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# A Counterstory: On Eating and Belonging

## Alaia Snell

Course Design: Counterstory

Professor: Dr. Aja Martinez



Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, Alaia Snell and her family have lived in Texas since 2006 after being internally displaced from Hurricane Katrina, one of the costliest Category 5 storms on record in the US. Alaia is currently an undergraduate student at the University of North Texas pursuing her Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and

Bachelor of Science in Economics. A Terry Scholar and McNair Scholar, she dedicates her time to giving back to her community and contributing to ongoing research in her field. Alaia is particularly interested in postcolonial literature, race and ethnic studies, critical theory, and the environmental humanities. The daughter of a family of immigrants, she is passionate about advocating for other climate refugees and investing in research that shares environmental and/or cultural stories, often using her voice in Speech and Debate and Moot Court to continue figuring multiracial women at the center, rather than the outskirts, of academic conversations. Alaia still returns to her hometown every year to visit her family and their Vietnamese restaurant located in the heart of the city.

Di một ngày dang học môt sang khôn.

*A day of traveling will bring a basketful of learning.*—  
Vietnamese Proverb

Following the end of the Vietnam War, Vietnamese immigration to the United States increased exponentially with approximately 125,000 refugees seeking a new home in the country. Unfamiliar with the English language and the American political arena, Vietnamese immigrants, like many other immigrant communities, embraced this new cultural sphere through a unique geographical and social repositioning, one dominated by the food landscape. In particular, “[r]estaurants, grocery stores and other various places of food purchase and consumption” (Lockerbie 42) became spaces wherein Asian communities and Vietnamese people especially could reinforce their immigrant identity abroad. The proliferation of Vietnamese restaurants in the United States has contributed to what Lockerbie describes as crafting identities with place in mind, one that is largely informed by immigrants and their cuisine (42).

Thus, Vietnamese immigrant stories and experiences have become fortified through the culinary practices brought to the United States from the 1970’s.

In discovering spaces to continue protecting displaced cultures and communities, Asian-American scholars have posed AsianCrit counterstory as a method to reclaim narratives of the ‘yellow peril’/model minority. Kolano describes how counter-narratives, stories in defiance of stereotypes against Asian-American people, help reimagine cultural wealth and center race as fundamental to such conversations (1150). Drawing on works from bell hooks, Delgado and Stefancic, and other Critical Race Theory scholars, Kolano explores the relationship between experience and broader educational discussions. In this way, counterstory operates as research methodology to understand race as a legitimate form of academic study (1150-1). Aja Y. Martinez, a foundational counterstory scholar, further explicates how such stories empower marginalized communities by collecting personal dialogue and narratives to visualize erased identities within standard methods of academic study (3). Martinez’s “Counterstory: Diary of a Mad Border Crosser,” as one example, exemplifies how counterstories on the lived realities of marginalized subjects involve weaving personal experiences and representations of current racial and political ideologies in order to study non-white interventions in otherwise white-dominated settings. If standard academic theory boasts the benefits of objectivity, then counterstory represents a new making of academic knowledges, one where personal intervention is deemed as credible, intentional, and insightful.

Today, the 1.4 million Vietnamese immigrants in the United States represents one of the nation’s largest foreign-born demographics, one which my family remains part of. The following dialogue details the generational relationship between two of these immigrants and their American-born grand/daughter. Informed by my grandmother’s, my mother’s, and my own experiences as an Asian-American, this counterstory illustrates an image of our historical trauma through a moment of preparing family dinner. For the Asian-American experience, food is our story, and this “landscape of... eating” (Lockerby AiA) has become a space where Vietnamese people are able to form accumulated knowledge that

reinvigorates networks of community. Set in winter of 2021, Clara drives home for the weekend from college, the campus largely shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In their conversation and spring roll wrapping, the mother and daughter uncover the similarities of their own generational experiences in the United States while discussing the ongoing violence against Asian people and what it means to belong in a community that is all but displaced.

## TALES OF SPRING ROLLS

I step out of the car and slam the door harder than I should have. So goes my almost hour-long trip back home for the weekend. I try to make these trips as often as I can now, especially since there is little to do on campus<sup>1</sup> and, as Mẹ successfully trained me, I miss seeing my family. I open the car trunk and grab my weekender bag and enormous backpack, filled with a generous number of textbooks I naively hope I can read over the two days I am home, though that is never the case. Tossing the bags over my back and taking a step around to open my garage door, I hear the whirring of the door machines already at work with a familiar, warm face just behind it being slowly revealed. Mẹ runs towards me with a bright smile on her face and embraces me in a hug.

“Hi, con<sup>2</sup>, I missed you!” she says excitedly.

“I missed you too, Mẹ,” I respond, then pass her one of my lighter bags I brought back.

“*Chúa ơi*<sup>3</sup>, did you bring back your whole apartment?” she pokes lightly.

“I have a lot of homework this weekend, Mẹ. Had to bring a lot of books back,” I add. More than likely, I could have gotten away with not bringing any, but it is a comfort to have everything I need for school in one place.

