

# 12

## SOUNDING ASIAN AMERICAN

### Geeks and Superheroes in Qui Nguyen's *Vietgone*

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In October 2016, I attended the National Asian American Theater Conference and Festival (ConFest) at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) in Ashland, Oregon. One of the most anticipated events during the ConFest was the production of Qui Nguyen's play *Vietgone*, directed by May Adrales. The play was part of OSF's regular season and had garnered national attention as one of the most exciting new plays of the year. It premiered in 2015 at South Coast Repertory, which also commissioned it, and received major awards.<sup>1</sup> On the weekend of the ConFest, the Manhattan Theatre Club, which co-produced the play, was previewing it for its New York City premiere. Needless to say, the audience expectation for the production at the ConFest was high, and the atmosphere of the house was festive. Here was a play that was being produced at major regional theatres on both coasts of the country and receiving positive reviews, and it was being showcased at the most important gathering of Asian American theatre artists. It was indeed a special and celebratory event.

When Nguyen was commissioned to write *Vietgone*, he was known for his work with Vampire Cowboys, a theatre company he co-founded with Robert Ross Parker in 2000 when they were graduate students at Ohio University. They moved the company to New York City in 2002, and the company quickly rose to popularity, receiving an Obie Award in 2010. As the first theatre company to be sponsored by New York Comic Con, Vampire Cowboys describes itself as "Geek Theatre" company that "creates and produces new works of theatre based in action/adventure and dark comedy with a comic book aesthetic."<sup>2</sup> According to Nguyen, the Geek Theatre of Vampire Cowboys is "a mixture of pop culture fun and strong imaginative theatricality. All their productions use puppetry, music, original songs, multimedia, and loads of first class fight choreography to tell their stories."<sup>3</sup> As Jason Zinoman of *The New York Times* puts it, what influenced Vampire Cowboys and Qui Nguyen are "the Simpsons, hip-hop and

any movie with fierce women and guns.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the company has insisted on producing plays that are “built on character, heart, and those often ignored by mainstream pop culture as the centerpieces of their shows.”<sup>5</sup> During his collaboration with *Vampire Cowboys*, Nguyen developed his style of playwriting and wrote a number of plays including *Soul Samurai*, *She Kills Monsters*, and *Alice in Slasherland*. Nguyen’s plays showcase characters that seem to come right out of comic books in action-packed scenes. Projection is frequently used to make the set resemble comic-book storyboards, and stage directions instruct characters to move like gravity-defying and time-warping superheroes. Nguyen’s characters speak in American slang, and hip-hop music is frequently used in performances.

*Vietgone* includes all of these dramatic devices, but the play departs from Nguyen’s earlier plays by telling a romantic story about real people. In the play, Nguyen tells how his parents met at a refugee camp in Arkansas after they escaped from war-torn Saigon in 1975. Nguyen takes much liberty with his interpretation of their meeting and calls the play “a sex comedy about my parents.”<sup>6</sup> In an interview, he recalls how he grew up listening to his parents’ stories and how he comprehended them:

When my parents told me stories about Vietnam, they told me the real stories, what actually happened. [...] But what I imagined was kung fu movies. Because the only things I ever saw [growing up] that had a lot of Asian people in it, were kung fu movies.<sup>7</sup>

Kung Fu is indeed in the play, but two other influences from Nguyen’s youth need to be underscored. His parents ended up staying in Arkansas after leaving the refugee camp, and Nguyen grew up in a predominantly African American neighborhood where he participated in freestyle rap battles. His experience as an Asian American growing up in the South in an African American neighborhood is as important as his interest in comic books and martial arts. Perhaps Zinoman puts it best when he asks, “What does assimilation mean to a Vietnamese-American playwright who grew up in Arkansas, married a white woman and feels black in his ‘heart?’”<sup>8</sup> (Figure 12.1).

The play is about war refugees who must restart their lives in a foreign land while facing the challenges of learning a new language, eating strange food, and realizing that they may never return home to Vietnam. Quang, based on Nguyen’s father, is a helicopter pilot during the Vietnam War and is described by the playwright as “adventurous, charming, rugged” (7). He has a wife and children in Vietnam but gets separated from them during the fall of Saigon in 1975. He ends up in a war refugee camp in Fort Chaffé, Arkansas, with his friend Nhan, but he wants to return to his family in Vietnam. In a desperate attempt, Quang gets on an old motorcycle with Nhan and rides cross-country to California in the hopes of getting back to Vietnam. But he ultimately realizes that he cannot go home. Tong, based on Nguyen’s mother, is a thirty-year-old woman who is “strong-willed, effortlessly sexy, and fiercely independent” (7). Tong is



**FIGURE 12.1** James Ryen (Quang) and Will Dao (Nhan) in *Vietgone* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, 2017.

