

Viet Thanh Nguyen in Conversation with Andrew Lam

On October 28, 2017, the Center for Literary Arts of San José State University hosted an evening with MacArthur Fellowship-winning author and scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen, who gave a reading from his Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, *The Sympathizer*. Afterwards Nguyen was joined on stage at the Hammer Theatre by author and journalist Andrew Lam. Their conversation was followed by a brief question and answer session with the audience.

Andrew Lam: I want to preface this by saying that I've known him since I was a teenager because I was his brother's friend. Even back then you were reading Jane Austen and wanted to be a writer.

Viet Nguyen: Absolutely

AL: And here he is. So when you won the MacArthur genius award a few days ago—at least when the news was announced—Facebook kind of lit up, and people were writing to you. I just want to say on behalf—if I can say I can represent anybody—of the Vietnamese American community, if we can have a group of people to represent—to congratulate you publicly. [Loud applause from the audience.]

It's a lot of money. [Audience laughs.] Vietnamese—we talk about money.

Lam and Nguyen simultaneously: We talk about money.

VN: I didn't tell my dad. My dad called me and said, "You won \$625,000! People in church told me about it." So I knew that would be more meaningful for him when Vietnamese people gossip about money.

AL: Right. Because it was like, "Oh my god, I know he's going to win the Nobel Prize next, and how much he's going to get?" And I had to research,

Jessie Mai Fussell and Olivia Lee transcribed this for *AALDP*.

and I'm thinking it is like \$1.2 [million]. Dude, that's also a lot of money, so work on that.

VN: Let's not get ahead of ourselves.

AL: But I think it's kind of ironic in the sense that here we are at a time of really troubled history of our contemporary America, while the political definition of what an American is is kind of shrinking, right? And we have this sort of racist White House with "Build the Wall" as a chant. And you have two Vietnamese refugees sitting on stage talking about literature.

And it's a strange time, and I want you to get in on that explanation where you know, it's not just you—it's splendid—but there's also Ocean Vuong who won major awards for being a poet, and this play in New York called *Vietgone* is making a splash by Qui Nguyen. Then you have someone in Canada who was shortlisted—Kim Thuy—for the Booker Prize. I can go on and on actually, because it would expand it to all these Southeast Asian achievements, and I'm counting all my friends who won the Whitman Award. And all these novels out from the Hmong and Cambodian community. It's just expanding.

It's a very odd time when [in] cultural production, you see Asian Americans making waves, and yet, you have this kind of strange xenophobia that is closing in at the same time.

VN: Well, I think of the historical view, which is, as I said earlier, that the xenophobia is not new. It's cyclical in American society. Now we're like, 'Oh! Oh! Oh! We're shocked'—just the liberals here, I'm not speaking for everybody... or even the Republicans feel this way too, right? "Oh my god! We have Donald Trump after Obama!" To me, that's not a surprise. It speaks to the central contradiction in American society, which is that we have the American dream and we have the American nightmare that's been with us from the very beginning. We're the inheritors of the Original Sin of this country from genocide, colonization, appropriation of land, to rape, slavery—you name it. And so, none of this is new. None of it is new. It just comes and goes in cycles and in waves. And so we went to one extreme—if that's what

you want to call it—by electing a black man for president, and we just went to the other extreme to elect an unqualified white man for president.

Another thing I have to mention is that the reason why I know it is cyclical is because when we got here in the late 1970s, my parents opened the new Saigon Mini Mart on Santa Clara Street [Audience applauds.] There's some shoppers here? Wasn't that a great place? [Audience laughs.] I walked down the street on Santa Clara, and there's a sign there on some store window, and it said "Another American driven out of business by the Vietnamese."

AL: Wow.

VN: And that's the same story as "Make America Great Again." Because when someone says, "Make American Great Again," they mean before you and I came to this country, right? And so it behooves us when we talk about all these successful Vietnamese American and Asian American writers [that] the reason why we have this opportunity is because America feels guilty. So America knows that there's some bad things that's happened in the history of this country, but if Viet wins the Pulitzer Prize, then it can't be all bad. We're not as bad as Vietnam because Viet can't even publish in Vietnam—but Viet can publish here in the United States, so the American Dream still exists. And so it behooves us not simply to accept these kinds of things but to say, "No, wait, let's go back and see how it is that we as Vietnamese Americans or refugees or Asian Americans fit into the larger picture." It's up to us to build these coalitions and alliances to draw the bigger historical picture and not simply to rest on our laurels and spend this \$625,000. [Audience laughs.]

