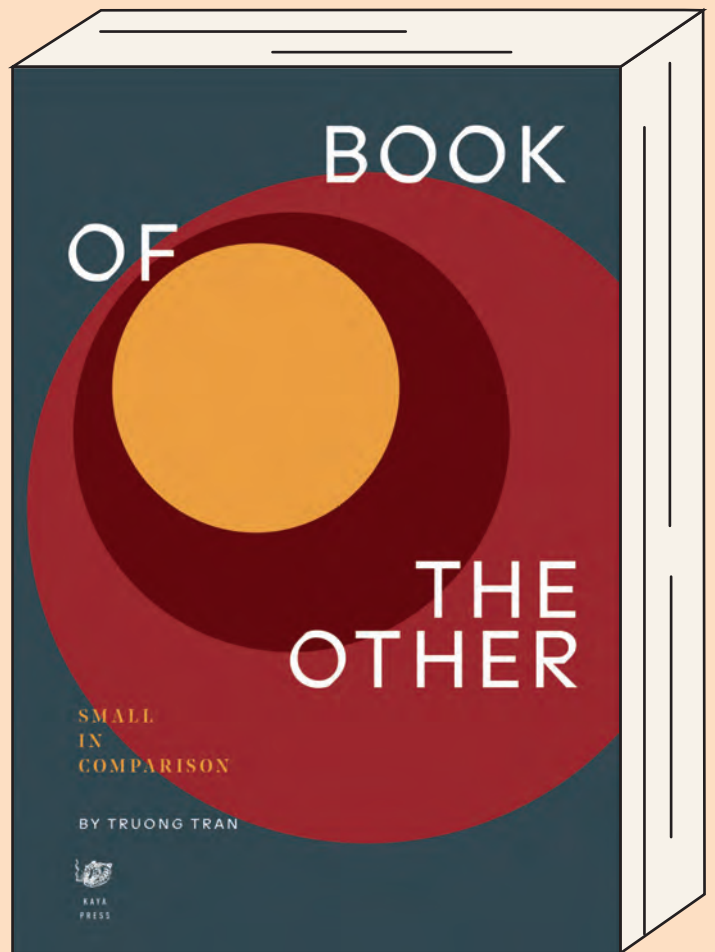


# A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO TRUONG TRAN'S

## *BOOK OF THE OTHER*



TRUONG TRAN



### ➤ About the Author

Truong Tran was born in Saigon, Vietnam. He is the author of six previous collections of poetry, *The Book of Perceptions*, *Placing the Accents*, *Dust and Conscience*, *Within The Margins*, *Four Letter Words*, and *100 words* (co-authored with Damon Potter.) He also authored the children's book, *Going Home Coming Home*, an artist monograph, *I Meant To Say Please Pass the Sugar*. His poems and books have been translated into Spanish, French, and Dutch. He is the recipient of The Poetry Center Prize, The Fund For Poetry Grant, The California Arts Council Grant, and numerous San Francisco Arts Commission Grants. He lives in San Francisco and currently teaches at Mills College, Oakland.

Truong is also a visual artist who believes that art, be it poetry, cooking, sculpting, and even gardening is his way of thinking through the consciousness of the times we live in. Of *book of the other*, Truong says "This is the hardest thing I've ever done. I set out to write a book with the premise and constraint of honesty. It took a decade of struggle to write, to circle back, to say the thing that needed to be said, and perhaps another lifetime to hold. This book is not the performance of anger. It is angry. This book is not performing otherness. I am the other or so I am told again and again."

### ➤ Synopsis

Just as the denial of tenure for Nikole Hannah-Jones with University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Wang Ping at Macalester have made headlines for academic racism targeting Black professors, and professors of color, Truong Tran's *book of the other* is a timely commentary on the inequities of the white establishment within academia and beyond. In this provocative collection of poetry, prose, and essays, Tran offers a stunning rebuttal to the idea of anti-Asian racism as a victimless crime—the hiring of a less qualified white man over a teacher of color who has served his public university for years, the performance of racial trauma for a white audience, the bind of racial representation and diversity politics, the daily racist transgressions that occur in events as simple as standing in line at the grocery store. These sharp-eyed experiments in language and form resist the luxury of metaphor to name not only the state of academic violence but the daily injustices one encounters as a queer working-class teacher, immigrant, and refugee. *book of the other* is written with a compulsion for lucidity that transforms outrage into clarity, an achingly poignant acknowledgment of the estrangement from self forced upon those seduced by the promise of color-blind acceptance, and the step-by-step recollection needed to return to oneself.

# ↻ HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE ↻

*book of the other* is a powerful exposé on exploring racial trauma, microaggressions, and workplace discrimination. The book explores the experience of immigrating from Vietnam, the violent binds of the English language, and the injustices one faces as a person of color in academia, serving as an important lesson in how racism and generational trauma affects the everyday lives of people of color. This guide can be used as a way to begin to understand loss, grief, and anger Vietnamese refugees experienced escaping from war. It is also a guide to introduce students to understanding institutional racism and generational trauma, and what it may look like, and how it can manifest. It is also a guide that can be used to help navigate all of these pressing discussions. Overall, this book is an excellent choice for courses examining Asian diasporic literature and experiences, along with pedagogy and rhetoric, and composition courses. Utilizing prose poetry, essays, and anti-poems, Tran's writing style strips away the violent history of poetic convention, opting for devastatingly honest forms that refuse to be misunderstood.

