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3-28-2018

I Want to Say It Plain

Paul Tran

Washington University in St. Louis

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Recommended Citation

Tran, Paul, "I Want to Say It Plain" (2018). *Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition*. 62.
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec/62>

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I Want to Say It Plain

We seldom talk about it. Since escaping Vietnam in 1989, my mother resolves to leave her past behind. All I know of my family comes from dinnertime flashbacks and calls made across the Pacific while I pretend to sleep. The desire to extricate personal and public history, to write into silence and reveal that which demands I live in fear of its knowledge, propels not only my mission as a Vietnamese American poet and historian, but also my efforts to assemble a collection of books by descendants of refugees and veterans of the Vietnam War after the Fall of Saigon.

Growing up in San Diego, California, in a tailoring and dry cleaning shop on Adams Avenue, I became what Edwidge Danticat calls *an accident of literacy* as I read library books beside my mother's sewing machine. I translated aloud Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Claude-Michel Schonberg's *Miss Saigon*. These texts, written by white men unable to exorcise what state actors call *the Specter of Vietnam*, made clear how Americans imagined the Vietnamese: jungle savages with necklaces forged from human tongues seducing innocent soldiers; kids ablaze or stacked, corpse upon corpse, in rivers of blood; men hanging from mangroves, their heads mounted on iron spikes with stickers of the CBS logo—a lidless oculus—taping their eyes shut.

Mastering language meant mastering monstrosity. Each letter, each sound, each word, each thought entering my mind like gunfire was an attempt to rescue the image of American democracy by depicting Vietnamese people, things, and ideas as inadequately built for freedom and absolving the United States of its defeat at the hands of *commies* and *gooks*. Like Oliver Stone's *Platoon* or Frank Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, these texts convinced my mother and me that we were not worthy of the lives we built out of servitude, food stamps, project housing, and ceding our freedom of speech to belong.

But I knew this was false. I knew the magic my mother and women like her marshaled everyday. I knew the joy, tenacity, resolve, and wit latch key kids like me extracted from adversity, abjection, abandonment, and the alluring possibility that we might exact revenge on circumstance. So I sought texts that record the blight and brilliance of Vietnamese refugees and their children, that render us more than nail technicians or technicians of empire, and rejected assimilationist tropes designed to ratify capitalism in the face of our Cold War enemies.

This led me to le thi diem thuy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. Set in San Diego, in a neighborhood fifteen minutes from my mother's store, le's novel follows a daughter of refugees as she comes of age and into her desires. It is the first text I read in which no Vietnamese person dies. It is the first text I read featuring a queer female subject at the heart of its plot. It is the first text where I saw myself powerful, dynamic, complex, and most importantly, as a conduit for looking at the human condition. No book or film about the Vietnam War I previously devoured offered Vietnamese subjects as more than prop. Nearly a century later, they all reify Rudyard Kipling's *The White Man's Burden*, a poem describing Southeast Asians as "half-devil and half-children" requiring "the light" of modernity and therefore justifying U.S. overseas imperialism. le's novel, instead, confronts the project for American global ascendancy through a queer female subject whose experience of race, class, gender, sexuality, and migration reveal the neoliberal pitfalls and contradictions of progress that are often masked as constitutive of shifts in contemporary power.

The Gangster We Are All Looking For gave me not only instruction but also shelter during the most difficult years of my life. Upon leaving San Diego for Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, where I trained as a twentieth century social and cultural historian, the novel was my only artifact of home. Reading it transported me back to Adams Avenue, back to my mother's sewing machine, the sound of her humming as her needle dug in and out of an oleander silk dress. The novel sat on my shelf as I succeeded and struggled in my studies, navigating being the first in my family to graduate high school and matriculate to a private

institution where few came from or cared about lives like mine. I never felt alone with le's words watching over me.

Even when I was raped the night before my twenty-first birthday in my junior year dorm, the characters le dreamt into life wrapped their arms around me, kept me warm against the rain ceaselessly falling outside my room and inside my soul, and helped me to rejoin the world again, months later, when attempts to convict my assailant of his crime failed to yield any justice and countless incomplete assignments threatened my academic standing. I spoke each word aloud, felt them hovering in the air, and determined to keep going. Nothing I endured in this life, I thought, compares to what my family surmounted for me to get here, and to that end, I could not give up. I could not surrender my body. I had to blaze on.

Since that night, I continued amassing a library of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry written by Vietnamese and Vietnamese American authors who descend from refugees and veterans of the Vietnam War. The authors include Lan Cao, Ocean Vuong, Hieu Minh Nguyen, Bao Phi, and Bich Minh Nguyen. The most significant book in this library, however, is Cathy Linh Che's *Split*, a collection of poems about intergenerational trauma and sexual violence. The speaker is a Vietnamese woman who survives rape and fights to define survival on her terms. Che's poems found me at a time when I felt as though all the doors to my future were closed. Though I graduated from Brown in May 2014, I did not have the grades or standing to pursue an academic career. I moved from Providence to New York City with no job. I had no friends. I only had my books, like *Split*, to light my way.

It was Che's collection of poems that spurred me into poetry, the notion that I could be a writer, and inspired me not only to create the primary sources by which the people I love are better documented, studied, and understood, but to create an artifact that might one day rescue someone like me from depths that extend into darkness and more darkness without end.

My poems begin when an idea or music produced by a curious combination of words compels me to confront what I do not yet have rhetoric or courage to: what leads us to violence

and helps us justify brutality? What happens to us during violence and helps us, as Audre Lorde said to the Modern Language Association in 1977, “transform silence into language and action”? Like le and Che, I write to record my observations of American life and repudiate false accounts by the “victors” about the “vanquished.” I write to understand how a split self sutures and makes sense of the world, its complex and contradicting mythologies, and I employ the skills I have been sharpening in workshop with Mary Jo Bang, francine j. harris, and Carl Phillips in The Writing Program at Washington University in St. Louis to dare my own death each time I think and speak—each time I draw my blood from a blank page.

Published in *The New Yorker*, *POETRY Magazine*, *MTV*, *NYLON*, and elsewhere, I am working on my first book of poems examining U.S. Empire from contact to present. I use my training in U.S. social and cultural history to turn over the prism of autobiography until I see what resists recognition. I explore commonplace ideologies in American life that support and oblige state and non-state actors to reinforce state goals such as slavery, imperialism, and rape.

Using this library of and contributing to expanding Vietnamese and Vietnamese American writing, I plan to become a professor that reveals to students the inextricable link between poetry and history: how have poets influenced U.S. domestic and foreign policy? How have state goals influenced poets? How can poetry reassemble a wounded world? How can it cauterize the wound? I am interested in mining literature, film, and criticism derived from and informed by the Vietnam War as my scholarly terrain.

Literature, and specifically assembling my library of authors from the Vietnamese diaspora, enabled me to choose articulation over abjection, knowledge over kneeling at the feet of my aggressors. As a poet and professor, I will marshal the entire province of human existence, the tragedies and triumphs that convened us here, to expand what Claudia Rankine calls the “un-policed imagination.” I will, as Danticat asserts, “create dangerously.” I am an immigrant artist. I am an accident of literacy. I have no other choice.

Sample Bibliography (more available upon request)

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