was a really good student. And so I got in, and I just went there, and I just really didn't enjoy it very much.

Like, I met some really nice people, and I enjoyed learning and all that. But it's a very kind of -- I don't know how else to say, but, like, bro culture. Like, very kind of -- a lot of drinking, a lot of, like, major sports, and I think kind of, like, gender-wise, it's kind of very stereotypical, like, stuff. And also, like, very predominately white. Which is fine, because that was -- I mean, that was still what Alpharetta was like. But -- and then the minorities that were there, it seems like they would get into, like, minority-focused school groups, which was OK. But I remember I got into a huge fight, because you have to take diversity awareness courses at the college. Like, you have to take -- like, they designate certain courses as, like, diversity oriented. And so I took, like, an English class. And there was this girl Asanta, and she was black, and she was in a black sorority. And I got into this huge fight with her because I basically said, like, I think that's kind of like a racially segregating institution, and that you're not helping diversity by being a part of it. And, like, I don't -- it's just difficult. Because, like, I understand that it's, like, historic, and a tradition and stuff, but to me, like, because she was saying that she felt that UGA was so segregated. And, like, I agree that it was, like, portioned off, but she felt that people looked at her funny on buses, and didn't want to sit next to her on the bus. Which, I mean, I can't say what her experience was, but I think -- I did not believe that, because most students at UGA are not, like -- like, die-hard racist, won't sit next to people on the bus thing. Like, I don't know. And so she -- I just told her, like, "You probably feel segregated because you're in a group that segregates you." You know? Like, "You -- you're in an all-black sorority. No wonder you feel like you only see black people, and when you go to sorority events, it feels segregated, because your groups are segregated. And I feel like outside of that, I don't think people are, like, staying away from each other as much. You know, like, I know I said that was kind of, like, broken off, but more in the sense of, like, the university versus the rest of the city. And the city kind of runs on the university, and then there's a lot of, like, poor [00:25:00] -- there's not as many, like, different minorities. It's, like, white people and black people, and a lot of the black community works for the university, and they don't pay them very well. And it's -- I don't know. It's just like a very weird setup. I think that's part -- like, I don't know. It was just frustrating that a lot of the school seemed to self-segregate itself. But I think

there was definitely -- there wasn't -- like, people didn't want to be together in other areas. So -- but it was very different. Like, not as many minority people, or people from other countries and stuff. Very much more, like -- I don't know, like, the words to describe it besides, like, bro. Which I think is a very silly way, but very, like, fratty kind of environment. And then the other half is very hip, but that's still kind of very, like, white and not diverse. I don't know.

JONATHAN TARLETON: So what sort of things outside of academics were you involved in?

Or --

WHITLEY WATSON: I mean, I was in the art school at UGA. So I did a lot of, like, art by myself. I, like, wasn't really involved with the school that much, because I think I just didn't -- I wasn't really interested in it. And, like, I wasn't really interested in college, the college life experience. Like, I was never really into, like, clubs or, like, football, or that kind of stuff. So I mean, I had friends, and we would go in -- you know, go just do stuff, hang out, do activities. I had a really good friend Stevie, and we used to throw, like, a lot of parties. But not, like, rager parties. Like, themed parties. So it was, like, we threw an alter ego party that was really cool. And, like, a '50s Christmas party. So I worked at the Georgia Museum of Art, so that was a really good experience, something I did outside of school. And basically, you just go. And I worked with this guy Larry and this guy Todd, and they were really nice, and you just install exhibitions, and move artwork. And so that was really great. That was pretty much it.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And was -- so was art something that you, you know, had a substantial interest in going into school? Or did you go specifically for art? Or --

WHITLEY WATSON: I -- I was, like, into art as a kid, and my dad -- my dad was a really good artist. And then my mom's mother is a really good artist. And then my mom's sister's husband is a really good artist. So a very artsy family, and all my cousins too, now, are kind of involved in arts -- arts-related things. And so I was really into that. And then somewhere in middle school, I kind of, like, was less interested in it. I just really wanted to do political science, and I was reading, like, a lot of, like, political stuff and philosophy stuff. But I took -- and then I did this project, and, like, one of my language art classes where we had to do, like, a visual, and I did, like, this painting. And it turned out pretty

good. And I was like, "Oh, that was really enjoyable, and so maybe I'll do a class." And so my mom let me do this class at SCAD which is, like, a local arts school in Atlanta. And I really enjoyed that. And so I decided, like, oh, I want to do art now. But I hadn't done any art in high school, because I was in band and you can't do both. And so somehow, I found out and decided -- and I don't, like, know -- like, looking back on it is very weird, but I figured out that, "Oh, I CAN-- I can take high school PE and some other class in the summer online, and that way I can take art my senior year." And then I gave a portfolio to my art teacher, and I was like, "I know I haven't taken any art classes, but I want to be in AP, like, college prep art." And so she let me go in it, and I did my whole, like, summer thing. And so I got to do it, and then I went to UGA, and like, wanted to do graphic design, which I didn't end up doing. But --

JONATHAN TARLETON: Could you talk a little bit about your art and what you -- what you do?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. So I ended up becoming a science illustrator. Like, that was my major science illustration, which was pretty cool because it was very detail oriented and communication oriented. So artistically, I think that's what I'm most interested in, is the idea of art as a communication. I think as a side, I'm really interested in making more people art literate, because I think they -- there's a lot of people who don't understand what -- why art is important, or why it's necessary. And, like, you hear a lot of things about, like, you know, you've wasted your time that you're not scientist or an engineer. So a lot of it is just making people aware that the biggest thing that I think art is about is, like, communicating. So a lot of the art that I've been making right now is -- I can show it -- I'll show it to you later, but it's -- it's very figurative, [00:30:00] and I'll start with a figure, but usually you don't see their face, or it's a little bit collapsed on itself or another figure. And then, but, like, a wide, colored geometric space that's sort of flat. So it's really -- I'm inspired by, like, suprematism, and, like, El Lissitzky, and these kind of compositions of shapes and that kind of thing, but also figurative stuff. So kind of mixing, like, very flat spaces with volumetric things. So it's pretty much it. And usually pretty -- very colorful. A lot -- very drawing-based. Because I really enjoy just -- I don't know. I took a class in college, and they were talking about how drawing kind of became

preparatory work. So a finished piece of art is a painting, whereas a drawing is just, like, something you do to begin with. And so I had a really good teacher, Jessica Wohh, and she was talking about the resurgence of just drawings being drawing -- like, a finished work. So I really liked that. And I like to work with, like, mechanical pencil, and, like, inexpensive things, because just the idea that you -- it's not about having all of your products or stuff. It's -- I don't know. Some -- it's something that anyone can do, and that's why I think too, is a part of, like, making people art literate is they think that art is just, like, this innate talent that people have, and, like, you know, "Oh, I can't draw a straight line." It's like, well, you could if you, like, sat down and, you know, practiced. And -- or, like, I really don't like the books that are, like, step-by-step how to draw a face. Because it's, like, ultimately, the only way to draw a face is to sit down and look at somebody, and really use, like, your observational skills and some, like, drawing techniques, and, you know, like, it's not a format, it's just -- it's skills that anyone can kind of pick up and get better at. So I guess that's -- that's, like, the material thing, it's just like -- it's not -- it shouldn't be inaccessible to people.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And what are some of the subjects of your work or--?