Source: Jenny Graham.

in the camp with her mother, Huong, and both feel guilty about leaving Tong's brother in Vietnam and worry that he may be dead. Despite her independent and strong demeanor, Tong suffers from nightmares of her loved ones dying in Vietnam. In the midst of the traumatic chaos at the camp, Quang and Tong get together at first for sex, but they eventually fall in love.

Despite the seriousness of the story, the play is a comedy in the style of Geek Theatre. Its set features projections that resemble comic strips, and the characters behave at moments like they are straight out of a superhero movie. Quan and Tong rap their songs, and Huong, a middle-aged woman, is cartoonishly flirtatious. Other characters in the play include Hippie Dude, Redneck Biker, and Ninjas, and they act like the stereotypes their names signify. I am interested in examining the use of language and sound in the play. How the characters sound in speech and songs is key to understanding the play, and I argue that Nguyen's unconventional use of language makes sense only in the context of the broader history of Asian American theatre. In *Vietgone*, Nguyen tells a superhero story about his parents, and that story can be told only by having his characters played by Asian American actors who can perform the sound and speech of Geek Theatre.

### **“Yo, What’s Up, White People?”: “Universal” English and American Gibberish**

Perhaps as a way to avoid the awkwardness of dramatizing his parents' sex life, Nguyen includes a character named Playwright who introduces the play in the opening scene. The play begins with Playwright facing the audience and

explaining what to expect. After the obligatory warnings about turning off cell phones and prohibiting recording devices, he tells the audience that “all characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblances to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.”<sup>9</sup> In the OSF production, the actor playing Playwright delivered the line in a comically ironic way, and the audience immediately understood that Nguyen, with a wink, wanted the audience to see (but not really see) the characters as based on real people in his lives. In the script, Playwright then announces that “this is a story about a completely made-up man named Quang.” The lights then come up on Quang, the male protagonist, as he says “S’up bitches” (10). Playwright follows Quang’s first line with an introduction of Tong as “a completely not-real woman” (10). The first line spoken by Tong is, “Whoa, there’s a lotta white people up in here.” Playwright then explains to the audience that Vietnamese characters will be speaking fluent English: “And though they are Vietnamese—born and raised there—for the purpose of this tale, it is to be noted that this will be their speaking syntax” (10). The three characters further demonstrate the linguistic rules of the play with an illustrative exchange. In the OSF production, Asian Girl and Asian Guy were played by Tong and Quang, respectively.

TONG: Yo, what’s up, white people?

QUANG: Any of you fly ladies want get up on my “Quang Wang”?

PLAYWRIGHT: Which is the opposite of this one:

ASIAN GIRL: Herro! Prease to meeting you! I so Asian!

ASIAN GUY: Fly Lice! Fly Lice! Who rikey eating fly lice?

(10)

The exaggerated contrast between the language spoken by stereotypical Asian characters and Nguyen’s Vietnamese characters signals to the audience that the world of the play demands a different kind of suspension disbelief. The audience, which Nguyen assumes to consist of “white people,” needs to discard their expectation of Asian characters speaking broken English and accept the world of *Vietgone* in which Vietnamese people who just arrived in Arkansas from Saigon can speak fluent English.

The linguistic device that generated the most amount of laughter at the OSF production of *Vietgone* was the way American characters sounded. Playwright demonstrates how American characters speak with characters named “American Guy” and “American Girl.” In the OSF production, the characters were played by the same actors that portrayed Quang and Tong, respectively.

PLAYWRIGHT: And on the occasion—when it occurs—that an American character should appear, they will sound something like this:

AMERICAN GUY: Yee-haw! Get’er-done! Cheeseburger, waffle fries, cholesterol!

PLAYWRIGHT: Spouting American nonsense which sounds very American but yet incredibly confusing to anyone not natively from here.

AMERICAN GIRLS: NASCAR, botox, frickles!