AL: Feel free to use it how you like, but we'd like to know—so put it on Facebook. [Audience laughs.]

I want to address the voice of *Sympathizer* as well as the anger that's inherent in it. And in some way, the anger that you have against this kind of monolithic American view of the world. I can share it with you as a journalist: I went to Vietnam on the 30th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam war writing about it, and there were journalists from the U.S. who came along. We went to this lecture by the UN on the degradation of the environment.

During the war one million hectares were destroyed. And afterwards, with population growth and population pressure, 44 million hectares of forest land were destroyed. And one journalist, I don't want to say which paper—it could be *The LA Times*, I don't know—said this out loud: "Are you saying the Vietnamese are capable of destroying their own forest?" And I wanted to reach over and slap her pen off or something because of course, we're not nymphs sitting around waiting for you to drop bombs on us. We can also destroy our own forest. But she was stuck on the Agent Orange story because that's the monolithic narrative. She can only see "what we did to you" as a way to self-flagellate, but it was a side story if they destroyed their own forest. I think that anger infuses your writing in some way. Can you elaborate?

VN: Sure. I mean of course there's anger at being depicted as a stereotype, you know, to be raped, massacred on screen, never to have anything to say and so on. But there's another kind of anger directed at what you're talking about, which is the condescension and the pity that are involved in thinking about Southeast Asians simply as victims. Now you might think that's a good thing, right? You know that if you think of another population as victims, and we'll do stuff to help them—but it's to permanently infantilize them. It's to take away their voice so that when we actually speak, we won't be heard because we're not supposed to have subjectivity.

This is a dual-edged sword because if we claim our subjectivity and speak up so that we're not just victims—we can't simply then just be victims. That's why I said it's important to claim our humanity and our inhumanity, to acknowledge that we're victims of Agent Orange and that we turn around and we also destroy our forest as well. And that's perfectly understandable.

AL: Because life is complicated.

VN: Life is complicated and things are screwed up. I used a four-letter word at the end of the book to talk about this.

AL: So then how does a minority community, a minority writer, get to claim their centrality besides winning the Pulitzer Prize? I mean, we write from the edge often enough, from the margins, and a lot of us find power in that. Because we're misunderstood, so we're going to write our anger right in our [work]. But I mean, is there a formula for this? Or how does one claim one's history back and still share the larger narrative?

VN: There's a couple of ways to answer that. You know, number one is that when someone gets a prize—not just me, but anybody else—there's a tendency to think the individual won the prize. And this makes sense because we live in a culture that inherits Romanticism, this idea that the writer is an individual genius, and that may be true. [Audience laughs.] I did not mean to say that! But I always think about the fact that my writing is made possible by all the generations of writers who've come before and all the generations of activists who've come before to create a space in which, when you and I publish, there's already Asian American literature. So that we could at least be recognized as Asian Americans because previous generations have fought for that recognition. But can you imagine what it was like to be a writer who was of Asian descent in the late 19th century, and they were there—Edith Eaton, Winnifred Eaton—you know, they were very lonely people.

AL: Or Frederick Douglass, right?

VN: Or him, too. So we have to acknowledge that there's a relationship between literature and political struggle, and the writer never accomplishes anything just by herself or himself, especially the minority writer. So any time a minority writer wins a prize and doesn't acknowledge the histories that have come before, you're seeing that sleight of hand of becoming a voice for the voiceless. It's all the struggles of the voiceless people that made the voice possible.

And the other issue with this is to refuse to accept our position in the margins and not to think that there's a binary between the center and the margin. This is a very common binary that is offered as a false temptation to those of us who are people of color or any kind of minority in this country—and it doesn't even have to be racial. The temptation is, 'Okay well, you're a minority, why

don't you just be *universal*, like us?' Are you a *minority* writer or are you a *writer*? That's an example of the false binary of the margin and the center, and we have to refuse that. That's why I look to writers like Toni Morrison. Toni Morrison says "Yeah, I write about black people, so what?" From that experience, you can find the universal. You can't back down and say the only way to find a universal is to write about a divorced couple in a Connecticut suburb suffering from adultery and cancer. That's a very specific experience, which is universal, and I'm perfectly happy to read it. Now, can that divorced couple read about our experiences and acknowledge that that is universal, too? But it's up to us as writers to also make that claim.