WHITLEY WATSON: It's -- it's a lot -- it's very figurative, and I think it's a lot of, like, ambiguous kind of gesture, or glances and things that can be taken multiple -- multiple ways, I guess. So I did a lot of also hu-- the last series I did had a lot of, like, male bodies. And I think I was looking at them, like, multiple ways, I guess. An object of desire, also as, like, an object of jealousy, that they're just ve-- like, innately powerful, more powerful than I can be. And then as an object of, like, just being a little bit foreign. And then I did a different set of bodies that were, like, female bodies. And one of them is, like, this big painting, and it's someone kind of leaning over, and they have, like, this sweater pulled over their head. And then there's, like, a big color fill, and then there's all these flowers. And that one was kind of about somebody -- like, there's somebody who, in my life, who did something, and it was kind of like a betrayal, and they behaved badly, and it really upset me. And it'll -- they're, like, in my family, and so it also made me think, like, am I inevitably going to be like this person because we share kind of, like, a genetic code? Or am I inevitably going to be like them because we share a human body?

And, you know, you have these temptations, and are you more than an animal? And can you be more than just, you know, a bunch of drives? So that was another one. (laughter)

JONATHAN TARLETON: So you mentioned the one teacher you had, Jennifer Wohh--

WHITLEY WATSON: Or Jessica.

JONATHAN TARLETON: Jessica, sorry.

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And I'm just curious if, like, through childhood and school, who were some of your favorite teachers --

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: -- or greatest mentors? And why, and what was that relationship like?

WHITLEY WATSON: So I had a band teacher named Mr. Chang who was -- I really liked him, because I liked how he, like, led us. I was in marching band and all this stuff. But he was very relaxed, very funny, and his whole thing was about leading people by example. So he's not going to be really harsh -- or he'll be harsh when he has to. But it's more about, like, setting a standard, and convincing people to follow you by showing them, like, how good they could be. You know, that you don't have to be really critical or let yourself get walked over. And he's just, like, really nice. Like, just be a nice person and people will want to help you. And be helpful, and people will want to help you. So him. I'm trying to think. I guess when I was working at the Georgia Museum of Art, Todd Rivers and Larry Forte, they were really great. I mean, they just helped, like, teach me a lot of things about putting together an exhibit, and tools. And I think that was just very empowering to, [00:35:00] you know, have all those skills. I'm trying to think of other people. I guess my mom really inspired me, just because she worked so hard and made so much of herself by herself, you know? And just also too being a very open person, and, like, she work -- working for a hotel, she had a lot of contacts with hotels all over the world. And so she really took advantage of it. Instead of buying other things, we went on a lot of trips. And so that was a big lesson to me. Like, one in not putting your money into things. But also, just, like, as a kid, I got to go to all these places, and I think it was great lesson in one, being accepting of other cultures and realizing that yours is not the

standard for the whole world. And two, not being afraid, because I feel like I've met a lot of people who get into new situations, and they're very scared. And I feel like I've -- being from a young age, seeing things as very different, I feel a lot more comfortable a lot of places, because it's like, you know, these are just -- they're just doing things differently. That's fine. It's -- you know, like, what interesting, good things can you get out of it instead of, like, "Oh, how am I going to, like, get my --" I don't know. Just seeing, like, some of my other friends and stuff, and they get really nervous. So I think that's one great thing that my mom did. I know there are some people that I'm leaving out, but I don't know.

JONATHAN TARLETON: So you mentioned -- you were saying sort of feeling comfortable in a lot of different situations. Are there any -- do you have any examples of that? You felt like that sort of lessened or modeled (inaudible)?

WHITLEY WATSON: I don't know. I think it's helped in New York, going through different neighborhoods, because people get scared of coming. Like, that was a very foreign idea to me, because I went on a trip with some friends, and we came, and they were, like, nervous about it. And she's like, "Why? It's just a city. It'll be fine. Like, just, you know, be aware of your surroundings, and walk very confidently, and know where you're going, and you'll be fine. Like, you don't need to be frightened. Or, like, you know, try new foods, or -- I don't know. Like, when people get, like, names from other countries, and they're like, "Oh, we'll just call you whatever." Like, oh, this is so hard. It's like, no, you can just look at it, and sound it out, and it's fine. Like, my -- I had a stepdad, and his name was Spyro Papadimitriov. And so that was the biggest thing, is just constantly, like, telling people, like, their name over and over and over. I don't know. I think it's more, like, a general thing. Trying to think of any situa-- like, getting -- like, traveling pretty good at, like, even if I'm somewhere where I don't speak the language or something, it's like, you know, you'll find a way to communicate with people, and it'll be OK. It's not -- I don't know.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And when did your mom remarry?

WHITLEY WATSON: She remarried when I was in high school. But they had been together since I was, like, a little kid. So yeah, and be there after school, and make me food, and

hang out and stuff. So it was really nice. And he -- he's Greek, and his parents are -- his mother's from St. Louis, but she -- very Greek family, very Greek community. And then his dad was from Greece, and so it was really cool growing up with a lot of that kind of cultural stuff going on, and, like, Christmas, and food, and Easter, and New Year. So it's, like, kind of an extra cultural background that I kind of am a part of, which is really neat.

JONATHAN TARLETON: Could you talk about some of those, like, holidays and traditions that you had growing up?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah, yeah. So there's Greek Easter, which is typically not the same day as other Easters, so we do the two Easters. Then we go over, and they do, like, the red eggs and stuff. And it's like, "*Christos anesti*, Christ is risen." They say it to you, and you go to church. And, like, beautiful, beautiful churches. They just built one in Marietta where they live, which actually has a huge Greek community. And they do, like, a Greek festival every year. And they're starting to do all the paintings. And that was one thing that rubbed off, because like the iconography on that, as -- later on when I was doing art stuff, like, that was something that I pulled in a lot. And they do have a lot of, like, flat color spaces, and it's more abstracted people. And so that was one thing that really was impressed on me. But, like, you know, they're, like, lemon orzo soups, and they do the spanakopitas and tiropitas. And, you know, lamb, and the New Year's bread. So we do that every year where you go in, and they bake the big round bread, and you put a coin in it, and then they cut it for -- it's God, the church, the house, and then it'll start with, like, the oldest man and his wife and family, and then the oldest son and his wife and family, and then the [00:40:00] -- and then goes on to the end. So, there's really funny kind of how stuff comes out of, like, people's traditions, because his dad, when he would do it, he ended up doing -- because my stepdad was his oldest son, so he did all the stuff, and then him and his wife, and then he did my da-- my stepdad, and my mom, and then he did his brother, and then he did me at the end. Because I guess -- because it's sort of like not part of it. Which wasn't offensive, but it was kind of like just an interesting -- like, he wants to be inclusive, but it's also his mindset of how things are set up. I don't know. So --

JONATHAN TARLETON: That's interesting.

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. So it'd just go over to the church, and Greek festival. And, like, we worked the Greek festival a few times. And I had learned, like, the alphabet so I could read, but I never, like -- I never learned the rest of it. So --

JONATHAN TARLETON: And was that -- would you consider sort of that Greek background as, you know -- as influential as some of your, like --