(10)

By having American characters speak gibberish, Nguyen reverses the convention of American stage speech in which foreigners typically speak broken English or gibberish and Americans speak fluent English. In so doing, Nguyen signals to the audience that the play is to be seen as comical and a fun take on cultural encounters. As Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times* puts it in his review of the play, *Vietgone* is a “raucous comedy” that “gleefully reverses” stereotypes.<sup>10</sup> With the stereotypes reversed, American characters are caricatured as stupid and comical for not speaking Vietnamese well, and they function as comic relief throughout the play.

*Vietgone* is the latest play in a long list of Asian American plays with characters that speak English fluently onstage when, in fact, they are supposed to be speaking an Asian language in the world of the play. For example, Velina Hasu Houston’s *Asa Ga Kimashita* (*Morning Has Broken*), like *Vietgone*, is about the playwrights’ parents and premiered at Manhattan Theater Club in 1987. Houston’s play is about her mother, a Japanese woman who married a half-Black and half-Native American GI during World War II. It opens with a monologue by a character named Setsuko Shimada, a twenty-year-old Japanese woman on an island in Japan in 1945. Wearing a torn kimono with her face smudged with dirt, she embodies the destruction her country endured at the end of World War II. Houston’s description of Setsuko is detailed and realistic, and if she did not say a word onstage, it would be assumed that she is a Japanese woman who does not speak fluent English. However, Setsuko opens the play with the following lines: “A beast wrestles with my soul. It comes at night, hiding in the crash of the midnight tide, arrogant and white, powerful and persistent. Who owns this creature?”<sup>11</sup> (221). It is clear in the play that Setsuko is actually speaking Japanese, but the Asian American actress playing her says her lines in fluent English. The audience is asked to imagine Setsuko as an actual Japanese woman with the linguistic exception. This kind of linguistic exception is common in early Asian American plays, as exemplified not only by Houston’s plays but also by those of Wakako Yamauchi, Momoko Iko, and Genny Lim. Of course, there are a number of practical reasons for having Asian characters speak fluent English onstage. For one, the vast majority of Asian American playwrights write in English, and most are not fluent in the language of their parents or grandparents. However, it is the explicit intention of Asian American playwrights to not use translation in their plays.

The Asian American playwrights’ intended choice to have Asian characters speak fluent English onstage is rooted in the history of how Asian American theatre emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. First Asian American theatre companies such as the East West Players (founded in 1965 in Los Angeles) were formed to allow Asian American actors to portray non-stereotypical characters. Stereotypical roles in theatre, film, and television at the time included coolies, laundromat owners, war victims, war brides, and many others that were marked as perpetual foreigners with exotic Asian accents, pidgin English, and gibberish. One of the main goals of the East West Players was to demonstrate the Americanness of Asian American actors by casting them in roles that did not require them to be

marked as Asian. For early Asian American actors, the ability to do an Asian accent was an asset as well as a liability. Most did not speak an Asian language and frequently had to fake an accent to get an acting job, and their portrayal further propagated the stereotype of the Asian perpetual foreigner. In short, Asian American actors advocated for themselves so that they would not need to play roles that required an Asian accent. They wanted to speak fluent American English onstage and onscreen in order to be seen and included as American actors.

Early Asian American actors and playwrights also faced the long-standing stereotype of Asian language being inherently comical. American popular culture is filled with jokes and comic bits about Asian languages and names sounding funny to the ears of those speaking English. From songs about “John Chinaman” to the Chinese foreign student named Long Duk Dong in the film *Sixteen Candles* (1984), Asian languages or what sounded like them have been seen as comical. Krystyn Moon, in her study of Chinese topics in American popular music in the nineteenth century, notes that Chinese characters were depicted by using “Orientalized sounds,” and how Chinese people spoke English was a major comic device in popular theatre. Moreover, how Chinese characters sounded onstage was a way to distinguish them from American characters: “The most common device for distinguishing between Chinese and Americans on the stage was a combination of pidgin English and gibberish.”<sup>12</sup> Given the troubled history of Asian accents in dramatic representation, it is not surprising that Asian American actors and playwrights wanted their characters to speak what can be described as an unmarked language.

