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Interview with Kristina Wong

Kristina Wong

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Interviewee: Kristina Wong

Interviewers: Zoe Grammer and Irene Cruz

Date: November 23, 2020

Location: Zoom

Collection: Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Archive, SBS 112: Women and Social Change, From 1890s to the Present, Fall 2020

Length: 00:53:19

Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Biography: Kristina Wong is a third generation Chinese American who was born and raised in San Francisco, California. Kristina's profession consists from being a performance artist to an actor. Kristina is the creator of the Auntie Sewing Squad. This organization involves individuals sewing masks from their homes and sending these masks to those in need.

Summary of Transcript: (00:00:00) Kristina Wong gives a brief introduction as to who she is, what she does, her family background, and what her education was like. (00:08:42) Wong reflects on her relationship with activism and what she has learned throughout the years. (00:15:03) She goes over the projects she has worked on, how these relate her identity as a woman of color, and what social justice means to her. (00:32:40) She talks about the Auntie Sewing Squad and how she's handling the Covid-19 pandemic. (00:39:50) Wong describes her position in public office, her thoughts on the 2020 election, and her plans for the future.

Interview Transcript:

IC: So, we can get on with the interview?

KW: Yes. [glitch in sound]

ZG: Our names are Zoe Grammer and Irene Cruz. It is November 23rd, 2020. We are conducting an interview with Kristina Wong over Zoom.

IC: So, we're just gonna start off and ask, what your full name is, a bit of your family background, and your current occupation.

KW: Okay. [echo in sound] My full name is Kristina Sheryl Wong. Sheryl spelled like Sheryl Crow's name. I realized that was easier to explain to people on the phone versus trying to spell it aloud. [laughs] I grew up in... I was born and raised in San Francisco, California. I'm a third generation Chinese American. So, that means my grandparents were immigrants from China...San Francisco. On one side, my fathers side, they worked in a laundry. On my mothers side, my grandfather and grandmother had a butcher shop. My parents were the first to go to college. I went to UCLA and I still live in Los Angeles. I graduated the year 2000. I work [laughs] work- quote unquote, as a performance artist, a comedian, I'm also an unpaid elected representative in KoreaTown. I mostly-well just full time freelance, so a lot of my year consists of touring to different colleges and theater spaces. Obviously, I'm not touring physically right now during the pandemic, so I adapted my shows- my one person shows to play in my home and I am doing a lot of remote work, whether it's writing or being on panels, or things like that.

IC: So, you mentioned that your grandmother, or your grandparents, were immigrants, so had they ever disclosed, like, how they came here and the type of feelings that they had coming to the United States and the challenges that they faced?

KW: Most of that information was sort of passed down from my parents, they- I do have one living grandmother, she will always say she doesn't remember anything. And I think a lot of it might be the pain, or trauma, or maybe, it is her age, but I don't think she necessarily romanticizes that journey. I know on my fathers side, the side that owned the laundry, my grandfather came over at like nineteen years old and was already married to my grandmother in an arranged marriage. [glitch] But it took 10 years for her to come over and join in San Francisco. So he was able to learn English from his laundry customers. I had always thought he went to school or something [glitch] because I was able to just communicate with my grandfather for the most part in English, but my grandmother didn't really pick up English at all and I know he came over in a boat, it was like a three week boat ride. I think my grandmother [noise in background] on my other [noise in background] actually they all came over on a boat. I think my- yeah- I think that's... I wanna say that's how they got over here [mhm] and it's like a three week journey with like- my mother told me that her mother, like [glitch], threw up on the side of the boat, like it was really tortuous ride, so on that side my grandfather- I didn't learn this until we were at a banquet, my grandfather on my mothers side, he was actually married and had a family and then I guess divorced them for his wife. And I only found out when my mom was like, "that's my brother" and I was like "whaaa?" and I had no idea she had a whole other set of half siblings [mhm]. But I guess he went back to China and got an arranged wife which was a much younger grandmother that I still have and... yeah I guess in terms of- journey- I know a lot of it was about escaping communism and I know that my- that same grandmother- so I had a great grandfather when I was born, he apparently was a politician, it was very high up and they had like cars and a house and all this kind of fancy stuff, but then communism was coming and taking all their stuff and they come to San Francisco and they have- you know, own a shop. In the end- yeah so this is all the stuff that I'm like hearing from other people, they don't share that directly and all of it was language issues [mhm] or not wanting to talk about it or not thinking they're that interesting enough to talk about it. [noise in background]

ZG: So, where did you go to school as a child and what was school like for you?