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. Definitely, because --

JONATHAN TARLETON: -- your -- your dad's family, and your mom's family?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. Definitely, because they're -- they're -- his parents are a huge influence on me. Like, his dad especially was always great, because he was very supportive, and, like, education. Like, very education minded. And, you know, here are some books, or, like, I'll explain to you what this, like, world event is, and, like, talking to him about it, and very open to, like, dialogue with me about more than just like, "Oh, you're a kid. Like, whatever." And too, just like that they're from a different place, and they have this different mindset that's not, like, American. And, I don't know, very cool to, like -- like, the perspective of them talking about different issues was nice, from, like, an outsider's thing. And just their experiences, like, of immigrating to America, and what that was like. Just, like interesting things. Like, I guess at one point, my da-- my stepdad's name is Spyridon, and his dad's name is Constantine. And I guess at one point people were just calling them Donnie and Gus, because it was -- like, it's the weirdest -- Donnie and Gus Pappas. Just, like, completely chopped their names up. And they're like, that's what -- that's who you are now. And, like, my stepdad would tell me these stories about, like, he went to -- so his parents -- he was born in St. Louis, I think. And then they moved to New York, and then they moved somewhere, and then to New York, and then they moved to Greece. And so he spent most of middle school -- or most of elementary school and middle school in Greece with his family. But then when he got to high school, they wanted them to, like, have really good education, so they sent him alone to Texas to go to Chaminade. And he, like, I guess, kind of spoke English, you know? And so just how hard -- and, like, you know, he's all alone. He's just, like, no one's around, and he's at this boarding school. And he's kind of having to learn English, and he's an outsider, and he's in Texas, and people think it's weird that he has, like, this

weird name. And I guess at some point, like, all the other students go home for break, and he's there with all the international students, and they're trying to, like, just hang out and do whatever. But yeah, really crazy. Yeah. So he went to Texas. His younger -- his littlest brother went to Texas. His middle brother got to go to Switzerland. And then his sister went to Rome, I think. And then just, like, all over the world. And then they ended up -- his parents moved -- they went to Saudi Arabia, so he went and lived in Saudi Arabia a couple summers. So they would talk about that, and his -- his younger brother -- and they ended up all moving to Georgia, except for, like, his sister and his middle brother. But his younger brother is very, like, into their heritage. So he's very much about, like, the dancing, and the stories, and wearing the Greek gowns. And he's very, very, like -- they're all very well-trained in, like, geography and history. So there would be these big debates about, like, "No, no, that's wrong." Like, "This is wrong, it's here, it's this tiny town." It's, like, all this world stuff. So that was really cool to, like, I don't know, have that. Sort of, like, pushed to know about all this stuff too, because you want to be involved, and -- yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And beyond sort of those Greek traditions, were there other holidays or [00:45:00] just sort of family traditions that you celebrated?

WHITLEY WATSON: No. I mean, can't think of anything that, like, sticks out as, like, specific to my family or anything. I do know that, like, for one year, we did Kwanzaa. And my mom was, like, really trying to do it, and my dad wasn't interested. So after one year, she was like, "Well, if you're not going to get interested, then I'm not doing -- (laughter) I'm not going to do it." So it was pretty funny.

JONATHAN TARLETON: Do you know sort of the story of -- behind how she got interested?
Or --

WHITLEY WATSON: No.

JONATHAN TARLETON: No?

WHITLEY WATSON: I don't know. Because I was pretty young, too. I think she just -- I don't know. (inaudible).

JONATHAN TARLETON: So what -- why -- what brought you to New York?

WHITLEY WATSON: So I got out of school, and I kind of didn't know what I was going to do. And I just was working at that art supply store, and I just -- it was sort of like not doing anything. I was in this house, kind of by myself, and all of my friends were other places. And it was kind of just lonely or whatever. And I just wanted to do something new, and I got this opportunity to come work as, like, an administrative assistant in an office here. And so I just did. And this ended up being really great. I wanted to be somewhere that had, like -- Atlanta, I think, has, like, a burgeoning art community. It's kind of getting bigger. But I was doing some things around there. I just wanted to go somewhere where more things were going on, or where I could be in contact with a wider variety of, like, art stuff. And it definitely is. Like, especially moving to Bushwick, there's a lot more people in the area that are thinking about it all the time, whereas in Alpha, I was definitely very isolated from other people. So --

JONATHAN TARLETON: And what -- what is the -- your -- your job? Your administrative job? What are -- what do you do?

WHITLEY WATSON: So I actually just quit last week.

JONATHAN TARLETON: Oh. Well, congratulations.

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. So that -- this was, like, my week off. But yeah, I just -- I did, like, photo editing, and just file organiz-- organization. Like, trying to organize all their files in the Google Drive. So definitely not what I wanted to do. Great opportunity to come here. And there was hotels. So, like, at one point, I did a lot of hotel research. So I just visited all the hotels in Manhattan, and some of them in Brooklyn. So that was a great way to, like, see the city and figure out where stuff was. But, you know, people were really nice, but not what I wanted to be doing. So that's why I quit.

JONATHAN TARLETON: So what is your other work? I mean, you're an artist. And, you know --

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. So I do, like, logos and freelance illustration. I had an illustration in the Brooklyn *L, L* magazine. And so I just had an interview this week, and I think I'm going to start with this art sales company coming up. So I'll be doing that mainly. But -- so that -- I do illustration and design, and then doing some film work with a group of people. My friend Raines is in a -- that's my boyfriend David, so we're trying to work on

this, like, comedy series with a couple of, like, Australian -- an Australian guy, and this English guy that they all know through Raines. But -- so basically, short comedic films, and then I'm doing some, like -- trying to do some art films with David. So --

JONATHAN TARLETON: And how do you find sort of the art community here versus (inaudible) -- being sort of spread out in Atlanta?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. So they're spread out in Atlanta.

JONATHAN TARLETON: Or what are the other differences that you've found?

WHITLEY WATSON: Well, the other differences, too, are just having, like, the number of museums and stuff (inaudible). So Atlanta has the High, which is our one museum, and then the Georgia Museum of Art. And then there are a few smaller things but, you know, obviously, this is much more of a capital of art. So there's, like, frieze -- frieze week that just happened, where you had, like, so many gallery -- or galleries, and art fairs, and just art events going on. Like, I think, in Atlanta, there's, like, the Dogwood festival. And there's just not as much going on, and not as many people doing stuff, or related, like, galleries. And, like, I went to one gallery crawl in Atlanta. And it was just very small. It was just a few galleries, and very small. So there's just a lot more different types of art getting sold and made, and people, like -- you know, like, the zine events, more events like that where you can meet other people interested in making similar projects.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And how have you found sort of the artist community? So interactions with that little artist? And --

WHITLEY WATSON: I mean, like, the video -- the video projects [00:50:00] I'm working on very much just came from meeting people, and then being like, "Oh, I'm interested in this." Like, well, let's make something. So I think -- I mean, I don't know that I was in the best place in Atlanta to find that stuff, because it was kind of out in the suburbs. But I did know a few people, and it just seemed -- it could be too, just, like, the stage of life that I'm in, a little bit farther removed from college that people feel more, like, you know, I'm not a student, like, I can really do things. But I don't know. My experience is just there's more people all the time wanting to do projects. You know? Or in, like, music, like, Pine Box has a music open house and a comedy open house, and they put up artwork all the time on the walls. And I think it's more just the sense that, like, a lot of

people are collected in area who all want to do the same thing, so a lot of people that you meet will be interested in, like, helping you, or getting help, or, you know, talking to you about your art thing. Which I guess in Atlanta, I didn't find that. I don't know that it's not there, but I didn't find it.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And I guess you said you initially lived in Flushing, and then you moved to Bushwick?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah, so --

JONATHAN TARLETON: So how have you found the different neighborhoods, and --

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. Well, Flushing, obviously, huge Chinese population. So it was actually, like, I got off at Flushing and then took a bus to where my aunt lived. But, like, so you get off, and, like, billboards in Chinese. Like, everyone there is, like -- a lot of people there are Chinese. And I thought that was really cool. And, you know, you go buy some fruits and stuff from vendors. But I didn't really get involved with it that much because I was just coming from work, and going home, and going back. And so I didn't really, like, meet anybody in the neighborhood, or end up going very many places. So I was just there, for, like, three months or something. And then I moved here, and I didn't really know much about this neighborhood or this building. Like, I thought it was, like, hipster capital of the world. But I just went to Jefferson stop, and saw, like, "Oh, cool." Like -- like, art murals, and seems like the warehouse is really cool. And then I found this one, which ended up being really nice, because they have the business here, so it's a lot more, like -- David, my boyfriend, moved into another one, and had to, like move out in the middle of the night. And now he's in one where they guy's basically just, like, won't take care of it, and it's just using -- he's having other people pay his rent, basically, overcharging them so he can, like, sit around and do nothing. So -- but this one's really nice, and that's also nice to be, like -- you know, there's musical artists going in all the time. But yeah, it's kind of like, I guess it's a lot of young people here who are, like, arts-minded, but maybe some of them are more party-minded. So it can be a little frustrating at times, because it seems a lot of, like, just for show, like, that kind of stuff. But there are a lot of people who are sincerely interested in it, so that's really cool. And it does seem pretty -- I don't know, I guess it's really weird, because there's this