Mẹ helps me bring my luggage inside the house. Home always smells better when you’ve

been gone for a while: sweeter, and cleaner. The smell this time hits me from the kitchen. I gasp and smile widely, peering inside at what Mẹ has been preparing all day. She often cooks when I come home and always seems pleased with my enthusiastic response. Across the various counters are stations of veggies, meats, and various bowls. A pot is prepped full of water to boil bún<sup>4</sup> while tôm luộc<sup>5</sup> and thịt heo luộc<sup>6</sup> rest next to the warm oven. Fresh garden mint leaves cut through the soft scent of creamy peanut butter. Mẹ always prepares her food like she is still cooking at her restaurant. The ingredients are organized and splayed out in a system across the room, but as soon as I see the bánh tráng<sup>7</sup>, I know exactly what meal my mom is preparing tonight. I gasp as soon as I process what her plan is, and she giggles sneakily behind me.

“I figured you would like it, but I need some help if we’re planning on eating tonight,” Mẹ notes as she walks towards her vegetable station.

“Oh, I can help with this,” I say dramatically, dropping my bags on the floor, rolling up my sleeves and walking towards the sink to wash my hands. “You know *Gỏi Cuốn*<sup>8</sup> is my favorite.”

“I know, con,” she says, smiling. “So, how was your week?” We text every day, so she knows exactly how my week went, but when I come home for the weekends, we always repeat what we told each other over the phone. It sounds different when hearing it aloud.

“It was... fine, I guess,” I answer, speaking loud enough so she can hear me over the sound of the sink spewing water.

“Just fine?” Mẹ’s concern spills from her voice as she continues chopping the sà lách.<sup>9</sup>

“Just busy is all,” I say pensively, drying my hands and working on picking off the rau thơm<sup>10</sup> from their stems.

Mẹ moves to my corner in the kitchen and starts helping me peel and wash the leaves of the rau thơm. We work in silence for a beat, then she turns around for her knife and cutting board to chop

<sup>1</sup> Set in the winter of 2021, this story follows Clara as she returns from college for the weekend after spending her first year and a semester at university in a global pandemic. During this time, campuses were largely shut down and in-person courses were moved to remote platforms to reduce the spread of COVID-19. See Megan Cerullo, “*Covid-19 Again Upending College Life as Campuses Shut Down.*”

<sup>2</sup> Vietnamese term to refer to one’s daughter.

<sup>3</sup> “Oh my God!”

<sup>4</sup> Rice noodles

<sup>5</sup> Boiled shrimp

<sup>6</sup> Boiled pork loin

<sup>7</sup> Rice paper

<sup>8</sup> Vietnamese spring rolls

<sup>9</sup> Lettuce

<sup>10</sup> Vietnamese mint

the vegetables into fine strands for the rolls. The rhythmic sound of her knife on the counter is almost musical.

Mẹ continues her chopping, raising her voice over the crunch of lettuce to ask, "Have you seen the news?"

She knows the answer of course. I always watch the news, read the news, consume the news in any way I can. As a competitive college debater, knowing what is happening in the world is practically my job.

"Which part?" I clarify.

"There was another Asian woman attacked last month."<sup>11</sup> Mẹ pauses, sighing heavily. "She wasn't even *doing* anything; she couldn't defend herself. I don't understand why people do this."

I finish picking the last of the mint leaves and pass her the bowl. As she continues chopping, I perch on the stool across the kitchen island.

"Well, when white people are calling COVID the 'China virus'<sup>12</sup>, all Asian people become a threat. It doesn't even matter what you look like or what power you have. We all become the same."

"That pisses me off," she responds.

I giggle under my breath. "I know Mẹ." I pause for a beat. "Do you think we should tell Bà to maybe... be careful? At stores and stuff?"

"I already told her this morning on the phone."

Mẹ and I have a mutual understanding of why I asked my question. To the general passerby, Bà *looks* Viet, whatever that means. It wouldn't even matter that she's Vietnamese though, just that she looks Asian enough to be an easy target. She is, in every sense of the word, Vietnamese. Though she only dresses in the highest end of products, her house is organized based on the laws of Feng Shui, she watches Viet soap operas every night, and she speaks minimal English. An immigrant from Vietnam, she says she doesn't care for politics.

"I don't know how she could know this is all happening, and people like her still support *Republicans*," Mẹ retorts.<sup>13</sup>

Bà claims to be apolitical, but whatever she hears from my grandpa, my uncle, my relatives, she parrots to Mẹ whenever the topic arises.

"They support what gives them a semblance of protection, Mẹ. If they are part of the party that neglects them, they may think they can try to earn their trust and respect over time. It's exactly what the model minority myth is founded on. If you are patient and diligent and quiet, you don't put up a fight and you stay in school, you will be more favorable as a result. Except it's not true, right?"

Asian people are still being killed because of their race, all because of a pandemic that is being attributed to an entire region of the world. And we can't expect her to support Democrats either. What have they done since this all started?"

As she finishes up cutting the mint, Mẹ scrapes the leaves on the cutting board into a smaller bowl and puts the knife in the sink for me to wash. As she starts working on her classic peanut sauce, reaching for the tương đen<sup>14</sup> in the cabinet, she turns to me.

