

America, Say My Name

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/09/opinion/sunday/immigrants-refugees-names-nguyen.html>

I tried Troy. I stuck with Viet.

By Viet Thanh Nguyen

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LOS ANGELES — What’s your name? Mine is Viet Thanh Nguyen, although I was born in Vietnam as Nguyen Thanh Viet. Whichever way you arrange my name, it is not a typical American name. Growing up in the United States, I was encouraged by generations of American tradition to believe that it was normal, desirable and practical to adopt an American first name, and even to change one’s surname to an American one.

Of course, that raises the question — what exactly is an American name?

When my Vietnamese parents became American citizens, they took the pragmatic route and changed their names to Joseph and Linda. My adolescent self was shocked. Were these the same people who had told me, repeatedly, that I was “100 percent Vietnamese?”

They asked me if I wanted to change my name. There was good reason for me to change my name, for throughout my childhood my classmates had teased me by asking if my last name was Nam. As in “Viet Nam.” Get it? The autocorrect function on the iPhone certainly thinks so, as I still sometimes get messages — from friends — addressed to Viet Nam.

I tried on various names. I did not want anything too typical, like my Catholic baptismal name, Joseph. Or Joe. Or Joey. I wanted something just a little bit different, like me. How about — Troy?

It didn’t work. That name, or any of the other contenders, seemed alien to me. My parents’ constant reminder that I was 100 percent Vietnamese had worked its magic. I felt some kind of psychic connection to Vietnam, the country where I was born but that I remembered not at all, having left at age 4. This psychic tie was ironic, because my fellow Vietnamese refugees in San Jose, Calif., of the 1980s — who never called themselves Americans — would describe me as completely Americanized. A whitewash. A banana, yellow on the outside, white on the inside.

If I were indeed a banana, many other Americans probably just saw the yellow part and not the soft whiteness inside. The dilemma of being caught in between opposing cultures was hardly new and has not gone away, but it was still difficult for me and everyone else who has had to experience it.

I was hardly reassured when I went on a field trip to the Defense Language Institute in Monterey and a pleasant young white American soldier, dressed in Vietnamese garb and fluent in Vietnamese, translated my Vietnamese name into a kind of American equivalent: Bruce Smith.

The Smith part was a good translation, as Nguyen is the most common Vietnamese surname, inherited from a royal dynasty. [In Australia](#), where many of the refugees went, Nguyen is among the most common surnames. I wonder if the Australians have figured out how to pronounce my name in all of its tonal beauty. In the United States, most Vietnamese-Americans, tired of explaining, simply tell other Americans to say the name as “Win,” leading to many puns about win-win situations.

As for Bruce, I think George might have been more accurate. Viet is the name of the people, and George is the father of the country. Or maybe America itself should be my first name, after Amerigo Vespucci, the cartographer whose first name — Americus in Latin — has become a part of all our American identities.

Or maybe, instead of contorting myself through translation — which comes from the Latin word meaning to “carry across,” as my parents carried me across the Pacific — I should simply be Viet.

That, in the end, was the choice I made. Not to change. Not to translate. Not, in this one instance, to adapt to America. It was true that I was born in Vietnam but made in America. Or remade. But even if I had already become an American by the time I took my oath of citizenship, I refused to take this step of changing my name.

Instead, I knew intuitively what I would one day know explicitly: that I would make Americans say my name. I felt, intuitively, that changing my name was a betrayal, as the act of translation itself carries within it the potential for betrayal, of getting things

wrong, deliberately or otherwise. A betrayal of my parents, even if they had left it open to me to change my name; a betrayal of being Vietnamese, even if many Vietnamese people were ambivalent about me. A betrayal, ultimately, of me.

I render no judgment on people who change their names. We all make and remake our own selves. But neither should there be judgment on people who do not change their names, who insist on being themselves, even if their names induce dyslexia on the part of some Americans. My surname is consistently misspelled as Ngyuen or Nyugen — even in publications that publish me.

In Starbucks and other coffee shops, my first name is often misspelled by the barista as Biet or Diet. I have been tempted to adopt a Starbucks name, as my friend Thuy Vo Dang [puts it](#), to make my life easier. Hers was Tina. Mine was Joe. I said it once to a barista and was instantly ashamed of myself.

Never did I do that again. I wanted everyone to hear the barista say my name. Publicly claiming a name is one small way to take what is private, what might be shameful or embarrassing, and change its meaning. We begin at some place like Starbucks, which is itself an unusual name, derived from a character in “Moby Dick,” itself an unusual name. Starbucks and Moby Dick are a part of the American lexicon and mythology. So can all of our names, no matter their origins, be a part of this country. All we have to do is proudly and publicly assert them.

Recently I visited Phillips Exeter Academy, a once all-white institution founded in 1781 whose population is now about 20 percent Asian. In front of the entire student body, a student described how he dreaded introducing himself when he was growing up and made up nicknames for himself so that he would not have to explain his name’s pronunciation. He asked me what I would say to people struggling to hold on to their names.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Yaseen,” he said.

I told him that his name was beautiful, that his parents gave it to him out of love. I told him about the name I gave my son, Ellison, whom I named after the novelist Ralph Waldo Ellison, who was named after Ralph Waldo Emerson. I claimed for my son an American genealogy that was also an African-American genealogy that, through me and my son, would also be a Vietnamese-American genealogy. Ellison Nguyen, a name that compressed all of our painful, aspirational history as a country.

America, too, is a name. A name that citizens and residents of the United States have taken for themselves, a name that is mythical or maligned around the world, a name that causes endless frustration for all those other Americans, from North to South, from Canada to Chile, who are not a part of the United States. A complicated name, as all names are, if we trace them back far enough.

Yaseen. Ellison. Viet. Nguyen. All American names, if we want them to be. All of them a reminder that we change these United States of America one name at a time.

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