neighborhood, and then right next to it there's the, like, project housing, I guess, which I don't know a lot about them. But it -- you know, with all the gentrification stuff, and you feel sort of caught in the middle of it, I think a lot of -- me and my friends, it's sort of like, "Well, I didn't come here on a trust fund. Like, I came and I picked to live here because it's not that expensive, and it's kind of -- you know, like, I can afford to live here, and it's pretty cool." And so it is hard to run into, like, people who are really kind of disrespectful of the neighborhood because they don't care. Like that guy I was mentioning who's gouging the rent, and just some other people, like, in the building, there's all the, like, trash, and people smoking in the hallways, and, like, riding on stuff. And I think it's because they just -- it's like a college dorm, or a playpen to them, or they see it is really trashy, so they think, like, "Oh, whatever, it doesn't matter." Because I think for other people, it's like, "No, this is, like, a nice place that I'd like to turn into my home." And even if is a little bit dirty or whatever, there's problems. Wouldn't it be much better to, like, spend your energy fixing them than just saying, like, "Oh, whatever, I'm going to like --" yeah. So it's hard, because, like, they have a business here, and people live here, and then there's other people that just have, like, these crazy parties, and beer bottles everywhere, and then, like, you go outside, and I think it's sort of the same thing. Like, people don't respect the neighborhood, I guess. I don't know. But overall, I think it's really cool. And there's a lot of, like -- I guess they said in the last two years is when this particular has really, like, blown up, and suddenly there's, like, shops and all this stuff. So that's kind of weird too, like, the Brooklyn Natural's really expensive. And I think it's because, like, there's a lot of young people who don't realize that, like, that's not how much food costs. So if you go a little farther [00:55:00] out into an area that's more, like, Latino, suddenly, you know, you have more normal groceries and products and stuff. And over here, it's all the, like, gluten free, like, organic. Like, there's, like, a \$17 jar of peanut butter at that store. Like, it's insane. It really is insane. And, like, in a way, it's nice to have those if you want to get one thing that's, like, earthy. But in other ways, it is really, like -- you know you can see why people would, like, freak out if that popped up. So -- and then that's weird, too. Like, being, you know -- as an outsider, kind of being caught in the middle of, like, gentrification. Like, "Oh, what do I -- how

sh-- what do I do to be, like, responsible, or nice, or I don't know? Or thou-- or I guess considerate?"

JONATHAN TARLETON: Yeah.

WHITLEY WATSON: I did notice that New York seems very tribal, like, people are grouped or group themselves by, like, their national origin. Like, you know, like the West Indies people, and black people, and Chinese, and Japanese, and Koreatown. And sometimes it feels like talking to people, they're a little more, like, openly racist than they were in Atlanta. And I don't know if Atlanta, just the history of, like, you know, being in the South that people are more careful about how they talk about it, or that they just have been forced to kind of address it more. But I think -- I've met a lot of people here who it's more casual, like, thrown out that that's just how those people are. You know? And it's like, well, look at their neighborhood. And it's this idea that, like, I don't know -- like, people use the tree-- like, how a certain neighborhood filled with a certain people is. It's, like, as proof that that's how those people are. I don't know. You know? Like, because they're all grouped together. It's more of, like, I don't know, it is weird.

JONATHAN TARLETON: As someone of mixed heritage, do you feel -- do you feel like you are accepted more into those groups? Or in the middle? Or do you have any sort of thoughts on if New York is so tribal, like, do you feel -- how do you feel in that sort of tribal landscape?

WHITLEY WATSON: It is a little bit, like -- yeah. I think growing up, my parents were very much, like, push the, like, mixed identity thing. Like, not pushed it, but they just explained it as, like, you know, you're just, like, both of us. You don't have to, like, choose one. There was this never sense of, like, well you have these two heritages. Like, we're two people who are pretty similar. (laughter) And, you know, we have a child who is similar to us.

JONATHAN TARLETON: Right.

WHITLEY WATSON: And so I think sometimes coming from -- yeah, it's hard to approach that tribalist kind of mentality as someone who -- I don't think that people are very different. So it's like you can't judge people based on -- even the trends, you can't really judge them based on, because there's going to be one person who breaks that mol-- and I'm

very, like, logically minded. So it's like if you have one person who doesn't fit that stereotype, then the stereotype is wrong, you know? So you -- I don't know. And it is the sense that certain people don't see you as part of, like, black culture or something, because obviously -- or maybe not obviously on tape, but lighter skinned person, you know? So they don't expect you to have the experiences they do. Or a lot of times, it is, like, in a certain way, the darkest person has the most say on racism or problems like that. The biggest -- like, one time I went to this speaking thing at UGA. And it was supposed to be -- I got the flier, and it was supposed to be about mixed race heritage. And so it's like, Obama, and Tiger Woods, and Mariah Carey. Like, come look! And I was like, oh, awesome. But I went, and then there's no one on the panel who identified as mixed, and like, some black students. And then they were going to talk about it. And so there was a few mixed people in the audience, and then it basically became this sort of fight where they were trying to tell us how it was, and, you know, a little bit -- like they were saying that you guys can pass yourselves off, and you get, you know, these privileges. And it's, like, obviously yes, but why would we do that? Like, I don't think they realize, like, that's really -- like, why would I choose to do that? It's a little bit offensive. And you think that, like, it doesn't bother me if I hear -- like, why would I want to use that to get into a club? Or a bunch of people say horrible things about a lot of my family? You know? And then that's sort of -- I don't know, and the one woman started it by saying, like, "Oh, like, I don't call myself mixed, but I probably am, because, you know, I'm lighter skinned, so that probably means that one of my ancestors was, like, raped by a plantation owner." And so, like, obviously that exists. But I think as [01:00:00] a mixed race person who just has parents that wanted to be a couple, it's sort of, like, frustrating way for someone to start the conversation about being a mixed race person. That it sort of came as very one-sidedly like, the only way these relationships can come about is negatively. Especially since there were people in history who had consensual mixed race relationships before, you know, the modern era. But anyways, all I have to say is, like, that's kind of an attitude that I encounter a lot, is that you just kind of -- I don't know. Some white people will sort of, like, be very sensitive, and defer to you. But then some people who are darker, you will kind of play off that, like, oh, you, you know, are not a

part of it. And it's weird. My boyfriend David is from Atlanta too, and he moved up at the same -- like, not together, but at the same time I did. And his dad is Jewish, and his mom is, like, super Southern. And it's been really interesting for him, because I guess people perceive him as being Jewish. Like, they think -- like, he looks Jewish in the sense that people, I guess, think that people do. And -- but his mom isn't Jewish, so I guess by the rules of Judaism, he's not Jewish. So it's a lot of that, like, he as a kid would face, like, the teasing and stuff. And he would do Passover and stuff with his family. But then when he gets here and people ask, they say, like, "Oh, so you're not really Jewish." So it's in a way he, like -- people look at him and kind of incorporate him to that, and sometimes will treat him as that. But then he's, like, not allowed. He's not part of it too. So I think it's kind of the similar thing that I feel, is like in some ways you are a part of it, and in some ways, people don't want you in their, you know, club or whatever.

JONATHAN TARLETON: So at UGA, you know, beyond that sort of event, where there was this sort of clear distinction --

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: -- made? And you were talking about how the community itself is just very black and white.

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: Or can be. How -- what was your experience there as, you know, someone who --

WHITLEY WATSON: A mixed race person.

