

Novel Dialogue 2.7

Viet Thanh Nguyen in Conversation with Colleen Lye

Transcript

AV

Hello and welcome to Season 2 of Novel Dialogue, a literary podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies. I'm Aarthi Vadde. My co-host and partner-in-pod is John Plotz. We'll be taking turns hosting episodes throughout the season. Novel Dialogue brings critics and novelists together to talk about novels from every angle: how we read, write, publish, and remember them.

Today we are honored to have Viet Thanh Nguyen and Colleen Lye in the virtual studio.

Viet is the author of the Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Sympathizer* and its equally thrilling sequel *The Committed*. These novels give new meaning to a confessional style by refusing to tell the reader what they want to hear. They move seamlessly across spy fiction, criminal underworld, and critical theory, which is unsurprising given that Viet is also the author of two academic studies, the first entitled *Race and Resistance* and the second *Nothing Ever Dies* about Vietnam and the memory of war. He is also an op-ed writer for the *New York Times*, where he addresses the politics and policy around migration, Asian American experience, and the role of literature and film in American Society. So glad you could join us Viet, it's a pleasure to have you here.

VTN

Thanks for having me, Aarthi.

AV

And then Colleen Lye is our sharp and discerning critic. She is an associate professor of English at Berkeley and a leading scholar of American literature, Asian American studies, and postcolonial theory. She is the author of the prize-winning *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature* and has co-edited journal issues on representations of Asia and the place of the humanities in the public university. She is now working on a book about Asian American contributions to Marxism and the radicalism of the 1960s. Welcome, Colleen.

CL

Hi, great to be here.

AV

Yeah, wonderful to have you both. I've been anticipating this for a while and I now pass the virtual mic to you, Colleen. Ready to go.

CL

So, I wanted to mention to you first off that I recently gave *Chicken of the Sea* to my nephew for his birthday and we read it together up in Mendocino where I took him for a special birthday trip, over breakfast with pancakes and I thought it was so cool because, well, he really loved it because he loves pirates and I was partly trying to get him to love chickens as much as pirates. And so you know it's one of these books that as the adult, you can't also help but read it at a different level and so I kept

thinking about your redemption of pirates, who are predatory characters, right in other of your works. And they're the enemy of the refugee.

VTN

Well, first of all, let me just say that you have now made my day, that Colleen Lye, the esteemed scholar and critic, fearsome critic and scholar, has initiated a conversation on *Chicken of the Sea*, which is fantastic. And I have to say, you know, the whole thing about pirates and chickens, I have nothing to do with that, you know. My then five year old son came up with this entire story of *Chicken of the Sea* and since this is a podcast about novels and writers and critics, you know one of the critical things for me to stress as a critic and scholar who became a fiction writer, is that creativity is its own strange thing that is so difficult to quantify and to theorize. I mean the output of it, we can theorize and criticize, and all of that, which I'm happy to do. But the creative impulse itself that generates stories, I think, is really mystifying to me. So with my son, you know at five years old he was deeply immersed, he is deeply immersed, in storytelling, loves narratives, loves images and he's a sponge for narratives. And so I think one way to think about this is that he's absorbed the mythologies of chickens and pirates and what they symbolize in terms of violence and adventure, on the part of pirates. Because when kids see pirates, they don't see the history of pirates and what pirates really did. They see this sort of children's version of pirates as a site of adventure.

CL

So much of what I want to talk about with you, which is how, I don't know theory, comes through your work in this really interesting way and how you move from writing academic criticism to writing fiction. But that one of the things that doesn't die, to sort of reference your book title, your other book title, is theory in the fiction. So that's another way in which you're sort of getting at this problem.

VTN

Well, you know I trained at Berkeley, you know, as an undergraduate and graduate student in English and in Ethnic Studies, I was well exposed, both as a scholar, but also as a writer, to the idea that art and politics are reconcilable, you know, that you can do these two things at the same time. And of course when we talk about politics, we're also talking about theory. The theory of politics. The theory of how to enact politics in art and then of course also all the other kinds of theories we're exposed to in an English PhD program. And I was always of the of the conviction that you know I wanted to bring all these things together, I just didn't know how to do it. And there is, I think, so little instruction on how to do it. You know before we started talking, Aarthi brought up this question of do you, did I, have an MFA? Am I opposed to the MFA? I'm not generally opposed to the MFA, but one of the things I am very critical about in terms of MFA teaching is that the notion of craft quote unquote in the MFA is, to me seems highly restricted to a certain set of aesthetic practices. Whereas when I was trying to figure out how to be a writer, I was concerned not only with those aesthetic practices like characterization and dialogue and all that, but also with, how do you talk about history and politics and theory in literature. These seem to be also craft or artistic questions. So I had to try to figure out how to do that on my own.