# ↘ BOOK OVERVIEW ↙

## ↘ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What does it mean to learn and speak the English language? What connotations does English hold for Tran? How does Tran speak about knowing and teaching the language?
- Where does Tran place his anger? Who is it towards? And why does he write about his anger in the format of a letter?
- How does Tran approach the subjects of shame and guilt? What aspects of social and political life are these feelings attached to?"

## ↘ SAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS

- Throughout *book of the other*, Tran writes his anger in the format of a letter. Write a letter describing what you are angry about. Name a specific incident that incites anger, describing the shape and feel of anger, and how it manifests.
- Answer the following prompt: What haunts you, what hunts you, and what are you hunting?
- Write a poem, or take an existing poem, where you use periods or another punctuation mark in such a way that intentionally disrupts the message of the poem. Write it in such a way that the poem references and explains its own techniques.

# » THEMES «

## LANGUAGE

Truong Tran tells the story of fleeing from Vietnam to the United States and learning English as a young refugee. Navigating a foreign country and a foreign language forces Tran to be silent. His journey and persistence in learning English bring him to the conclusion that he will not live a life in silence. He tells this story through prose poetry, essays, and anti-poems that highlight his anger and frustration with having to constantly fight against that silence throughout his life.

### » Quotes

- *“can you call yourself a writer. when everything youve written. feels as though. you have been written.”(25)*
- *“i am only retelling this as a way of existing. i am only retelling this as a way of breathing. this is discrimination. i am only retelling this narrative because silence is simply no way to live. silence will not move this body forward. i am retelling this narrative as a way of being.” (94)*
- *“you are writing this book in the english language. it is not your first language. you are proud of this fact. and still you wonder. what are you proud of. why this pride.”(139)*

### » Discussion Questions

- Who has the right to learn English? What type of power comes with knowledge of the English language? How does Tran examine this hypocrisy?
- How do you maintain the authenticity of lived experiences through narration and storytelling?

# ✧ THEMES ✧

## GENERATIONAL TRAUMA



Truong Tran also grapples with his experiences with generational trauma in refugee families fleeing from a war-torn country. He specifically tells the story of his family moving from Vietnam to the U.S. as refugees. Tran experiences much guilt, shame, and fear about living a new life in a foreign place. He attempts to find his voice and hold his ground by continually telling his and his family's narrative. However, Tran does not want to exploit his family's generational trauma through conventional telling. He avoids doing so by sharing his narrative through multiple writing styles such as prose poetry, essays, and anti-poems. Much of his writing also takes the form of a letter. These formal experiments allow Tran to write about his experiences regarding guilt and frustration in such a way that challenges the impacts of generational trauma.

### ✧ Quotes

- “your father tells you stories. from his childhood memories. that sack of rice as metaphor. for being. this is your inheritance. this is yours. and you will carry it with you. in these times. you carry this with you. as a matter of necessity. this is the story. existing between a father and a son. it is not meant. for public consumption. and yet you tell it. as a way of being heard. of being seen. out of fear. for this day. of not being seen.” (58)
- “you are telling this story now in the hopes of telling a story beyond the story. this is a story of a father and a son. this is a story of love and acceptance. this is a story of pride and shame. that a story of a father's pride. a son and his shame. would arrive at a story of arriving at a silence.” (146)
- “i left vietnam as a child. i left my grandfather. my pet rooster. my neighbor. my cousins. i left at night when no one was looking. i left because of war. this place where i am living now. this place where i am teaching. this place is more than a place. this place is home. this house could be burning. in the middle of the day. everyones looking and still. i am not leaving my home.” (220)

### ✧ Discussion Questions

- How does Tran cope with his guilt about being torn between his American life and Vietnamese heritage? How does he express this guilt in particular?
- How does silence function through the generational trauma that Tran and his family experience? How does it come into play with immigrating from Vietnam to the U.S. as refugees?

# » THEMES «

## INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Truong Tran deals heavily with institutional racism as a teacher of English in higher education. Given Tran's contentious relationship with the English language and the hostility of academic racism, he feels out of place in these institutions. However, he has a unique take on the English language as he has had to question grammatical rules in learning the conventions of English. This ability allows him to hold his ground in educational settings that were not built for people of color like him. In writing about navigating his 'otherness' in these institutions, he expresses his resiliency against countless acts of racist violence.

### » Quotes

- “a white woman. once wrote this sentence in a poem. she turned from the book. she said this. she taught me the importance of saying this to the reader. there is no other way to say this.” (40)
- “somewhere in between the past and present somewhere in between the you and the i somewhere in between the immigrants tongue the american vernacular somewhere somehow someone will question the language. the grammar of this text. somebody will query the use of tense. how do you lineate this past this present when this happened. when this happens when this is happening. even now.” (89)

### » Discussion Questions

- What are some instances of institutional racism that Tran names?
- What makes institutional racism different from more overt forms of racism? Is one more impactful or dangerous than the other?

## ↘ RECOMMENDED FOR THESE CLASSES ↙

*book of the other* explores the painstaking narrative of the shame, guilt, and loss that Asian Americans face under the system of U.S. racism. The book examines topics such as immigration, microaggressions, and generational and racial trauma, which makes it an excellent choice for high school and college students in English and Asian American studies courses. The mixed-genre format makes the lessons and themes easily accessible and provides an enriching opportunity to take a deep dive into literary and cultural analysis.

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## ↘ ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ↙

### ↘ WRITING STYLES

- What is Anti-Poetry?
- Understanding Prose Poetry

### ↘ INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

- Surviving Institutional Racism in Academia
- What Institutional Racism Can Look Like
- Systemic Racism in Higher Education

### ↘ VIETNAMESE HISTORY

- Results of the Vietnam War
  - Understanding the Vietnam War
  - Vietnamese Boat People
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