AL: But it's also complicated because I think if you get famous, like you, then they move your book from "Social Studies" to "Best Seller." But me, I'm still in the Vietnamese American studies section. I try to get at that universal while still dealing with my own stuff, but you know, something that we should talk about is fame, which can be a double-edged sword because it moves you towards that center that maybe you've been fighting all along, right? It might be — I'm just wondering. What kind of effect does that have on you? Because the anger is part of "You don't get me, but I'm going to explain." What if now that you have expressed yourself, will there be the anger that fuels the writing?

VN: That's a very good question. That's a logical question to ask: 'Why is Viet so angry?'

AL: Yeah, why are you pissed off all the time? [Audience laughs.]

VN: I think of anger as a very useful emotion. I mean, potentially. There's a force of anger that overwhelms you, that makes you do terrible stuff – not a good anger. But for me, I went to Berkeley for college. I got radicalized. I got very angry.

AL: I remember you protesting.

VN: Right. I got arrested and all these kinds of things. And I'm totally proud of that. But it's very hard to sustain that kind of anger over a lifetime. I've

dialed it down—I think of my anger as a pilot light; it’s always on, it’s always low. If you meet me in person, I’m never angry. We’ll have a good drink, a good conversation. You can say offensive things to me, and I can still smile at you—but I’m going to remember that. [Audience laughs.]

AL: Trust me; he will! [More laughter.]

VN: So I think anger is very useful. It keeps the writing hot.

AL: What if you exorcise it, then where’s the energy?

VN: Well, I don’t know, check in with me a little bit later.

But to get back to your question about being in the Vietnamese American Studies section, that’s why I’m saying that literature can’t be divorced from political struggle, because if we expect literature to change the world, it can’t. It can’t.

AL: I agree.

VN: Because all the people who need to be changed, they’re not reading books. [Audience applauds.]
How do I know this?

AL: Because of the president...[Audience laughter.]

VN: But if you go to Amazon.com—well that’s true—but literally, if you go to Amazon, in the author page that you have, and it shows you where your books are sold. And my books are sold—surprise, surprise—in the blue parts of the country. And so, literature is very powerful, it can move people, but people need *to want* to be moved. Meanwhile, we’re left with the unequal society that we have that puts me in this section and you in that section. That’s not just; that’s not fair.

AL: It’s not just! [Audience laughter.]

VN: We need a political movement to change that.

AL: Speaking again of fame, is there a danger in being the go-to person now that you are on the roster of every—because I've been a journalist for a long time and I know we're pretty lazy. It's like "oh something happened to the Vietnamese, let's call Viet Nguyen up for a quote", and that happens. Is there a danger in becoming the representative of the community?

VN: Absolutely – the Ken Burns' documentary of the Vietnam War just came out. And yes, I got a dozen invitations of "What do you think about this?" And my standard reply was, "I'm tired of being a professional Vietnamese." Because that's what we are. There's a reward to that, but it's a trap at the same time because people will just go talk to the professional Vietnamese; we don't have to deal with anybody else. That's a career opportunity, but it's also a trap because then you spend all your time, in this case, talking about someone else's work, about the Vietnam War, about Vietnam—and I just refuse to do it. One of the reasons I refuse to do it is because I wanted to let other people be professional Vietnamese. The more professional Vietnamese we have, the more opportunity we have to get different voices out there to change the nature of the conversation.

I am being signaled that it is a good moment to switch it to the audience. Thank you so much.

Q&A with the Audience

Although there were no microphones available to the audience members in the theater of more than 500 seats, Viet Nguyen listened carefully to each audience member's question and then summarized and restated it for the benefit of the rest of the audience. Below we have provided a reconstruction of the audience members' questions and Nguyen's response. It was inspiring to see him turn a room that size into an intimate conversation.

Audience Member: Could you share a little about your writing process and the emotional journey while writing the book? What was your community in the phases of drafting and redrafting?

VN: Basically, the emotional journey sucked. Sorry to... I don't know... gosh... you know what, if you don't need to be the writer, don't be a writer. It sucks. I'm pretty sure I've done 10,000 hours, as Malcolm Gladwell says is what you need to become an expert at something. And what that means is, as a writer, you're just sitting at a room, staring at the computer screen or whatever and however you choose to write. And some people have chosen a better room than other people. Mine is just a white box. And that meant that for 10,000 hours, I lived in California, and I didn't see the sunshine. Didn't go hiking. Didn't go skiing. Didn't do any of those things that make California great. And it was a very difficult experience because any kind of art is difficult to learn. And any art, besides being 99% sweat and 1% inspiration, is basically 99% rejection and/or misunderstanding. No one cares if you're going to be a writer. If you're a Vietnamese, your family least of all. They're like, "Are you kidding me?! Just don't write about us in your stories, but meanwhile, go to work at the grocery store." So there's a lot of obstacles along the way. Part of it is internal, and this is for me, just struggling with the difficulty of learning how to write, struggling with neglect, of security, rejection, frustration. For me it was very particular because I have two careers – I'm a professor, a scholar, and also a writer. I basically decided that I was going to do both at the same time, and it turns out I did both things equally slowly. For 20 years, I felt I was living in obscurity; no one cared about what I was doing; blah blah blah. And I got lucky. I had a happy ending. I have a fairy tale ending to my story. And so I can only look back on it and think would I have still done all this stuff even if all these riches weren't at the end. And I think I would. That's what all of us who are writers have to ask ourselves. Would you do this – would you suffer through all this – even if your book would never see the light of day? If you answer yes to that, then be a writer.