And in *The Sympathizer*, I do think of it as a very theoretical novel because I think of its structure, I think of its political vision, I think that who's included and all of that as coming out of the set of theoretical concerns about how to write anti-colonial fiction and anti-imperial fiction. But in *The Sympathizer* the theory, I think is quite muted. It's incorporated into the structure of the novel, including the ending of the book, it's incorporated into the ways that trauma and violence and memory are dealt with. But it's not explicit, so readers are left to fend with the results of theoretical thinking at the level of fictional praxis, which is, you know how fiction should work in one sense. In *The Committed* I decided to make

the theory more explicit in the sense that there are actual conversations about theorists taking place in the book. And the reaction of some reviewers—I mean, I've not read very many reviews, but you know one or two—has been wow why is there philosophy or theory in a novel? And to me that reaction is so stupid. “Why not?” is really the question. Like if you have not encountered it why are you put off by it? I mean all these people who would be, you know, capable of reading Beckett, for example, who I quote in the book, somehow see the introduction of theory in someone by a writer of color and say that's not, that's weird. We don't know how to how to cope with that.

And my response to that is number one: this is a thriller I find ideas thrilling, so why not? Number two: to pretend that ideas and theories don't have a real world impact, it's ludicrous, I mean, most people have never read Karl Marx, I have, but this is a set of ideas that have mobilized millions of people, and so on and so forth. So it's, you know, to foreground theory or philosophy and fiction I think, or any other form of writing in the United States is to work against the grain of a depoliticized or apolitical aesthetic culture in the United States that doesn't want to see the foregrounding of ideas.

So it was very deliberate for me, for example, to stage a theoretical conversation about fentanyl in the brothel between our narrator and the bouncer at the brothel who is this big Black Senegalese guy who's only called the epistemological “muscle,” and I'm like why can't this happen? Because we know as a matter of fact that a lot of theoretical revolutionary thinking has taken place in prisons, and therefore I assume in brothels. Why not? You know, sex workers have also been involved politically as well, so that was all part of the deliberate design of the novel to, in this case, find an excuse, and I think a very valid excuse in the case of *The Committed* taking place in 1980s Paris, to make people confront some of the political theoretical questions explicitly that I think have been really crucial to me, but also to these people in this setting.

CL

I love that response because I was gonna ask you whether you thought *The Committed*—by the way, I love novels of ideas so you know, I tend to gravitate to those kinds of novels and the fact that it was combined with a thriller, 'cause I also love emplotment, you know, was sort of the perfect novel for me to read, that is *The Committed*. So one thing I was going to ask you was whether you thought that you're, that *Committed*, could be thought of as another version of what Nick Dames has called the “theory generation novelists” that are usually associated with college educated characters who explicitly reference the Foucault and Adorno and the Derrida in their novels, wherein theory makes itself felt in the content and not the form of realist novels and he's talking about people like Jennifer Egan or Teju Cole, Ben Lerner. And of course, these are sort of middle class, college educated characters, but that what you have going on is putting theory in the mouth of characters who didn't attend university, who are—so what you just said about that the brothel is like the open university, or, you know, the university without walls, that you're showing alternate routes for theory, that's super interesting.

VTN

Yeah, I think, I mean I've read those works that you mentioned. And of course you know I've read the more conventional novels of ideas which are, you know, typically kind of bourgeois I guess, or at least featuring you know, highly educated intellectual characters and all that. And I love all of that, I love all of that. That's not to—in my case, I think I wanted to make sure that this was a novel of revolutionary ideas, not just a novel of theoretical and philosophical ideas. And I wanted to also satirize the theorists and the intellectuals themselves. So there's a strand of *The Committed* where, you know, we encounter French intellectuals, and not to discount what French intellectuals have done, because they've obviously influenced me, but my other, one of my other impulses is to satirize power wherever I can see it taking

place, and that would include among my allies, among leftists, among academics, among intellectuals, because in fact, the failures of hubris and political thinking are not ideologically restricted.