KW: I went to an elementary school called Alamo. Before that, I went- it's very much in San Francisco... there's a lot of Chinese-Americans and I went to, like, a Christian Chinese preschool until kindergarten and then went to public school, so that was Alamo. And there's just enough Chinese-Americans that there was like a Chinese school program and I learned really nothing in and except for how to be- feel guilty all the time for not knowing [laughs], or not learning like [inaudible]. And then I went to another public middle school called Herbert Hoover Middle School. Now the big kind of mythology in San Francisco is like getting- going to Lowell high school, like the- I always say it's like if high school in San Francisco were the Kardashians, Lowell is Kim Kardashian's ass, like, it is like, it's the money maker that leads everything else, right [mhm]? And it was like a big deal for like every Chinese student to get in there and they had like a racial quota at the time where you, specifically depending what race you checked off, you had to meet a certain criteria and like to be Chinese, specifically, was the hardest to get into that high school that year. Now parents have sued the school and all this kind of stuff, and you know it's a longer conversation of like what now that makeup at that school looks like because of

that, but I didn't get it and you had to be like two points from perfect and I was like three.

ZG: Oh wow.

KW: And so I was just devastated, right? 'Cause I was just like- being Chinese was like- how did I do everything right except being born into this body? Right?

ZG: Mhm.

KW: And I really like resented that and hated that and hated that it's not like being Chinese is some kind of cake walk? Or like the same kind of privileges growing up white in America and yet I still have to get better scores than white people to get into Lowell? Like just because like this weird anomaly that is San Francisco? So, I ended going to a private high school called Mercy High School which just closed last year. Fun story is Kimberly Gimfoil, Donald Trump Jr.'s, girlfriend went there like ten years before me.

ZG: Mhm.

KW: And like the joke is like, on our Wikipedia page, she and I are listed as notable alumni, now that school is closed for lack of enrollment. So, [laughs] that's the school I go to [laughs]. You could be more you could be Kimberly Gimfoil [laughs]. That's- those are the two things you could be [laughs]. I don't know if you are familiar, she's the one at the RNC who was screaming, "The best! is yet! to come!" Like actually all my highschool teachers on facebook were like, "I didn't teach her to do that." Like [laughs], they totally disowned having to do anything with her being who she is, but anyway [glitch in talking] yeah I went to UCLA and that was pretty much the last institution I finished.

ZG: Yes.

KW: I did a year of graduate school and never finished it because I ended up being able to eke out a career as a working artist which I'm still in now.

ZG: [coughs]

KW: And grad school at that point was just me trying to figure out what to do until I could figure out what to do [noise in background] with myself and yeah, just took a half and half way through that process, but I was able to start touring as an artist.

ZG: Okay. Were you involved in any type of activism during your college years at UCLA, if so...

KW: Sort of, yeah, go ahead.

ZG: How has it impacted your life today?

KW: I was not part- I will, I will say that in high school I was really into like the environmental movement, but I didn't understand that movement as being tied to class and race. And I think as, you know, as I get older and understand that movement, I understand a big critique around it is that environmentalism, there's actually a hashtag, environmentalism so white, uh, this idea that, that it-it's sort of presented as a, um... It's very hard to like yell at people about styrofoam, or like eating organic food if they don't have access to those things, or if they income wise don't have it, or if they live in a food desert and stuff like that, and that was the disconnect that I wasn't making. And so for certain communities they can choose to go green and be minimalist because they have a lot of money to pursue that. Um, and so that was something that I was really into, "save the planet, save the animals," but wasn't looking at it in a [pause], a holistic way, understanding like well what happens if you.. If an entire country is dependent on manufacturing this crappy thing [laughs], like what, you know? And it's not to say that we have to keep certain things in place to keep people employed but, but I think the bigger issue is under- is trying to speak from environmentalism to the point of view of how it actually affects people of color the worst and in poor people who bear the brunt of it. Not just like, go green, drive electric cars, that's it. So that was what I was really into in high school, and then when I got to college I think I just was like, I described it is as, I just got- uh, what's the word, um, when you get hit from the side [laughs], the thing where you just like, I was suddenly like confronted for the first time with really looking at race and gender, and uh, I had never... I guess I had been kind of taught to not think about it, and just kind of, like even though that thing had happened to me getting [inaudible]. I feel like this is the case for a lot of Asian-Americans when they look at issues around affirmative action. It's very hard to look at the whole picture of who it benefits and just get really, like, bitter and feel like, "Why are we always working the hardest?" Um, but yeah, I think, like, I finally had a language to describe all these little things that I've experienced and never knew it was okay to say something about, or question, um, little dynamics in my friendships or-or side comments I would get from folks, or ways that I was read when I came into a room, or um, yeah so. And-and-and that me pursuing goals without thinking about those dynamics and things would just be sort of upholding an injustice that I had just sort of come to accept. So, it was-it was sort of an onslaught of anger and resentment that all just [makes whoosh sound effect] came up at once and I literally had an ulcer, I just became so angry my first year and didn't know where to direct it. And uh, I remember being on vacation the summer after my first year of school and just, literally just being so bitter and I just wanted to avenge all those who wronged me, like it just had all these just feelings of- so hopeless and helpless and I want so and so, and I wanted to show people off. Like, what does it even matter? Like it's that sort of exploit, like I hope I run into my ex kind of thing so they could see how well I'm doing, but like, everyone was my ex you know [laughs]? And I know people my age now who have that kind of weird attitude about life where like, they just, I don't know. But it was- it's not healthy, and um, I think most of my activism was channelled through the arts, was like, rather than fight, fight, fight everything, how can I create things or new images, and there's no- [pause] there's no perfect kind

