Vietnamese American Trajectories: Dimensions of Diaspora

Linda Trinh Võ

In response to my ethnicity, I often hear some variation of “I served in Vietnam” or “Where’s the best pho restaurant in town?” or “I have this wonderful Vietnamese girl who does my nails.” I know that I am not the only one to hear these comments or questions, although I have had to learn not to take offense, especially when they come from strangers trying to initiate polite conversation. In my gracious moments, I think at least Americans are not just associating us only with that war in which we were perceived as helpless peasants, barbaric warriors, or cheap prostitutes. But nowadays our ubiquitous soup joints have influenced American culinary taste, and our interactions are amicable, even if it is only while we are servicing their beauty needs. Currently, with the U.S. and British invasion of Iraq, I hear the term “Vietnam War” in the media constantly; however, the reference is rarely about the Vietnamese or Vietnamese Americans. I am troubled by the parameters of these perceptions about us.

While Asian Americans, mainly Chinese and Japanese, during the anti-War Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s saw the killing of their “Vietnamese brothers and sisters” as a reflection of their own dehumanization, they were unsure of what to make of us once we arrived on American shores. These activists had worked hard to situate themselves as “Americans,” so some reacted by disassociating themselves from these FOB (fresh off the boat) foreigners. Asian American Studies scholars have also struggled to figure out how to incorporate these newcomers into their teachings, research, and theories; unfortunately this inclusion still remains underdeveloped or neglected. I have had to navigate my own way into this scholarly arena as well and relied at first on the typical “refugee” model that focuses on us as simply victims of the Vietnam War and its aftermath. Previous research concentrated on evaluating the mental and physical health of the first waves, mainly because there was governmental funding for this type of research. Other

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studies assessed our level of assimilation into American society that cast us into the dichotomous categories of gangsters (meaning unassimilated) or model minorities (meaning assimilated).

This special edition of Amerasia Journal is my attempt as guest editor to counter these narrow perceptions of the Vietnamese who live in America and to examine their complex connections to Vietnam and its history. It includes the works of a new generation of scholars, activists, writers, artists, and community workers who address the gender, sexual, class, political, religious, cultural, and generational diversity of this population. They use different methodologies and are from varying disciplines including cultural studies, communications, economics, education, ethnic studies, history, literature, political science, public health, public policy, religion, and sociology. In order to include more perspectives on the Vietnamese American and Vietnamese transnational experience, I have intermixed longer research articles with complementary shorter reports or review articles, as well as interspersing artistic projects throughout the collection.

**Shaping Transnationalism: Labor, Cultural Production, and Social Relations**

Vietnam has hardly been isolated historically, but is marked by 1,000 years of invasion by the Chinese, followed by 300 years of French colonialism, Japanese occupation during WWII, attempts at French recolonization, and a decade of direct U.S. intervention. In the post-war years, Vietnam has been shaped by countries with socialist regimes, followed by the 1986 *đổi mới* policy in which they opened their doors to foreign capital, as well as fostering relations with Vietnamese in the diaspora, known as Việt Kiều, for remittances to support the national economy. Currently, transnational corporations have been investing in the country because of low production costs and a growing consumer market. There are mixed sentiments among Việt Kiều, with some expressing staunchly anti-communist politics and vociferously advocating against trade with Vietnam or travel there until the current regime is overthrown. Others make frequent homeland pilgrimages to be rejoined with relatives and are working on “rebuilding” the country by establishing business enterprises or non-profit agencies. Mông-Lan’s opening poem “rush hour” captures the stillness of history amid the constant motion of a changing society in Vietnam.

In her essay, Trân Ngoc Angie makes explicit the transnational connection between Viêtnamese and Vietnamese American laborers who face similarly exploitative working conditions in the garment and electronic assembly industries. Her study analyzes the multi-layered lev-
els within these industries, comparing labor conditions in factories and home work sites for male and female workers, as well as critiquing the oppressive structure of global capital. She also examines how some individuals experience continued exploitation while others are able to find some avenue of mobility. She raises difficult questions regarding the sacrifices refugees and immigrants make in their quest for a better future—whether their journeys have been worthwhile if they face comparable or worse predicaments in another land.

Where once you saw few items that had the “Made in Vietnam” mark, now mainstream consumer goods, like the infamous Nike products, along with Vietnamese foodstuff and products, including cultural products, are readily available in this country. Kieu Linh Caroline Valverde examines the transnational flows of popular music that are affected by cultural tastes and economics as well as by politics in the Vietnamese diaspora. Ironically, while singers, composers, and musicians in the Vietnamese diaspora have focused on preserving traditional music pre-1975 out of a longing for a nostalgic homeland, Vietnamese nationals who stayed behind to rebuild the homeland have relied on musical experimentation and modernization. It is difficult to delineate the national boundaries of cultural production since musical forms in Vietnam have been shaped by foreign influences, which then can be transplanted in the diaspora followed by a reintroduction in Vietnam where it is transformed again before being marketed in the form of videos, CDs, and concerts for fans in the diaspora. However, such cultural production and consumption processes are not linear, but as symbols of nationalist pride and exilic desires, they are marked by political contestation.

