
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Bao Phi Interview

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Interviewer: Elyse Warnecke

Artist: Bao Phi

Location: Phone interview Minneapolis/Chicago

Date: May 21, 2019



Image taken from npr.org.

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200/ AAS 203: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring Quarter 2019 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design.

BIO: Bao Phi is a Vietnamese American spoken and written word artist. Coming from a family of refugees from Vietnam, his escapism and life values he has found in literature have allowed for many great accomplishments, such as poetry championships, several books of poetry collections, and most recently, children's books. He uses his life stories and lessons, as well as current events to guide his audience, as well as his daughter and younger generations, through a rather difficult world. His most recent project has been publishing a children's book illustrated by Thi Bui.

Interview Transcript:

Elyse Warnecke: So, tell me a little bit about yourself.

Bao Phi: Okay, so I'm a writer and a poet, I've been working at the Loft Literary Center as an arts administrator for nineteen years. And I'm a father, I was born in Vietnam, and raised in south Minneapolis. My family were refugees from the war.

EW: What inspired you to write poetry? When did you become interested?

BP: So, I've loved books since I was young. You know, I remember loving books since, like, age of five... And as I got older, going to the library all the time, but... a lot of the books back then were pretty much--I was really into escapism, I guess you would call it, or fantasy, so... a lot of King Arthur, a lot of Greek mythology... all kinds of stuff, like hero stuff, like white male hero stuff, pretty much; comic books, all of that. And, poetry wasn't until, I would say, high school, when, you know, I, as a Vietnamese refugee, working class, poor community, where the American Indian movement started growing up there, there was so much happening around that time; I had two brothers in the military during the first Persian Gulf war, there was a lot of police brutality, and crack cocaine, and, you know, institutional racism and institutionalized poverty out there, or economics and the first Bush. You know, there was so much going on, and I, being a refugee in the middle of it... it was poetry that was an affordable, accessible way for me to explore a lot of these things. And so, I would say poetry, I started writing it seriously when I was about 16.

EW: Oh, okay. That's really interesting! So, before your success as a poet, what career path did you believe you'd take?

BP: I don't even know if you would call what I would have right now success, but... the way that I would answer that question is... when I was young, when I was in high school, the idea of being a poet, like a poet as a life, just seemed completely out of reach for me, you know? Like, you have to understand I was in a working class, working poor family, refugee community of color. And I thought that people who actually published poetry books, they were gods. I didn't know, it was basically like looking at a Hollywood actor and saying, "Yeah, I would like to be a Hollywood actor someday." You know, it was like that inaccessible to me. I knew that I liked writing poetry, I knew that I liked reading it, but I didn't think that it was something I could actually do someday, if that makes sense... And so, there wasn't really a path for me, in many ways I didn't think it was possible to do that, and I wouldn't know how... And it wasn't until I got a full scholarship to a private liberal arts college, and... I took Native American lit for a freshman seminar, and... the person who taught it is Diane Glancy (American poet)... I had always loved reading books, and I especially wanted to read books by people of color and indigenous writers... And that professor, Diane Glancy, was the one who really encouraged me to take creative writing classes, and, really, that's when I started to think about... is this something I can kind of work on? And... even after graduation I spent years working at a restaurant delivering pizza.

EW: Oh, okay.

BP: Yeah, so... I don't have a magical story to tell you, that there was like, something that, you know, happened, and I was like, "Oh, I can be that someday... I really don't know how I got here." I did know that it was a lot of work, I know I didn't do it by myself... I know that I've

benefited from community change, which I was a part of. But it wasn't just me, obviously. And so... there wasn't necessarily one path. I thought it would be, you know, working at restaurants for the rest of my life, honestly.

EW: Yeah, I thought it would be interesting to learn more about that. I've been watching your performances... specifically the one, the reading for Pankake? (Pankake Poetry Reading) There was a lot in that.

BP: Oh, really?

EW: Yeah, I really admire your passion.

BP: Well thank you, I really appreciate that.

EW: How would you define or categorize your work, or yourself?