of way around it immediately. I mean, there's a lot of, like, questions and issues and I think artists of color constantly have to ask themselves more about what they're making than white artists, and sort of like, what's at stake in presenting certain images, and bear more of the brunt of representation than like if- if you have a play with two Asian characters, like if they're both kind of odd, flawed characters, some people could have a problem with that because they're like, "Why are the Asian people so crazy in this play?!", you know? And like, um [pause], I yeah, and so I just found myself kind of working through activism more that way than going to rallies and protests, like that just wasn't, um, I actually had quite an aversion to that form of protest because I just felt like, after having that first year of college where I got kind of so sick on the inside, I didn't want to sustain that level of anger in me, um, and wanted to find other ways to work it out. But now, I understand protests are a part of- are a necessary part of rebellion and also that sometimes there's no time to like, "let's just process this and turn this into humor!," right [laughs]? Is it just- because... for lack of a better- shit is just happening so fast that you just, sometimes you have no choice but just to have that gut reaction first before you can filter it out into something else and I think that has definitely happened around a lot of the... the Black folks that are being killed by the police it was just happening, so much so fast and the school shootings and that is was like this- there was no moment to kind of pause and breathe and find any humor in this.

IC: So, you tackled the issue of Asian fetishization and mail order brides for your senior project in college and

KW: Mhm.

IC: And you have worked on the Radical Cram School digital series which has served as a form of empowerment for young Asian-American Pacific Islanders, and other children as you cover, like, a variety of topics, surrounding social justice. So, what inspired you to create the digital series and kind of, what message do you hope to spread through it?

KW: Yeah, so a lot of that came up, basically a producer's, Teddy and Anna, they're a married couple and they have three children and their oldest daughter is named Liberty, and I had been friends with them since- I've been friends with Anna before she met Teddy, and I've been friends with both of them since before they had three kids. Teddy is a professor in social justice and math, which I had no idea, with a math education, I had no idea you could [sound glitch] social justice and math education, you know [laughs], could come together because you feel like, I-I feel like math is such a finite specific thing and social- you know, but that's what he teaches. And he messaged me, they live in Ohio, he messaged me, "We're coming to L.A. for Christmas, are you around? Liberty came home saying she doesn't want to be Chinese anymore and I thought, like, you should maybe sit down and talk to her and her friends because you're an empowered Asian woman." I just- I think at that point, my TV pilot that I had put all this energy into hoping it was gonna happen didn't go and I just blurred it out, "Let's make it a web series!" So, but the crazy thing for me also was I was Liberty when I was growing up. I was- I had many moments

where I would fantasize about having blonde hair and blue eyes and parents who would send me to summer camp and having the parents, like, living in a full house kinda situation, where I'd like be able to just communicate to all my family members in English and not live with any sense of guilt, and have a sense of history that extended beyond my grandparents. You know? So, just also what would I teach her? But that's where this sort of idea was born and discount. It wasn't immediately, okay well we're going to wear berets and be a girl scout troop. But, originally we were gonna call it like, "*Asian American girl Town Hall*," and it just kept evolving and until it was this Radical Cram School and this idea that one day we would try to and it for me half of it was semi-humorous and that you can't really teach a revolution in one day to a kid. Some of these concepts are so big and so heavy and these kids are so little. So, that was a little bit of the humour of it is, some of the kids might absorb, but a lot of it- it's gonna go way out of their head because they haven't even- I mean you know they haven't even experienced it. The truth is a lot of kids experience racism at a very young age and the criticism we gotten from this, "they are too young to learn this," and it's like no, if they are too young to experience racism, they're not too young to learn about it. So, that was the series and yeah it just kept growing and we got a lot of backlash from the far right. Specifically, the [glitch in sound] Alex Jones kind of camp or right wing conspiracy theorists and that was frightening, [laughs] because they just- I laugh because it's just like you know, one day you're like watching comedians make fun of these people and next thing you know your face is on their TV show and you're like, "what?" So, yeah that was pretty crazy because a lot of what I felt like was sort of a satire that other activists would appreciate. They were reading as one hundred percent real deal. They are like, "oh my gosh they are training these kids to become communists," "this is an indoctrination camp." I'm like, "that was sort of like the quote, like the wink?," but that's actually not what's happening. [laughs] Yeah anyways, so that's that series and then we just decided to shoot a second series after that happened because we were just sort of like, "what do we do?" Like, "do we hide?" "Do we apologize?" No. We don't hide. We don't apologize. We just do it again because this is the enemy we want to make.

