Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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[Interview #1]

CN: This is Cynthia Nguyen with Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine. Today is February 12th, 2019. I will be interviewing Alexander Tran at UC Irvine in Irvine, California. Alex, please state your full name, date of birth, and place of birth.

AT: My name is Alexander Vuong Tran. I was born in Orange, California.

CN: And date of—

AT: Date? March 8th, 1984.

CN: How would you describe the neighborhood you grew up in?

AT: I grew up in a predominantly lower class Mexican neighborhood in Santa Ana.

CN: How would you describe your life at home growing up?

AT: I would say it was pretty typical. I grew up in a suburb. I went to school. Both parents worked and took care of me when they came home.

CN: How would you describe experiences in your early school life?

AT: Being outside of the house was always difficult for me, so I always had anxiety about going to school. It was always like I always had a stomach ache before having to go to school.

CN: What was the demographic of the school?

AT: Demographic? I lived in Santa Ana, but I went to school in Garden Grove, so most of my classmates were Vietnamese Americans too.

CN: How were your relationships with classmates and teachers?
AT: I moved schools a lot, so I never really developed a strong bond with my classmates like other kids who lived in the same neighborhood and went to school with the same kids in their neighborhood, and stayed in one district from kindergarten to 12th grade, so I moved a lot.

CN: Were there ever any issues regarding race?

AT: Not really, cause everyone there was pretty much Vietnamese.

CN: Were your teachers also?

AT: No, they were usually white.

CN: What was your first language?

AT: My first language was Vietnamese.

CN: Do you remember having to learn English?

AT: I did and I didn’t have to learn English really until I started school and that’s when I feel like I lost a lot of my Vietnamese.

CN: How do you feel about losing your Vietnamese tongue?

AT: Somewhere along being in school and having to learn English and speak English, I started to be embarrassed about my skills with Vietnamese that I had lost so—

CN: Like with family?

AT: Yeah, with family. So at home, I spoke English and so did my parents. My parents were bilingual, so they spoke English and Vietnamese, but when they spoke to me they spoke in—they could speak in Vietnamese, but I would respond to them in English. My parents did put me into like Vietnamese language classes, on days I wasn’t in school like Saturdays and Sundays which I hated, along with religious classes, those usually came together. And I’m very happy that they did that because I can read Vietnamese I just don’t understand what I’m reading. I was never very proud of the Vietnamese language because it was not the mainstream.
CN: You told me you had a Vietnamese name before, tell me about that.

AT: Yeah, so I had a Vietnamese name. My name was always Vuong, but when it was time to put me into school, probably in kindergarten I think that’s what it was, my mom had written on a napkin the name: “Alex”, which was my American name, and she tells me, “This is your American name. This is the name, you’ll be using at school.” And I remember crying and saying that’s not my name. But that’s my name now.

CN: Where and when did you go to college?

AT: I went to college in 2002, right after I graduated from high school. I also went to high school in Irvine. Where I went? I went to UCI, so this is the school that I dropped out of.

CN: How was your parents’ reaction to that?

AT: So things were going pretty much downhill in my emotional life and my relationship with my parents, so I just remember that the whole home life situation was already a mess, so I mean, there was a lot going on and this was just another disappointment.

CN: Tell me about your parents. When and how they came to America.

AT: So my parents were first generation Vietnamese. My mother came to America in 1975, as well as my dad. My mother was sponsored after the Fall of Saigon because my grandfather was, I believe he was a driver that worked for the U.S. Embassy at the time so they were sponsored. And with my father, his father was a translator for the U.S. Embassy so his family was sponsored by the U.S. that way.

CN: And how did they meet?

AT: They first met in Oklahoma, where they were sponsored by religious organizations as refugees, and I believe they met in college, but I don’t remember exactly.