According to the linguists Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, unmarkedness refers to a type of language that is made powerful by being both normalized and naturalized. Markedness, on the other hand, is a “hierarchical structuring of difference” and “a process whereby some social categories gain a special, default status that contrasts with the identities of other groups, which are highly recognizable.”<sup>13</sup> The unmarked language of Asian American theatre allowed the actors and playwrights to claim Americanness as a “special, default status.” However, as it is the case with any form of essentialized identity, unmarkedness is as problematic as markedness. If markedness assumes that Asian characters speak pidgin English, unmarkedness has the danger of erasing cultural differences and privileging naturalized English as the universal language of American theatre. Moreover, as Josephine Lee observes, “even the universal language is ethnically marked.”<sup>14</sup> Lee warns that assimilation was

made impossible for many immigrants from Asia, Africa, and the Americas, as well as for Native Americans, because of a racist legal and institutional history—including slavery, genocide, and exclusionary laws and policy—as well as because of individual acts of prejudice and ignorance.<sup>15</sup>

From the Chinese Exclusion Act of the nineteenth century to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, Asian immigrants were prevented from inclusion into the American society. The stereotype of the perpetual foreigner

with an accent was a cynical expression of such exclusion and what Karen Shimakawa calls “national abjection.”<sup>16</sup> Early Asian American playwrights had to decide how they would portray Asian American characters who faced legal and cultural exclusion and abjection, and many had their immigrant characters speak the language they would never perfect. In their plays, the characters live unas-similable lives, but they speak the language of the assimilated.

### “I’ll Make It Home”: Linguistic Attitude and the Insider Audience

In writing *Vietgone*, Nguyen had to decide how his Vietnamese characters who could not speak English should sound onstage for the audience that did not speak Vietnamese. Like Velina Hasu Houston and Wakako Yamauchi, Nguyen has his characters speak fluent English, but unlike the earlier playwrights, he does not have them speak in unmarked or “universal” American English. As the opening scene of the play shows, Quang and Tong speak in a style that is marked by the influences of comics, hip-hop, and other forms of popular culture. Bill Varble, in his review of the OSF production, notes that Quang and Tong sound like “American Millennials,” but it would be more accurate to say that the way they speak reflects a combination of the influences Nguyen experienced throughout his life.<sup>17</sup> At times, the characters sound like comic superheroes, and at other times, they talk like downtown New Yorkers. And when they rap, they embody the hip-hop culture Nguyen participated in while growing up in a predominantly African American neighborhood in Arkansas.

Moreover, Quang and Tong sound like characters in other plays Nguyen wrote in the style of Geek Theatre. In his review of Nguyen’s *She Kills Monsters* produced by Garage Rep at the Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chris Jones describes the play as “high-school speak” and “Dungeons & Dragons cool.”<sup>18</sup> Although Jones does not elaborate on what he means by “high-school speak,” he implies that sounding (or trying to sound) cool is key to describing the type of speech used by Nguyen’s characters. Nguyen states in a video interview that he wrote the play for the “sixteen-year-old version” of himself and made the Vietnamese characters sound like how he speaks.<sup>19</sup> Quang and Tong in *Vietgone* speak in ways that express their sense of self-importance as if they want to be seen as cool but they know deep inside that they are geeky, insecure, or traumatized. In other words, the actors have to perform their characters’ coolness in exaggerated and comical ways while ultimately undermining their effort by admitting to their weaknesses. For example, in Scene One of *She Kills Monsters*, the main character, Agnes meets Chuck, who is described as “a nerdy teen dressed like a Grunge Rocker roadie,” to learn about Dungeons and Dragons. Their exchange demonstrates how each character performs his or her version of coolness while also expressing their insecurities and trauma.

AGNES: I’m Looking For Chuck Biggs?

CHUCK: You’re Looking At Him! But My Hommies Just Call Me Simply Dm Biggs Cause, You Know, I’m “Big” Where It Counts.

AGNES: Uh...

CHUCK: As in MY BRAIN!

AGNES: (*Relieved.*) Oh!!!

CHUCK: Not because I'm fat.

    Seriously, it really has nothing to do with body mass index, I actually work out...or plan on working out—

AGNES: I get it.<sup>20</sup>

Later in the scene, it is revealed that Agnes's little sister had died, and she is seeking help from Chuck to better understand what happened to her. While the play is essentially about loss and grieving, the language used in the play is "high-school speak."

In *Vietgone*, most interactions between characters are written in a similar way, and language functions as a tragi-comedic device. After the introduction of Quang and Tong by Playwright in the opening scene, lights come up on Quang who is riding a motorcycle with his best friend Nhan. The two are taking a road trip from their refugee camp in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, to Camp Pendleton, California, because Quang is determined to return to Vietnam to be with his wife and kids. Nguyen's stage direction reads, "Quang is rhyming to himself for fun as they blaze down the highway." Quang raps the following lines "for fun" as Nhan becomes increasingly annoyed:

QUANG.