BP: You know, I'd prefer not to. Like... I'm a writer and a father and, beyond that... obviously I'm proud of who I am as an Asian American and Asian American community and social justice in general are important to me. But... like who I am and how I would define myself, I mean, I have no idea. You know, usually if I have to provide an answer I say I'm an Asian American writer, and that's about it.

EW: Yeah... Was identifying as Asian American something that was also important to you personally?

BP: It became important to me later on... I think that... this country is not invested in Asian Americans being proud of themselves... Asian American identity is not necessarily a thing that's supported in any type of spectrums in this culture and this country. You know, I think that Asians are... pressured to assimilate to one thing or another. Even like, our assimilation away from whiteness is assimilation to something that's not Asian, right? And there's nothing wrong with that, there's nothing wrong with people taking on different identities like... as long as it's holistic and real, who cares, right? But I will say there's not a whole lot of bonus towards an Asian American identity. And so, like many people, as a young person, I wanted to be anything *but* Asian. Because there was nothing cool about being Asian... There was literally nothing cool... maybe Bruce Lee, and that's it... And it took me a long time to get there, you know? I think it took me learning about the struggle of different people who are... lumped into this political organization, like, designation, called Asian, that made me really kind of construct some ideas I had... about race in this country.

EW: In the poem that you wrote to your daughter, you mentioned that you had made efforts to “keep her from the plastic world” you’d “allowed her in.” Tell me about the meaning of that concept.

BP: Well, you know, this world is fake as fuck--everybody’s fake, everybody’s selfish... You know, that poem specifically is about... taking her to Barbie’s Dream House which is... the epitome of fakeness, of plasticness, and... although obviously it’s quite literal in that regard, like the plastic worlds of like, this gendered, racial idea of beauty. I would say that that was a larger statement, like I just feel like our entire world’s really fake. And I sometimes have a deep regret that I brought a child into this.

EW: In your poem “Broken English,” you talk about a specific issue that your mother came across at a store, and the line of white people watching silently.

BP: Yes.

EW: Has anyone from their end ever come forward to try to bring justice to the situation?

BP: Oh, no... no. [Laughter]

EW: How have situations like that affected the lives of you and your family?

BP: Well, I mean, you know, this is the role of Asian people, like we suffer and nobody gives a shit... Like that’s just the way it is... and I think that the best that we can do is try to change that, but, to tell you the truth, sometimes I don’t have a whole lot of optimism. And... there’s a larger question, too, about the way that, not just Asian people, but how all of us work in this country. You know, like even being openly aware of social justice has become a commodity, right? Where allyship and being “woke” is a performance that gets you points... it’s very capitalist, it’s very transactional... and it’s pretty frustrating. And I think the role of Asian people--you don’t get shit for sticking up for Asian people. There’s nothing--it’s still not cool to be Asian, it’s still... there’s no “woke points” to be had for sticking up for Asian people. You know... people don’t even think that we suffer from oppression, and so... plugged into the system, there’s no reason for anyone to stick up for Asian people. But... that being said... that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try... And so, I feel like part of my role as a writer is to use whatever platform I’ve built for myself and whatever platform I have to kind of speak up about these things.

EW: How do you use your role as a parent to do that?

BP: Well... speaking of which, it’s Asian History Month, and I have talked to many of the educators of my daughter... there’s no Asian American history to be taught in the American

school system, zero. There's zero Asian American history taught. And when you talk to educators about Asian American history, they're like, "Oh we'll, like, talk about lion dancing." Which is, you know, cultural and not political. Right?

EW: Mm-hmm.

BP: And so, what she needs to learn and what, I would argue, all kids need to learn, not just Asian kids, but *all* kids need to learn Asian American history. Because we learn about that struggle, and respect one another. But we--again, Asian Americans, everyone thinks we just got off the boat, and... that we haven't done anything to contribute to this society in terms of social justice, but... those of us who do a little bit more digging, we know that the grape strike was... at *least* half Asian Americans... Everyone talks about Cesar Chavez, and to a lesser extent, Dolores Huerta, but not one of the founding fundamental parts of that movement, which was Filipino, right? So... all of that being said, as a parent, I try to be proactive, in a kind way, to talk to her educators, to ask to please have an awareness of Asian American history, and I volunteer my time... You know, this Thursday I have a day off and I'm using it to volunteer my time to come in and talk about Asian American issues with kids. I and also some friends of mine created an informational brochure about Asian American figures that people may not know...