Audience: Growing up in San Jose, did you feel much discrimination in your schooling or in the community?

VN: Rarely did I hear a direct racial slur or anything like that, and I was very lucky that I had a very privileged education. My parents sent me to St. Patrick and then to Bellarmine, which are very elite schools, so I think I was insulated from a lot of that, if it existed. But there was that sign: "Another American

driven out of business by the Vietnamese," and there were those movies – *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and so on. What I learned from that is you don't have to be called a racial slur in order to experience racism. No one needed to call me a gook to let me know that a lot of Americans knew that word because they were watching all these Vietnam War movies. That's a form of racism, that the Vietnamese people were erased, were silenced, were distorted, and that's a very powerful form of racism because it completely eliminates our humanity, or inhumanity as the case might be, from the American imagination, from the world's imagination because these American movies were being exported everywhere. And worst of all, it erased possibly, our own humanity from our imagination—that we thought we were just stereotypes. In some ways, I wish that we didn't have the generic, universal racism that's institutionalized because it's very hard to fight. In order to fight that, you have to transform the institution. Look what's happening with Harvey Weinstein, how difficult it is to transform Hollywood, the institution, which manufactures these images that are racist and sexist and so on. It's actually much easier to deal with someone who calls you a racist slur to your face.

Audience: You capture the psychology of a liar really well in your book. Did you have a duality in your own experience?

VN: I'm a pretty good liar, actually. I don't know about all Vietnamese people in this room, but for me to survive as a young Vietnamese American, I had to lie a lot to my parents. And I think these were good lies. I kept my parents happy. And I could do my own thing. Because I don't want to pick fights with my parents about every single issue, so I had to lie for my sake and their sake. I experienced that duality very early. Basically, I grew up feeling, in my parents' household—my parents' very Vietnamese household—that I was an American spying on their strange customs. And when I stepped out, among the other Americans, I felt like I was a Vietnamese person spying on these strange Americans. I just took that duality, and I put it into the character in *The Sympathizer* and exaggerated it greatly because my own life is not very interesting. His life is much more interesting. But his duality, the opening line in the book is that "I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces," that duality is my duality greatly exaggerated, because I think it's not an

uncommon experience for those of us who are minorities—again, however you choose to define minority—to feel duality.

It goes back to W.E.B Dubois's *The Souls of Black Folks* where he said to be a negro in America is to always see yourself through one's own eyes and through the eyes of white people, the majority. That duality, that condition of always seeing yourself in two ways is universal for any kind of minority. I think it's universal for everybody. We all put on a face that's not ours; but for people who are of a majority, that's a choice, that's a social choice. For people who are a minority, that mask is put on us. And we all have to negotiate with it. I grew up having to negotiate, having to always put that mask on, and take the mask off in some circumstances, and I took that experience and turned it into fiction.

Audience: The white people in this world, or in this country, are not going to be majority for too much longer; we'll be a country of minorities. Do you see that changing things for the better?

VN: Not with our current electoral system. I think it does change things, obviously, culturally and economically. We're seeing some of the consequences of that at the level of politics and what happens with the elections and all of that. Will it change the country in a positive way or will it lead to a greater dissension or struggles and division and so on, and I don't know the answer to that question. I think that it depends on white people. I really think that's the answer. I think that those of us who are minorities already know what it's like to be a minority. And we know what it's like to experience duality—to negotiate, to make concessions to get along, to make the system work. White people traditionally haven't had to do that as an entire group. There are obviously people who had to do that within that classification, but in general, when we speak of white privilege, it exists. So it depends on whether people are willing to give up privilege. Are men willing to give up privilege? If men aren't willing to give up privilege, we're going to have a battle. If white people aren't willing to give up privilege, we're going to have a battle. So a lot of it depends, not just on minorities or those without power or those who are less powerful, but with those who have more power

collectively. If those with more power can give up some of that power and share it in a society with minorities, it'll be great. But I can't guarantee that.