YELLA MUTHAFUCKAH ON A MOTORCYCLE  
RIDING SO FAST LIKE HE'S SUICIDAL  
DRIVING 'CROSS AMERICA TO CATCH A FLIGHT TO  
HIS HOME CITY SO HE CAN GO HOMICIDAL  
IN SAIGON  
CITY IN VIETNAM  
SHOT UP BY THE VIET CONG  
THEY STOLE MY PEEPS' FREEDOM  
SO I'M COMING TO KILL THEM  
CALL ME THEIR ARCH-VILLAIN  
CAN'T STOP ME I'M WILLIN'  
TO DIE FOR THIS VISION  
OF A VIETNAM THAT'S FREE  
FROM THOSE EVIL VC  
YOU CAN'T STOP ME  
I'M LIKE A PISSED OFF BRUCE LEE  
WITH A HI-YA, A KICK, AND KUNG FU GRIP  
WE'LL COME OUT SWINGING, WE DON'T GIVE NO SHITS



The message of the rap is bitter and angry, but the way it was performed at the OSF production was indeed fun. The actor playing Quang was serious, but the set was bright and colorful. And the audience broke out in a loud laughter when Nhan, a comical character, interrupted Quang's rapping with "Dude—[...] Will you PLEASE stop rhyming and driving at the same time? You're going to get us killed!" (12).

The predominantly Asian American audience at the OSF reacted enthusiastically to the scene not only because it featured an attractive and masculine Asian man and his sidekick, a pair rarely seen in American theatre, but, more likely, because of how they sounded. The language used in *Vietgone* is similar to how the character of Song sounds in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*. Josephine Lee describes Song as speaking "slangy language" that is appealing to an "insider audience." That language, according to Lee, can be seen as "answering directly some of the stereotypical assumptions about the Asian character."<sup>21</sup> In other words, Gallimard and the audience watching *M. Butterfly* may expect Song to speak like a stereotypical Asian female character type as either a Lotus Blossom or a Dragon Lady, but Song speaks like a southern Californian. Song's speech may surprise most people but pleases the Asian American spectator who feels like an "insider audience." Similarly, the predominantly Asian American audience at the OSF ConFest cheered the collective experience of being an "insider audience" watching onstage Asian characters that did not sound stereotypical.

At the same time, the way Nguyen's characters sounded may have also reminded the audience of earlier Asian American characters whose language is uniquely different from "universal" English or stereotypical speech. For instance, in Frank Chin's 1972 play *Chickencoop Chinaman*, the protagonist Tam Lum says, "I talk the talk of orphans" in "motherless bloody tongue":

I am the natural born ragmouth speaking the motherless bloody tongue. No real language of my own to make sense with, so out comes everybody else's trash that don't conceive. But the sound truth is that I AM THE NOTORIOUS ONE AND ONLY CHICKENCOOP CHINAMAN HIMSELF that talks in the dark heavy Midnight, the secret Chinatown Buck Buck Bagaw.<sup>22</sup>

Born in the US, Tam did not learn the "maternal" language, Cantonese, and he refuses to speak the "good English" that he associates with white supremacy.<sup>23</sup> Instead, he chooses to speak the language of "Chinaman sons of Chinamans, children of the dead." Frank Chin elaborates in an interview that "For us American born, both the Asian language and the English language are foreign. We are a people without a native tongue. To whites, we're all foreigners, still learning English."<sup>24</sup> To him, Chinese Americans do not have a language because they cannot speak the language of their ancestors, and to speak fluent English

would signify a futile attempt at assimilation in the US that does not see Asians as American, no matter how many generations of their family have lived in the country.