CN: How would you describe growing up with immigrant/refugee parents?
AT: I mean, it’s the only upbringing I know, but I knew we were different. Even though I grew up in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood, or Mexican neighborhood, I wanna say like I remember my neighborhood was mostly white at the time, but over time, it slowly became more and more Mexican so—I’m sorry I forgot what the question was.

CN: How would you describe growing up with your immigrant/refugee parents?

AT: I have to say that American culture had a strong influence in my childhood. I watched a lot of TV and that’s—I think from that I realized that we were different. We weren’t like *Full House*. I think that’s when I realized we were different.

CN: Was traditional Vietnamese culture present in your childhood?

AT: It was. We were very close to my aunts and uncles, who lived in the same county, and I grew up with my cousins, so there was a lot of us that are around the same age. And my grandparents lived in Westminster/Garden Grove where there’s that big population. And my grandparents were very big on their heritage and they still held onto the Vietnam that they lost so they held onto their traditions and I’m lucky that they shared that with us.

CN: Did you have any special cultural traditions growing up?

AT: I’m always going to remember Lunar New Year, which is very Vietnamese, and my grandfather would actually dress up in his áo dài and give out the Vietnamese red envelopes. I would remember that more—it’s almost the same as Christmas.

CN: Would you just celebrate that at home, or would you go out to festivals?

AT: It would always be at my grandpa’s house, but we would go to festivals too.

CN: Do you have any siblings?

AT: I have two. One is my younger sister, she’s around 27, seven years younger, and then there’s my brother who’s 20 something, 12 years younger than me.
CN: How would you describe growing up as the oldest?

AT: There was a lot of pressure being the oldest son, especially in Asian culture. There was a lot of expectation, a lot of pressure, to set the example and to be the most successful in the family. Basically to carry the family name.

CN: Did your family practice a religion when you were growing up?

AT: My parents, actually my grandparents were very devout Catholics, so in 1954—actually both sides of my family were Christian or Catholic—and in 1954 when the border had opened in Vietnam, my grandparents immigrated with his family to the South for his political stance. So, they were very Catholic and my mother was very Catholic too, so she was basically the religious force in the family. My dad's parents—I think my grandmother on my dad's side was Catholic, but my grandfather had adopted another—I think when they were sponsored to America, my grandfather was sponsored by the church of Christ and he followed that religion and kind of forced my grandmother to follow that Christian faith. So there was a lot of fighting in his household over religion and I think that's how my father got a very bad impression of religion. So he was never the religious one. He hated going to church. He would always either not go or just kind of hang out outside until it was done.

CN: So did you have to go to church when you were younger?

AT: Yeah, my parents would make me go to church. I went to church until I was fourteen years old. I went to First Communion, I was baptized, all that church general stuff.

CN: Oh, what did you think of that when you were younger and now?

AT: I think being immersed in Catholicism is—No matter what my thoughts are on religion at the current time, at the present moment, I think I will always have that Catholic fearing guilt, like I'll never be able to get rid of that. Like if I see a church or a statue of Mary, I'll act right. No
matter what I believe, I think just growing up in that tradition, you just can never shake off what
you've learned. I can't say that I'm a Catholic, but I'm still afraid of God.

CN: Have you ever talked to your parents about the war in Vietnam?
AT: No? I mean, because my parents were always there to remind me how lucky I was and how I
was not taking advantage of all the opportunities I have and what they didn't have. So, my
parents did talk to me a lot about the war and that's how I developed this negative feeling
towards my heritage because I would hear about Japanese culture or Korean culture and they had
a refined culture where, what did we have? We had war. We had death. We had suffering. We
had poverty. What was there to be proud of? We were just lower class Asians in a sense.

CN: Did you ever visit Vietnam with your parents?
AT: Not with my parents. In 2007, I did take a trip to Vietnam and people would ask me like,
Have you ever been back to Vietnam? And my response was, "I've never been". Even though it's
where my heritage is, I don't feel like that's my true home. When I came back, I didn't feel like
yeah this is my homeland and now I know where I belong. I felt like an outsider and I think a lot
of that has to do with the lingering animosity from the war between those who had left and those
who were left behind and the cold divide. There's still a lot of resentment, when I had gone,
between Vietnamese people and Việt Kiều [overseas Vietnamese]. We weren't really seen as one
of them.