In what he terms the “double gender revolt,” Hung Cam Thai analyzes transnational marriages between Vietnamese women seeking Vietnamese American husbands who they assume will treat them equally and Vietnamese American men seeking brides from Vietnam who they believe are more traditional. It becomes an economic mismatch as well, since the men, as a result of being immigrants, have experienced downward mobility, while the women, in the post-1975 period, have gained educational and occupational mobility. In both cases, as a result of not fulfilling their expected gender roles, it is difficult for them to find partners locally who will “respect” them. Currently, co-ethnic marriage within the Vietnamese American community is high given the large population and the pressure by parents to marry someone with common ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious practices. However, rates of interethnic marriage between Vietnamese Americans and other Asian Americans have risen, along with higher rates of interracial re-
relationships as contact between these groups increases, which resonates with the war bride experience, albeit in a very different context.

Creating Place: Communities and Organizations

Even though the “Little Saigon” communities in southern and northern California are the largest, Vietnamese American communities have also been established in New York City, Chicago, Houston, Seattle, Virginia, and New Orleans, as well as many other sites throughout the country. In “For Us” South Minneapolis spoken word poet Thien-Bao Phi reiterates the importance of claiming place by powerfully articulating the struggles to find resonance in our own voices. Karin Aguilar San-Juan focuses on the Vietnamese community in the Fields Corner area of Dorchester in Boston, analyzing how its development has been shaped by distinct local histories as well as by memories of the war. She highlights the construction of the Vietnamese American community center in the heart of the district and multigenerational efforts to effectively organize their resources. The center is impressive given the relatively small number of Vietnamese in contrast to other locations without such a center, especially ones in which the residents are concentrated and the commercial areas more extensive. Despite initial resistance, the Vietnamese in Boston are able to carve out a symbolic and physical space for themselves, unlike other communities across the country, particularly in multiracial neighborhoods with scarce resources or in once all-white suburbs, where the reception has been reserved or outright hostile.

Lan Duong and Gina Masequesmay write about why and how groups within the Vietnamese American community establish their own cultural space—informal and formal—and the ways these sites provide
them with social and emotional support. Based on research in San Jose, Duong’s article shows how technology-infused cafés and karaoke bars are places of nostalgia, escapism, and leisure for Vietnamese refugee and immigrant males, but are also places where they can assert their heterosexual masculinity, in particular by reinforcing conservative gender roles. Masequesmay discusses the struggles of lesbians, bisexuals, and female-to-male trans-genders to forge their own identities, as well as describes a support group they formed called Ô-môï, based in Orange County. This queer group caters to those who feel more comfortable around other Vietnamese who share similar cultural and social experiences. Both essays examine how exclusionary processes force individuals to find alternative spaces that can further marginalize them, but in fact, these ethnic places also ease their adjustment and facilitate their involvement in the community.

Marking Histories: Education, Research, and Archives

Many scholars have mistakenly placed the historical marker on the fall of Saigon—April 30, 1975—as the beginnings of the Vietnamese American experience. However, there was an American presence in Vietnam and a Vietnamese presence in the United States prior to this period, with the latter including military trainees, diplomats, international students, and war brides or international brides. Vu Pham examines the role of Vietnamese students and professionals studying in the U.S. as a result of Cold War policies. He explores their political role in this country and their efforts to shape foreign policy and homeland politics, especially during the tumultuous years of the war. Many of them remained in the U.S., while others would return home to become refugees later, particularly since their close U.S. connections made them vulnerable to persecution after 1975. Pham reminds us that the visual images of Vietnamese clinging onto the helicopters as Saigon fell in 1975 or the later images of desperate people in overcrowded boats may be etched onto our imagination as the typical experience; however, they do not fully capture all Vietnamese paths to this country. Even those who have arrived since 1975 are not homogeneous and include: adoptees who left in 1975 through Operation Babylift; refugees, including many ethnic Chinese, who escaped Vietnam by land or by boat; immigrants who came through the Orderly Departure Program; mixed race individuals and their families who arrived through the Amerasian Programs; former political prisoners and their families who entered through the Humanitarian Operation Program; recent immigrants who are reunified with family members, including transnational brides; and contemporary
adoptees.