Daniel Y. Kim argues that Frank Chin's use of language has "less to do with the idiom, grammar, and syntax of 'street discourse' than it does with the expression of a particular *attitude* toward language use itself—an appropriative, violent, and disfiguring attitude."<sup>25</sup> In the absence of an Asian American vernacular, Frank Chin emphasizes the "aural and oral dimension" in his writing and creates what Kim describes as "the sound of a particular agency, one that is imagined as a racially authentic and that is propelled by a certain aggression."<sup>26</sup> The words spoken by Tam in *Chickencoop Chinaman* are not authentic Chinese American speech or an Asian American vernacular. Rather, they signify the anger toward racism and imitation of "a certain masterful, literary intent" in African American writers such as Ralph Ellison.<sup>27</sup> Both *Chickencoop Chinaman* and *Vietgone* are influenced by African American writings and speech, and both emphasize the performative dimension of language. The main characters speak in musical rhythm and project an attitude of exaggerated bravado in their speech. The actors must emphasize the performance of language and embody the characters' anger and playfulness through sound and speech.

The comparison between Frank Chin and Qui Nguyen helps to explain the unconventional language in their plays, but there is one critical difference between the two. Unlike Frank Chin, Qui Nguyen encourages actors to improvise. In his notes on music, Nguyen states, "The performance of these songs should be improvisational and performed in the actors' own styles."<sup>28</sup> This means that actors can freestyle rap the songs. Improvisation further underscores the performative dimension of language and allows actors to interpret the songs for their audience. In Nguyen's version of Geek Theatre, his Vietnamese characters are angry, vulnerable, and traumatized, but they are also cool and can express their feelings in freestyle rap. More importantly, the meaning of the play is generated in the performance of Nguyen's words and songs by Asian American actors. In this sense, the OSF audience may have responded more enthusiastically to the performances of Asian American actors who were embodying the story of Nguyen's parents and less to the Vietnamese characters. Indeed, watching talented Asian American actors rap can, in itself, be cathartic to the Asian American spectator.

Although Nguyen wrote *Vietgone* before the musical *Hamilton* premiered, the comparison between the two works cannot be overlooked. In *Hamilton*, non-white actors perform white characters partly as a way to remark on the construction of whiteness in the founding of the US. Similarly, in *Vietgone*, Asian American actors perform Vietnamese characters to remark on how Vietnamese refugees have existed in the imagination of American nationhood since the fall of Saigon in 1975. In both works, rap is used as a theatrical device to establish the relationship between the actors and the characters. Instead of actors embodying and performing the characters, they sing and rap about what the characters think

about and feel. In *Vietgone*, for instance, the song “I’ll Make it Home” expresses how the characters Quang and Tong negotiate their new lives as war refugees in Arkansas.<sup>29</sup> To Quang, “I’ll make it home” describes his desperate desire to return to Vietnam even if it means risking his life. Tong, on the other hand, is willing to make the US her new home while acknowledging how difficult that may be. The song is about the conflicting attitudes Quang and Tong have about their wish to return to Vietnam while knowing too well that they must make the US their home. But what makes the performance of the song by Asian American actors powerful are the parts that refer to what the characters have not yet experienced. Quang describes the US as “a country not known for love for peeps with a yellow face,” and Tong describes it as “a place where our kids will think of us with disgrace” (36). The songs in *Vietgone*, like *Hamilton*, are used to provide a historical hindsight of the characters and to explain their lives from the viewpoint of the actors performing them.

### **“You and I Speak the Same Language”: Asian American Superheroes and Geek Theatre**

As expected of a sex comedy, *Vietgone* ends with the lovers, Quang and Tong, getting together in the last scene. In his heartfelt confession, Quang tells Tong that he cares about her, and when she does not want to take it seriously, he explains what he means: “I just... You’re the only thing in this country—maybe even in this world—that even makes a lick of sense to me. You and I speak the same language” (90). Quang does not mean that they speak Vietnamese but that they “understand each other” (90). Like a handsome hero in a Hollywood classic, Quang kisses Tong, and their story comes to an end. It is an appropriate ending for the character of Quang who is portrayed by Nguyen as a superhero. Like other superheroes, he not only gets the girl at the end but finds love after an adventure that leads to his self-discovery and figurative death. During his motorcycle road trip with Nhan, Quang meets American hippies who teach them about marijuana and free love, and he fights off Redneck Biker and Ninjas in what Nguyen describes as “the most badass martial arts fight ever to be seen on a theatrical stage” (74). Like Superman, Quang defeats Redneck Biker and Ninjas with punches and kicks that defy gravity. The adventure reaches its climax when Nhan finally convinces Quang that they are nothing but ghosts to those who are in Vietnam and that they died when they arrived in the US. Nhan tells Quang,

You’re dead. We all are. We died the moment the VC crossed Newport Bridge into Saigon and you flew us the fuck outta there to save us. And that’s what you did, you saved a lot of lives that day, but there was one life that got lost and that was yours. Let Thu [Quang’s wife] and your kids mourn you. Let them say their goodbyes.