When I look at the kind of history that I'm concerned about, it's not just American imperialism. It's not just French colonization that I'm concerned about. It's also you know the thinkers of these particular countries, including you know, thinkers of Vietnamese communism too, who are themselves seduced by their own habituses, by their own forms of power, by their own ideologies. And one of the terrible ironies that we're all, of history that I think we should all be familiar with, is that you know revolutionaries once they have power, you know, can oftentimes abuse the power themselves. That doesn't invalidate the revolutions or the necessity of a revolution. It does to me, raise the question of how do we talk about that?

CL

In terms of inserting Vietnamese character into the scene of Paris and the home of modernism on the one hand or French theory on the other hand, the encounter between Sartre to Fanon, you know, is then sort of interrupted or mediated now by the insertion of this Vietnamese fictional character to think about the other French colony. Yeah, so I'm curious whether that was in your mind. What that would mean if it were?

VTN

I think with both *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* part of the project is to make sure that at the center of a story about the Vietnam War or French colonialism, we have the actual colonized subject. I think that, you know, obviously in my experience, dealing with American representations of the war we were always marginal and in French colonization we are again marginal and so it's not enough, I think for me to simply write novels that insist that, oh, we have to center the stories of Vietnamese people or other colonized people as characters. No, I mean, I also wanted to make us central to the very notions of French colonization and civilization and American power and imperialism so that we're not just the subjects of our own stories, we're the subjects of those stories as well. Because I think we're under either dominant rubric, French universalism, or American multiculturalism, we're permitted to speak as long as we only speak about our particular narrow experiences. We're not expected to engage in a wholesale assault on the very structures that have allowed us to speak in the first place, and that's the ambition of these two novels. So *The Sympathizer* is designed to again not just talk about a detainee story, but to criticize the very nature of American story about the United States itself.

AV

Can I jump in there, because what you are talking about with respect to Vietnamese voices, insisting that they are part of, they're part of the whole American fabric and can take ownership of the American story, seems to me of a piece with something like *The 1619 Project* that Nikole Hannah-Jones was the force behind and the degree to which white America was threatened by an origin story that began with slavery, and so I'm curious whether you think the Asian American, maybe if I can use the word commandeer since there's a referencing to commandants in *The Sympathizer*, for us to commandeer the narrative, do you think that it could possibly be as threatening to a white narrative as say, *The 1619 Project*, given the history of race relations in this country and how binary it is to this day, despite attempts to pluralize the resistance?

VTN

I think it can be threatening, judging from the hate mail that I received. And whenever I say American imperialism, either explicitly or implicitly, or talk about what the United States has done overseas in my

fictions or in my essays for newspapers and magazines, I typically will get a, you know, variety of negative responses criticizing me. But I think that, I think no, it's answered to your question. I think that *The 1619 Project* has drawn as much controversy as it has precisely because it is about a claim to the foundations of the United States and saying the foundations of the United States are itself already corrupted through slavery, and because in fact that it's true and we see the ongoing consequences of the racialization of black people, the ongoing legacies of enslavement and its consequences and so on, in the very fabric of the United States, very structure of the United States today, people bringing that up are going to provoke a really, really powerful backlash precisely because it is and still perceived to be so central and so threatening to core American ideas.

Now the idea of Americans are imperialist is also threatening to those core ideas as well, but because American imperialism today, or you know, throughout the 20th century has been conducted outside of U.S. boundaries, or at least the boundaries of the continental United States, Americans have a much easier time compartmentalizing that and not thinking about that.

CL

That is to say that going transpacific, going transnational is something that Asian Americans themselves have to be conscious of in terms of not being American exceptionalist, on the other hand, American empire is a real thing, and so, but with the American empire declining, then it's really hard to sort of navigate that relative position of where to situate, especially the Asian American.

This brings me back though to, I still want to come back to *The Committed*, which I totally appreciate what you're saying about that the intervention is making this not just about centering Vietnamese stories within literature, but also using a Vietnamese character in the case of *The Committed* to challenge political theory itself, and that seems to me what's going on here, and one of the things I couldn't help thinking about was how *The Committed* is, insofar as it's been thought of as being too American like some of the reviewers have said, Oh, this is like not really authentically somehow French in terms of looking at racial relations in France. It's very American in terms of how it's depicting that scene. I see this in a way as you're taking French, Americanized French theory back to France.