CN: And you still feel the same about it now?
AT: I think things have changed. I remember when I went to Vietnam, it was like a wild west,
like it was the next frontier and the economy and business and life was booming without
regulations so that's why I compare it to the wild west. And now when I hear people talk about
Vietnam, I think the young people have forgotten about the war and are ready to move on from
that and look into the future. And I think a lot of that has to do with the internet where the world is a lot smaller now and people can see what other people have and they strive for that. And I think it's the older generation of Vietnamese here that still long for the old way. Who still hold onto those resentments and that pain. I think the young people of Vietnam are more interested in opportunity.

CN: What is your current job title?

AT: On the weekdays, I am a pharmacy technician and on the weekends I am a freelance makeup artist. Very different.

CN: How did you come to both of those?

AT: So I was working in the pharmacy and one of my coworkers had just graduated from FIDM, a design school, and we had become friends and we recognized that we both were really interested in—we were both artsy fartsy. So I was like, "Hey, Kelly." And this was during the time when youtube was blowing up with makeup gurus and tutorials. And I was like, "Hey, Kelly let's go to makeup school." And next thing you know, she found us a school and that's where it all set off. That was maybe like five or six years ago. I still do it now. I enjoy it.

CN: And what about your pharmacy tech job?

AT: I mean, it's a really good job. It pays the bills, but I went into that with going to pharmacy school eventually in the back of my mind, but that never panned out. And I think I would've been really bored, had I followed through with that. I would've had a lot more money, but I think it wouldn't have been as fulfilling.

CN: Do you think you'll be doing either these things in the future?

AT: I think I'll always want to do makeup because it's that creative force that I need. I think that if it were a full time job, I'd hate it. I think that because it's something that I do on the side, I can
still enjoy it, but if it were my whole livelihood, I don't think I would enjoy it the same anymore. And part of me thinks that the reason why I wanted to go into pharmacy school was because of the influence of my culture and my parents. You're not a success unless you're a doctor or lawyer or engineer. It's very stereotypical. I was like any other kid, I want the acceptance and approval of my parents. And the concept of success and making it in life is definitely influenced by my upbringing. There was always that part of me that had to be creative, which my parents didn't approve of because it didn't make money and I fought with them because I was an art major in school and I really had to fight for them to let me be an art major.

CN: What did they have to say about that?

AT: They were like, "Why are you going to college and going into such a risky profession that won't pay you back? That's completely impractical." And I understand now for first generation Vietnamese people who had escaped the war and lost everything, how that experience would influence them to be practical minded.

CN: From your personal experience, how would you describe that intergenerational communication?

AT: It was hard. I wanna say that sometimes there was almost no communication. I felt like we didn't even understand each other, like we were just completely irrelevant to one another. I'm sorry can you elaborate on the question?

CN: Like, well i guess my follow up question would be what do you think could assist different generations as they attempt to communicate and better understand each other? So how would it make that process better?

AT: So now, looking back on the difficulties I had communicating and seeing eye to eye with my parents, I'm more understanding. They were first generation Vietnamese people, with their own
experience. I was born here. I never saw war. I never lost my country. I never experienced all that suffering. I'm pretty amazed for them to have put up with me, you know, this basically American kid, with kind of American values. But, I think it's a lot of things. I think that parents generally will not see eye to eye with their fifteen year old kid, but to add this cultural divide and this two different experiences, just adds more difficulty to that mix.

CN: Have you ever encountered racism?