(85)

In that moment, Quang realizes that he died figuratively in Vietnam and that he can be reborn in the US.

The character arc of Quang is unquestionably that of a superhero, but Nguyen complicates the superhero narrative by adding a scene he calls “Epilogue.” In the scene, it is the year 2015, and Quang is much older. He sits at a dinner table to be interviewed by Playwright about how he met Tong. Playwright tries to get his recording device to work while Quang drinks his beer. Most notably, the stage direction reads, “For the first time in the play, Quang now speaks with a deep Vietnamese accent” (92). In the OSF production, the actor playing Quang transformed onstage from a movie-like superhero who just kissed the heroine to an older man wearing glasses and surrounded by beer cans. In the Epilogue, he is no longer the comic superhero version of the father imagined by the playwright, and he would rather sing country music (“Mama’s Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys”) than freestyle rap. His broken English is close to what Nguyen’s actual father probably sounds like (92). He would rather talk about everything else but the Vietnam War because he does not think his life should be defined by the eight years he fought as a helicopter pilot. Playwright grows frustrated with Quang’s lack of interest in the interview but ends up provoking Quang by calling the war a “mistake” (96). Quang explains to Playwright that Vietnamese people do not want Vietnam to be remembered as a mistake and that to them, “the war was not political, it was real”: “We fight because it was only thing we could do. But we not choose to be in war. War came to us” (97).

Quang’s explanation to his son, given with “a deep Vietnamese accent,” is the final message of *Vietgone*. Throughout the play, Nguyen portrays his father as a superhero who saves people’s lives with his helicopter, defeats racists with gravity-defying kung fu moves, and speaks and raps like the coolest man on earth, but in the Epilogue, Nguyen shows his father as an everyman who prefers to talk about memories of his son rather than the war. For both the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and the Manhattan Theatre Project, May Adrales directed the actor playing Quang to transform into an older man by wearing a pair of glasses and a cardigan. This onstage transformation echoed how Superman becomes Clark Kent by putting on nondescript clothes and a pair of glasses. With the ending, Nguyen signals to how he imagines his father as a superhero: he is to be portrayed by a charismatic and masculine Asian American actor who can speak, rap, love, and fight like a badass. The body of the Asian American actor, in this sense, functions as the superhero costume, and one of the superpowers the characters possess is the ability to sound like the playwright, a young Vietnamese American who grew up immersed in comic books and rap music. It was this version of the superhero that the audience at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival cheered, and when the superhero transformed into a mere mortal in the last scene, there was, in the audience, a collective recognition of the heroic power Asian American actors brought to their characters. And the source of that power came from how they sounded onstage.

## Notes

- 1 The play received the 2016 LA Drama Critics Circle Ted Schmitt Award and the 2016 ATCA/Steinberg Play Award. It was a finalist for the Harold and Mimi Steinberg/American Theatre Critics Association New Play Award.
- 2 [www.vampirecowboys.com/about.htm](http://www.vampirecowboys.com/about.htm). The term “Geek Theatre” was coined by producer Abby Marcus who eventually married Nguyen.
- 3 Qui Nguyen, “About the Collaboration: Geeking Out Onstage,” in *The Downtown Anthology: 6 Hit Plays from New York’s Downtown Theaters*, eds. Morgan Gould and Erin Salvi (New York: Playscripts Inc., 2015), 309.
- 4 Jason Zinoman, “Identities as Elements to Play with and Juggle: The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G,” *The New York Times*, 3 April 2011. [www.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/theater/reviews/agent-g-by-qui-nguyen-at-st-marks-church-review.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/theater/reviews/agent-g-by-qui-nguyen-at-st-marks-church-review.html).
- 5 Nguyen, “About the Collaboration,” 309.
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- 23 In the play, Lone Ranger tells Tam: “But, say, ya speak good English, China Boy.” Chin, 38. Lee analyzes Tam’s speech in the framework of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in Chapter 3 of *Performing Asian America*.
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- 29 A short video version of the song created by Manhattan Theatre Club is available on YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Lq8tOzDBJrU>. The video features Raymond Lee as Quang and Jennifer Ikeda as Tong. The two actors were in the production produced by MTC in 2016.