The UC Irvine Libraries Southeast Asian Archive that has worked to capture these divergent experiences is a rare entity since it was not initiated by a professor’s research interests or by university administrators—more typical beginnings for special collections—but started by the prompting of community members. Dorothy Fujita-Rony and Anne Frank, both who have been involved with the growth of the archive, explain the evolution of this special collection. For over a decade, I have seen librarian Anne Frank, newsletters in hand, promoting the archive at national conferences and have come to greatly appreciate her dedication, especially the ways in which she has negotiated community and academic politics. Since the health of the first generation has been compromised by the war, their escapes, and their resettlement, it becomes imperative to “save” our history, and the archive can play an instrumental role in this endeavor. There are lessons to be learned from the more established Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino American communities who have worked tirelessly through their organizations and museums to collect and preserve their respective histories. Recently, with the guidance of Jackie Dooley of the UC Irvine Libraries Special Collections and Archives Department, the archive received a $65,000 Library Services Technology Act grant from the California State Library to process the materials and a $208,000 National Endowment for the Humanities grant to process and digitalize the collection, making it more accessible to users worldwide.

When I was growing up in U.S.-based schools during the Vietnam War, the only time I heard the teacher mention anything about Vietnam was in regards to atrocities committed by the “Vietnamese” on the “Americans,” and unfortunately, little has changed for students today. Mariam Beevi, James Lam, and Michael Matsuda describe the Vietnamese American curriculum project being implemented in the secondary schools in Orange County, California. Although students and teachers seem to be receptive to the curriculum project, school boards and administrators are less convinced, even in districts with a high density of Vietnamese students. Children in these districts lack mentors, have little guidance regarding college, face racial discrimination, live in poverty, have parents who work long hours, and have been negatively impacted by dislocation. The curriculum project is part of a larger project by community members and organizations to address these social problems. With cutbacks in education and emphasis on test scores, prospects for these kinds of educational projects are challenging, even when this knowledge is intrinsic to our understanding of American history.

In “Grave Digger” and “Red, White and Blue,” Viet Mike Ngo,
born in the states when his father was a student, moved to Vietnam in 1970, and later came back to America as a refugee and was a resident of Orange County for ten years, expresses the harsh legacy of history as he grapples with its impact on his life. A captive since 1989 and serving a life sentence for a gang-related activity he participated in as a youth, he is leading the struggle for more Ethnic Studies classes in the prison college program as well as the fight against racial segregation at San Quentin State Prison. As a result of this activism, the California Department of Corrections (CDC) has placed him in solitary confinement and transferred him, currently, to Avenal State Prison.

**Facing Challenges:**

**Healthcare and Generational Issues**

Tu-Uyen Ngoc Nguyen, Marjorie Kagawa-Singer, Sora Park Tanja-siri, and Mary Anne Foo report from their PATH study on Vietnamese American women’s health care perceptions and practices, focusing on breast and cervical cancer. Ironically, the mental and physical health of the Vietnamese was often “overstudied” because of federal monies available to researchers in the initial stages of resettlement. However, their inclusion in long-term studies or ones that focus on their current health status, including cancer rates, insurance coverage, health screenings, and check-ups, are only in the early stages, such as the California Health Information Survey, one of the few to include Vietnamese samples that are statistically significant. In addition to understanding basic health routines, these studies must be disaggregated to understand our gendered immigrant histories. For example, where did they live in Vietnam during the war (to understand if they were exposed to warfare toxins), and what path did they take to immigrate (a one-day flight to the U.S. vs. languishing for years in refugee camps). For so many of us, we do not know our family health histories given the difficulty of translating medical terms, the disconnection with relatives in Vietnam, and inadequate medical records from Vietnam. It is crucial to understand this impact on the second and third generations to guide us in terms of data collection, outreach programs, and public policies.

Although they are barely emerging on the mainstream political arena, within every Vietnamese community are countless associations, organizations, and clubs that have focused on homeland issues, as well as being engaged in local and national concerns. However, those who are most vocal and garner the most media attention do not necessarily represent the needs or voice of this extensive community. Community politics is still controlled by the first generation, many of who were the military and political elites in Vietnam. For them, homeland politics is
still of primary importance, and adopting fervent anti-Communism ideologies is mandatory, evident with the Hi-Tek Protest of 1999. These men understandably have a difficult time forgetting the past, for they committed their younger years to fighting in the war; some spent the next phase of their life in prisons known as the “re-education camps,” only to be relocated to another country where they face social, economic, and political displacement. Their peers have moved on with their lives, busily pursuing the American dream, their wives have become independent, their children disrespectful, and U.S. society does not honor their sacrifices. Expectedly, they are unprepared to build coalitions in a complex multiracial political arena. This comment is not meant as criticism, but to highlight the challenges facing the Vietnamese American community as it negotiates generational leadership issues. Using the results of the San Jose Mercury News and Viêt Mercury survey, Christian Collet and Nadine Selden report on the “generational” divisions that exist within the Vietnamese community by comparing interest in homeland affairs and domestic agendas as well as voter registration patterns. As a result of homeland animosities, it is difficult to build a community of trust, cooperation, and coalition, although the authors indicate that there is possibility for change with future generations.