AT: Yes. I think—Yes and no, because growing up I went to school in a very Asian, Vietnamese dominant community. I would say I would have experienced soft racism. Once we'd left this very multicultural bubble of Southern California or California in general, like on the East Coast, when people would ask me, *Where are you from?* And I would say, "Oh I'm from California. I'm from Irvine. I'm from Orange County." And the follow up would be, *No, where are you really from?* And it's usually from someone who's not Asian. Usually someone who's white, sometimes black, or sometimes some other ethnicity or race than Asian. I think that I didn't experience racism just from the dominant race, the dominant society, like I experienced it from black people, Mexicans, all kinds of people.

CN: Do you have any connection with your Vietnamese/Vietnamese American community?

AT: I do, I volunteer for this organization called VROC, which is the Viet Rainbow of Orange County, and it is a social advocacy group that focuses on LGBTQ issues, specifically within the Vietnamese community in America.

CN: How did you find them?

AT: How did I find them? Actually when I was in college, my friend Hieu [Nguyen], we both met through the LGBT resource center here on campus. I used to be their publicity coordinator. We developed friendships with other students on campus who spent their time and volunteered
for the center and I lost touch with Hieu for a few years, but thanks to social media and Facebook, we reconnected. And around that time, Hieu became somewhat of an accidental activist and was upset that queer Vietnamese were not going to be allowed to march in the Bolsa Lunar New Year Parade. So that got into the papers and he started to kind of rekindle this VROC organization, which was already there, but I think he brought another generation of interest to it. So I get involved with their events and it's really good.

CN: Before VROC, how would you describe the relationship between first generation Vietnamese community and the LGBTQ community?

AT: I think it's a lot of misunderstanding and hostility and lack of acceptance. Looking at Asian culture, sex itself is very taboo. My parents wouldn't talk to me about sex and sexuality. When they're already very reserved about discussing sexuality, adding this issue of being gay, which I identify as, it's really difficult to get them to understand and to even just raise the issue. There's so much shame. Sex is seen as something so shameful, I find in the Asian culture, that to take it to the level of sexuality that is seen in the larger society as deviant, my parents were like, "Why are you doing this to us?" like they just could not—they were like, "You're watching too much TV. Where are you learning this from?" They thought that this was like an affliction of American culture, There aren't gay people in Vietnam. There aren't gay people in Asia. This is not something we talk about. This is not something we've heard of. You have had to have learned this from Western culture. And that was difficult. Recognizing my sexuality and trying to come to terms with that and trying to get acceptance and approval, and not receiving it, made me resent my heritage and Asian culture. I think that experience was really difficult.

CN: And did you find most of your support from VROC and on campus?
AT: I did, but not having that parental support, I think was the most important. No matter who you are, I don't think that you want to be unloved by your parents or feel ashamed to be who you are in front of them. Even to this day, I couldn't talk to my grandparents about dating and stuff.

Being raised Catholic, I still have that fear of God, that Catholic fear, even though my rational mind says, *You're not even Catholic.* Subconsciously, that root is always in there and that reaction, that gut reaction, that gut fear will always be there. So I think being raised to see homosexuals as deviant and as a lifestyle, as an illness, inside I will always have that little bit of hatred for myself and lack of self acceptance. But that's why VROC is great. That's why the LGBT resource center on campus is great, because it's a way for me to talk to and connect with other people and really accept myself and talk back to that cultural conditioning and analyze it. I think that with straight people, like my parents, they don't have to question love and relationships. It's just, it's mainstream and once it's mainstream, they just follow the path, but when you break free from that mainstream, you have to question yourself. You have to question norms and really look into why do we do things and why do we act the way we do. I think growing up gay or growing up different really makes a person have to analyze deep inside of themselves and look at culture in ways that, say people who are born with inclinations that fall within a mainstream, don't. I remember my parents, one time, asked me, "Well, how do two men do it?" And this was further down the line, and even I was embarrassed to try and explain that to them. But I'm glad that I got to the point that they were able to get over their own taboo, their own embarrassment to ask me that question, so I was proud of them. But at the same time I was like, Oh *my god, my parents are asking me how I do it.*

CN: And what is your relationship with them today?
AT: Today, thankfully—it was a hard road, but they've accepted me and I'm really grateful for that. I wouldn't say it was easy, it was a struggle. It was painful and sometimes I forget how hard it was, like I look at the acceptance today and I'm like, *Oh my god, you millennials have it so easy, you can be like queer or whatever and it's cute.* But back then, you got disowned. You got beat up. But, there's still young people, who experience what I experienced and I have to remember that. I can't forget how difficult that path was, take it for granted.

CN: What do you think is most important for Vietnamese Americans to remember about their heritage or history?

AT: That's a difficult one. Good question. I feel like the Vietnam that my parents remember, the Vietnam that they lost, is quickly disappearing. I feel like that even the Vietnamese from Vietnam are forgetting and—I'm sorry you're gonna have to ask the question again.

CN: What do you think is most important for Vietnamese Americans to remember about their heritage or history?

AT: I wanna say that it's important to remember our traditions, to value them and not forget them, and to keep them alive. It's hard because part of our tradition is to not accept queer life and culture, to accept differences. I think that's kind of the weirdness about it. Tradition will have those negative connotations of being stuck in your ways and backwards and not being able to accept different perspectives. I think it's important for Vietnamese Americans to be able to balance both holding on to their traditions and heritage, but at the same time being open to different lifestyles and cultures.

CN: Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to talk about?

AT: I don't know, you're the interviewer.

CN: That's the end of the interview.
AT: Oh, yeah?

CN: Yeah, is there anything else you want to add?

AT: Is there anything that I brought up that you wanted to go into more?

CN: This one's kind of about culture. Growing up Vietnamese American, were your parents' cultural values different from your own?

AT: Oh definitely. I think my cultural values were influenced by school and the media. Had I been isolated in their house, they might have been exactly the same, but I was a different generation from them, growing up in a different world. They had a completely different childhood and experience than I did. I think that's where a lot of the misunderstanding came from and I don't know that non first generation Mexican Americans or Italians or say—have that same issue.

CN: I guess I'll ask you more about VROC. How often do you participate in the stuff they do?

AT: I'd say lately every two weeks. Recently we marched in the Vietnamese New Year parade and I'm really proud of the organization because they were able to—What was it that I had said to Hieu? I had said to him thank you, because Hieu is like the head, I said, "Thank you for showing the Vietnamese community that the queer community is also part of that fabric." We exist. and I had to say, "It's this organization and the brave people who are willing to speak out that speak up for those who are too afraid to or can't. And to say we're here, we're queer, but we're also Vietnamese too." It's queer people in a Vietnamese community. There doesn't necessarily have to be a separation. When I was growing up with my parents, when they told me, "There's no such thing as gay in Vietnam," or "Those people go to jail. This is an American thing. This doesn't exist." But thankfully this community, VROC, lets the world know, No, there are queer people in every culture and every walk of life, every society. That's great. I wish I had
that. There's a lot of parents involved who are kind of changing the face of what traditional Vietnamese, the older generation, think about what queer looks like. Sometimes you just gotta get in peoples' faces.

AT: I think being a second generation Vietnamese American, I felt in a limbo. I didn't feel American and I didn't feel Vietnamese either. I felt like I didn't belong and it was somewhat of an identity crisis. And I had that same crisis where with coming into understanding my sexuality and what I had learned about sexuality from growing up. Like does this mean I am a man? Does this mean I am a woman because I like other men? Is there something wrong with me? I never felt like I belonged to a particular side of a spectrum. But the experience of being different, of being in between or without belonging, to come to terms with it forced me to define for myself what I was. I didn't really necessarily have to be either or, I just had to be me. As long as I wasn't out to hurt anybody, that's all that really mattered. And I could be either. I'm learning that I don't have to be one or the other. I can be a little bit of everything and isn't that better than just being one thing?