JONATHAN TARLETON: -- identifies as mixed?

WHITLEY WATSON: I think it's sort of like -- I mean, again, because I kind of like didn't put myself really into the culture of UGA, it wasn't as -- it wasn't as big of a deal all the time. It sort of was the same as, like, when I was in high school, where some people don't know, and it comes up when you have, like, some kind of topic on race in class. Or -- or it is just trying to like -- I feel like I spend a lot of my time defending, like, a two-point perspective, you know? Like, I spend a lot of time, like, telling people, like, yes, racism exists, but that doesn't mean that white people are evil. Like, (laughter) that's

constantly -- like, when I was talking to that girl in our diversity class, like, I just wanted to tell her, like, you know, I get what you're saying, and you have to tell people, like, oh, my dad experien-- like, some guy when my dad was a kid they, like, broke a bottle over his brother's head, like, teenagers when they were kids, like, just to be mean. And, like, they took him out of, like, a class photo, or, like, put him in the very back for the class photo when he usually sat up front. And like -- and just, like, experiencing racism in Memphis as, like, a mixed race couple. Like, there are some really horrible things that still go on in telling people that. But at the same time, it's like, my mom was there with him through a lot of that. And, like, dealt with a lot of people saying horrible things to her, and she stood by him. And it's like, you can't look at it as white people versus black people. You have to look at it as, like, you know, the racists versus, like, people who are not racist. Like, you shouldn't take that as hatred for -- like, use that to hate another people group. You have to look at it as, like, all the people who have decided to be together versus everyone else. So yeah. Yeah. It's very much sort of walking this middle line between -- and it is hard, because a lot of times, if you try to talk about, like, all this kind of thing that might be a little bit racially insensitive or racist, people think -- like, take it as an attack. And so, like, explain too, like, "No, I don't mean that. You just need to, like, be a little bit more aware of what you're saying." You know? One time when I was in high school, though, we were -- I had a really good, like, language arts teacher. And so she decided, like, when we read *Huckleberry Finn*, she was going to make us have a question about how we were going to handle [01:05:00] the fact that he says, like, "nigger" in it a lot. And so I thought that was a really good thing, instead of just saying, like -- like, just doing a disclaimer in saying, "Oh, we're going to do it that she made us talk about how we were in --" like, each class handled it differently. So that was really cool. But there was one girl in the class who was like, "Well, you know, I think we should say it because it's part of the text, and it's part of the time. And also, there's no black people in our class, so -- you know?" So it's like, a few people in my class were like, "What?" So it was weird. Like, who realized, who didn't realize. And just too, that she felt like, "Well, they're not here, so whatever." You know? But that was, like, very interesting. I don't know.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And then so you mentioned that your boyfriend is part Jewish --

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: -- and part very Southern? (laughter)

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah, yeah. Very Southern.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And I'm just curious what your experience -- you know, being in, I guess, what would be considered by some people a mixed relationship?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And over -- over your life, just, you know, personal relationships across, you know, different races or backgrounds?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: What -- what has that been like, or your experience been like?

WHITLEY WATSON: Well, I've only dated, like, white people. And I don't -- I don't think it's -- it's not, like, a preference, but I think it's been who I've been around, you know? Just predominately white people a lot, and a lot of white guys. But the first guy I dated, I guess, someone told him in school, like, "You know she's black, right? Like, why are you doing that?" Which was so surprising to me, because I figured our school, like, no one would act like that, because it's very diverse. But I guess someone did. So that was really weird. And then the second guy I dated, I think his grandparents kind of had a weird problem with it. Or, like, I remember one time I went to visit him, and we just went out, like -- you know, like, we were living at different colleges so were apart a lot. And we went out one day and, like, spent the day together. And we came back, and his grandpa was just really mad. And it just seemed like, "I don't --" he's like, "You should be doing other things, you shouldn't be running around." And I don't know if it was that or whatever, because I don't know, that's what he told me, that his grandpa's kind of racist. But then, like, being with David, it's been fine. It's not really been an issue at all. I don't know. It was kind of, like, growing up, and being in middle school too, it was, like, a little bit of a struggle in being self confident, which I think is more just like a personal thing, but also related to just looking different, and wondering, like, will people even consider me as an option, because I'm not -- you know, because I don't look like everyone else, or a little bit different, and feeling like, "Will they reject --" like, on top of,

like, will they just not like me as a person? Or are you good looking enough? But also just like are they not interested in black people? Because that is, like, a thing, that people just are, like, “Oh, like, I’m attracted to everyone but black women.” You know? And that’s another thing where it’s kind of in between being, like, this, like, I just have this huge hair, (laughter) and it’s such a struggle, like, growing up to find what to do with it. And it’s just like -- and when I was in middle school, I just straightened it all the time, so it was never curly. And I remember being -- like, I have to drop everything and do this on Sunday, because I can’t go to school with it being, like, crazy curly. But, like, as I went through college and stuff, I kind of got out of it. And so now it’s just curly all the time, and people like it, and stuff. But yeah, that thing too is just like, I didn’t have, like, other friends with similar hair to tell me -- or, like, I wasn’t around relatives or anyone who could tell me what to do with it. And my mom was really good about, like, braiding and all this stuff. But it was just sort of like, “What do I do?” (laughter) All this hair. You know, and then when I was in, like -- when I was in elementary school or something, my cousin Tina is, like, just flat, like, white, like, blonde hair. And my grandmother, like, cut her hair. You know, it was just like snip, snip-snip-snip, really easy, straight. And so I was like, “I want a haircut, grandma. Cut my hair.” And so they did it, but they, like, got it all wet. And then as it was drying, it would get, like -- you know, it would shrink up and get shorter. So she’s cutting it, and it’s getting super uneven. And, like got so -- and I had, like, really long hair. It got so messed up that they had to, like, basically cut my hair to, like, to a one-inch fro thing. And I was in fifth grade, so just everyone thought I was, like, a little boy. And it was like -- oh, I had to go see my -- I had to leave my grandpa’s house one time, and I was just so upset. And they’re like, “Oh, don’t worry. I’m sure you are a great grandson.” And I was just like, (cries). And then yeah, and so going into middle school, like, I just had this, like, weird hair, [01:10:00] and everyone would, like, tease me and stuff, and, like, I don’t know. So it became, a very, like, point of stress, just, like, how’s it look? And does it look normal? And --

JONATHAN TARLETON: And you said that now you just kind of keep it curly all the time?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: But do you have -- did you place significance on --

WHITLEY WATSON: It definitely -- yeah. Like I keep it curly all the time, and it's fun, but it doesn't -- like, it very much is, like, "Oh, I just wish it was straight so I could be stylish, like, how I see other people, you know, being stylish, like, cool hipsters in malls." And so they all just have this straight hair, and it just makes it seem, like, more polished, and more sophisticated. Mine is just, like, a little more, like, funky, and, like, yeah. That's the thing too, it's like, you have this big hair, and everyone thinks you're, like, really earthy and hippie. And it's like, no, I'm very edgy, and very, like -- you know? (laughter) So but not that you can't be. I think it's just my personal, like, what I've, like, learned is, like, cool. So --