IC: So, you were also involved in, "*Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*," which

KW: Oh, I was "*Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*." [laughs]

IC: and you talked about the high rates and depression and suicide among Asian American women, so do you think that there were any kind of socio cultural expectations or standards placed among Asian American women or that played a role in this? Or...

KW: Oh, totally. Yeah. The movies available to- there's a filmed version of it that's available on Vimeo to watch and there's old George Bush jokes in it. [glitch in sound] And at that point most of us- George Bush wasn't so bad, but like [laughs] he was like the worst president, but who knew the bar could get lower. Yes, so depression totally something I've dealt with my whole life and had no language around and no support system around. When I had asked my mother at a very young age if I could see a therapist, her first reaction was, "it costs too much." Which sent me the message of, "you're not worth- your joy is not worth any money". Like, that's the message

it sent to me right? And then the other thing she said, “if anyone finds out you saw a therapist, they're not gonna hire you when you're older.” Which made me go, “Oh my gosh, my entire value of my life is being able to get a job, nothing else.” I really... every decision I had made for a long time- you know it's really important to think about money and what you can save. But, like at the point that you sacrifice safety or you can't enjoy a single thing in your life because you have so much guilt around you know, eating a four dollar slice of cake or something. You know, it's just this misery making right? Or...and I think that because when I got out of college [glitch in sound] and didn't really [glitch in sound] have much as much income as my friends who went off and got salary jobs. I didn't really feel like I was an adult [glitch in sound] until I was solvent which wasn't until my late twenties. And I think before that reason, I just carried a lot of pain around money, guilt around money. I always felt like I had to- was at the mercy of people with money or the approval. Even with this last election, I wanted- I thought that if Trump got elected, I would adopt a bunch of dogs and buy guns because I was just that terrified, that I needed to have like comforting animals around me and my mother she said nothing about the guns. She just said, “A dog is very expensive, the medical bills could be insane.” And I'm just like thinking, “Wow, she's still the same lady,” oh and she's one of the aunties. But you know, just like, totally ignored the fact that I, like, shouldn't that concern you more that I'm thinking about buying a firearm than a fluffy animal? But anyway, maybe someone will interview my mother and get her side of the story, but [laughs] yeah. So I think that was a lot of that, I think a lot of that kind of fear was around admitting something's wrong. My aunt who passed away early in her life got a divorce and my mother was like, “Don't tell anyone your aunt is going through a divorce,” and I'm like, “Half my friends come from divorced families, like I don't know what the big deal is,” but like everything was shameful and so I sort of internalized that everything was embarrassing. That people- no human being should have sex or sexual feelings or anything. I think this kind of constant hiding and constantly being someone's prisoner and constantly projecting fictitious like, success around my life, more than actually living a specific kind of joy was so misery making. So, that's very much the character that I play in my show. I'm Kristina Wong. I'm an artist who's gonna do a show about the [inaudible] of suicide among Asian American women and I'm gonna fix this problem. Oh, the show by the way, is all fiction. It's not about me, it's about women outside the Wong family. You know basically, this character is always trying to fix everything is quickly falling apart hiding all this and so that's sort of the trajectory of the show, is it becomes clear that she needs to fix herself before she can try to fix anybody else. I feel like I have come a long way from that. I was both working that issue out with myself while touring that show and now I'm, you know, I don't know... Like my mother still others me about weird money stuff, but I might just get a dog to spite her. I was thinking about it this morning, “I should just get a dog to just to spite her.” But anyway [laughs]. Yeah, so that's- a lot of it is also that people believe that depression looks a specific way that like, if you're not walking around writing like sad poetry and, like, threatening to hurt yourself constantly really loud in a mega phone and that's something I think these women culturally not very inclined to be seen doing. I think also people don't see Asian women. So, I think it's hard for them to imagine that they're having a hard time versus like, the rockstar covered in tattoos, who's very vocal about it you know? So, a lot about depression in this community, which is quite high, is it has to do with certain ability- certain fiction that has been put upon what Asian women are supposed to behave like and what- also what depression

looks like out loud.