Audience: Not all white people are the same. A lot of white people are refugees; Italians were refugees; the Irish were refugees; many Europeans were refugees.

VN: So the comment is that not all white people are the same. Absolutely right. I speak this from the perspective that not all Asians are the same either. And some white people are refugees, the Irish, Italians, and so on. The difference is that you can be Irish or Italian and come to this country, and a generation later, you can be white. But Vietnamese people or Somalis or Syrians, we don't have that luxury. There's a difference between ethnicity and race. Now you look at the example of the Irish, you go back to the 19th century, and you look at the depictions of the Irish, it's racist. Irish depictions were equivalent to negroes, African Americans. But somewhere along the way, they stop being of color. And they became John F. Kennedy. That's the mechanism of racial differentiation in this country. We definitely need to acknowledge the heterogeneity of white people, the fact that there are rich white people and poor white people, but if poor white people are going to align with racism, against people of color, we got to call them out for that, too.

Audience: Can you comment on the religious imagery that you use in your writing?

VN: The easy answer to that question is that I grew up Catholic. My parents were born in the province of North Vietnam that was famous for producing hardcore revolutionaries, basically communists, and hardcore Catholics. My parents were hardcore Catholics. So I grew up steeped in Vietnamese Catholic culture. And Vietnamese Catholic culture is generic Catholic culture multiplied. I grew up with a very religious education through St. Patrick and Bellarmine, so I'm very aware of all the allure of Catholic symbolism, Catholic history, Catholic theology; and for a writer that's a very rich history. Because we know that if we're writing in the West, there will be huge resonances with people who were raised Christian, and that they'll know these kinds of images.

Like many other writers, I deploy these images very deliberately in these books.

Audience: Are you going to sell the rights to the film of *The Sympathizer*? If so, are you concerned about what Hollywood might do to your vision?

VN: Am I selling out to Hollywood? The short answer is I am selling out, but not to Hollywood. I tried to sell out to Hollywood with all these writers, actors, and so on. And we came very close. I found a producer who was an Asian American woman—if I mentioned her films, you'll know what they are, very powerful films with African Americans in them. And we were on the same page, great conversations. We were on the same page racially, politically, aesthetically, and so on. Then she went off with my vision and she and my agent negotiated for a long time. And finally, she said we can't do this unless we get Keanu Reeves. The point is, you cannot sell a story with strong Asian or mixed Asian leads in Hollywood. That was the message I was getting for the budget we needed to do this. So we're in legal negotiations with a European producer, which I felt like that actually makes much more sense. Because the editors who bought my book – it was rejected, by the way, by 13 out of 14 New York publishers – but the 14th publisher was English. And he was of mixed-race descent. And I thought, yes: Americans don't get it. The 13 editors couldn't see that this book could be sold. And likewise, you can't trust Hollywood to think that they'll do a good job with this book as a movie. And then of course, if the other producer still screws it up anyways, I can just blame the producer.

Audience: How did you settle on the device of the confession for *The Sympathizer*?

VN: When I started writing *The Sympathizer*, I knew it was a first-person narration and I knew I wanted him to talk to somebody – I just didn't know exactly who. By the time I got to two-thirds of the book, I realized where the end of the book was going—without giving too much away, he's going to a re-education camp—I realized it's a confession, because he's going to a re-education camp. If you know anything about re-education camps, the prisoners there are forced to write their confessions over and over and over

again until they satisfy their interrogators and that's what's happening in the book. So there's a historical reason for it.

But the aesthetic reason is actually more important. That is that he's writing his confession, this Vietnamese person to another Vietnamese person. Now when you do that, you don't translate, right? Minority writers oftentimes feel pressured, whether they know it or not, to translate from their minority culture to the majority. Sometimes it's very literal. They'll say a word, *pho*, delicious beef noodle soup. Whereas if I'm talking to a Vietnamese person, I would never explain what that is. And it goes even broader than that, beyond just words, like customs, assumptions, worldviews. So having him speak to another Vietnamese person was my device of preventing translation from taking place. It was my way of saying I'm going to be a minority writer, but I'm going to write just as if I was a majority writer who never has to translate. And everybody else who is not Vietnamese will be forced to eavesdrop on this conversation because I as a reader have always had to eavesdrop on conversations of the majority.

Thank you very much.