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American Tamed Tongues

I stared blankly at the empty test sheet with my head bowed down in embarrassment, pretending that I actually knew what the Vietnamese words meant. The tiny plastic chair, one that was meant for kids half my size, scraped noisily from my growing panic. *I'm supposed to be good at school. I'm supposed to know my language. I'm supposed to be in a higher grade for my age.* The truth was, I *excelled* in English, but I could not read nor write proficiently in my native language, Vietnamese. My throat closed from the swell of shame that erupted in my chest. I was never going to be good enough to be a real Vietnamese.

I was 14 when I had embarrassingly sobbed in my final exam for my 4th grade Vietnamese class. I didn't like Vietnamese, or more precisely, *my* Vietnamese with its garbled sentences that were a cacophony; a music line with staccato notes randomly placed within the measures. My Vietnamese was a stilted mess of fragments. Well, at least that is how I felt growing up: an American girl with a fractured Vietnamese identity.

In *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*, written by essayist and poet, Gloria Anzaldua, focuses on the idea of language as an integral building block to one's ethnic identity. By having the theme of language, she is able to convey feelings of inferiority that manifest when a language is prohibited, limited, and mangled by outside influences. She ends on an empowering stance of how ethnic identity perseveres even after it has been battered by those outside influences. Although the essay ends on an optimistic note, why is the erasure of ethnic identities such a

classic American component? As a country that has been founded on systemic racism, it is not surprising that there are still plenty of byproducts from this system that people of color face in modern-day America. Anzaldua's personal experiences with ethnic identity may have been subjective, but they have the power to overlap and acknowledge other people of colors' experiences growing up in the U.S., such as mine, and to provide hope that the remains of our ethnic identity will survive.

As a first-generation immigrant, I have seen firsthand the chipping of Vietnamese culture within myself and my American-born relatives. Like many other children of immigrant parents, my first language was the language that my parents had spoken at home, Vietnamese. When my parents were busy working and I was too young to be on my own, I was still immersed in Vietnamese when I was in the care of my relatives. I thought in Vietnamese. I ate Vietnamese meals even when we had to go out of our way to get the right spices. I lived in a Vietnamese home in America; the land of social mobility where relatives back in Vietnam thought that dollars are just slapped into palms because of how easy it is to make money. To escape the poverty of their villages induced by the Vietnam War, my parents came with hopes and dreams of a more fulfilling life for their children. Unfortunately, those same hopes and dreams fueled the first step in taming my tongue.

A parent's job is to make sure that their children are equipped with the necessary skills for their future. When immigrant parents do not have the English that is needed for their children to obtain jobs and an adequate education, they become desperate. Anzaldua recalls a memory where her mother was "mortified that [she] spoke English like a Mexican" and directly urges her in Spanish to speak English (to get rid of the accent) in hopes of getting a good job and education, (Anzaldua 35). This urgency for English to be the more maintained language isn't

uncommon. The same urgency had appeared in my home and to eventually lose a native tongue is not uncommon in America. I have met many teenagers who cannot speak their ethnic language. *But,* to have Anzaldua's experience represented to people of color is rare and to have mastery over both languages is rare. To have a figure like Anzaldua exist despite the familial pressure to integrate into American society sends signals to the mind that even if a language has been lost from assimilation, it can be regained again. Our identities are flexible and have the ability to reintegrate our ethnic pieces; there is hope.

What is the next step now that we are motivated to recollect our tamed tongues? It's difficult to know where to start when there are no clear distinctions that would mark someone within their ethnicity. There is a significant murky-in-between of intersecting identities that Anzaldua addresses in the middle section of her essay, acknowledging that these identities fall in the line of a spectrum and may make people feel as though they do not exactly fit within one identity or are not enough to classify as either identity. Although she has been speaking to quite a broad audience, for American-born, or others who were not born in the country of their ethnicity, Anzaldua's statement of "Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul—not one of mind, not one of citizenship," (Anzaldua 42). The reframing of ethnicity as being a state of soul is a direct refutation to the "requirements" that someone may feel obligated to fulfill before they can call themselves by their ethnicity. A state of soul cannot be quantified in the same way that someone could say, "you have to follow this (ethnic tradition) if you're a real (ethnicity)!". Similarly to her use of the word, "citizenship", as a faux requirement. Her definition is extremely validating because a state of soul can only be measured in a qualitative value; you are comfortable with your identity once you can accept that being who you are is enough.

I too have felt the pressure of needing to follow all traditions or rules to qualify as a Vietnamese person. It was as if the cultural traditions that I already adhered to and enjoyed did not rack up enough points to reach the title. It felt as if I was a circle that was trying to stretch itself to become a square; no matter what I did, I just could not stretch into the corners of the square. From being able to gleam into Anzaldua's perspective, I've realized that these feelings of shame and embarrassment do not last forever. Her inclination to speak English with other Chicanos to provide a neutral territory is an example of how these two emotions can control our tongues (Anzaldua 39). Because shame and embarrassment are such powerful leashes, time and validation have become essentials to the healing and growth of my Vietnamese-American identity. Our self-perception is how we form our identities. With time and support from my family, I have been able to grow into myself and become comfortable with who I am now.

On February 1st of 2022, the year of the water tiger began. I gazed at the red envelope of good luck in bà ngoại's weathered hands for Lunar New Year and prepared myself for the traditional string of wishes that I had practiced reciting the night before. I drew in a breath and tried to calm the dancing nerves in my lips:

"Chúc mừng năm mới bà ngoại! Chúc một năm mới sức khỏe dồi dào, làm ăn phát tài, an khang thịnh vượng!"

I had stuttered a couple of times, but her lips pulled into a wide smile. Praises bubbled from her mouth and pride rested in the crinkle of her eyes. In the warmth of her hug, my shame, guilt, and embarrassment accumulated from the years dissolved; my tamed tongue was released.

Works Cited

Gloria Anzaldúa, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue.” *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987, pp. 2947-2955.