"Sometimes I feel lucky that I don't look Asian."

My grandfather, her dad, is white. She used to tell me stories about her childhood of how difficult it was to 'fit in' to a community.

*Asian people didn't accept me because I wasn't 'Asian enough,' and white people didn't except me because I was too Asian. I was a loner, and I liked it that way.*

Knowing that, Mẹ made it that much easier for me by marrying my Cuban dad. Now, I relive Mẹ's moments myself.

*So, like, what are you?*

*Yeah, I can tell you're a little Asian. You have more almond-shaped eyes.*

*You don't look "Vietnamese."*

I sigh. "Looking Asian won't change anything, Mẹ. They know just by glancing at us that we aren't like them. As soon as we speak Viet, they know we aren't like them."

Mẹ finishes mixing the sauce together and hands me a spoon to taste. I steal it with a smile and drop a small sample on my tongue,

11 In the year 2021 alone, Anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States increased by 339%. Some community leaders suggest the increased access to reporting tools have allowed Asian-Americans targeted by violence during the pandemic to report the crime. See Joseph Choi, "*Anti-Asian Hate Crimes in US Spiked 339 Percent in 2021: Report.*"

12 See Laura Kurtzman, "*Trump's 'Chinese Virus' Tweet Linked to Rise of Anti-Asian Hashtags on Twitter.*"

13 Out of all regional demographics of Asian-Americans, Vietnamese people are the most likely to vote red, although this number has slowly dwindled in past years. See Catherine Kim, "*GOP Confronts Big Trouble in Little Saigon.*"

14 *Hoisin sauce*

relishing in the savory, nutty taste that can only be tương chấm.<sup>15</sup> Based on my reaction, Mẹ knows it's perfect and begins scraping it into a plastic to-go container. At least it's not the margarine box again.

"Go ahead and start making yours, con," Mẹ demands.

I go to the now cleared kitchen island and fetch two bánh trắng from the plastic bag, dipping them in the bowl of hot water Mẹ prepared just a minute ago. The paper starts to soften, so I place it flat on the counter to begin wrapping.

As I reach for the now boiled bún, I tell Mẹ, "Sometimes I wish I looked *more* Asian. I feel like people don't believe me until I show them family photos or something. I have to prove to them, and myself, that I belong here. My proof is through the memories of my family, and I don't know if that's enough."

I start to add the fresh mint and lettuce to my roll before Mẹ catches me.

"Con, if you're not Asian then neither am I."

I look towards her. We look so similar I get distracted trying to point out which features of hers match my own. Her eyes tell the story she is trying to tell me themselves. Even a few decades later, I will still be treated as she was. Perhaps in ways less overt, and ways that are not, but she understands what it means to be lonely.

"You have your family, con, and if they accept you, if they know your blood, who cares what the rest thinks?"

I start to wonder if I'm being selfish. Asian people are dying because they look 'too Asian,' and I complain that I wish I could be a little more like them. I think for a moment that maybe I am better off like this, distanced but alive.

"We have each other, con, right?"

I can't change the way I look. I don't want to. Changing anything is erasing some other part of me, pieces of my dad or someone else that I don't want to dismiss. Racial ambiguity is kind of like my superpower. I am a culmination of stories and a story waiting to be told, and I can't erase one of them by waiting for it to be recognized by people who can't see it or refusing it exists at all.

"Yeah, Mẹ. Con yêu mẹ,"<sup>16</sup> I say cheekily.

"Okay, don't be cheesy," she jokes, and we both break into belly laughs.

I finish putting my roll together and notice something missing. "Do you have the...?"

Mẹ hands me a bowl before I finish my sentence. "Did you think I'd forget or something?"

I laugh and steal a handful of tofu from it, dropping them in an even line on my new creation.

"Never," I respond.

As soon as I gently place the last one, I hear a ringtone on the kitchen table, and Mẹ is already running to pick up her phone. Another familiar face appears on her screen.

"Hi, Bà," I yell from across the room.

"Clara says Hi, Bà," Mẹ repeats to the phone.

In the static of the cellphone speakers, I hear her respond, "Hi, con."

Mẹ points the camera towards me and tells Bà excitedly, "She just finished making Gỏi Cuốn!"

Nervously, I begin folding the paper around my filling, careful to make sure it isn't overflowing or creating air pockets inside. I bring the sides inwards and roll the excess on the counter to complete the dish.

They look terrible, as usual.

Chuckling under my breath, I say, "Mẹ does it better."

"They're for eating, anyways," Mẹ comments.

"Looks good, con," Bà reassures with a smile. "I want to eat some right now. Save some for me."

I laugh aloud. "Next time I visit, Bà, we'll make some together."

Mẹ walks to her bedroom to finish their phone call. I pour my mom's rich peanut sauce into a small cup and head to the dining table, plate in hand, to enjoy my first of many weekend-home meals.

*Con cảm ơn chúa,*<sup>17</sup> I whisper under my breath. Then I dive into my spring rolls.

<sup>15</sup> Peanut sauce

<sup>16</sup> "I love you, mom."

<sup>17</sup> "Thank you, God."

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