ZG: So, what other projects have you gotten involved in since then? Do you feel that your identity as a woman of color has influenced your involvement in social justice or has given you a different perspective on social issues?

KW: Totally. Yeah. I think for a long time out of college I was like, “I care about social justice, but I don't want to be poor forever.” I was just [glitch in sound] kind of like- I also was just... I also felt like it was like, it was how do you live with the contradictions of wanting to be an actor, but also do activism? Like how do you sell things in a commercial for products that ostensibly, like, if you go into the history of it, probably destroyed some communities somewhere, right? Or probably have a negative environmental impact on something? Like- and I just wasn't sure how to sit with all that. But I think I'm learning that like, yes we have contradictions and a lot of it is about trying to figure out how to innovate but also, minimize oppression and I'm happy- not happy but like, I guess something that I think is great is that I'm beginning to see a lot more activists sort of sit in their contradictions and that we are in a place now where people have to [inaudible] to wanting to be an anti-oppression organization, or wanting to center BIPOC artists. These are things I think before that, folks tried to imply because they were so nervous about even admitting that there was racism to begin with. This is not across the board. Obviously, we have an administration right now, that wants to stop ethnic studies or stop the teaching of racism because that's somewhere gonna make racism go away right? It makes no sense. Help me with the question again, it was...you said-oh, what I have been working on since...so, I think a lot of... I've made several shows since, “*Wong Flew Over the CucKoo's Nest*” and several projects. “*Wong Flew Over the CucKoo's Nest*,” had a huge impact on my life because I toured it so long and on and off for eight years and I didn't know how to move on from that show, because I felt like every new show I made, no one wanted to bring it to their campus or their theater, the way they wanted to bring the depression suicide show. So, I began to wonder, is my only value as an artist being this depression person? Like, constantly carrying this weight around? I got very jaded and got to the point where I couldn't even... Like there used to be this section of the show where I started talking about it. Just like, tears flow like crazy. Then, I was like, “what is happening?” because like I do that secular show and I can't [glitch in sound] I can't cry anymore. I've taken something very traumatizing personal of my life and I've squeezed it and there's nothing left. So, I went to Uganda in 2013, to research a show that was gonna be called “*The Wong Street Journal*,” and it's still called the “*Wong Street Journal*,” and I thought it was just gonna be a show looking at microloans. What I didn't know was gonna happen was I met these rappers on the street. My second day there...this was like a village...a fairly, I mean it's a town, but some areas like, folks still live in huts, have no electricity, there's some buildings and sort of this mix and a lot of people still depend on stuff on their farm to eat. I met these rappers the street. I thought they were gay men because they were holding hands and there's a very underground gay community there that organizes in secret for their rights. Everything was like, peculiar. Like, switching around in my head and they were like, “come here” and they like pointed to this dark room behind them. I was like, “okay.” [laughs] and it was a music studio. Like, this could have

been a nightmare [glitch in sound] story, but it was a music studio. I started recording this rap album with them, which played later on the radio in that town. It just becomes this moral of the story...the show became this story about me as an Asian American, and this is right at the start, with like when Black Lives Matter, that hashtag began to surface. So I was beginning to kind of think about myself, not just this person of color who could conveniently avoid my own anti-Blackness and my own... where I have had privileges that black and brown bodies have not and began to like, really in this very weighted sense like, experienced what my privilege looked like as a Chinese-American in Africa and what kind of privilege I carry with me as someone who's American and in every attempt to try to help another community how I could actually be hurting them. An example I give of kind of, the most well intended source of help that everyone has bought into that has actually been quite destructive is something like Toms Shoes. So, the guy Tom who founded Toms Shoes was like, "oh well, if you buy a pair of shoes, we will give a identical pair to someone in another country who has no shoes." What they don't tell you is cobbler town now has no job because who wants to get their shoes fixed when Toms Shoes are going to drop a bunch of shoes off, that the shoes drop off is inconsistent. So, this creates a little bit of chaos community that is like, "oh do we make shoes this year?" "we don't make shoes?" "like, what are we doing?" Sometimes when those goods are just given away, they kinda just get stock piled into the resold. The... a version of the selling food stamps right? Selling food stamps and I was seen how I could-without even my best intentions be a conduit for that happening and offering to help these rappers like "oh, okay. I'll help make a studio happen." Like, I was creating all these weird fights between the rappers who were like, "well, where's my studio?" and here i'm like here "oh, I thought you all shared a studio." Like, [laughs] that's not how it works. Right? Like, they're all fighting for monzugal lady, which is the "white lady" in... which I was I guess and getting an old piece of her. So, I had to like create some boundaries and try to think of some systems that make sense so that it's not handouts to them, but it's also like I'm still calling the stakes because I have so much power, even as you know, a fair so-so artist in America. I have like, so much power to like, steer someone's life in a specific direction there.