Finding Voice: Literature and Expressions

New generations of Vietnamese Americans born during the end of the war or after 1975 are now coming of age. Their memories of the war are what they see in Hollywood productions, through old news footage, or glimpses perhaps revealed by relatives. A whole new generation is coming to terms with this history in their own ways, extending themselves beyond the “survival and silence” mode of their parents’ generation—to work hard and be thankful to America. In “Incense” Viet Le speaks of uncanny moments of remembrance and their startling connection to the present.

Isabelle Thuy Pelaud’s review essay of Catfish and Mandala by Andrew X. Pham, a refugee socialized in the U.S. who goes on a self-guided bike tour through Vietnam, discusses the search not so much for answers. The quest, rather, is for how to even phrase the questions. I agree with her that this book resonates with younger Vietnamese Americans, for I have heard a number of them, even those who have never trekked through Vietnam or plan to, say, “This is the first book I’ve read that speaks to my experiences.” For the younger generation, there are multi-layered connections to the parent’s generation and to their histories. Viet Le’s second poem, “I Sleep in Your Old Bed,” reveals the memories of the passing of his father—the slow fading of a generation.
—but one whose existence lingers with the young. We are reminded that although on the surface one can see “model minority lives,” we are living in families contending with mental illness, physical ailments, addiction problems, internal divisions, and pressures to excel at all costs—all symptoms of an earlier history.

Vietnamese have had to make choices, many of which would alter the places they called home, their personal connections, and their identities. In “Stories from Home,” Brandy Liên Worrall movingly reflects on how larger historical events impact her family, even decades later. As Thu-huong Nguyen-vo so eloquently states in her introduction to the piece, her story is our story, and we can only ponder what if America was never in Vietnam. I have never seen the hills of Appalachia where Worrall calls “home,” but in many ways, I have been there. She has the courage to speak truths and to desire memories, not knowing where it will lead her. I can only say that our families and communities are filled with secrets that are not even whispered, out of fear of being revealed to the authorities; however, I suspect that the silence is more likely out of apprehension of being judged by others or by our own conscience.

I met Phúc Luu when I was invited to participate in a conference at the University of Houston. I was particularly intrigued to see Vietnamese American college-aged attendees, one after another, confronting a panel of religious leaders about how alienated they felt from their religious institutions, which is in sharp contrast to the deference usually accorded them. While other panelists did not understand the comments or pretended not to, Phúc candidly acknowledged the challenges attracting second-generation congregations or worshippers who may feel more comfortable with English and less structured religious practices. In his piece “Across the Ocean of my Soul,” he addresses this issue, as well as revealing some of his personal religious navigations in Texas, a place he calls “home.”

Michele Janette discusses the flourishing body of Vietnamese American literature of various genres and themes written in English by mainly first-generation writers produced between 1963-1994. She addresses the historical context in which this literature was created and argues that the reason why some works have received wider recognition, while others have had more limited audiences, is linked to America’s political relationship with the war and recovery from it. Literary production is actually quite prolific in the community, with volumes of Vietnamese-language books being published, especially those that are biographies, memoirs, or recollections of particular groups, events, or organizations that are self-published or published by ethnic publishers, some of which are sold at ethnic bookstores while others are dispensed.
only to in-group members. Although some are filled with nostalgic half-truths and are stylistically rudimentary, others have literary and historic value and should be of interest to scholars. I conclude this collection with Janette’s article because she articulates how we are really in the beginning stages of Vietnamese American studies and there is much work that needs to be done.

**Transforming Vietnamese America**

Although the majority of our population is first-generation, we can now speak about a diverse and growing cohort of 1.5, second, and even a third generation of Vietnamese Americans. Recently, I was reminded of this diversity when I tried to contact Quynh Nguyen, a trilingual labor activist, who had unionized workers at the Farmer John meat processing plant in Los Angeles and was now with the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, to participate in a community panel I was organizing for a national Sociology conference. Looking her up on the Internet, I found what seemed like a close match, except that it stated she was with the Center for Policy Initiatives in San Diego that focused on “good jobs, democratic workplaces, affordable health care, quality childcare, affordable housing and secure retirement benefits.” I soon realized during my phone conversation that I had the wrong person. Both Quynh Nguyens had specialized in Asian American Studies at UCLA and were working on social justice causes and multiracial alliances. Well, this is a coincidence I would not have encountered a few years ago—two Vietnamese American women working on the forefront of progressive political agendas. Incidentally, there are other Vietnamese Americans gaining national prominence on conservative political agendas as well, but I will have to save that conversation for another time. The trajectories of our diasporic communities are changing, and I hope this collection illustrates how our research, teachings, and artistic and cultural perceptions of Vietnamese Americans must be reflective of these transformations and dimensions.

**Note**

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