VTN

Some of the debates in France right now around the question of race, you know that there's this huge controversy there where you know some French people are saying that the thinking around race that's happening in France today being led by these younger insurgent French people of various kinds of colonized descents are somehow too American that they've been influenced by American thinking, and that this therefore invalidates the position of these particular activists and thinkers. I mean what that indicates to me is that the thinking around race and imperialism, and so on in France, is no longer, can no longer be contained simply to the possibility that you have to talk about this in a French way, whatever that means, because it's more complexity involved. The circulation of ideas, as you're pointing out, has gone bilaterally in two directions, and so as you said, you know a lot of what we would characterize as American thinking about race has been deeply influenced by French thinking about colonization.

CL

And you come to this writing of fiction from a training as an Asian Americanist, and in a way you're moving from that particularity to a kind of universality through becoming a writer. That's kind of how I read you biographically but I'm wondering whether maybe we could start by your reading out this

amazing quote from this afterward that you wrote to this recent anthology. The afterward called "Becoming Bilingual" from 2016 and it starts with "Letting myself feel through language."

VTN

"Letting myself feel through language saved me as a scholar and academic and a writer. It saved me as an Asian American, too. Once or twice over the hard decade of learning to write I would say in public that I was no longer in Asian Americanist. The commonplaces and conformity of thinking and practice in Asian American studies dismayed me. But I've not yet been able to leave Asian American studies, and perhaps never will. What I love about Asian American studies and the Asian American culture that has been influenced by it and vice versa, is the sense of duty, service, community, solidarity and justice. I share those values even if I think that in their exercise they can sometimes be unimaginative. Failures of imagination and the pleasures of conformity are not restricted to the conservative. They are human failings, and Asian Americans have sought to prove their humanity in all ways. I've come to recognize and accept these failings in this flawed humanity."

So you know, for me, becoming an Asian American when I was 19 and a transfer student at Berkeley was really important because it was that bolt of intellectual and political lightning that really shaped me as a writer and a scholar, really allowed me to become a writer and a scholar because that was not really something that I thought I could do as a son of refugee grocery store shopkeepers, you know. And so that's all these things that I talked about in that quotation about the sense of mission in Asian American politics, identity and culture happen and are really crucial, and yet at the same time you know, I think as a scholar of Asian American studies and as someone who spends life thinking about these kinds of issues it's also for me you know, obvious that there are some serious limitations to being an Asian American, if we only think about it in the most conventional terms, and because of the nature of racial formation and capitalism and imperialism in the United States, in fact, there's a lot of conventional thinking about being Asian American, that accepts the boundaries of capitalism, the boundaries of the United States, the boundaries of American exceptionalism, and American imperialism. And there is no way that we can deny that. That is also part of what it means to be Asian American.

So we also have to be able to think beyond what being an Asian American is, in my opinion. So I do think a lot about the ending of Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*, which I quote, I think, in *The Committed*, where he talks about that dilemma of being Black, that it's something that you are and something you want to deny. You can't escape from that dilemma because that dilemma is wrapped up in the very nature of racism and colonization that simply can't be willed away even at the same time in our minds, we want to will it away, as he says at the end of that book. And so that dilemma is totally parallel, I think, to being an Asian American and it's parallel because the processes of racialization that produces a global Black peoples is also related to the same processes that have produced the Asian immigrant and Asian Americans as your own work has also testified to.

CL

You're, the title of that essay "Becoming Bilingual" necessarily put me in mind of a dialogue with Kingston, with whose *The Woman Warrior* ends with "it translated well" and it's so much about trying to recover a mother tongue and she has a certain kind of way of resolving or not resolving that problem of the loss of the mother tongue, which is something you also talk about in your nonfiction and fictional writing. You know you talk a little bit about your informal pedagogic relation to Kingston, you never went to an MFA program, how you were asleep in her class. But she's also some kind of mentor. Of course, she's an intertextual reference in "Becoming Bilingual", so I can't also help but think that you went from becoming an Asian Americanist to becoming an Asian American in a kind of universal sense in

reaching your mother, reaching your family, reaching a more public audience through your fictional writing rather than through your academic writing.

VTN

For Kingston, in the language issue and all those things you raised up, very prescient of you to bring those up, because in fact, I'm writing a nonfiction book that is very memoiristic right now and this question of the mother tongue and my mother and Kingston and what happened in that seminar at Berkeley where I fell asleep every day, come up, you know. What happened in the Kingston seminar was that you know my mother had fallen seriously ill and I wrote about it in her seminar and then I totally forgot that I wrote about it because was so painful for me. So I did try to deal with it when I was 19 years old and then it was so painful I tried to forget about it immediately and was unaware that I forgot about it. Until I dug up my archives, like I kept all that stuff in a box in my high school, in my childhood bedroom, and then I opened it up like last year and found what I wrote and I was like Oh my God, I can't believe I wrote this. It's bad writing on the one hand, but also I was like trying to grapple with what was happening to my family and me emotionally at that time.