EW: Okay. Have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian or Asian American, or been labeled as an Asian or Asian American artist?

BP: Sure. Yeah. That's usually the only time anyone pays attention to me, quite frankly.

EW: What types of performance or exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

BP: Well, I did have a children's book come out last year. So, that's pretty new for me. Usually the readings I do are for high school age or older. So now that I have a children's book, I'm reading to little kids, which is very different for me. And so, the approach has to be very different.

EW: What are your ultimate goals when writing and performing poetry?

BP: ... It's really to, I hope, lend a little bit of visibility to these issues that I feel are buried, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally.

EW: Could you explain a little bit more about that?

BP: Yeah, so for instance, you know, what I just told you about these Asian American issues, right, like some of that, the burying of that history is deliberate, so... for instance, we looked at how Chinese built the brick roads. More than 90% of the railroads were built by Chinese, but they have been like, deliberately excluded from the historical narrative, right, like that is a case when someone has deliberately erased Asian people from the history of this country. So, there's a hope that in talking about these issues like that... it creates an awareness for people and a curiosity for people to look into such things. You know, there was a young Vietnamese man who was shot and killed by police, and a lot of people don't think that Asians suffer from police brutality. A young Vietnamese man was shot and killed by police who claim he was holding a pen, and threatening them with the pen... So... talking about these issues, we hope--I hope--that they might gain visibility so that those of us who are Asian American are part of the dialogue, because we have to be. We have to be part of the dialogue. But we're often not.

EW: Right, so that relates to that one poem of yours about the man who was suffering from police brutality? The man that, he's asked his name at the very end... I forget what it's called.

BP: Well, I have a few poems about it.

EW: Yeah.

BP: You know, that's always part of it... trying to talk about things that people might not know about.

EW: Yeah. So lastly, what are you currently working on?

BP: So, I'm working on my second children's book, which should be coming out in September. And... you know, I'm always writing and whether or not... You know, the thing about being a writer, especially as a poet, is you keep doing work; you keep doing projects, who knows. You have to approach every project like you're never gonna get published again. At least that's the way that I do it. I don't feel entitled to anything. ...I feel like it's possible that I might never publish another book of poems. It's possible that I'll never have another children's book. And so... basically I keep trying and I just see what happens.

EW: Sure. Do you still try to write one poem a day or something like that?

BP: You know, I was doing that, but I pretty much quit. I was kind of done, yeah. I stuck in it for about two or three years, and I just, I had enough.

EW: Okay. Would you mind telling me more about the second children's book you're working on?

BP: Yeah, sure, so... the first children's book was based on me and my dad, was very male... it was primarily about the relationship between a father and a son. And that's fine, you know... Asian boys need representation too... there's not a lot of representation of Asian men and boys, so... there's nothing wrong with that. But, when I wrote it I always knew that I wanted to do something for the women in my life, the female-identified people in my life. So, you know I have a daughter, and the second book is... the main character is a good combination of me and her. And she and I just talked about this. So, it's about a little girl who has two Asian moms, and she's very sad because she's being bullied at school. And it's really about her using her imagination and the love of her family to overcome these feelings of being different and being hurt. That's really what it's about.

EW: That's a really good message. I would agree that children really do need representation; there are so many different situations that people come from, and it's important for people to be as aware of this as possible, as early on as possible.

BP: Absolutely.

EW: Thank you so much for letting me interview you; it's been a real pleasure getting to know more about you and having this conversation.

BP: Oh no, thank you for doing it. And I'm sorry it took a while to get us connected... the last literary center had a major initiative that we were doing for the first time, and everyone here is just scrambled.

EW: Oh, okay. Well I really appreciate you taking the time to do this.

BP: Well thank you for talking to me, and... good luck on your project.

EW: Thank you so much.

End.