ZG: So, in your *Talking Taiwan* interview, you mentioned that you were hoping that the Autnie Sewing Squad would not have to become a long term project.

KW: Yeah.

ZG: And the pandemic has been poorly handled by the government. This was in May, now we are eight months into quarantine.

KW: [laughs] I know.

ZG: The U.S has...

KW: [laughs]

ZG: The U.S has been breaking it's own records for cases for hospitalization deaths almost daily. How has this pandemic affected you? How [glitch in sound] do you feel about the Auntie Sewing Squad still being around and now providing help for those in other communities?

KW: I'm proud that we exist. I'm glad we exist. We shouldn't not have to exist. Honestly, like the talk of this pandemic was like the most stressed out i've ever been in my life. Like one, I was dealing with the existential threats too of like, "gosh, does everytime I go to the post office to drop off a box, am I gonna get myself COVID?" and I remember when Chris Cuomo from CNN got it, I actually wrote to the group and it was only like two weeks in and I was like, "if I go down, what should we do?" I was already not making a will for my life, but I'm trying to come up with a back up plan for the group [laughs] like, how do we keep sewing these masks? I mean that's frightening right? That's- that I had to think about those sort of things, in addition to, like, the pressure of how am I going to keep- and at that point it wasn't even indigenous communities, farmworkers, it was just essential workers, like that was the only thing in my worldview. And now, I think- I think... I'm glad we exist as a way to get things to communities that aren't able to- that weren't able to access federal support before, and that's indigenous communities, incarcerated communities, undocumented communities, farmworkers, right? But I'm also, it just makes me even more horrified that we live in a situation where fabric and elastic, you can't get those basic things on every human being in this country, like what? And at that, some of you don't even, and by "you" I mean the government, don't even think masks work or are necessary, or could be a choice and this is so horrifying, and it wasn't even supposed to be political at the top of this, like to me this was my all health matters moment, where your health is my health and we're only strong as our weakest link. And suddenly [sighs], this becomes like a Trump versus everyone situation again and it's really unfortunate. We didn't need [glitch in sound]. We actually found this article that said that the U.S. post office was supposed to deliver five masks to every person and that was scrapped, now we're fucking doing it. We are the government, literally. Some of these requests for masks we're getting- it's like,-it's so messy and like, I can't even describe the intertribal politics we're weighing into, like I had no idea, or I never really interacted with this many- like I have friends with indigenous backgrounds, but I've never really dealt directly with people on reservations before and then some reservations have issues- there's some tribes that, like, [glitch in sound] they don't get along with each other, and so we're navigating that as we're trying to like, either fundraise, or get coats, or get things to them. There's a tribe in Alaska that had an- they were like, no one should give anything to the Navajo anymore because they got- raised so much money. But the Navajo are still asking us for help, so what're you going to do and the rates are still through the roof so it's like, what do we do? Oh, we saw you raised the money, bye?! Like [laughs], how do you walk away from any of this? Um, and I think this is the big thing that I'm sort of wrestling with as an artist, I'm doing a show about this from my house called "*Kristina Wong Sweatshop Overlord*." Which is like, I've never worked in garments in my life, like I've always kind of hobbyist sewed, but I also don't tend to work with ensembles because I don't like working with- I get nervous about working with big groups of people because I like, oh I get too attached to them or they'll let me down, or we'll start fighting or

someone will start dating. You know, like I kind of like, that's why I kind of make my own work solo and just pick collaborators when I pick them and yet here, I'm running what feels like an ensemble theater with people all over the country. [laughs] No one's sleeping with each other because we're all aunties and um, so that sort of eliminates one big drama but, yeah. Here we are like trying to figure out in the mess of this how to get stuff to people that they should just already have access to and even though there are cheap masks on the market, it's just a bunch of people can't afford them. Like, so one tribe in Alaska, I guess a bunch of masks were sent to them but because of where they are in Alaska, they're just stuck in a um, just like stuck in a FedEx facility or something like that. Stuck in a holding facility and they can't get them and the numbers or something they sent us was like, thirty percent of our elders are positive right now for covid, and I'm- we're just like, "well how are you going to get the masks that we send?" [laughs] So, they're gonna have... they want us to send it to this nonprofit they have an agreement with and they do have, like, someone who will literally just like drive it over, like this is the level of like breaking-these systems are set up to work and yet they don't work. Like the... these shipping systems and-or house system and things, and nothing is working and like it's literally down to Aunties, just like me and my messy house, trying to figure out how to get a bunch of masks to a bunch of elders in Alaska, this is- huh?! How'd I get so close to this? So [glitch in sound] yeah, I'm just sort of [glitch in sound] studded and I think what made this storytelling in this is the constantly reminding people, if they go, "You're a hero! You're a hero!" I'm like, I just got into this in March, honestly, right? Like, there are people who have been helping farmworkers year round for decades. There-these folks in these tribes, it's like, it's been constant peril and now it's that much more exacerbated, like those are the real heroes, like I'm- like I keep telling everyone next pandemic, I'm out [laughs], like figure this out, I can't do this again. But you know, here we are and this is something better to do than clutch our pearls and watch the news. [pause] Yeah, but I think like the story at the end of this is, what a disappointing response from the government and wow, our systems are really fragile and we really need to look at who bore the brunt of this and create situations where it is not this hard to send people fabric and elastic ever again.