And I found, you know the letter that Maxine on Kingston wrote to me. And I quote from that letter in this nonfiction book, I have the copy of the letter there so you can see what we were talking about, and I think it's, for me it's important to talk about that because that is the mentor relationship that you discussed that, it would take me 30 years to absorb what happened in that seminar. What I was trying to deal with as a writer and as a human being, what I was trying to deal with as a student ignoring what what Kingston was telling me basically, but not ignoring it enough to throw away the letter.

And it got harder in the sense that I'm focused on these Marxists and domestic issues as a 19 year old, thinking that things would be very clear. We just got to take over some buildings, stage a revolution and in fact things got more complex as you mentioned, with thinking about international issues and the transpacific and trying to take that into account. And now in this nonfiction book I also pick up the questions of indigeneity, things I never thought about really when I was like 19 and throughout most of my professional life, but things that I think are actually really crucial to thinking about what it means to be Asian American. Kingston gestures at some of these things in *China Men* also, for example, but I've also been thinking about what it means to be a refugee coming to the United States, becoming a settler and the work of critical refugee studies and Yen Le Espiritu are really crucial here, but literally, when we came to the United States, we were resettled through a military camp called Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania, and I literally just did not think about that. That's the power of American exceptionalism. It's just a fact of life that you have something called Indiantown Gap. And then for the purposes of this book I did a little more research. And of course the reason why you have a Fort there is to defend white settlers against the Susquehannock people, almost all of whom were wiped out by the end of the 17th century, and that forms the historical crux of my entry. My family's entry into the United States.

Kingston also brings up China, like you know to be Chinese American is inseparable from all these things that happen in China. And likewise you know for me part of what this nonfiction book that I'm writing deals with is the fact that when my parents were refugees for the first time in 1954, when the country was divided, they moved from North to South as Vietnamese Catholics, as refugees, but they were resettled through South Vietnamese government policy and through American funding on the lands of ethnic minority or indigenous peoples in the central highlands of Vietnam. A process that the indigenous people see as colonization and forced assimilation on the part of the Vietnamese Catholic regime, of which my family, it was a part.

So these kinds of complexities are not what I was thinking about when I was 19, they totally complicate any kind of transition I could make from being Asian American to being universal or to being human, because for me to be universal or human without acknowledging these kinds of things reiterates a colonial process in which my humanity, my privilege as being a refugee who can claim a refugee identity as a mode of entry into everything we've been talking about, also comes at the expense of these settler processes that happen in two countries, not just one, so very complicated and something that you know the theoretical and political issues that we've been discussing have helped me to try to cope with or deal with.

CL

Yeah, the Kingston dialogue also puts me in mind since you raised the question of China in Kingston. She has that line in *The Woman Warrior* about how "China wraps double binds around my feet still." And this double negative, right, has been a thing in the Asian-American novel from at least *No-No Boy*, as a way to think about the specificity of the split subject of the Asian-American and clearly your work from *The Sympathizer* on is to try to articulate what that is within the, to me, within the tradition of the Asian-American novel. What is that split subjectivity? In comparison with Du Bois's double consciousness, for example, and so I was thinking, like there's this line from the opening just for people for whom this is not fresh, I suppose. On page one of *The Sympathizer*, famously, it opens: "I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I'm also a man of two minds."

And then a few lines later, you say: "Sometimes I flatter myself that this is a talent, and although it is admittedly one of a minor nature, it is perhaps also the sole talent I possess. After all, a talent is something you use, not something that uses you. The talent you cannot not use, the talent that possesses you, that is a hazard I must confess."

First of all, "the talent you cannot not use." See as a former student of Gayatri Spivak, that's a very postcolonial theory, deconstructive way of articulating the dilemma of a kind of double bind, right that you have a, you're in a situation, "human rights is something that we cannot not want," is something that she famously says, and I see you as articulating a kind of new way of thinking about the double bind of the refugee from Vietnam, almost updating the double bind of Kingston's Chinese American girlhood among ghosts. The double bind of the Vietnamese refugee, updated in a kind of self-consciously theoretical language with this again insider gesture towards those of us who are theory generation people, right is a new way of articulating a kind of universal particular for the Asian American, but now with the Vietnamese refugee as that central protagonist.