JONATHAN TARLETON: And so your grandparents, what were their -- do you know much about how they felt about your parents' relationship?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. So I think they were very accepting, which is another reason why I get frustrated when people are like, I guess, talk about white devils and stuff. It's like -- like, my -- my family, my white family has never been in the position to own slaves, and they're very open, accepting to my parents. And then so I think my -- my dad said, like, he really appreciated that my grandpa was always very open to him. And even after they got divorced, my family is very close to him. And, you know, my cousins that are like, "Oh, Uncle Milton" and stuff. And I know that I had one uncle who -- I mean, obviously, they're not perfect, and they do have some, like weird -- they don't hate people outwardly of other races when they meet them in person. But, you know, one -- after they watch all their Fox News and stuff, they'll say stuff that's just ridiculous, and you have to tell them it's (inaudible) -- like, I will tell them, like, "That's ridiculous," and they'll be kind of like, "Yeah, yeah, you're right." So it's just like this foment they get into when they're not around people who, like, they can -- they obviously see that the person is worthwhile, but they just get these silly, like, things. But yeah, so I had one uncle who I guess, told my mom, like, after I was born and stuff, like yeah, "I really don't agree with what you're doing, and I just think it can't work." And she was just like, "All right. Well, it's -- it's a thought." You know? So -- but I guess my -- my grandparents, my dad's parents were a little bit nervous about it, just because, you know, that he would get in trouble, or they

would face a lot of, like harassment and stuff. So I think they were nervous about it. But overall, it was never, like, you know, anyone was ex-- excludatory (*sic*), or, like, trying to keep them apart, or upset with them. I think everyone was very, like, you know, just accepting. I remember being -- you know, because you see movies and stuff as a kid, being nervous that, like, thinking that my grandparents didn't like me as much, or that they wouldn't like me. But I think it was very much an outwardly, like per-- like, just curious, because you see on TV, like, people don't like you. But they -- they did.

(laughter) You know? Like, they didn't like me any different, and they're very proud of me, and so it's all good.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And you -- you were talking about Camp Kansas?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: So what about your relationships with your cousins?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah, my cousins are great. My cousins are, like, just awesome. And I don't know what it's like for them, like, having a black uncle, because people don't expect it, because they're all so, like, blonde and stuff. But I think my dad said one time it was a little bit -- he was a little bit nervous going out with all these, like, little blond white kids to, like, get ice cream and stuff. But it's nice. Like, they all -- they all love me, and they all love him and my mom and stuff. So it's good. And I don't see my cousins on the other side as much, but whenever we see them, it's, like, all fine. My -- one of my dad's -- one of my dad's nephews, I guess my cousin, he married a white woman. So they have, like, a little, like, beautiful mixed kid. And sometimes, I wonder, like, "Oh, I wonder if I'll get to ever talk to her about, you know, similar things or whatever." But my other cousin on my mom's side, Daniel, like, he's been in a lot of interracial relationships. And he's, like, very quiet and reserved. But I remember one time, we were talking something at, like, Christmas or something, and someone said something that was a little bit racially, like, insensitive. And he was very vocal about, like, "You cannot [01:15:00] do that, you cannot say that. Like, that's wrong." So that was really -- you know, it was really nice that he's, I don't know, thinks that way. (laughter) You know? So I think they're all very open. And, you know, it was almost, like, not as much of even an issue for them. Like, obviously exists, but it's not a question

of, like, "Oh, I should be open to people." It's just, like, why wouldn't I talk to all these people? So...

JONATHAN TARLETON: You said your parents really, kind of, emphasized mixed identity?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: So what did that look like in terms of just experiences, and how they explained things?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. I think it was just very much that, like, where -- I don't know. I think they just treated it as very normal. Like, they didn't treat it as, like, any special situation, or, like, this is your i-- they're talking, like, this is your identity, or blah-blah-blah. It was just like, you know, we're just two people, and we look different. You know? A lot of -- everyone's parents look different. So -- and just never -- never categorizing it as, like, "Well, your dad has one culture, and I have this culture. And how does it mix, like, when you spend time with your dad or time with me." It's just like, just treated as, like, you know, it's all a wash. And, like, they're very -- they're similar. Like, they're together because they had a lot of similarities. And I think just that.

JONATHAN TARLETON: So you said that in middle school, when you got really into sort of political science? Or middle and high school? And I was just curious if that sort of interest in politics has carried over into the rest of your life? Or if you're any -- you consider yourself politically engaged? And if so, what that looks like?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. I think the, like, interest in politics and stuff, just I think -- sometimes I do think it comes from being of a mixed heritage, where you can't necessarily take the one position all the -- like, obviously you could. You could be a crazy, like, mixed person. But to me, it's always been thinking about the two sides of things, and that it's not one group versus the other. There's obviously -- like, if black people are one way and white people are one way, then what would a mixed person be? Like, obviously, that's -- that's not true. It's like, there's a bunch of different people. So my -- I think that's what made me interested in politics, is just, like, looking at both sides, and how the nuances of it instead of just, like, that guy's good guys, or different -- like, too different. But now, I think I've taken on the mindset that, like, everything is political. And it's very hard to, like, live up to that. But the idea that, like, the art that I'm making,

the things that I choose to ignore or, you know, pay attention to, coming to New York, I think -- and also just suddenly, like, being an independent adult more, and paying my taxes, and doing all this stuff is -- I've become a lot more interested in the city and what's going on, and trying to keep up with, like, inequality, and the homeless, and different political strategies for dealing with it, and crime. And I don't think I do enough, but I try to be in my personal life very vocal with people about -- mostly it comes out in race, and, like, what's OK. You know, and just like instead of letting people slide, like, tell them, like, that doesn't make any sense, you shouldn't say that. And, like, in terms of, like, how they treat poverty and stuff. I've tried to, like, give to organizations for homeless, and, like, that's been the biggest thing. Moving to New York City, is like, how do you deal with -- for a while, it was just like, give money to people in the street. But then they're saying, like, don't do that, you should give it to organizations who are trying to figure that out. And then I worked as a contractor for a long time. And also as an illegal intern for a while at different places. And just seeing how -- it's, like, really, kind of large companies sort of doing sort of shady things to the workforce. And I've gotten very interested in that, and kind of, like, the lack of opportunities for growth that a lot of people have, because they're keeping you in these positions that are, you know, non-benefit, you're paying self-employment tax, even though you're not self-employed. And -- but I, you know, haven't come up with anything to do about it. But it's on my mind. And talking to other people about it is sort of where I'm at now. I don't know. Very -- I don't know, pretty in the middle, liberal-minded, conservative-minded. Very -- I like to take the, like, moderate, nuanced kind of path, [01:20:00] so.

JONATHAN TARLETON: I'm just curious what you thought, you know, you've sort of taken from either of your parents and their respective partners, so, what is alike between you, and what is different, and how would you characterize yourself in the context of your family?

WHITLEY WATSON: I think my mom has given me this really good sense of every -- like, you can do things that you want to do, like you just can, and not just saying, "Oh well, there's no time," or whatever, it's like, just -- just work, like, extremely hard, and you can make it happen. It's all what you're willing to put into it, and you should be more ambitious

than your circumstances might suggest you should be. And also to not be afraid, and travel, and don't throw your money into, like, material stuff. Throw it into, like, having a broader experience of the world. She -- I think she is a lot more, like -- obviously she's shown me how to be ambitious, but she is a lot more of a go-getter and socially, like, active, because I'm a little more shy. I think that's where we differ. My dad -- I think learning from my dad has been a very, like, I guess, like, sort of an acceptance and, like, contentedness. I think I learned some acceptance, just the fact that he was gone for a long time and came back, and being a little bit, like, frustrated with that, it's just seeing, still, that we -- like, now we have a very good relationship, and seeing that this -- you know, that's been something, but also he, you know, he as a person is very much an espouser of, like, be OK with what's going on around you, and you know, just manage your expectations, and you can't control people, and you can't control circumstances. You can only control yourself and how you react to them. And, like, perseverance that -- he has this, like, pot and he's just still going to make it work. And yeah, so both of them very much just like you can push past whatever you're -- wherever you're at right now and do it, and all you have to do is really devote yourself to it. And then my stepdad, I don't know, maybe like a thoughtfulness, a diligence. He's a very smart guy. He's -- I think he is a little bit more like, which is that -- in that he was, like, a little more of an introvert, a little more to himself, and I guess it was just nice seeing somebody like that, and having someone like that to talk to, but just, you know, kind of thoughtful, enjoy it, be kind. He's very kind. Be kind to people, be supportive and like, don't -- he never loses his cool. Just, you know, be a nice person, so, yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And you don't have any -- do you have any siblings?

WHITLEY WATSON: I have no siblings. I always wanted to have a little brother, but I didn't.

JONATHAN TARLETON: In talking about sort of the art world, how do you feel, sort of, your place in the art world, or you know, your experience as a woman, or a mixed heritage individual, in the art world? Specifically in New York, or just across your time in Georgia.

WHITLEY WATSON: Obviously, like, when I was in art school, you think that it's going to be this very liberal-minded place, and it's not all the time. (laughter) It's really -- it's very

boys-clubby, and a lot of this stuff too, it got very frustrating as, like, talking to other friends in the art school, that they did kind of just -- there were, like, five of them. There's no guys in our school, but they found each other, and then they kind of became a clique, and it became like they were this -- it wasn't like, "Oh, we're outnumbered so we're going to join together," it was like, "We're the cool ones, and we're doing the important artwork," and especially too, how they would treat art educators, like, because it was more women in that. It was just frivolous and not real. [01:25:00] One guy came up one time and just was, like, giving my friend a hard time because she was listening to, like, Katy Perry while she was painting, and she was just really frustrated, because it's like, you know, like, obviously I understand that this is not high music. I'm just listening to it while I work, and why -- why should I be stupid because I like dance music, you know, or I'm just a little girl because I like that, you know? And they would stay up all night in their studios, and blah blah, and it's like, we're going home. Especially like as a young woman on this campus that does, you know, there are people who get attacked and all this stuff, like, I want to go home and paint in my house where I feel safe. Like, I don't want to walk through here all night, and they just I think a little bit didn't understand it, and it was this boys club. And then the same thing with, like, race as, like, when I was in high school, it was like people don't really get it, and it usually comes up when it's the topic, you know? So -- or a lot of times, like, as a woman, or a person, you know, mixed person, it's like you are expected to make art about that, and I really don't want to do that at all, because you know, I don't think it's relevant -- it's relevant to me as a person, obviously, but it's not -- it's not what I'm interested in talking about, you know? It's not any more significant than, like, you know, like I'm making art about being a white guy all the time, so that's it. (laughter)

JONATHAN TARLETON: You mentioned your parents being, you know, having situations in Memphis, their being harassed or otherwise for being in a mixed relationship. Like, did they tell you many of those stories, or did you experience them?

WHITLEY WATSON: Not really.

JONATHAN TARLETON: Well, I guess you didn't experience them.

WHITLEY WATSON: I didn't experience them. (laughter) They told me -- they've told me,

like, some of them. They don't tell me -- obviously, because they're not together too, so we don't tie them to a lot of, like, their time together. I think they would be willing to tell me, but I haven't really asked. But one of them was like -- which I just found out about this year, that was like, really horrifying was my mom and dad worked on Beale Street, which is always very cool to think about. And like, in bars. And I guess they -- these cops came, and they took my dad, and my mom was trying to follow them, and they took her to an office building, and handcuffed her, and kept her there all night, and didn't charge her for anything, and but like -- just asking all these questions and stuff, and it was just because she was with him, and then she went to court the next day, and they were trying to try her for, like, assaulting an officer, and she's like, tiny, she's a tiny person, and I guess she was all, like, disheveled, and her, like, wrists were all bruised and stuff, and like, the judge was like, "This is ridiculous," and threw it out, but it's like, I mean, like, in the '80s. It's really crazy. And most of them aren't, like, intense like that. Most of them are just like people walking up them and saying, like, "I don't like what you're doing," and like, I guess my dad was saying, like, you know, "I used to just fight people all the time, and eventually I realized I can't fight everyone," you know, and so I guess he told me that, like, one time he just said, you know, "I bet if you spent time with us, you would think differently," you know, like if -- which has been a huge influence on me. I really like that story, and it's just, like, the only thing that makes people upset at other people is that they're ignorant of it, and not like, "Oh, you're just ignorant," but like, you really just don't under-- like, have not been exposed to these people, and the same thing, like, going around and traveling, like, if you would just spend time with, you know, people of other races, you would see, they're just boring like you. They're just normal people, and some of them are really cool, and some of them are not cool, and some of them are smart, and some of them are not, and it's really just a matter of exposing yourself, you know? Like if that guy sat down with them and just, like, "Oh, they're just a couple. Just a normal couple." And the other one was, I guess, my mom got a lot of stuff, like she got offered a job in Maryland, and they're like, "It's going to be great, like great pay, great area, nice neighborhood, and very white," like that was supposed to be a selling point to her, and she's like, "Yeah, well, that's not going to work for -- that's not

really going to work for me and my family, so.” Yeah, I think mostly just people telling them, like, “I don’t like what you’re doing,” which they’re both pretty -- I think my dad used to be a little more, like, ornery about it, but they’re both kind of like, “OK.”

JONATHAN TARLETON: And I’m from the south as well. I’m actually -- I grew up in Athens.

WHITLEY WATSON: Oh, wow!

JONATHAN TARLETON: Right outside Athens.

WHITLEY WATSON: I hope I didn’t, like, offend you, [01:30:00] because I --

JONATHAN TARLETON: No, absolutely not. Absolutely not.

WHITLEY WATSON: Just a visitor to Athens for, like, four years, so I don’t know.

JONATHAN TARLETON: You know just as much as I do. But I was curious, just because so much -- often discussions of race are broken down as, like, southern, northern, these questions, and I was wondering about your experience across the south versus the north in your life, and if you see sort of a distinction between them?

WHITLEY WATSON: I honestly think in the south people are a little bit better, just because they are constantly cognizant of their, like, being labeled super racist. So obviously there are people there who are very racist, but I think up here you get people who are very racist and don’t think they are, or think they, like, don’t think about what they say at all, because it’s like, no, southerners are the racists, and up here we are enlightened. It gets really, really frustrating, because people do think people from the south are all, like, just like, redneck crazy racists, and they think that you come up here and are, like, in this paradise of stuff, and it’s like no, people are still, like, there’s a lot of problems up here. I don’t know. It does get frustrating that the south gets the rap for, like, being the most -- I don’t know. And up here, they are tolerant, but at a certain point, I feel like they’re -- it’s like the liberal equivalent where people are for certain things, but not on any kind of deep level. It’s just, like, that’s what you should be for, and so, like, they’ll go to bat really hard for, like, gay people and certain minorities, but they’ll say, like, really bad stuff about Hasidic people or Jewish people, which is something that’s happened, like, I’ve been around -- it’s like they -- people really criticizing, like, Hasidic people, and obviously it’s a different culture, and maybe there are some problems, but again, my thing is, like, if there’s one person who, you know, and I’m sure there’s more than one

person who doesn't fit what you're talking about, then it's not OK, and it's not right to judge them, and like, how can you be for -- be so for tolerance, but unwilling to extend this group of people any kind of, you know, understanding?

JONATHAN TARLETON: And did you grow up with any sort of faith or religion?

WHITLEY WATSON: We went to, like, this Methodist church a little bit, kind of off and on. It was very -- I remember, like, the one we went to as a kid was very, like, pop -- like, you know, pop rock music, and younger, because it was just my mom, and then we got into, like, mission trips, and went on a few mission trips to Costa Rica, and then kind of like waned off when I was in high school, and then when I was high school, I was very much like an atheist, and very extreme about it, and then I got to college, and my -- who's now my best friend, Stevie, and she was very religious, and then I got more back into it when I was in college, so. And then I was going to a church pretty regularly when I was in Atlanta, and then I moved here and I haven't been going as much, so. But yeah, I would say I'm a religious person, but again, it's a lot less organized and much more about the personal, so like the same way I approach, like, changing people's political ideas through, like, just meeting them and exposing them. It's the same thing religiously, like, it's just about trying to work on your own life, and then hopefully that extends in to the people around you just by, you know, talking about it and being open.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And I know you're just change-- about changing jobs, but I guess, what are your sort of goals in that facet of your life, and what are you working towards with your art and everything?