IC: So you're planning to run for public office so

KW: I already ran.

IC: Oh.

KW: I ran and won! Yeah.

IC: Okay. Yeah, yeah. So, what inspired you to run for public office and I mean like, in more of a well- in general I guess do you feel that any of the events that have occurred during this pandemic has like, increased your interest in politics and...

KW: [Laughs] So I've already, yeah I can do that question. So I have a show called Kristina Wong Runs for Public Office, which is about how I ran for local office on my neighborhood

council and won. And a lot of people ask if I'm going to run again, and I'm actually not sure because I see that I'm doing more work in the Auntie Sewing Squad than I've done in my two years of neighborhood council because in neighborhood council, when you're in an elected position, it's not just like, "this, this, this!" You've got to have a census, or a majority vote, you have to go to these monthly meetings, you have to do parliamentary procedure. Whereas if you're an auntie, you're just like, "pull up your bed sheet, take some scissors, you start cutting masks" and [laughs] like that's that. So yeah, I ran the longer- I'm giving you the condensed story- the condensed version of the story I tell on my show. So basically, I had a television pilot when Obama was president. True TV was going to pay for this pilot, if they liked it, they were going to order it for an entire season. The premise of the show was, it was sort of a, "Nathan for You meets Michael Moore," which was like Kristina, this naive activist who's well intended with crazy ideas, is going to get people activated for social justice, but usually the ideas don't work out but it's funny anyway, it's kind of funny anyway. Now this was a fun character to have when Obama was president and when it was okay to be naive and kind of poke gently in a loving way at the activists, but once Trump took office, political apathy wasn't...wasn't... I don't know that, you know, that we had the same issue with apathy, but we did because there was like a march every weekend. It also didn't make sense to have-we have like this clown president so having like crazy, absurdist, activist artist trying to subvert- didn't make sense, because it was like, you can't like, stacking crazy on top of crazy, wasn't that great commentary. So anyway, I really and also as I was working- I will say that I was working in a situation where most of the production company was white, everyone that they okay-ed for me to hire was white. All very nice people, but like, there was a lot of blind spots in terms of things that I think just made it seem like I was just... felt like a racial caricature of myself at some points in ways that I don't think were helpful for anybody and I think I became a lia- like I was going, man, I feel like I might be a liability for the left more than anything else with this character. So obviously, I don't have a tv show, they didn't pick it up for the season and I was just basically like, as an artist not sure how to... how to... how to, you know, as someone who used to do crazy things and- the world was the straight man and I was the wacky one, but now it's like, we're the straight man and the world is wacky and I was like, how do we subvert this? And I just remember waking up and reading about like, either, I think we pulled out of the Paris Accord or it was some really crazy tax cut that Trump approved and I was just like, "fuck this I'm running for office" and that, like then I was like that's the way I'm going to approach this as an artist. Like, rather than invite people to my crazy play where let me show you how crazy the world is with this crazy play, why don't I enter- like if they're going to take my job as an artist I'm going to take theirs, because in my mind at that point artists and comedians have switched jobs, right? Comedians are now the ones that- okay well we used to laugh at- the phase is we used to laugh at comedians and listen to politicians, now we laugh at politicians and listen to comedians, right? And so it's like, I'm just going to enter this earnest space, run for office, and do a show about that, but also serve my term out, not like as a character like not like, "hey everybody!" Like, it's because it turns out I'm the most normal person on neighborhood council because everyone else who's not an artist is like nuts, but to see if there's any power in doing that, so that was that show and that's why I decided to run. I think it is important for everyday people to run for office if it calls to them and I think it's important for artists to be embedded more in government and politics because we are the ones who have vision

and we know how to work with very little. Like, when I see meetings and they're so long and slow I'm like, "man the twenty-six of us could be doing so many other active things with this time but instead we're like trudging through an agenda" and like trying to figure shit out. So yeah, I'm stuck on whether or not I want to run again, but I do recognize the important of having an artist actually affect policy and laws and legislation, like we can scream all we want and make cultural day, but someone at the end of the day has to pull the lever inside the office to change a law to make more housing available or whatever. So yeah, that's that.