VTN

Yeah, good catch with "not not" a very deliberate allusion to Spivak, and in this nonfiction book I'm writing I'm explicit about it, I paraphrase, Spivak's "cannot not want" identity, for example, speaking exactly to this double bind that you were talking about, that again for those of us who are racialized subjects, for example, or colonized subjects we cannot not want to deal with the rhetoric and the ideologies of the dominant societies and powers that have racialized us or colonized us, and so any form of racialized identity or any other form, minoritized or subjugated identity is always going to be caught in this double bind that cannot be unbound except through the termination of these systems of power and ideology.

And so that of course to reach that unbinding is going to take enormous amounts of effort, and therefore in the gap we have all these other liberal gestures at things like you know, color blindness or assimilation into universalism and things like that, which is where the language of universalism and humanity becomes so problematic if it doesn't recognize the very complicated nature of this double

bind, that we can, that's not that we can never be fully human, I think we are fully human. It's that we are also fully inhuman at the same time, either through what has been done to us or what it is that we ourselves do.

AV

So one question that's been coming up for me throughout listening to your brilliant conversation, Viet and Colleen, I should say one word that keeps coming up for me is autodidacticism and I wonder if either of you would feel like you're products of a colonial education. Because it sounds like you were in seminars with mentors, you were resistant to some of their ideas, but they certainly were part of perhaps an earlier moment of either decolonizing or multiculturalizing the university and you're both PhD's, products of the theory generation as you put it, and yet you're not the same kind of novelist as say a Ben Lerner. I mean you're not the same kind of novelist as Thomas Mann novel of Ideas or JM Coetzee. And so I'm thinking about the role of reading for oneself, reading outside the lines of the syllabus, is autodidact, something that you would use to describe either of your own trajectories? Or is it impossible for us to claim that when we all are sitting here with PhD's.

VTN

Colleen, you go first.

CL

Well. That's such an interesting question. I suppose I would say in some ways I'm autodidactic from the perspective of having to constantly find a place for myself within academia because I didn't come from a family background that encouraged that at all. And perhaps that to some extent that's very true of many immigrant, maybe especially Asian immigrant students whose parents want them to, you know, pursue more remunerative or you know clearly economically upwardly, mobile kind of professions. So there's always this feeling of being an outsider within academia because you have struggled to kind of connect that kind of academic world with your family world. So there's a lot in Viet's work about trying to write so that his family can read his books that resonates with me. And what resonates with me about that is that somehow trying to reach the family and also reach the public end up overlapping in this interesting way. So what can my mother read? That's something that's kind of moving about Ocean Vuong's work as well is that it's so much about being able to reach his mother through fiction and poetry.

And so there's a way in which one is an autodidact as an immigrant, it seems to me even while being formally trained because it's like being doubly orphaned or something because your entry into American life via academia, which provides a kind of refuge or home, also somehow disconnects you from your family for many, That it not necessarily all Asian Americans, you know, some of whom do come from middle class or highly cultural capitalized backgrounds let's say in Asia. So that that part of your question resonates with me and I connect with that in Viet's work.

VTN

So mentioning Ocean Vuong, I do quote from him in the nonfiction book that I'm writing, where he talks about the orphaned language, like you know the language that he's working with is orphaned and I decided I'm not going to use that metaphor for motion because he already did it so, but I think for me maybe a different metaphor is an adopted language, because I was thinking that you know I came the United States when I was four. I was a native speaker of Vietnamese at a four year old level, right. And, of course my Vietnamese stayed there as I acquired English and I think for me it was very complicated, learning English was not complicated, but the mental, the unconscious thinking that I was going through probably was complicated, that I had some at some point made the decision I'm going to master English,

as complicated as that term might sound, and I'm going to give up Vietnamese. I don't think it was necessarily very, very deliberate. I wasn't thinking through this politically, but in retrospect this was a very conscious political choice on my part with huge emotional consequences for me and my family. And so I, you know, I decided not to pay attention to Vietnamese. And so a lot of my thinking is well, what do I call my languages, Vietnamese and English? Are they mother tongues, native tongues? And to me, you know, how can I call Vietnamese a native tongue or mother tongue when I can't speak it beyond the level of like a child? And English is not a native tongue or mother tongue for obvious reasons, but it feels like a native tongue and a mother tongue. And so the language, the notion of adoption, I think, resonates with me, that I've been adopted into the English language forcibly, and I've chosen to adopt the English language and that produces, though, that produces ambivalence, that part of the double bind that you're talking about. Like I cannot not speak in English. And I cannot not speak in Vietnamese. I still feel bound to that language as well and still struggle through trying to acquire that language.