WHITLEY WATSON: So ultimately, I want to do illustration, so it's about, like, editorial, so I think right now it's just about building up my work and, like, a portfolio of editorial illustrations, and I like doing fine art, and murals would be nice to do, some big murals. I've been kind of thinking of ways to, like, find a space and do a first one, sell paintings. And then also I've gotten really into, like, writing, comedy writing, and movie writing, so that would be nice, and to make, like, art films, like sort of just short mini art films. And I think that's it. Mainly right now the biggest career goal I have is just to not work [01:35:00] in an office again, (laughter) because I did that, and it's just -- not that it's bad, but it's like, I like being out in the, like, sun in the daytime, and doing different things

every day, and going different places, like even when I worked for the museum, it was nice to just, like, we were doing something. Walking, like moving around and that kind of thing. So just finding something where I can be a little independent and work with other creative people.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And I guess I'm curious. I know we've talked, sort of, certainly about this, but how would you characterize sort of how you've changed over different stages of your life?

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. I think as -- when I was, like, a very little kid, I was very more extroverted, and very, like, performance and whatever, and I don't know why, like when I was in middle school, maybe just -- or like elementary school, maybe it was, like, my parents, or feeling like a little bit of an outsider or something, and I got very -- much more introverted, and I know, like, in middle school I was very, very just, like, alone. My mom would go to work, and I'd come home and be alone, but I remember not, like, making a lot of effort to, like, do things with people. And then in high school, it was very much about, like, academics, but not in the -- like, I was very oblivious to, like, grade point averages, and like, what you had to make on tests. It was just, like, very much just like, if you can be the smartest, then you will be worthwhile, you know, like a very proving yourself. So I was in, like, all these high classes with people, but they're very, like, had a direction they were going with it, and mine was very much just like, be the best, or like, beat people, or like, prove that you're, like, really smart. And so I think when I got into college, it was sort of like, had a really big change, and I was just like, "Oh, what am I doing?" and thinking more about what I wanted to do, and I was in a really long relationship from high school to, like, the middle of college with somebody, and he was just not a very -- I don't know. He had all his own issues, but very much like, breaking down my confidence, being very mean, and very kind of just controlling and not -- like, it was very bad for my self-confidence, and feeling worthwhile, and like, after I got out of that, and spent more time with, like, my friends, and doing other things, I kind of, like, found myself. I stopped listening to music for a long time, because he just thought all my music was terrible and stuff, so I was like, rediscovering all these things that I really like, and talents that I did have, and then coming here, and like, I was a lot

more open to people, and meeting people, because I didn't feel, like, bad about myself all the time, and so then when I got here, I think this has been, like, one of the best places I've ever been in terms of, like, being open to meeting people and talking to people, and that was a huge challenge that I had to get over, was this idea that -- I had this idea, like, I don't need people. I can just make all my stuff, and put it on the internet, and never meet anyone, and it just doesn't work. (laughter) You know, if you want to get a job or do anything, you have to just -- it's not a big deal. It's just tell people what you like and what you want to do, and it was just so hard for me to, like, get over it, but now I think it's really good, and doing a lot more art stuff, and being a lot more adventurous with it, and not as afraid. A lot more proactive, and like, working a lot, so. But I guess, I think racially, it's been pretty much the same, like, the whole time. It's just you're a person, race is not actually real, it's just a little bit, like, it's like hair color. You can't -- there's no good guys or bad guys that you can tell by race. It's just -- it's kind of like a really complicated cultural thing, and you have to be -- you just have to expose people to different things.

JONATHAN TARLETON: To kind of go back a little bit, you mentioned that in high school, you were in band. I'm just curious if that was, you know, what sort of part of -- what sort of part that played in your life, or other similar ways you spent your time at that time.

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah, when I was in middle school, I was in band, and so when I went to high school, I was like, "I don't want to do this. This is stupid," but I ended up doing it, and it was really great, because it was like, you know, six hours a week that you're forced to be with people, so I made a lot of friends in band, and like, it was really great, and just being a part of it, and we did really well in, like, competitions and stuff, but it was -- we were, like, going to all these football games, and having no interest, but it ended up being a great experience, [01:40:00] and having all these good friends from it. And then I also did soccer for a long time. I was on a, like a rec league, the same rec league, and I never did, like, the travel thing. But I was on the same team with all these same girls, so you get really, like, close teams, so that was cool. And then I did it in high school which, funny enough, this just reminded me, we took, like, our soccer photo, and this girl was sitting next to me, so like our thighs were together, and she was like, "How do you stay

so tan all year?” (laughter) So that was funny. I’m trying to think of other things that I’ve done.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And what did you answer?

WHITLEY WATSON: I don’t think I said anything. I was just like, “Oh, I don’t know.” It’s really funny, because my mom is, like, as dark as me all the time, and she -- everyone thinks she’s, like, you know, Puerto Rican or Filipino, or something. Yeah, but it was always weird, like, that we were the same color, and I guess we look a lot alike. I think I look like my dad a lot too, but they also think me and my mom were like twins. But activities, other activities, I think that’s it. Yeah, band was really cool. I don’t know that I did any -- I was sort of like a debate team, like, sidearm. So our school had, like, like a nationally-ranked, like, really -- I think they might have won nationals one year, the debate team.

JONATHAN TARLETON: What was your school’s name?

WHITLEY WATSON: Chattahoochee High School. So there’s just this culture of kids who are really into philosophy, really into world politics, very like, interested in intellectual things, and our football team kind of sucked, so they were, like, the rock stars of the school, and they, like, had really good parties, I guess. I didn’t do any partying in high school, but they were, like, the cool kids. I remember being, like -- I was in a lot of classes with them, so I was friends with them, so I would try to, like, read what they were reading and do what they were doing. It was like quiz bowl, so, yeah.

JONATHAN TARLETON: And you’ve mentioned that you have a lot of interest in other cultures, and getting to know other people. So is travel a part of your life at all, or like --

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I’ve been extremely fortunate that my mom is always taking me on awesome, awesome trips, and last year, I went to Cambodia, because I graduated college, so she was like, “OK, where do you want to go?” So we went to Cambodia, and it was amazing, and we drove all in this van, and we went to like - - we drove cross-country Cambodia, and it was beautiful and amazing, because the country’s beautiful, but also they have this very near history of, you know, the Khmer Rouge and all the fighting, and the US bombing them, and the Marines coming in, and so there’s people there, you know, who went through that. The guy who was our tour guide,

like, was in a Khmer Rouge camp for a few months, and like, has friends died and lost family members, and just hearing someone -- and you know, meeting all kinds of Cambodians, they're like, "Oh, my parents were killed," or you know? And being -- I don't know. I felt very, very lucky to go there and be able to talk to people about that. And then we went -- the same year we went in the summer with my cousin Katie to Italy, and she's from Memphis, and she had never been out of the country, and it was great that she just got to, like, see new stuff, and obviously being in Italy was really cool, and one of the things that stood out was we went to Naples, and they have a lot of African immigrants, so that was really cool visually to see them in, like, their very traditional clothing walking around Italy. Yeah. And then this summer I'm going to Israel, except I'm going alone, so it'll be interesting.

JONATHAN TARLETON: Well, this has been really great. Is there -- is there anything else you'd like to talk about, or anything I'm totally not asking you about that I'm completely missing?

WHITLEY WATSON: I don't think so. It was pretty thorough.

JONATHAN TARLETON: All right, great. Well, thank you so much.

WHITLEY WATSON: Yeah, you're welcome.

END OF AUDIO FILE