Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: CUONG NGUYEN
Interviewer: Adrienne Nguyen
Date: November 27, 2012
Location: Irvine, California
Sub-Collection: Vietnamese American Experience Fall 2012
Length of Interview: 01:02:06, 00:35:49

Field Notes

This interview was conducted at Mr. Cuong Nguyen’s house in Irvine, California, on November 27, 2012. Present during the interview was the narrator, Cuong Nguyen, and the interviewer, Adrienne Nguyen. We followed the protocol and signed all of the consent and release forms before the start of the interview, and I answered clarification questions he had.

Both of us had pretty long days—the house is currently undergoing construction, and it had been pretty difficult to get my dad to agree to a time to have the interview. It was appropriate then to exercise my fear of failure in the class to get him to finally sit down with me to have the interview. Since were both home, and since we are father and daughter, we were dressed pretty similarly—slippers, sweat pants, and sweaters. Comfortable physically, even though it became quickly obvious how we were both dreading this interview, and showed that my dad had been avoiding me almost as much as I had been avoiding actually doing the interview, since at any point I could’ve said that I was on the verge of failing to have the interview.

The interview started off really rockily, and I found myself—despite thinking that I had been prepared, both theoretically and in practice with the workshops—stumbling over words, not engaging as well as I could, just trying to rattle off every single question on the list, possessed all of a sudden by the importance of trying to address the question sheet as if it was a survey on which every question was of critical importance, without really engaging as deeply as I could have with the material at hand with what my dad tended to say. We were both facing each other the entire time, but our bodies were also tilted in the direction of the microphone, and while I was staring at him the entire time when I wasn’t looking desperately down at the questionnaire for more guidance—oh, and he had requested to look at the questionnaire prior to the interview, so he knew what kinds of questions were coming, though I hadn’t thought to tell him that I’d have follow-up questions on the spot, which led to a point in the interview where he stared at me blankly when I asked him something that was clearly not on the questionnaire—and in any case, he wasn’t ever really looking at me.

Especially when we got to the more difficult parts of the interview—I’ve talked to my dad about the war before, and as I mentioned during the presentation, he’s always been a lot
more candid about certain things that I thought I’d be able to tease out of him during the interview as well, but he silenced himself, kept it inside—something reserved for private spaces only, though I did share it with the class. It was bizarre, seeing an entirely new side of my dad—he was still my dad, and a lot of what he said was still things that I had heard in some form of another—which led to my slacking off in some ways; I realized that I never asked him to clarify what he studied in college, which was computer science and engineering, though his employment history could probably hint at that—but in some ways he became more open to me because though I was his daughter, in his space as his daughter, he also eventually warmed up to me as a burgeoning scholar who was really interested in his words as an academic.

Because of that shift in rapport—oh, rapport, that was difficult and hard and uncomfortable and confusing—I heard things I’d never heard before. He’d told me that he’d been put in jail, but I never knew to what extent and what his experience had been like. I don’t think I’d ever even thought to ask, simply because it was something I didn’t want to ask. But as this other side of me, I pressed. But at times I could recognize that there was a disconnect between the two selves my dad and I had both drawn for ourselves, and he would return to being my dad, and I would just be his daughter again, and we were both made super uncomfortable by the sudden tension and the weight of the words being exchanged. Sometimes, too, I knew that he was getting emotional, and I didn’t know how to deal with that—which is a human failing of my own, to start, but I had also never seen my dad get emotional about anything, barring drunken enthusiasm about football and a good bottle of wine. This was uncomfortably real, and it was... enlightening and uncomfortable all at once.

Rapport was a really weird thing to establish. I think I do it a lot better with strangers because I am pretty good at pretending that I am an engaging and warm person, but when people already know me well, and I know them well—I didn’t think that would ever present a problem, but I think it would depend on to whom I was talking and what we were talking about. If I had been told to interview my dad about his recreational habits when he was in college, I think the tone of the conversation and the rapport would have been a lot easier to build, but because this was a topic that I think I approached too confidently, thinking that because we’d talked about it in depth before that it would be easy to just have a conversation—it wasn’t. The microphone completely changes the situation, and discussing deeper and more meaningful things without the occasional flippant remark is a lot harder to navigate with my dad, given our usual relationship of flippant remarks and general easy going natures.

I mean, in general, it was just more stressful and a lot more difficult than I thought it would be. Without that rapport I assumed would be there as a safety net, I had to navigate through the fall out of that assumption and try to make sense of how I could approach my dad with sensitivity and respect, but also take advantage of the fact that I am his daughter to get him to tell me things that he otherwise wouldn’t say to other people. I think by the end of the interview that was achieved, partly because I remembered our oral history training, partly because we’d been talking for so long that a sense of comfort established itself, partly because the topic got less heavy, i.e., less laden with trauma—and it got easier. But oh, all the moments of awkward, extended pauses and “ums,” and other spaces, wow, those were about fifty times more uncomfortable with my dad than I ever thought they could be. If my transcript was an exact replication of the audio, I think it would become clear really quickly how difficult this was for both my dad and I to navigate, because on top of the awkward pauses were moments when he
cleared his throat, when he coughed, when it was clear that he was emotional and I was just staring at him, wondering what was going on. That was a particularly off day for me, I think.

In any case, though, my dad is a really great narrator. It was good that I could have an off day and be mostly silent, because he is really good at carrying silences in the sense that he knows how to fill them. I asked a couple of non-open-ended questions, and he bounced right off of them without needing a follow-up question to continue talking. He’s good at elaborating and giving lots of detail and tangents, which is pretty much a sign that we’re related by blood. It was difficult and it was uncomfortable, but like I said—enlightening. I’ll be a lot more careful about the assumptions that I make, and be sure to have a follow-up plan to catch myself, and try not to overestimate the level of my preparation, because apparently whenever I think I am prepared, I am grossly unprepared.