IC: So kind of as a follow up, the election was pretty recent, so do you have any thoughts you'd like to share about it?

KW: Ugh so relieved for one, but I also recognize we have so much work left to do that- I think it was just sort of a skin of our teeth we got... I think when Obama was elected after eight years of Bush, I remember just like, just letting go of the wheel, taking a nap in the back seat and then was so shocked when Trump got elected, but like, I didn't realize until I kind of read up on it, Obama deported two million, he drone strikes on folks right, like wasn't the perfect president, right? I mean, a lot of us have healthcare that we didn't have before but we could've kept a better eye on that and I think we need to- I think if anything, like, leaving these very traumatizing four years and we'll still probably be in the pandemic in January, is we really have to keep a close eye on democracy and make sure it's something we don't let go of and I think with being an auntie especially, and being so close to this pandemic- I just remember one morning like a couple months ago, and we had stopped making stuff for hospitals because they were pretty much covered, but a hospital messaged me for N95 masks, and I'm just thinking, you're in a billion dollar hospital and I am at my kitchen table with no shoes on, asking me for medical equipment. Like, if you pull a camera back, this is what's happening, is this how bad this is? You know? Yes, it is that bad. But that- this is a disaster, this is such a mess that me, of all of people crazy performance artist, is like at the center of the storm trying to figure out how to get equipment to people in a hospital. I don't even know that many people who work in medicine, right? [laughs] Yeah, so just many thoughts I have is that we actually have more power than we realize. That I do think that while maybe our auntie work has done- there are probably other ways of us to participate. Hopefully in not such a frantic, exhaustive pace which we've been doing because oh my god the first few months... I even see other aunties getting stressed out because we just gave six thousand masks to the Navajo nation last week and that's a lot of work to sew that many and to find all those materials even post-pandemic. So yeah, I just hope we keep our eyes on stuff and know that it doesn't get easier every election, like that base that has been emboldened to embrace white supremacy and not wearing masks and questioning basic things like, health regulations is only been emboldened and it's terrifying [pause], yay terrifying [laughs]!

IC: So for our last question, so what type of projects or movements or goals would you like to create and conquer in the future and why?

KW: I'm just trying to get through this pandemic honestly [laughs]. It's hard for me to think about the future right now, because this has just been so consuming and I mean, the new project

is the show, "*Kristina Wong Sweatshop Overload*." It's really a living diary of this pandemic, literally I'm performing from my house and my Zoom camera, and there are slides that say day one, I don't do all two hundred plus days, but I think that's been something important. I do want to do something with this auntie community. I don't know that we need to become a nonprofit because running a nonprofit is its own job and when you have a nonprofit you usually have to keep people on payroll, maintain a board, tell the IRS what you're up to, and we're just- I just feel like our format, we've been able to get a lot of work done in the moment in ways that we've been able to work faster than- we've been able to get to some communities faster than the government. And definitely faster than some nonprofits would've been able to reach them. So, but I think it's been a really powerful community rooted in generosity and this radical giving and sharing, we're an intergenerational community, we have mothers and daughters and some fathers and daughters who sew with each other, we're all over the country. During the fires in northern California, we were able to locate one auntie in Napa and mail her a bunch of masks and her home became a home base to distribute those masks to farm working organizations. So it's like, that's a really powerful network and we are also able to get all these coats for standing rock and black hills, for the Lakota people and they're facing subzero temperature and a lot of people die from straight up exposure to the cold and we were able to create little hubs all over the country to collect warm coats to distribute, and for a sewing group we have a lot of money raised. We wouldn't be able to build a hospital, or anything like that with that, but we've been able to do a lot with those donations. I'm just trying to think how to do it without me having to spend this much of my life on it, but that's- I think it's a really powerful story if anything. I hope- I just... At the beginning of this, and it is happening now, but I remember just saying, when I was just feeling so overwhelmed and just feeling like everyone was screaming in my inbox, they needed a mask and I was just sewing and sewing and sewing, I was just like I hope history remembers this work. I hope they don't just- and it's not that we need glory, but I just like to see all these women of color who are doing this sewing and the weight of this failure to respond... I just want them if there's a museum about Covid, I hope it's not just a big picture of Donald Trump and his wonderful response to this. I hope there's a section with the aunties and this crazy effort. I think so many women and their labor- it's like we're forgotten in all this and yeah. I just want that space to be there. Thank you so much for making the time to interview me.

IC: Thank you for letting [laughs] us interview you!

KW: Of course!

IC: Yeah, it was really...

ZG: Yeah, thank you so much!

KW: You have to transcribe this mess, so good luck! [all laugh]