And in that sense I think that on the autodidact question, one of the things that I found really seductive about academia is that it was not autodidacticism, that here was a very clear career path unlike becoming a writer, you know very clear career path, and I can just jump through the hoops. It's like becoming a doctor like my brother did, do what I'm supposed to do and I can become this professor. And that's pretty much exactly what happened, but, and I did not choose the other route of becoming a writer, which has, you know, MFA track and so on. There are some hoops there, but the hoops are not as well laid out. And so I became an autodidact in the sense of teaching myself how to write fiction. And I think that is true, that as I said earlier, that the MFA track and the ideological aesthetic assumptions of American literature didn't resonate with me, so I had to teach myself what I needed to learn to become the writer, kind of writer that I wanted to become. But in doing that, I also impacted myself as an academic, that I ruined myself as an academic in the sense that I thought, oh I cannot be the academic that I was trained to be in graduate school. I will never be, you know, these like these idols that I had because I'm not that kind of a scholar anymore. And in that sense also then I'm autodidactic in that sense because with this nonfiction book I've had to, you know, rethink nonfictional form to accommodate who I am as a person, who I am as a writer, and who I am as a scholar, that none of the forms that I've seen have been, are adequate to what I want to accomplish, so if and when this book is finished, you know turning in the first draft I think in a month or two and if the form of it stays, you'll see, I think that it does try to do stuff that is not conventional. And so in that sense, you know formal decisions are for me very much autodidactic when we reach a moment where we discover that the forms that we've been given are not sufficient to what it is we need to talk about.

AV

OK, so I feel like we've been through the wringer of intensity and now we're ready to relax a little and. So Viet, in *The Sympathizer*, I recall your narrator having this wonderful line "Weapons I professionally admired, but vodka and novels I loved," and so we in Novel Dialogue like to ask every novelist on this show: what do you do, eat, drink or play when the writing process gets rough? What do you do to see yourself through?

VTN

Oh sure, I mean it varies, basically, you know, just based on the time in my life. But video games I always resort to and I'm a terrible gamer, so I'm not devoted to it because, you know, I'm just afraid I'll become addicted. So even for example, when I was writing my dissertation, there was a moment when I just went out to Target and I bought Sega Genesis, played it for a week until I was sick and tired of it and I returned it. So that's what I do. I still do that with whatever video game is happening, you know. So my last thing was playing solitaire a lot. No, was it solitaire? No, playing hearts on my iPhone for months

and months, so there's always a different video game at some different stage of my life. What I drink is whiskey relentlessly. I'm trying to be better about it, but honestly *The Sympathizer* was written on drugs, you know. Legal drugs.

AV

Legal drugs, okay.

VTN

But I mean literally *The Sympathizer*, every single night of writing *The Sympathizer* I would drink whiskey and Ambien, which is a combination that you are not supposed to do, but it worked great for me because I really needed to go to sleep. I just had, I was like I have a kid coming, you know and I gotta finish this novel before he's born. I can't waste any time. I have to turn myself into an efficient machine, so literally I would be very healthy. I would run like 4 to 6 miles a day after writing and then before going to bed I would drink myself to sleep with Ambien to make sure I was ready for the next day. So I don't recommend this process to anybody but whatever magical synthesis happened it sure worked for producing *The Sympathizer*.

AV

Well, this will be our Novel Dialogue exclusive, whiskey and Ambien. Thank you both so much for doing the show. It was really a pleasure to have you both on and a thrill for us.

And I would just like to thank our sponsors that include the Society of Novel Studies for its sponsorship and acknowledge support from Duke and Brandeis Universities. Nai Kim is our production designer, Claire Ogden our sound engineer, Hannah Jorgensen the transcript editor and James Draney is our blog editor.

Past episodes include Kamila Shamsie talking to Ankhi Mukherjee and Corina Stan in conversation with Caryl Phillips. From all of us here, thanks for listening to season 2 of Novel Dialogue. If you like what you heard, rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts.