UNIVESITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Anticommunism as Cultural Praxis: South Vietnam, War, and Refugee Memories in the Vietnamese American Community

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
Requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

by

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2008

The dissertation of Thanh Thuy Vo Dang is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm:

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Chair

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2008

DEDICATION

Tặng cho gia đình và cộng đồng đã nuôi dưỡng Thúy bao nhiêu năm nay.
For my family and my community that nurtured me all these years.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Vietnamese have a saying, “Một ngày làm thầy, suốt đời là thầy,” which roughly means, “If you are a teacher for a day, you are a teacher for a lifetime.” This resonates with my sense of gratitude to the teachers in my life, whether they belong to the university or not. The love, respect, and gratitude I feel toward all my “teachers” will forever be a part of me. I have had the good fortune of learning from so many. I thank my dissertation committee members, Roberto Alvarez, Rosemary M. George, Lisa Sun-Hee Park, and Lisa Yoneyama for their support of my work and for being the truly courageous scholars who have inspired me throughout my graduate studies. A special acknowledgement goes to my chair, Yen Le Espiritu, who has been so much more than an academic mentor. She has been my anchor and my guide throughout these seven years of learning, field work, teaching, writing, mothering, and so much more.

I thank my dear cohort members, Faye Caronan, Tere Cesena, Monika Gosin, Ashley Lucas, and Theo Verinakis for their friendship and humor. They have each taught me much about how to care for and support each other through graduate school. The first two years were bearable, even enjoyable, because they were all there with me. To my grad-mom dissertating buddy, Theresa C. Suarez: she has taught me a great deal about kindness, perseverance, and the stakes of our work. I am so honored to have crossed the finish line with her.

I must also acknowledge the phenomenal women of my reading group, Tới Đâu Hây Tới Đó, who always remind me of the importance of my work and who help me find the language to enter into important conversations about the community and the academy. Special thanks to Cam Nhung Vu who has always been a wonderfully

supportive friend and conference co-panelist. I have learned to not take myself too seriously and be less "Type-A" through our friendship.

Outside the walls of the academy, I have had many teachers who offered valuable insights on navigating life's moments, no matter how grandiose or trifling. My dearest friends from the I.E., Nhu and Ha Thai, have shown me how the best types of friends are those who can pick up a conversation from where we left off months later with ease. My college girlfriends, Melinda Leidy and Linh Thong constantly keep me in check and always remind me why I went to graduate school in the first place. My childhood friend who I re-discovered after a long absence, Giang Nguyen Foster, has become a source of inspiration through her amazing ability to do so much and yet always make time for others. Through my renewed friendship with Giang I have re-learned how to giggle like a little girl. These women offer me with their own brands of wisdom on how to love, laugh, forgive, and overcome trying times. They have been there for me in the darkest hours and have celebrated many milestones and happy moments. I consider myself so unbelievably lucky to have such friends and muses.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to my community teachers, especially Nghiep Le and Son Tran, who served as "uncles," mentors and friends to me for many years. Lan Le, Rose Tran, and Bác Thuy all took great care of me while I did community work and grad school work. It has been such an honor and privilege to spend time with them and learn about their lives. They have provided me with another home and family in San Diego.

Of course, I would never have been able to get this far without my big, amazing family. My father is the smartest man I have ever known though he never had a formal

education. He has taught me, by example, to live life with humility and courage. I have never met a stronger woman than my mother, whose strength quietly lies in the everyday ways she cares for her children and grandchildren. My brothers and sisters inspire me everyday with their strength, generous spirits, and capacity to love. To my big sister, Oanh, I owe my entire beginning in higher education. I will never forget how she always believed in me and did everything she could to provide for me while I sought an education. To my little sister and best friend, Xuyen, I owe a million thanks for every small gesture of love she bestowed on me during our wonderful years living together. She has been my daughter's "other mother" and the best room-mate anyone could ever ask for. And my daughter, the smallest teacher in my life, has taught me a great deal about how to be patient and she lends me a fresh set of eyes each day to view my academic endeavors and put everything in perspective. I thank her, Allyse Minh Kieu, for loving me unconditionally.

Finally, I thank my life partner Duc Dang for being by my side for almost fifteen years. He has seen me through many different schools, many different degrees, and the many meltdown moments that were all part and parcel of grad school life. All the while, he has taught me how to be more open and more forgiving. He has been, and continues to be, the greatest love of my life. There was a time when all we had was each other. Today, we have each other and so much more.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnic Studies

University of California, San Diego, 2008

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In dialogue with new critical scholarship on immigration, refugee, war, and memory studies as well as drawing from the methodologies of cultural studies and ethnography, this dissertation examines "anticommunism" as a set of cultural discourses and practices that shape the past, present, and future of Vietnamese diasporic communities by exploring when, where, and for what purposes South Vietnam emerges in refugee memories. That anticommunism continues to be an important paradigm for

Vietnamese diasporic identity and community formations more than thirty years after the official end of the war and despite increased transnational relations between Vietnam and its diaspora suggests the need to theorize the multiplicity of meanings that it has amassed through the years. Through ethnographic interviews, participation in and observation of Vietnamese American community events in San Diego and analysis of its cultural productions, I examine how the refugee (or first) generation apprehend and deploy anticommunism in community spaces and in their private lives in order to engage with conversations about how memory, history and silence intersect and reveal hidden dynamics of institutional power and violence. How can acts of collective remembrance and the burdened silences of the first generation regarding the Vietnam-American war and post-war traumas work as alternatives to state sanctioned narratives (in Vietnam and the US) that erase a or disavow South Vietnamese perspectives? Can we read differently the public face of anticommunist politics that has authorized community censorship and violence in the past thirty years? This dissertation takes apart what has been academically and generally dismissed as conservative exile politics and looks to everyday community meaning-making practices as a legitimate and important site of knowledge. Thinking of Vietnamese American anticommunism as a cultural praxis—a mode for engaging in memory and meaning-making practices—it becomes possible to discuss the complexity of post-war grappling with death, loss, exile, and survival for those on the ground.

INTRODUCTION

> How do we write about absences? How do we compel others to look for the things that are seemingly not there? How do we imagine beyond the limits of what is already stated to be understandable?[1]

> Saì Gòn ơi! Ta mất người như người đã mất tên
> Như mộ bia đá lạnh hương nguyền
> Như trời sâu đã bỏ đất sầu…còn gì đâu…
> [Oh Saigon! I've lost you as you have lost your name
> As the cold tombstones scented curse
> As the sad earth abandoned by stars and sky…what is left…][2]

A Memory without a Name

Absence need not be viewed strictly as a void, a lack, or mere emptiness. Absence can also be a site of possibility, the potential for presence, as yet recognized "truths," or even "arrested histories" awaiting future release.[3] Taking my cue from Yen Le Espiritu's queries above, I suggest that things which are "seemingly not there" in dominant historical discourse often co-resides with the stories that can be articulated in the present. I take Vietnamese American anticommunism to be a dialectical engagement with dominant history, as complex articulations of absented South Vietnamese stories in public and private realms of refugee lives. The "anti" in anticommunism would suggest a reactionary framework, a form of oppositional politics linked fundamentally to US Cold War politics.[4] I suggest, however, that we expand our understanding of how

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[1] Yen Le Espiritu, "Thirty Years AfterWARd: The Endings That Are Not Over," *Amerasia Journal* 31:2 (2005): xx.

[2] From a popular post-1975 Vietnamese song called "Saì Gòn Niềm Nhớ Khong Tên [Saigon a Memory without a Name]" Transcription and translation of the song are my own and any error that may detract from the song's nuances are mine.

[3] I employ Carole MCGranahan's notion of "arrested history," or a form of submerged history that is archived for future use since its "release" is rendered impossible in the present as irreconcilable truths. See "Truth, Fear, and Lies: Exile Politics and Arrested Histories of the Tibetan Resistance," *Cultural Anthropology* 20:4 (November 2005): 570-600.

[4] While Vietnamese American anticommunist politics share some characteristics with US Cold War McCarthyism, I would like to suggest some fundamental differences. For one, Vietnamese American

anticommunism has become an entrenched *cultural praxis* within Vietnamese American communities and ask what work it does in creating "imagined community," or affective links between refugees and the next generation. Anticommunism is more than merely a conservative politics for first generation Vietnamese Americans, as commonly understood.[5] Rather, it has been deployed as a short-hand for a wide range of ideas and practices, from paying respect to one's family and elders to educating the community and society at large about South Vietnam to maintaining a Vietnamese culture in diaspora. While the deployment of anticommunism as cultural praxis is not unproblematic, I suggest that re-conceptualizing its work in the community allows us to move beyond a much-too-rigid notion of community that has depended heavily upon maintaining the boundaries of anticommunist and communist, us and them, inside and outside. Interrogated as such, anticommunism is no longer a reactionary politics, but also a productive and affective means for articulating stories. However, what can be articulated through an anticommunist framework continues to bear the tensions of stories that remain unspoken among Vietnamese refugees.

Following Walter Benjamin's concept of history, where the past is not purely recounted as that which really happened, but rather through "seizing" memory as it

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anticommunism is context-specific, usually referencing the civil war between North and South Vietnam rather than general international "red scare" rhetoric. Furthermore, Vietnamese American anticommunism is primarily contingent on the defeat of South Vietnam in 1975 and subsequent complaints against the communist government by refugees and those victimized by their policies, such as reeducation camp prisoners.

[5] Vietnamese American community politics has historically aligned itself with US conservative politics, as evidenced by the platform of the highest ranking Vietnamese American elected officials in recent years such as California State Assemblyman Van Thai Tran (Republican, 68th District). Furthermore, Professor Ngo Thanh Nhan suggests that "The main actor that has been supporting, financing and supplying the rationale for the anti-communist viewpoint has always been the U.S. government." See "Some Thoughts on US-Viet Nam Diplomatic Normalizations and Changes in the Politics of the Vietnamese-American Community." Paper presented at *Asians in America Conference* (New York University: 22 March 1996).

"flashes up at a moment of danger," I re-think Vietnamese American anticommunism as a modality for seizing the past at a critical moment when South Vietnamese stories are quickly receding into cultural memory.[6] Vietnamese refugees are dying and along with their passing will go the stories they have yet to tell. My dissertation urgently re-frames anticommunism as a cultural discourse, a platform upon which Vietnamese refugees have performatively charted the terrain of refugee subjectivity and social belonging, as well as a forum for authoring alternative truths in tension with national histories in Vietnam and the US. Previous scholarship on Vietnamese American anticommunism acknowledges the importance of this political discourse in binding together the refugee community and addresses the question of why Vietnamese Americans are anticommunist.[7] Viewing anticommunism through a political frame, these studies have been unable to address *how* Vietnamese refugees make meaning out of the conditions of loss and longing, how they grapple collectively with memories without a name precisely through anticommunist discourses.

By interrogating the cultural work of anticommunism, I foreground the everyday ways Vietnamese Americans collectively understand and make meaningful their losses in

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[6] Benjamin 1969.

[7] See, for example, C.N. Le's article, "'Better Dead Than Red': Anti-Communist Politics Among VietnameseAmericans," in Anti-Communist Minorities in the US: The Political Activism of Ethnic Refugees, edited by Ieva Zake. New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, f*orthcoming*. Additionally, Kate Khanh Pham's master's thesis (2001) explores how community leaders use anticommunism to "reconstruct histories" and "represent identity." Her study examines the "historical, political, and psychological roots of anti-Communism in the Vietnamese American community." She concludes that the "hegemonic narrative" of Vietnamese American anticommunism is used to contest the historical absence of the South Vietnam story in the US, but this narrative is highly patriarchal and elitist. While I agree with many of her assertions about Vietnamese American anticommunist politics, Pham focuses only on the public structure of anticommunism rather than the processes that shape this discourse. Nor does she consider how anticommunism is understood and practiced on the ground. Therefore, while I am inspired by her work, I suggest that more complex analysis is needed. My study foregrounds the cultural dimensions of anticommunism.

the present. What are the different meanings of anticommunism? What kinds of affiliations or identifications does anticommunism enable or foreclose for Vietnamese Americans within US history and contemporary society? Shortly after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, I was in Little Saigon (Orange County, California) and saw a Vietnamese American woman in her late-fifties manning a table outside the Asian Garden Mall with a large sign that read "Terrorism = Communism." During the interminable "War on Terror," we have witnessed how Vietnam has resurfaced as a topic of much contention, providing a point of reference for parallels or historical lessons.[8] Given that communism no longer poses a real threat to America and the "free" world, what does this strategy of equating communism with terrorism do for Vietnamese refugees in this moment of terrorist preoccupation? I would like to suggest that we read this political statement made by an elderly woman outside an ethnic shopping center as a call to remember those who have been easily dismissed or forgotten by the US nation-state. This sign serves the purpose of inscribing a different memory of a different war in the here and now; a memory which Vietnamese refugees continue to live with day to day. The sign brings "Vietnam" into the present. Most importantly, the sign suggests that we, Vietnamese refugees, still matter and we are still here to tell our stories. Thus, I locate the urgency of my project in calling attention to the "absent presence" of Vietnamese

[8] For examples of discussions about Vietnam-Iraq similarities and differences, see Jeffrey Record and W. Andrew Terrill, "Iraq and Vietnam: Differences, Similarities and Insights," *Strategic Studies Institute Report, US Army War College* May 2004, Robert Freeman, "Is Iraq Another Vietnam," *CommonDreams.Org* 19 April 2004, http://www.commondreams.org/views04/0419-11.htm, William Greider, " Iraq as Vietnam," *The Nation* 15 April 2004, and Andrew Lam, "Iraq Massacre Can't Shake Vietnamese-American Support for US Troops," *New American Media* 14 June 2006.

refugee/community perspectives in academic discourse (particularly in the growing field of Vietnam Studies).[9]

In the second epigraph, a popular post-1975 Vietnamese song called "Saigon a Memory without a Name," the refugee's loss of the homeland mirrors Saigon's loss of its name. The song's title aptly captures the dilemma of remembering for Vietnamese refugees: how to remember a place and a time that has been transformed beyond national recognition? What are the parameters for remembering and forgetting for refugees whose temporal and geographical relationship to South Vietnam are anti-historical, filtered through anticommunism? After the reunification of North and South Vietnam in 1975, Saigon was renamed Hồ Chí Minh City, but it continues to be colloquially called Saigon by many diasporics and nationals. Saigon's persistent re-emergence in diasporic cultural production and in the everyday language of Vietnamese suggest how the sites of *culture* and *the everyday* enable a politics of remembering previously foreclosed by institutional regimes of knowledge. Through remembering and mourning for the loss subjects (and places) of history, anticommunism compels us to think about "what remains" after loss.

David L. Eng and David Kazanjian suggest that loss be infused with creative and generative possibilities, that the act of mourning loss renders a productive dialogue between the past and present which subverts the linearity of historical time. Drawing from Benjamin and Freud, Eng and Kazanjian argue that "the politics of mourning might

[9] In 2006, I joined the Vietnam Studies Group listserv in order to address a comment made by a scholar dismissing the Vietnamese American community as a legitimate site of historical knowledge because of their anticommunist beliefs and practices. Joining other Vietnamese American scholars, I suggested that anticommunism be explored as a multivalent discourse that reveals our political stakes as academics who use the community "out there" to validate our theories of subaltern knowledge but when that knowledge confronts us, we can easily dismiss it as biased, un-objective, too sentimental, etc. I see my project speaking precisely to those ideals of scholarly objectivity.

be described as that creative process mediating a hopeful for hopeless relationship between loss and history."[10] Vietnamese American anticommunism has crucially been premised upon mourning for South Vietnam and the war/refugee dead. I find Eng and Kazanjian's formulation of loss compelling as a way to move anticommunism from a strict political engagement with "homeland politics" to a discursive cultural form that has been invigorated at different historical junctures for various purposes. Throughout the dissertation, I elaborate upon the multiple purposes that anticommunism serves for the Vietnamese American community.

To take up anticommunism as a cultural discourse means to also consider the ethical stakes of representation. My work extends a Foucauldian discourse analysis that recognizes the dialogical relationship of politics and culture, but also argues for an ethnographic exploration of discourse as understood and deployed on the ground. Homi Bhabha posits that, "Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural trails set in the fixed tablet of tradition."[11] Following Bhabha, I argue that iterations of Vietnamese diasporic identity rely on performatively charting and negotiating the boundaries of community and national affiliations. In particular, performances of identity for Vietnamese in diaspora have often revolved around "contests of memory" over the deployment of the current Vietnam flag and the South Vietnam flag.[12] For those marginalized within a dominant culture, Bhabha argues, "the 'right' to signify from periphery of authorized power and privilege does not

[10] Eng and Kazanjian 2003: 2.
[11] Bhabha 1994: 2.
[12] In Chapter 3, I examine the South Vietnam flag and Flag Resolutions (city and state bills that recognize the South Vietnam flag as the symbol of the Vietnamese American community).

depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority.'"[13] In other words, "tradition" is not that which is unchanging and authentic, but rather subject to negotiation and re-invention for those on the social margins.

Articulations of re-invented traditions happen in the cultural domain, thus culture (particularly Asian American culture as Lisa Lowe has argued) offers alternative spaces to re-member different stories that have been silenced within the development narrative of the nation-state. Lowe suggests that:

> Asian American culture 're-members' the past in and through fragmentation, loss, and dispersal that constitutes that past. Asian American culture is the site of more than critical negation of the U.S. nation-state; it is a site that shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state.[14]

While the actual presence of Vietnamese bodies in the US calls attention to the history of "fragmentation, loss, and dispersal" as a result of a failed US war in Asia, Vietnamese Americans are rarely critical of US empire because of South Vietnam's allied relations with the US.[15] Thus, Vietnamese American political discourse contains contradictions

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[13] Bhabha 1994: 2.
[14] Lowe 1996: 29.
[15] Karin Aguilar-San Juan situates Vietnamese America within US Cold War politics. She states that Asian America is often a site for the contestation of US nation-building projects. One aspect of these projects is the imposition of democracy in overseas nations, particularly in Asian countries. She argues that Vietnamese America does not easily fit into Asian America's oppositional stance to US imperialist wars in Asia since it adheres to the anticommunist ideology of the US nation-state. Therefore, Vietnamese Americans inhabit a complex, often contradictory space within the US since they do not stand in opposition to US imperialism abroad but nonetheless remain racialized outsiders domestically. See "Gazing/Colonial: Looking at the Vietnamese American Community in Boston and Orange County." *Hitting Critical Mass: A Journal of Asian American Cultural Criticism*. 5:1 (1998).

within that must be reckoned with on the ground. Grounding discourse in community practices further demands we consider the question of ethics in representing subjects of war and violence.

In this era of war and global displacement, the United States is among the leading industrialized countries of resettlement for refugee populations, with nearly 54,000 admitted in 2005.[16] However, refugee scholarship has been structured through either an international human rights discourse[17] or an immigration/assimilation model furthered by the classic social sciences.[18] By critically examining the "refugee" as an *analytic* rather than a subject made legible through state policy and dominant media configurations, I suggest that we may better understand how experiences such as the loss of one's homeland and historical erasure are lived and reckoned with on the ground. Mimi Thi Nguyen examines the discursive construction of the Vietnamese refugee as a "multivalent category of difference," particularly focusing on the symbolic value that the refugee figure accrues in politics and culture.[19] Through a cultural studies framework, Nguyen attends specifically to how the refugee figure acts as a screen for representations of gendered and national identities in the US. I extend Nguyen's study by moving between

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[16] From data on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee official website (www.unhcr.org). According to the UNHCR Statistical Yearbook for 2005, by the end of 2005 the global population of concern numbered 21 million (8.7 were refugees and the rest were divided among asylum seekers, repatriated refugees, internally displaced persons, stateless persons, and others). Among the 21 million population of concern, 8.4 million were from Asia (approximately 40%).

[17] For an example of the human rights discourse, see Bradley and Petro 2002.

[18] In the early twentieth century Robert Park and the Chicago School developed the social science view of assimilation as the final stage of a four-stage cycle of "contact, competition, accommodation, and eventual assimilation" which is "progressive and irreversible." Further refining this theory, Milton Gordon devised seven stages in which "identificational assimilation" was the end-stage. Usually this identificational assimilation occurs in the second or third generation, when the children of immigrants no longer identify themselves as hyphenated Americans and have culturally and structurally assimilated into the mainstream. For examples of the classic social science model of immigration and assimilation, see Park 1950, Gordon 1964, Glazer and Moynihan 1970, and Portes and Rumbaut 1996.

[19] Nguyen, M. 1995.

cultural studies analysis *and* ethnography in exploring the discourses and practices of the Vietnamese refugee community, a group that has negotiated the contradictions of refugee-hood, I argue that we may understand alternative ways of "being American," one that does not privilege a linear narrative of assimilation and American expansionism.

Vietnamese refugees are one of the most closely scrutinized groups in US immigration history, emerging out of the highly televised and divisive American loss in Vietnam, yet little is known about how they work through the contradictions of their lives in the US. Espiritu suggests that situating the refugee figure in the "space between" nations allows us to understand how those on the social margins of history respond to and transform epistemologies of global violence.[20] Any discussions of Vietnamese American community and identity formations must grapple with the figure of the refugee as well as contend with the haunting presences of the Vietnam/American War.

According to official chronologies, the Vietnam/American War ended in 1975; this idea is reinforced in the cultural imaginary with the iconic image of the last US helicopter lifting off the embassy rooftop in Saigon moments before the approaching communist forces invaded the city. Yet privileging the moment of the "Fall of Saigon" has precluded other ways of relating to and remembering South Vietnam and understanding Vietnamese American community and identity formations. Privileging the Fall of Saigon, we forget that approximately one million Vietnamese had been internally displaced from North to South in 1954, the year when Vietnam was divided at the 17th parallel by the Geneva Accord; we forget that Vietnamese refugees departed at different historical moments with varying levels of experience under the new communist regime,

[20] Espiritu 2006a.

thus speak against the regime from diverse personal memories; we forget that before 1975 nearly 15,000 Vietnamese were living in the US and some participated in the antiwar movement.[21] Privileging the Fall of Saigon also means that anticommunism is configured only as a reactionary politics, that Vietnamese refugees are only anticommunist because they lost the war and subsequently lost their country.

While the Fall of Saigon certainly fanned the flames of anticommunism, it would be historically inaccurate to locate its emergence in 1975. Tuan Hoang examines pre-1975 South Vietnamese history and suggest that "anticommunism" in South Vietnam served as an alternative to socialist ideology, what he sometimes refers to as "noncommunist ideology" crafted by the urban intelligentsia as a means of hashing out their own roadmap for nation-building.[22] Rather than a reactionary politics, anticommunism was actually an alternative nationalism. Looking at the same historical period in South Vietnam, Nu-Anh Tran analyzes the ways in which South Vietnamese sought a distinct cultural identity often at odds with the American presence.[23] Thus both scholars show different dimensions of South Vietnamese politics and identity that challenge the premise of dominant representations of South Vietnamese as inept, weak, corrupt, and ultimately reliant on the US for a sense of identity. While Vietnamese American anticommunist discourse has certainly acceded to the linear (chronological)

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[21] Vu H. Pham (2003) provides a historical account of the Vietnamese intellectuals residing in the US prior to 1975. While in popular and official discourses, Vietnamese in the US have been defined as "refugees," it is important to note that there exists a number of Vietnamese scholars, professionals, and war brides who entered the country before 1975 and therefore do not fit into the refugee model. Pham emphasizes the need to periodize Vietnamese America as far back as the beginning of the Cold War in 1945, arguing that an intellectual historiography of the pre-1975 cohort would allow for moving beyond the victim complex imposed by the refugee model and offer a view of Vietnamese Americans as social agents of change.

[22] Tuan Hoang, "Promoting anticommunist and bourgeois values in Saigon, 1954-1960," Paper presented at the Association for Asian Studies Conference 2008, Atlanta, GA.

[23] Tran, N. 2006.

view of the war and its ending, primarily through privileging the Fall of Saigon, I suggest that there are slippages that we may enunciate in order to understand how Vietnamese refugees resist closure and insist on a circuitous path towards narrating South Vietnam stories.

Around the 25th anniversary of the Fall of Saigon, mainstream American news agencies featured extensive coverage of the Vietnamese American community, re-hashed the debates over the Vietnam War, and attempted yet again to reconcile "Vietnam" and its refugees in the public psyche.[24] The caricature of a Vietnamese refugee that emerges within these representations is that of an aging veteran with a fanatic commitment to "homeland politics," an anticommunist politics.[25] According to a 2000 *Mercury News* poll of the San Francisco Bay Area's Vietnamese American community, more than 2 in 5 of adults over 55 and over 1 in 3 of adults over 45 believed that "fighting communism" is a "top priority."[26] The mainstream media characterizes Vietnamese refugees as "Ghosts of the past..." or "sad, aging veterans of a lost war."[27] Years after encountering these representations, I began to see how the ghost metaphor resonates with the experiences of refugees who persist in the space between Vietnam and the US, channeling their sentiments, memories, hopes, and dreams through space and time. However, I do not

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[24] In a sample of news articles taken from the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* between April and June of 2000, I found a range of articles dealing with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, US veterans and their reponses, Vietnam War films and other cultural production, surveys and features of Vietnamese American communities across the U.S. addressing their political views, economic achievements, and responses to "Black April," op-ed pieces on the US involvement in Vietnam, and the conditions of contemporary Vietnamese economy and society.

[25] See, for example, Lamb 2000, Martelle and Tran 2000, Pan and Ly 2000, Tolson 2000.

[26] Collet and Selden 2003

[27] Mydans 2002. "It is early in the morning -- at cafes like the Coffee Factory (15582 Brookhurst Street) and Le Croissant Dore (9122 Bolsa Avenue) -- that the *ghosts of the past* emerge. *Sad, aging veterans of a lost war* drink strong French coffee and murmur about the lives and the land they left behind." Emphasis my own.

deploy the metaphor of the ghost in the same way as journalist Seth Mydans writing about first generation Vietnamese American men drinking their cà phê sữa đá.[28] In fact, his description of Vietnamese refugees points a pitying finger at the refugees who have been saved by American benevolence, implying they are here today in the safety of Little Saigon sipping their coffees only because the US has saved them from communist tyranny. Examining the contests of historical narrative and cultural memory over such a "seething presence" as the Vietnam/American War in contemporary social life, we see how Vietnamese refugees illustrate what Avery F. Gordon must mean by "...the living effects, seething and lingering, of what seems over and done with, the endings that are not over."[29]

Journalist Mike Tolson's portrait of the first generation reveals that their preoccupation with the past is a coping strategy for living in an unfamiliar present.[30] Tolson interviews Vietnamese refugees and finds that engaging with homeland politics allows for many to imagine themselves as part of a community, offering a sense of belonging to a đồng bào (literally meaning the same womb, or community). He suggests that for Vietnamese Americans, "It is more than nostalgia and more than the still-vivid memories of death and chaos. More than the guilt of having failed or having escaped when most could not. It has something to do with the responsibility of *dong bao* and too much unfinished business."[31] Viewing Vietnamese refugees through the lens of war, trauma, and displacement, Tolson suggests that there is something more to be deciphered

[28] Vietnamese-style iced espresso with condensed milk.
[29] Gordon 1997: 195.
[30] Tolson 2000.
[31] Ibid.

about Vietnamese refugees. He offers the idea of đồng bào, or loyalty to one's community however that is defined, as a means of understanding why the "war" has not quite ended for so many Vietnamese Americans and why anticommunism continues to be a vital component of their lives in the US. In *Against the Romance of Community,* feminist scholar Miranda Jones offers a compelling critique of identity politics by questioning community as concept and strategy, rather than take community as an immutable category. She argues that, "Fetishizing community only makes us blind to the ways we might intervene in the enactment of domination and exploitation. I see the practice of critique, and in particular a critical relationship to community, as an ethical practice of community, as an important mode of participation."[32] Mindful of Jones' critique of community, my dissertation views the Vietnamese American community as a construction mediated through anticommunist practices and beliefs. "The community" is thus not a pre-existing entity based on primordial ethnic or national affiliations, but is continually contested and negotiated, and consequently dynamically evolving. Thus far, Vietnamese Americans have negotiated the terms for community belonging mainly through anticommunist discourse and practices.

Using Tolson's speculations as a point of departure, my project explores how war, displacement, and refugee status affect the formation of community and identity among Vietnamese refugees, the first generation of Vietnamese Americans. I do so by examining the various ways anticommunist discourses and practices shape the lived realities and collective imaginations of Vietnamese American women and men. While other studies have noted the contentious nature of Vietnamese American anticommunism

[32] Jones 2002: ix.

and given cursory explanations (often sympathetically) for the community's public conservatism, this is the first in-depth study of *how* anticommunism has shaped community through not only political but cultural and personal spaces.[33] Recent works in political science explores anticommunism through the "protest-to-politics" model and investigates whether or not homeland politicking offers Vietnamese Americans a means of "mainstreaming" or assimilating into the political life of the US.[34] These studies focus on the integration of Vietnamese into the US mainstream and fail to examine the complex relationship "homeland politics" has to the process of adapting to life in the US and, more importantly, to the dynamic engagements between memory and history. For Vietnamese Americans, anticommunism is not only a matter of political opposition to Hanoi; it can also be means of claiming an important role in US society as allies (as opposed to assimilated subjects). Thus, I argue that anticommunism is not *only* a matter of politics and is certainly not *only* manifest in political protests, boycotts, and demonstrations. While these are important, and highly visible, venues for observing how a homeland politics shapes Vietnamese American community and identity, focusing only on these sites forecloses other possibilities for a more complicated analysis.

The body of existing social science literature available on Vietnamese Americans focuses primarily on narratives of escape and trauma and the ways in which they have adapted to American life through patterns of resettlement and measures of mental health,

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[33] See, for example, Aguilar-San Juan 2000, Collet and Furuya 2005, Collet 2007 and 2008, and Ong and Meyer 2004.

[34] The political science model that examines protest as a means of participating in mainstream politics and becoming American follows Browning, Marshall and Tabb (1984) in situating ethnic minority politics as marginal to, but always striving towards, US mainstream politics. See Collet and Furuya's (2005) application of the protest-to-politics model for Vietnamese Americans. Ong and Meyer (2004) are skeptical of Vietnamese American protest as a means of political incorporation, however. Wong (2002) suggests that political incorporation is a complicated concept and there is no agreed upon definition of what this may mean in academic circles.

academic achievement, and economic performances.[35] These studies take a US-centric approach to Vietnamese refugees and immigrants, viewing them as new problems to be solved by public policy and social services.[36] While these studies provide some interesting findings for both first and second generation Vietnamese Americans, they often rely upon the classic formulation of assimilation as a linear process and measure the adaptation of Vietnamese in terms of socio-economic status, educational achievement, and mental health without considering the ways in which they actively respond to these larger historical structural forces.[37]

This approach to Vietnamese as refugees and immigrants prefigures the Vietnamese subject as a social problem for which economic upward mobility and mental health interventions are the desired solution. Etienne Balibar calls this "formation of an immigration complex" an example of neo-racism.[38] He explains that the contemporary view of immigration as a problem for the nation allows for hierarchies of race to be maintained with "lethal" effects:

> This is the implication of immigrants in—and their presumed responsibility for—a whole series of different problems which makes it possible to imagine them as so many aspects of one and the same 'problem,' of one and the same crisis. We touch here upon the concrete form in which one of the essential characteristics of racism reproduces itself today: its capacity to lump together all the dimensions of 'social

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[35] See, for example, Bui-Xuan-Luong 2000, Do 1999, Freeman 1989 and 1995, Kelly 1977, Montero 1979, Zhou and Bankston III 19998.

[36] For example, Keith St. Cartmail's 1973 book, *Exodus Indochina*, "examine[s] what has been done and what can still be done to alleviate the refugee problem *now*." Emphasis in original.

[37] A notable exception is Nazli Kibria's sociological study of Vietnamese American families in Philadelphia. She focuses on the social networks within the Vietnamese community, such as the "patchworking" system whereby friends and relatives can pool resources together. She explores the interaction between U.S. social structures and the everyday lives of Vietnamese Americans. This was one of the first texts to understand Vietnamese Americans as actors, or agents, working to create new lives for themselves and their children. See *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans*

[38] Balibar 1991.

> pathology' as effects of a single cause, which is defined with the aid of a series of signifiers derived from race or its more recent equivalents.[39]

While Balibar writes about the situation in France in particular, his critique of this view of immigration can be applied to the US context as well. Espiritu offers an urgent critique of the social problem approach to US immigration studies in *Homebound*, where she insists upon a "critical transnational perspective" that considers the role of US empire in the migration of those from postcolonial (or neocolonial) societies.[40]

While giving a cursory look at the Vietnam/American war as impetus for migration, the existing literature on Vietnamese Americans fails to consider the psychic and emotive effects of war and displacement and the means through which refugees negotiate life after loss. In addressing the psychic and emotive, I do not focus on refugees as "mentally ill" or traumatized individuals, as evidenced by the proliferation of refugee studies through medicine (psychiatry) shortly after 1975.[41] Refugee scholarship employs a clinical approach that views the refugee body as "diseased," "foreign," and therefore in need of psychiatric and medical attention in order to be regulated into normative western ideals of "health and mental health." Aihwa Ong examines the ways in which institutions such as medical clinics discipline the refugee subject through extending Foucault's notion of "governmentality." Significantly, she shows how Cambodian Americans negotiate

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[39] Ibid: 220.
[40] Espiritu 2003.
[41] For examples of general scholarship on refugee and mental health see, Boehnlein, James and J. David Kinzie, "Refugee Trauma," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 32:3(1995): 223-252, Michael Hollifield, et al., "Measuring Trauma and Health Status in Refugees," *JAMA* 288:5(2002): 611-621. For specific mental health studies of Vietnamese refugees see K.M. Lin, L. Tazuma, and M. Masuda, "Adaptational Problems of Vietnamese Refugees: Health and Mental Health Status," *General Psychiatry* 36:9(1979): 955-961, William Liu, M. Lamanna, and A. Murata, *Transition to Nowhere: Vietnamese Refugees in America* (Nashville: Charter House, 1979), and S.J. Gold, "Mental Health and Illness in Vietnamese Refugees" *Western Journal of Medicine* 157:3(1992): 290-294,

these regulatory structures through pragmatic, culturally specific and creative ways.[42] Whereas the "clinical approach" most evident in refugee studies individualizes the issues of trauma and coping, I suggest that anticommunism serves social and collective purposes in the ways it is used by Vietnamese Americans to respond to not only the traumas of war and displacement, but the traumatic erasure of their perspectives from official history.

My work departs from refugee studies through a refusal to individualize and medicalize the "traumas" of war and migration. Rather than posit Vietnamese refugees as traumatized victims in need of state-sanctioned medical/psychiatric care, I insist that their "traumas" or wounds are collective and continue to haunt the social imagination. While "trauma" has become popularized in recent years in response to the return of the repressed in histories of the Holocaust and the Vietnam War, Karyn Ball argues that we need to be attentive to how trauma has been turned into "capital accumulation" for academic discourses.[43] Citing John Mowitt's notion of "trauma envy," where "trauma becomes an envied wound" that allows for a ranking of certain traumas over others, politics is then conceived of as taking sides, as being ultimately about good versus evil rather than about how those categories of good and evil are created.[44] Ball speaks in particular of this "post-emergent phase" when the institutionalization of "trauma" has turned it into a cliché and divests trauma of its ability to generate "moral sensitivity and

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[42] Ong 2003.
[43] Ball 2000. Brown argues that the "trauma of capital accumulation" (a concept borrowed from Mowitt) is the very crux of academic engagements with trauma; that is, the aftereffect of trauma's growing entrenchment in academic discourse is in becoming a commodity fetish.
[44] Ibid. See also Mowitt 2000.

critical responsibility."[45] However, in positing that the trauma motif be a viable one for examining Vietnamese refugees, I am not privileging this particular group over another. Rather, in understanding how Vietnamese refugees cope with real and remembered trauma, we may ground our critiques of *how* trauma has been used as a means of imagining community. Viewing Vietnamese refugees through the lens of trauma studies, I heed Wendy Brown's caution regarding the danger of wound fetish; that is, she critiques identity politics as often reliant on the cache of victim-hood, insofar as the wound is made to stand in for identity itself.[46] Because Vietnamese American anticommunism has relied on a claim to "injury," I argue we must interrogate how those injuries are called upon for the purpose of narrating different versions of South Vietnamese history.

Recent Vietnamese American scholarship suggests that South Vietnam and refugee stories have been erased from public spaces in both Vietnam and the US. As cultural critic Nguyen-vo Thu-Huong suggests, dominant national narratives in Vietnam and the US privilege very different perspectives, but they have both silenced the histories of South Vietnam and the refugee generation.[47] In Vietnam, the "American War" is situated in a broader history of anti-colonial struggles, serving to valorize a nationalist victory over the invading American superpower. Leftist US historians have emulated this history in their critique of America's involvement in Vietnam.[48] In this story, there is

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[45] Ball 2000: 16.
[46] Brown 1995. Brown argues that many feminist projects inadvertently reinforce the sexualized and masculinist character of nation-states, politics, and cultures. Through rights claims put forth by victimized constituents of the state, they reaffirm the historical injuries constitutive of those identities.
[47] Nguyen-vo 2005.
[48] For example, Thomas Hodgkin's *Vietnam: A Revolutionary Path* (1981) valorizes Vietnamese nationalist history and neglects the role of South Vietnam in that history. Ngo Vinh Long has also written extensively

only one Vietnam fighting against the US. What of South Vietnam and those loyal to its memory? While this nationalist history, often retold by leftist American historians, serves as counterpoint to the "Vietnam Syndrome" in the US (that is, making Vietnam about the US), it also serves to "forget" South Vietnamese pasts.

On the other side of the Pacific, the US lays a different claim to Vietnam War. A discussion of Vietnamese American community formation must grapple with the figure of the refugee as well as contend in some ways (great or small) with the haunting presence of the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War sparked an entire industry devoted to representing, debating, imagining, and producing a Vietnam that could help the public comprehend and perhaps overcome an era of turmoil and dissent in America.[49] However, in foregrounding the war, the Vietnam and its people tend to be forgotten or imagined only as the props and setting for the struggle over American exceptionalism. Examining television and film representations from the 60s through the 80s, Rick Berg notes that "…Vietnam is like Morocco in *Casablanca* (1942), exotic and marginal, the end of the earth where criminals and soldiers of fortune retreat, a place without an indigenous population, culture, history, or politics, never a nation, hardly a peninsula, not even a domino, merely a space on a map signifying imperialism's history and its frayed ends."[50]

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on Vietnam's nationalist resistances, including peasant resistance against the French in *Before the Revolution* (1973) and Vietnamese resistance to Americans. See "Vietnam's Revolutionary Tradition," in *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*, ed. M, Gettleman, J. Franklin, M. Young, and B. Franklin (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 4-17.

[49] While a detailed discussion of Vietnam War scholarship is outside the scope of this dissertation, I find the following books useful in providing a representation and synthesis of the main strands of this scholarship, particularly because these are some of the most popular and often-cited. See Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1972), George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York; Wiley, 1979), Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983), and Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

[50] Berg 1990.

Katherine Kinney echoes this analysis and further explains that the war was collectively imagined as "something Americans did to each other…"and Vietnam and the Vietnamese serve as merely "the exotic backdrop for the American encounter with 'the heart of darkness' within itself."[51] This dismissal of Vietnam-the-country and representations of Vietnamese people as dispensable and interchangeable with other Others paves the way for a re-scripting of the Vietnam War as a war that we lost in 1975 but ultimately won in the decades after. In the US, what we see is the public's consolidation of "Vietnam War" and Vietnamese refugee narratives into acceptable tropes of the loss of American innocence, the victimization of American veterans and hapless Vietnamese escapees, and the eventual rescue of defeated South Vietnamese "allies" by a redeemed American nation. Thus, even though the war was lost militarily, the US has now laid claim to a "moral victory."[52]

In "Theories of German Fascism," Benjamin ponders the question of what it means to win or lose a war. He suggests that "…the winner keeps the war in hand, it leaves the hands of the loser…the winner conquers the war for himself, makes it his own property, the loser no longer possesses it and must live without it"[53] Here, as in other writings, Benjamin is concerned with the question of writing history based on the premise of time unfolding in a linear progression, the modern nation's temporal schema. Official histories are thus told from the vantage point of the victors, and Benjamin insists that "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins."[54] If winners ultimately control narratives about the war and its outcomes and losers are left without a history,

[51] Kinney 2000: 5.
[52] Espiritu 2006b.
[53] Benjamin 1979.
[54] Benjamin 1969. Emphasis in original.

then we need to critically consider how Vietnamese refugee discourse and practices work against the grain of official history. If even the three million Vietnamese dead are not safe from the misappropriations of history, acts of remembrance and mourning in the Vietnamese American community that call the dead into being serve as dialectical engagements with Vietnamese nationalism, US nationalism and imperialism, and the transnational movements between. Dialectics, as furthered by Benjamin, allows for a necessary and ongoing tension between past and present; an irresolvable tension that calls attention to contradictions and advances a critique of the linearity of history and the power relations that undergird its writing.

One shared sentiment among my interview subjects is that South Vietnam has been terribly misrepresented. According to one interviewee, the American mainstream receives the "wrong information" about the South Vietnamese story. Another participant who has been active in community work for more than twenty years said to me: "Right now I'm still upset because we do not have a lot of books, you know, writing good things, good things about the South side..."[55] My participants often voice their frustration at the erasure, or organized forgetting, of South Vietnam from US public discourse, echoing Nguyen-vo's assessment of the memory of those she terms the "victors, progressives, and empire builders." Nguyen-vo suggests that as victors, Vietnam, has instituted a policy of forgetting South Vietnam and the violence and trauma suffered by South Vietnamese. At the same time, the progressive elements (the Left) in the US "simply branded all those who were not fighting with North Vietnam as puppets of US imperialism, thus erasing any legitimate position for those from the South acting in

[55] Tran M. Quan 2004. All interview subjects' names have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

extremely complex realities of war. Any displays of 'anti-communism' here in the US by Vietnamese immigrants simply confirmed the progressives' dismissal of Vietnamese American politics as reactionary."[56] Finally, the empire builders (or the Right) exhibit general historical amnesia towards South Vietnam narratives, but have also been adept at re-tooling their Vietnam War for new political stakes. Thus, regimes of remembering are fraught with tension and contestation. Therefore, in contesting the "wrong information," we must examine unlikely archives, unexpected places where power has left an indelible mark and re-think the ways those on the ground negotiate with power in their daily lives.

Vietnamese Americans stand at a unique position to call attention to the "imperialist moorings" of the US because of the contradictions between their community and homeland politics as well as their refusal to forget the war or have it erased from national memory.[57] As "shrapnel shards" blown here by a war Americans wish to forget, Vietnamese Americans embody a history that cannot be easily reconciled with US national narratives.[58] However, beyond being here, they also actively choose specific affiliations, remember particular stories, perform multiple, complex identities in the spaces they inhabit. They also actively script and re-script the meanings of the war and their pasts in service of their present and future needs as a community. I explore how Vietnamese Americans collectively remember and forget the war, its aftermaths, and their homeland and the ways in which these memories are employed for the purposes of

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[56] Nguyen-vo 2005: 169.
[57] This phrase comes from Oscar V. Campomanes' analysis of Asian American Studies as it relates to issues of US imperialism. See "New Formations of Asian American Studies and the Question of U.S. Imperialism," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 5:2 (1997): 523-50.
[58] I borrow this phrase from le thi diem thuy's poem "Shrapnel Shards on Blue Water" where she inscribes the Vietnamese refugee perspective against the writing of "Vietnam" as a war rather than a country. To view her works, see her electronic chapbook at http://www.thedrunkenboat.com/thuy.htm.

constructing a sense of identity and belonging through the vehicle of anticommunism. In other words, how do Vietnamese Americans collectively create meaning out of the past and how do these meanings shape their identities in the present? How do their memories interact with historical discourse?

In "The Politics of Cultural Memory," Eric Kluitenberg persuasively suggests that identity and memory are both dynamic processes co-dependent on each other, and that both are sites of contention in politics and the media.[59] Marita Sturken similarly views memory as socially-mediated and dialogically tied to processes of forgetting. Through her cultural analysis of collective memories and struggles of the Vietnam War and AIDs epidemic, she reveals the dynamics ways memory images and objects are used by society to contend with absented stories in official history.[60] Memory mediates between the past and the present and the ways in which we remember the past tells us much about our desires and anxieties in the present. In her examination of the narratives of Hiroshima, Lisa Yoneyama makes a compelling argument for the need to critically assess the "dialectics of memory," that is, to understand the ways in which memory and history are juxtaposed.[61] She does not view memory and history as oppositional (for example, as Pierre Nora has), but suggests that it is more important to understand how narratives about the past, whether as memory or history, are mediated by and through hegemonic institutions and ideologies. Viewing memory practices through their relationship to power thus opens up possibilities for transmitting alternative forms of knowledge.

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[59] Kluitenberg 1999. For furher discussions of the social dimensions of memory, see Maurice Halbwachs, *On collective memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press,1992)., Mieke Bal, "Introduction" in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, edited by M. Bal, J. Crewe, and L. Spitzer (Hanover: University Press of New England Press, 1999).
[60] Sturken 1997.
[61] Yoneyama 1999.

In *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, T.G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper provide a useful analysis of the proliferation of public and scholarly discussions about war memory since the 1980s, particularly in the form of commemoration. They suggest that, "The politics of war memory and commemoration *always* has to engage with mourning and with attempts to make good the psychological and physical damage of war; and wherever people undertake the tasks of mourning and reparation, politics is *always* at work."[62] Rather than view mourning and commemoration practices as personal rituals, they are interested in its social and political dimensions. They critique the three prevalent scholarly discourses about war memory ("state-centred, "social-agency", and "popular-memory") as being incomplete and exclusive, arguing instead for a theory that can incorporate aspects of all three. The first approach, linked to the works of Eric Hobsbawn and Benedict Anderson, privileges a political perspective and centers the nation-state as the locus of war memory and commemoration practices.[63] The second approach, evidenced in Jay M. Winter and Emmanuel Sivan's scholarship, minimizes the role of the state and adopts a humanistic approach in viewing how war memory and commemoration are best understood through individual acts of mourning that transcend national borders.[64] Finally, the last approach, from the Popular Memory Group and further elaborated by historian Alistair Thomson, focuses on the relationship

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[62] Asplant, Dawson, and Roper 2000: 9. Italics in original.

[63] Ashplant et al explicitly reference Hobsbawn and Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1992), particularly their concept of how rituals and symbols serve the political purpose of fashioning national identities, and how history-making reflects the ideology of nation-building. They also point to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), especially to the often cited idea that people are brought together under a common national identity through "imagination," facilitated by institutions such as the newspaper.

[64] Jay M. Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (1995) and his co-authored *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (1999, with Emmanuel Sivan) consider civic practices and unofficial sites of remembrance suggest a universal process of mourning and working through in these practices.

between individual memory and official history and thus offer a middle ground between the first two approaches.[65] Using oral history and life stories as the basis of its theoretical framework, this popular-memory paradigm allows for understanding how subjects make meaning from their memories, but it continues to privilege the nation as the locus through which subjects make their memories meaningful. What Ashplant et al wish to promote is a cross-cutting theoretical model that addresses the dialogical role of state and civil society while also accounting for the *transnational* (rather than only national) dynamics of war memory and commemoration.

My work situates Vietnamese American practices of remembrance and mourning in the transnational fields traversing distances (both real and imagined) between Vietnam and the US. I follow the works of scholars such as Espiritu, Nguyen-vo, Sturken, and Yoneyama who insist upon an urgent and critical engagement with the memory practices of silenced and disavowed subjects of history. Jeannette Mageo insists we view the "semiotic character" of history's relationship to memory. She suggests that "The semiotic processes so salient in cultural memory suggests not only that its truth value must always be placed in quotation marks but also that it is potentially generative of culture as a meaning system."[66] Caroline Chung Simpson shows, through her reading of the "absent presence" of Japanese American history in the postwar years, that marginalized histories

[65] The Popular Memory Group (from the University of Birmingham) distinguishes between private memory and public representation. Subsequent developments to this approach came from oral historian Alistair Thomson who helps contextualize private memories (told in oral history or life stories) within national narratives. This approach functions to establish a relationship between the "state-centred" and "social-agency" approaches.

[66] Mageo 2001: 2.

continue to haunt US national narratives.[67] My work shows how anticommunism makes visible the haunting of the nation and the transnational fields beyond.

The Site and the Methods: Through the Eyes of a Second Generation Vietnamese American Ethnographer

Situated at a relatively close proximity to the unofficial capital of overseas Vietnamese (Little Saigon, Westminster, Calif.), San Diego is a dynamic region highly diverse ethnically and economically, but maintains a reputation for its politically conservative social milieu. Vietnamese Americans are the second largest Asian Pacific American group in San Diego County, officially totaling 33,504 (U.S. Census Bureau).[68] They make up 14 percent of the total Asian American population, second only to the Filipino American population whose large numbers can be attributed to the US military presence in San Diego.[69] Like Filipino Americans, the settlement of Vietnamese refugees in San Diego can be understood in relation to the US military. In 1975, faced with the reality of defeat in Vietnam and the need to evacuate South Vietnamese personnel, the US government set up reception centers at four military bases across the country. Marine Corps base Camp Pendleton, located in north San Diego county, was the first of the four centers receiving the first wave of Vietnamese refugees.[70] Refugees arriving in the US in 1975 are profiled as the well-educated urban elite of South Vietnam. Almost half of this

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[67] Simpson 2001.
[68] However, the estimate by the Vietnamese Federation is closer to 40,000.
[69] Espiritu and Wolf 2001. As US nationals due to the US takeover of the Philippines in 1898, Filipinos were qualified for and actively recruited to join the US military, primarily as the gendered invisible labor in the service sector (stewards, cooks, etc.) For a compelling analysis of the ways in which Filipino American military families in San Diego negotiate their militarized lives through remaking gender and domestic roles, see Theresa C. Suarez, "The Language of Militarism: Engendering Filipino Masculinity in the U.S. Empire," Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 2008.
[70] Do 1999; Kelly 1977; Montero 1979. The other three bases were Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania; Eglin Air Force Base, Florida; and Fort Chaffee, Arkansas.

population was under the age of 17 at time of arrival with males slightly outnumbering females 51 to 49 percent.[71] The second and subsequent cohorts were much more diverse. From the late 1970s through the 1980s (and continuing in a lesser degree today), refugees and immigrants from Vietnam include the ethnic Chinese, many are less educated than the first wave cohort from varying educational and class backgrounds. Many came through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) and the Humanitarian Operation (HO) program to settle in already established locations such as Little Saigon in Westminster, California.[72]

In San Diego, the new arrivals can usually be found in the City Heights area, close to the ethnic businesses between El Cajon and University Boulevard. Linda Vista was the original "enclave" for the early arrivals, but the more affluent Vietnamese Americans have moved up to Mira Mesa and Rancho Penasquitos.[73] Because of the proximity to Camp Pendleton, many first-wave elites who were affiliated with the South Vietnamese military or US government have resettled in San Diego. My project explores the Vietnamese American community in San Diego for two main reasons. First, while dispersed, the population in San Diego is represented by one "umbrella" organization, the Vietnamese Federation of San Diego[74] (hereafter referred to as Viet Fed) while in Orange County and Santa Clara County (the areas in California with the largest concentration of Vietnamese Americans) the community is much more fractured and divisive. Secondly,

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[71] Montero 1979: 22

[72] The Orderly Departure Program (1979) facilitated family reunification for refugees already in the US who could sponsor their family members. The Humanitarian Operation program (1989) was intended for released reeducation camp prisoners in Vietnam to come to the US legally.

[73] Zhou 2001.

[74] The Vietnamese Federation of San Diego is called "Hiệp Hội Người Việt San Diego" in Vietnamese. The Viet Fed is the only Vietnamese American organization in San Diego with its own community center and with strong ties to the City Council.

my fieldwork doubles as community volunteer work, thus the San Diego Vietnamese American community is an ideal site for my steady and active ethnographic engagement with the community for four years as a graduate student at the University of California, San Diego. I based my fieldwork on my volunteer work with the Viet Fed, a non-profit (with 501c(3) status) organization made up of volunteers who are predominantly male professionals and retirees. It was founded in 1984 as a mutual assistance association for Vietnamese refugees and, according to a former president, served the purpose of uniting the smaller organizations under one umbrella. These early Vietnamese organizations were founded mainly for "fraternity and friendship," explains one participant. In 1994, the Vietnamese Federation established the first San Diego Refugee Community Center in Linda Vista, a community neighboring the University of San Diego that has been home to the first group of Vietnamese refugees.[75] The nhà cộng đồng [community center/house] as the center is called by organization members, has since served as headquarters for Viet Fed operations.

The Viet Fed acts as an umbrella organization to over forty smaller groups including various veterans' groups, religious groups, elders association, medical association, business associations, etc. The express mission is to promote Vietnamese culture and heritage in San Diego. Every year, the Viet Fed's largest events include the Tết (Lunar New Year) Festival and Black April (April 30, 1975) commemoration. As a "cultural" organization the Viet Fed is a politically conservative organization with leaders

[75] In Lê Thị Diễm Thúy's novel, *The Gangster we are all Looking for*, the Vietnamese American protagonist's refugee family "washed ashore" in the neighborhood of Linda Vista. Reviewed by the *San Diego Reader*, the novel was celebrated for its grounding in local life.

who are in line with the anticommunist stance of the community.[76] One of the projects the Viet Fed has successfully completed is getting the Flag Resolution (R298764) passed in San Diego.[77] This has gone hand in hand with the very public endorsement of key mayoral candidates and city officials who would be in support of their anticommunist agenda, regardless of the candidate's party affiliation. However, beyond their apparent anticommunist agenda lie more complicated relationships to both the homeland and the US nation-state, as I slowly began to uncover over time.

Through an examination of anticommunist discourses and practices, I present a multidimensional ethnographic approach to the study of Vietnamese American community and identity that relies on interviews, participant-observation, and textual analysis. I focus on Vietnamese refugees, or first generation Vietnamese Americans. They include those who came to the US before 1995 (giving them more than a decade to become acclimated and familiar with the community) and were adults when they arrived. I conducted lengthy oral history interviews with 16 men and 4 women[78] from diverse social and economic backgrounds with different life trajectories, but all consider themselves refugees from communism. My interviews ranged from 2 to 4 hours long and I often followed up with shorter interviews or casual conversation over coffee, lunch, or

[76] I understand that "conservative" may mean different things at different historical moments, but I am specifically referring to the *political* conservatism of this group. I am interested in exploring the transformations of the Vietnamese Federation over the span of 20 years in order to map out the major issues that the community organizes around and how they have changed.

[77] In Chapter 3, I examine the former Republic of Vietnam's yellow flag with three red stripes and the Flag Resolutions passed across the US recognizing this as the symbol of Vietnamese American "freedom and heritage."

[78] Because of the composition of the Viet Fed as primarily male, I faced the difficulty of finding women to interview. Even after I made numerous female contacts, they were often hesitant to talk to me, referring me instead to their husbands or other male colleagues.

dinner.[79] Twelve of the participants in this study left Vietnam in 1975 and the remainder left in the 1980s through either the Humanitarian Operation program or the Orderly Departure Program. Seven of the men in my sample are veterans of the Republic of Vietnam military in different branches, but mainly from the Navy. That my sample is skewed towards male, "first wave," and veteran cohorts is reflective of the make-up of community leaders of the first generation in general. Most of my participants indicate that they were only able to whole-heartedly participate in community work after they have achieved relative financial stability and reached a point in their lives when family needs are adequately met. In my sample, only one person remains unmarried, one is widowed, and another child-less. Thus, while I interacted regularly with participants at meetings and functions, I also became well acquainted with many of their family members. Therefore, I include observations and conversations with, to a lesser degree, those from the 1.5 and second generations since they are also active members and participants at community events. Their views are also valuable because I am interested in how anticommunism gets transferred and integrated as part of the cultural consciousness of the younger generations.

Since the Viet Fed also works with student groups in the community such as the University of California, San Diego and San Diego State University's Vietnamese Student Associations (VSA) and youth groups such as Catholic and Buddhist youth organizations, I integrate second generation participation at events and meetings and

[79] In addition to the interviews, I attended weekly executive board meetings, cultural programs such as the Tet Festival, Black April commemoration, the Mid-Autumn Festival, multicultural fairs and parades, as well as charity work. One example of the charity work the Viet Fed has done is a campaign for the victims of the San Diego firestorm and Hurricane Katrina. The justification for raising money in the Vietnamese community has been to prove our worthiness as American citizens through a display of civic responsibility.

reflect throughout on my own position as a second generation researcher working with first generation "elders." I consider my work a different approach to understanding generation difference, one that strives to balance the two sides and examine intergenerational differences outside the context of family. Thus while my project focuses primarily on the first generation, I am also interested in how anticommunist discourses and practices differ between the two generations present in community work.

Mainstream representations often depict anticommunism as an issue "plaguing" only the elders, but in what ways has it filtered into the collective imagination of subsequent generations? Since I am closer in age to the second generation, my role in the Viet Fed has been as a liaison with younger Vietnamese Americans. However, my position in the Viet Fed has had the effect of positioning me as an older representative of the community towards the youth groups. This unique in-between subject position, I believe, allows for a more complex analysis of generational difference and the transmission of memories of South Vietnam from the first to the latter.

I volunteered with the Viet Fed for four years, first as an "assistant to the general secretary," a position created specifically to pull me into the Board of Directors. After the two-year term ended, I was persuaded to be the president incumbent's running mate in order to lend a youthful voice to his platform. As Vice President External (VPE) for the next two years, I gained even more visibility and responsibility. When I became VPE, I had to negotiate the new responsibilities of a highly visible leadership role with the demands of research. The new title afforded me easier access to interviewees since many more people recognized and trusted me, but it also became a drawback for me because of what could be told to a leader in the organization. I no longer merely assumed an

"observational" or neutral position and my actions would furthermore reflect on the elders of the e-board. In her ethnography of a Keralite community in "Central City" and Kerala, India, Sheba George astutely observes that "involvement begets even more involvement" as she was persuaded to take on more volunteer work throughout the course of her fieldwork[80] This statement resonates with my own experience in the field as I found myself become more and more involved with event planning, decision-making, and refereeing between elders and youth. But this involvement has afforded me more insight and the ability and credibility to ask hard questions about a very sensitive and controversial topic.

Linda Trinh Vo ponders the implications of "third-world scholars from first-world academic institutions studying third-world communities in the first-world."[81] In this instance, the demarcation between insider and outsider are blurred, as is the line between one's personal and academic agenda. While some argue that being an *outsider* gives researchers a more acute observational and objective edge, others would insist that being an *insider* allows for one to understand the nuanced practices of the community and gain entrée into social circles much more easily.[82] Yet this debate is much too absolute and does not really convey the multiple and situational subjectivities of an ethnographer, whether positioned on the inside or outside of the community she studies. Renato Rosaldo argues that "The social analyst's multiple identities at once underscore the potential for uniting an analytical with an ethical project and render obsolete the view of

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[80] George 2005: 8.
[81] Vo 2001a: 17.
[82] For a discussion of this insider-outsider debate, see Halstead 2001. Abu-Lughod (1994) refers to researchers who work with their own communities as "halfies" since they have half their foot in academia as well.

the utterly detached observer who looks down from the high."[83] Vo elaborates on the ethical dilemma for the ethnic researcher as follows: we are perceived as "speaking for" and "speaking from" our communities and there is the expectation that we will necessarily give back to the community through our research while simultaneously trying to make our work conform to the theoretical demands of the academy. This has been a prevailing challenge in my fieldwork. While situating my work as an intervention in larger academic discourses on war, memory, history, and power, I also realize my responsibility to the community that has given me a "home." Margery Wolf makes a parallel observation, insisting that "if there is any crisis in ethnography, it is a growing uncertainty about our dual responsibility to our audience and our informants. If there is a conflict, which should be privileged?"[84] Through my multiple locations as a researcher and as a member/leader in the Vietnamese American community in San Diego, I have been negotiating the various responsibilities attached to these roles throughout my field work.

As a sometimes participant, sometimes observer, simultaneous insider *and* outsider, I have been walking the tightrope of ethnographic responsibility for many years. When should I give privilege to the academy's expectations and when can my subjects' desires take precedence? When can I forget myself as the researcher, or can I at all? When can I lose myself completely in the tasks of a community organizer and when can I let myself be the young woman who learns from her elders? A few months into my project, I began to describe my fieldwork as schizophrenic. For this project, my own

[83] Rosaldo 1989: 194.
[84] Wolf 1992: 137.

subjectivity as a young Vietnamese American woman has proven difficult, yet beneficial because many of the elders regarded me as a student and a representative of "youth," thus they feel obligated to educate me about their views on the war, Vietnamese American community issues, etc. Because of my Vietnamese-speaking skills and my patience in sitting through incredibly long meetings, I gained entrée and credibility in the organization and have established a personal as well as working relationship with most of the members of the executive board. My presence at past events has also made me a visible persona in the networks of the Viet Fed. But when it came time to sit down and make sense of all this "data" on paper, my schizophrenic fieldwork presented an enormous challenge: how to "write culture" when you are not afforded any objective distance?

For anthropologists and other social scientists, "doing ethnography" is quite different now than at the turn of the century when Malinowski crafted the art of participant-observation.[85] Our theories and methods have become unhinged from the once scientific notion of the study of man. Ethnography has become a complex and contentious process rather than a *fait accompli* for the armchair academic after a long sojourn in a faraway place. In fact, we cannot isolate ourselves in remote villages and hope to write good ethnographies about daily life and social practice without attending to the macro-level structures that influence those particularities of the everyday. Local and global issues are no longer conceptualized as irreconcilable polarities, but intersectional and dialogical. John and Jean Comaroff suggest that the ethnographies of today should "make the familiar strange and the strange familiar" as well as "make our own existence

[85] Geertz 1973.

strange."[86] This means the ethnographer must consider her role and contextualize her choices within the community, among her subjects, and within the project as a whole. So when an insider becomes a researcher, or a researcher with ties to the "inside" seeks acceptance and insider status to further her research, many more factors come into the equation.

As I wrote this dissertation, there have been many moments of confounded hesitation. How do I disentangle, in order to make coherent, the observations and reflections of small and large-scale community and organization events, the interviews and casual conversations with individuals and the post-meeting group chats, my own volunteer work, the friendships that have been forged through countless social interactions that were never purely business nor pleasure, and the conflicting needs and desires of my subjects and my own? If I heed some of my subjects' wishes and write a moral narrative that posits Vietnamese communists as perpetrators and Vietnamese refugees as victims, I would only reinforce the idea of the "emblematic victim" serving the interest of a hegemonic US history-making apparatus.[87] If I write a critique of Vietnamese American anticommunism as a reactionary, conservative politics, I would only feed into existing notions of the first generation as living in the past. My work straddles this uneasy divide.

I approach anticommunism through tracing its marks on the everyday lives of my participants, which means that I write about the ways anticommunism is *affective* as well as an effective mechanism for imagining community and identity. Writing about affect,

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[86] Comaroff et al 1992: 6-7.
[87] In *Race and Resistance* (2002), Viet Thanh Nguyen discusses the "emblematic victim" as a gendered trope through a textual reading of Le Ly Hayslip as a figure of reconciliation between Vietnam and the US.

particularly about a community one is intimately tied to, makes the research and writing all the more real and unrelenting. While I write about my participants' thoughts, beliefs, and feelings, I cannot help but write some of my own into this project. And my heart has often been torn, always at the brink of being broken by the impossible demands of my community and my occupation. Ruth Behar has said, "anthropology that doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing anymore," and I have come to realize this at the end of my research and writing.[88] Behar encourages us to write vulnerably in order to do justice to the vulnerability of our subjects. My project has become even more meaningful because of (not in spite of) those moments when I feel painfully torn, when my heart breaks to hear some of my participants' stories and understand that so much remains unspoken, unspeakable.

Through attempting to disentangle and call into coherence the "data," I realize how complexity and entanglement are embedded elements of this project. Anticommunism cannot be disentangled from the fabric of Vietnamese American community life and from the personal lives of first generation Vietnamese Americans. Theirs are stories of lives transformed by war, displacement, loss, and diasporic longing. But they also tell tales of rebuilding lives and communities informed by memories of a time-place no longer there. They tell stories of a present haunted by memories that cannot find a home and irreconcilable truths that bear the weight of history but have no place there. My dissertation might be seen then as a make-shift home for some of these stories.

[88] Behar 1996: 177.

Chapters

The dissertation is divided into four distinct chapters; each provides a different site to explore how anticommunism works in the Vietnamese American community. The first chapter "sets the stage" for the iterations and performances of anticommunism thereafter by showing how first generation men and women are bound together by their anticommunist memories and sentiments in community work. I offer a description of the weekly meetings and routine activities of the Viet Fed and provide profiles of four of its members in order to show the different personal memories and perspectives they have on South Vietnam, the war, and their lives in the US.

The second chapter examines "Black April," or the commemoration of April 30, 1975 as a key site for understanding how anticommunism has become a modality for narrating a silenced version of South Vietnamese and refugee history. I focus on the struggle over naming the event as either "National Resentment" or "Commemoration," a controversy that splintered the organizers along the generation axis. Finally, I analyze the performances at Black April 2005 in order to elaborate on the various representations of anticommunism, as a politics of remembering and mourning the dead and a human-rights focused narrative that suggests the continuation of the "unfinished business" for Vietnamese in the homeland the diaspora.

The third chapter, then, moves from mourning and commemoration to civic engagement and celebration. In this chapter, I examine the South Vietnam flag as a symbol of "Freedom and Heritage" and the movement to have the flag recognized by US municipalities. I present my observations of the ceremony to honor the flag resolution at the 2004 Tết Festival. This chapter stresses the ways in which anticommunism has

become a multivalent discourse that involves claiming space and educating the public about Vietnamese American history.

The last chapter moves into the private lives of Vietnamese refugees and explores the stories about war and migration that remain unspeakable, but are articulated "indirectly." I show how personal memories of war and migration submerged in collective memory are often "unsayable" or sometimes kept secret because the telling would wound loved ones. Thus, anticommunism has afforded Vietnamese refugees a means to gesture at their losses while maintaining traumatic secrets, the secrets that continue to haunt the diaspora and resist absolution and closure offered in historical discourse.

CHAPTER ONE

The Setting and the Characters: The Social Life of Anticommunism

The Vietnamese Federation of San Diego's nhà cộng đồng [community center/house] sits unobtrusively on the south side of Linda Vista Boulevard, just about half a mile beyond the Asian business district on Convoy Avenue, at the periphery of the community in San Diego called Linda Vista.[89] Prior to its establishment in Linda Vista in 1995, nhà cộng đồng was located in East San Diego where there was, and is, a high concentration of newer immigrants, including Vietnamese. Le Thi Diem Thuy begins her novel *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* with a mapping of one Vietnamese refugee family's movement around San Diego:

> Linda Vista, with its rows of yellow houses, is where we eventually washed to shore. Before Linda Vista, we lived in the Green Apartment on Thirtieth and Adams, in Normal Heights. Before the Green Apartment, we lived in the Red Apartment on Forty-ninth and Orange, in East San Diego. Before the Red Apartment we weren't a family like we are a family now. We were in separate places, waiting for each other.[90]

In this mapping, we see how refugee migrations across the Pacific splintered one family and their journey to becoming a family again traverses the low-income neighborhoods of East San Diego and Linda Vista. Le's mapping of the narrator's temporary homes parallels the movement of nhà cộng đồng as well. While the nhà cộng đồng moved from an inconvenient location on the second floor of a business building in East San Diego to its own building in Linda Vista in order to house meetings and events more efficiently

[89] Linda Vista, in Spanish translates to "pretty view," is also home to the private Catholic University of San Diego. This community was where many Vietnamese refugees settled in the late 1970s and 1980s and one of the clearly visible geographical imprints are the Vietnamese businesses in the area, including the Vien Dong Supermarket.
[90] Le 2003: 3.

and spaciously, during my time on the Board of Directors, I have witnessed an ongoing effort to move it back to East San Diego to better serve the area with the most social need. To buy their own property and relocate to East San Diego has been an ongoing project for each of the presidents since 1995, but it remains unfulfilled. While I conducted fieldwork, I spent a great deal of time at the nhà cộng đồng for weekly Board of Director meetings and special events during the weekends.

The nhà cộng đồng provided a home base for me to regularly interface with community members and gain valuable insight into the lives of first generation Vietnamese Americans. While I was able to spend some time at elders' homes, the routine of meetings and events at nhà cộng đồng became a productive site to observe how anticommunist discourse and practices serve as modes through which many first generation Vietnamese American men and women create a space to talk about their pasts and their memories of South Vietnam as well as a means of delineating their right to belong in the United States. If memories of the Vietnam/American War and postwar aftermaths have become ghostly imprints in national narratives, what spaces enable such memories to emerge? As the past is called upon for the purpose of articulating a uniquely Vietnamese American identity in the present, how does anticommunism serve the needs of a community desiring a "place to stand [một chổ đứng]" in US society?[91] I ask what shapes and forms do refugee memories take *in between* the private and public realms through which anticommunist discourse and practices travel? This chapter examines the weekly meetings and other routine "sinh hoạt cộng đồng [community activities]" of the

[91] I borrow the phrase "place to stand" from an interview participant who told me that Vietnamese refugees need to find a place to stand in the United States, or "tìm một chổ đứng tại dất Mỹ."

Vietnamese Federation over the span of four years, from the summer of 2002 to the summer of 2006.[92] This period covers two executive board terms for the Viet Fed, both of which were under the leadership of the same president and a relatively stable Board of Directors (hereafter called BoD). I examine the weekly meetings as a social space that reveals the making of community at the intimate level, a space where members share common objectives and work through their differences. This space sustains many of the members in more ways than the obvious. That is, each week they are able to do more than plan upcoming community events or discuss current political issues with their peers. In the safe space of the conference room at nhà cộng đồng they can relate to each other as friends; and for me they have become another type of family in San Diego. Because of the disruptive forces of war and migration in Vietnamese refugee lives, I believe that family, in whatever form we can find, is a hard-won and prized concept for Vietnamese Americans.

I explore the ways anticommunism has functioned as a "practice of everyday life," to borrow from Michel de Certeau's seminal work. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau insists upon a means of examining how individuals re-appropriate traditions, symbols, art, and language—the stuff of cultural identities—in order that they may subvert dominant regimes of representation that seek to conform individuals to predetermined identities. Thus everyday life can be a productive analytical site that may offer individuals a chance to create meaning for themselves against the grain of totalizing narratives. If "Vietnam War" history is one such totalizing narrative that posits

[92] I became involved with the Vietnamese Federation during the summer of 2002 when I came to a general election to seek interview subjects for a conference paper and became an "accidental" independent delegate first, then a Board of Directors member.

Vietnamese Americans as either injured victims of the Việt Cộng or deserving refugees of the US nation, then how do individuals respond to and re-appropriate this discourse in the everyday tasks of community work? While the structures of meeting and community work deviate from the quotidian practices of everyday living as discussed by de Certeau, I expand the notion of "everyday life" to include how the Viet Fed meetings may reflect the *everyday work of community building*. That is, the frequent, routine, and predictable nature of the meetings allows for an analysis of community work at the more intimate and grounded level.

While there certainly are other social spaces in which to examine the meanings of anticommunist discourse for first generation Vietnamese Americans, the Viet Fed weekly meetings are a productive and unique site because of the ways in which variously different individuals come together to not only talk, but act upon their convictions.[93] In fact, this site may be more productive than others because of the way anticommunist discourse and practices become seamless facets of community work. This space highlights the dynamics of collective memory as well as the negotiations of class, generational and gender difference tied to the maintenance of an anticommunist "moral community."[94] This intimate space also reveals the ways members work through differences and ultimately contrive a solidarity contingent on a shared (and perhaps

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[93] Another highly charged "everyday" space that comes to mind are the coffee shops where Vietnamese Americans (mainly men) gather and share stories about the old days and talk politics with each other. I have lingered outside of these coffee shops in both Orange County and San Diego to catch the gist of their conversations which often included the Vietnam-American War and the war in Iraq. However, this space was for sharing ideas and stories, not for planning events or acting upon anticommunist convictions.

[94] I borrow the phrase "moral community" from Guillermo J. Grenier and Lisandro Perez, who argue that the Cuban community in Miami shows the persistence of an "exile ideology" which is dependent on the construction of a "'moral community' that serves to build political capital and a sense of solidarity in the enclave." See *The Legacy of Exile: Cubans in the United States* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003).

invented) past. First, I describe the meetings and the process of planning for events in order to show how anticommunist practices and beliefs often define community work for first generation Vietnamese Americans. I am especially interested in exploring how class, generation, and gender are negotiated at these meetings in order to present a unified community perspective during public events. Then, I describe the mealtime ritual occurring at the tail-end of meetings in order to show how it provides a different space within the meetings for building affective relationships between members that continue to rely on an anticommunist sensibility.

In this meeting space, I have had to confront the ambivalence, anxieties, and uncertainties I often felt as a "complicit researcher," or "halfie," as well as fumble through my role as a BoD member.[95] My initial entry into this organization happened at a timely moment in the summer of 2002 when a term had just ended and a new BoD was being elected. Thus, as I approached Vietnamese elders to make their acquaintances for my project, they saw me as a willing recruit into an organization direly in need of young faces.[96] The meeting space was painfully awkward for me at first since I did not know anyone and I certainly did not understand all the community politics under discussion. Being relatively new to San Diego also made me feel like an outsider, or the "un-cool kid" on the playground who had no one to talk to, no one to stand next to, no way to just blend in. The elders always tried to make me feel welcome by constantly remarking on

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[95] I borrow the term "complicit researcher" from K. Wayne Yang, who describes his role this way through his activist-ethnographic work on urban schools. I use the term "halfie" to reference Lila Abu-Lughod's (1991) argument that "halfies" are those anthropologists who possess split subjectivities, existing between cultural and physical spaces.

[96] Throughout the dissertation I refer to first generation Vietnamese Americans as "elders" and the second generation as "youth" to indicate how community members reified these categories and terms in their everyday speech.

the need for young blood to reinvigorate the organization and they often complimented me on being an exemplary student, a model for other Vietnamese American youth. Yet I could not easily start a conversation with elders, in part due to my upbringing to show respect through listening rather than speaking and also because of my "kitchen" Vietnamese.[97] I was constantly insecure about my Vietnamese language abilities, feeling a bit inadequate with my limited academic vocabulary. Although I had ample experience working with student and some grassroots community organizations prior to this fieldwork, I was wholly unprepared to be immersed in a *first generation* organization where I would usually be the only person under 40 at any given meeting, where all the business was conducted in Vietnamese. I often spoke a mix of Vietnamese and English since complex words such as "theory" and "ideology" were beyond my grasp in Vietnamese at that time. A year after I began working with the Viet Fed, I took two summer months off to participate in a Vietnamese language program at the University of Wisconsin at Madison to better my academic Vietnamese. I came back from my summer studies eager to dialogue more with the elders, to find an outlet for my new relationship with my native language.

While I initially took the role of the fly-on-the-wall ethnographer, taking meeting minutes in English and quietly observing proceedings from my seat in the corner, as I became more familiar with the elders and the Viet Fed programs, I took on more

[97] Although I took Vietnamese classes through Catholic Sunday schools as a youth, my lack of interest made my Vietnamese reading and writing grade school level at best. However, I was raised in a household with parents who did not speak English. I was often their interpreter for official business and my Vietnamese-to-English process is rather rapid and accurate. I could understand everything I heard in Vietnamese and quickly relay it into English. The opposite process was significantly slower because I had very little occasion to have discussions with my parents and my siblings and I formed the habit of speaking English with each other.

participatory roles. My actual BoD title also changed from "assistant to the secretary" during the first term, a role created to get me on the BoD, to Vice President of External Affairs for the second term. I became more than a student researcher-volunteer who may have the occasional pseudo-important job of representing the Viet Fed at civic events; I became a key player in the organization and the organization became a crucial site of belonging and community for me.

I cannot pinpoint the exact moment when I began to feel at ease with elders in the Viet Fed, so subtly did our relationships develop over a long period of time. I showed myself to be patient and doggedly consistent in coming to meetings because of a commitment to my research, but more truthfully because this was the one place in my life where I could practice being a scholar in Vietnamese. I listened and learned from them in ways that I could not with my own parents. And they spoke to me and looked at me with a glimmer of respect and a great deal of patience. I practiced articulating myself in Vietnamese in order to legitimize my right to do this project as a "halfie." So, in this way, my research allowed me to learn about the meanings of anticommunism for first generation Vietnamese Americans while learning how to speak to elders coherently, to listen to them thoughtfully in order to interact with them on terms that conveyed both respect and critical engagement.

The Vietnamese Federation of San Diego

A Community and Organization Profile

I was introduced to the Viet Fed in 2002 by my dissertation advisor's friend, an energetic first generation Vietnamese American woman dedicated to recruiting youth volunteers for community work. At the time, I was merely a curious outsider who wanted

to make contact with Vietnamese veterans of the Republic of Vietnam military in order to conduct a study on the civic activities of this group in San Diego for a conference paper.[98] My first impression of this organization was that it resembled an old boy's network, organized along very militaristic lines. Very few women held leadership positions within this organization, but many worked behind the scenes to sustain the organization's events. When I was asked to join the BoD for a two-year term, I recognized an opportunity to get to know the Vietnamese community in San Diego better. At the time, I was not too concerned about the gender and age imbalance—being the token female and youth allowed me to take a more observational role.

The BoD was (and still is) comprised of the President, two Vice Presidents (internal and external affairs), a General Secretary, and a Treasurer. Other regulars at the meetings included an advisor to the President (a former president) and several other dedicated representatives (Culture, Education, Entertainment representatives). Throughout the four years of my involvement, I noticed that the gender ratio at board meetings would be around 1 woman to 3 men, sometimes 1 to 4. This skewed gender ratio approximates the participation of men and women in the Viet Fed member organizations as well, which are still predominantly first generation organizations. Most of my interview participants explain that the gender imbalance can be attributed to two main factors: the multiple and strenuous demands first generation women have at home and/or in the workplace and their "traditional" upbringing that requires women to take on more supportive roles in community or public spaces. Nazli Kibria's ethnographic study

[98] The conference was sponsored by The Regional Studies Network of the UCSD Civic Collaborative and was called "San Diego's Veterans: Understanding Their Critical Role in the Life of the Region." My conference paper was titled, "The View from the Other Side: Vietnamese Veterans in San Diego." October 12, 2002.

of Vietnamese refugee families reveals that domestic caretaking in these families was still conducted primarily by women even while women usually took on additional responsibilities such as running businesses, tending to money matters, negotiating with social services and healthcare.[99] As such, the significantly low number of women in the BoD may suggest that the multiple and rigorous demands of family and work may have a higher impact on women's ability to do community work when compared to their male counterparts. However, this gender imbalance in first generation Vietnamese American organizations does not reflect the numbers of women and men in attendance at community events, which tend to be quite evenly distributed. The skewed gender ratio in the Viet Fed leadership reflects the structure of many other post-1965 immigrant communities in the US where the prevalence of women working outside the home subverts prior gender norms; that is, of man as provider and woman in charge of domestic care-taking. In response, as Sheba George demonstrates in *When Women Come First*, immigrant men take up prominent community leadership positions in order to reassert masculine power and authority.[100]

The weekly meetings were always held either on Tuesday or Wednesday in the conference room of nhà cộng đồng for the BoD and other active members to debrief past events, prepare for upcoming events, and review the general status of the Viet Fed. They were often quite structured, but there was always room for digression and humor since many members were either long-time friends coming into their roles or soon became

[99] Kibria 1993.
[100] In particular, George (2005) suggests the church plays a vital role in offering a space where male leadership can be articulated for immigrants from Kerala, India, whose familial and gender roles were dramatically reversed with the migration of female nurses to the US.

close through frequent interaction.[101] Meetings were held at 6:30 p.m., but usually began around 7:00 p.m. The business portion would run until around 8:30 or 9:00 p.m. (unless there was an important event coming up that demanded more attention).

There are two major events that the Viet Fed plans every year, the Tết Festival and Black April commemoration, and several other smaller-scale seasonal events such as the Tết Trung Thu [Mid-Autumn Moon Festival], Hùng Kings and Trần Hưng Đạo death anniversaries, and community health fairs. In addition, the Viet Fed participates in local fairs and parades such as the Linda Vista Multicultural Fair and San Diego Veterans Day Parade as well as relevant charity work such as fundraising for San Diego Firestorm (2003, 2007), Hurricane Katrina (2005) and Asian Tsunami (2004) victims. And, like other immigrant civic organizations, the Viet Fed participates in local efforts to raise funds for homeland causes, such as "Thương Phế Binh [Disabled Veterans]" or orphans in Vietnam and the many floods throughout the Vietnam countryside. These aid efforts usually take on the form of benefit concerts, where proceeds from ticket sales as well as solicited donations during the events are sent to the appropriate recipients. These are the cultural activities I have had part in planning and promoting, attending and, at times, even standing up to act as mistress of ceremony. Therefore, my foot is not only halfway in the door as a "native" ethnographer attempting to keep objective distance to what I observe, but I've been thrust into the midst of all the activities despite my initial reluctance.

[101] Two Viet Fed officers who did not know each other prior to their roles in the BoD became quite close and discovered they shared a hobby of photography. On many occasions, they came to each other's homes to share photography equipment or show their latest photos. Occasionally these two officers would pass along photos they had taken of me (and later, my daughter) during our weekly meetings.

The Viet Fed also acts as representative for Vietnamese American political interests, therefore during election years, the Viet Fed has spearheaded voter registration efforts and collaborated with the US Attorney General's office in making Vietnamese language voter materials available in San Diego county in 2004. Board members with connections to local elected officials have also lobbied a flag resolution to recognize the South Vietnam flag by the city of San Diego.[102] Other political activities members participate in include demonstrations against human rights abuse by the Vietnam government or protests against ambassadors and other leaders from Vietnam. However, members do so on their own right and not under the banner of the Viet Fed, since its 501(c)(3) status explicitly forbids political interest activities.

Yet, even if the political activities are relegated to "individual" interests among the board, members I argue that "cultural" events planned by the Viet Fed have always been politically-charged sites for constructing imagined community. Always aware of itself as a refugee organization and deeply concerned with casting itself in opposition to Vietnam, the Viet Fed demonstrates that cultural sites have high political stakes. The "cultural" events mentioned are imbued with a distinctly Vietnamese American politics that demands dialogue with the past. Scholarship on Vietnamese American communities should seriously consider the multiple dimensions of the "cultural," the ways in which these sites call into being the omissions in previous historical constructions of the Vietnamese diaspora, which may afford us new models for analyzing community and identity.

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[102] In Chapter Three, I discuss the meanings tied to this flag resolution in greater detail.

Because the Tết Festival (in late January to early February) and Black April commemoration (weekend closest to April 30) are important events, but also by now quite well-rehearsed, the BoD can usually plan for them three to six months prior. The Tết Festival is much larger in scale and requires more collaboration with outside organizations, vendors, and city resources and as result the organizers will begin planning in early fall by reserving the space (either City Heights Urban Village Performance Annex or Linda Vista library parking lot), obtaining permits, and lining up performers. For Black April, however, the planning happens two to three months prior when a committee is formed that includes representatives from elders, veterans, and student groups. Committees for both Tết and Black April are constituted by an open general meeting that all member organizations may participate in. These open general meetings usually occur two to thee times a year and were usually well-attended (approximately 25-30 organization and non-affiliated delegates). General meetings to discuss Black April always attracted more (mainly male and first generation) delegates than the Tết Festival planning meetings, mainly because active community members tended to be those committed to the goal of preserving South Vietnamese stories and challenging "communist" history.[103] In addition, the widespread appreciation of Tết as a cultural event gives members rationale to dismiss it as a neutral and "safe" site. On the other hand, Black April commemorations are unambiguously political in nature, even if the means to convey refugee politics are cultural (e.g. song, skits). Thus many delegates

[103] For instance, elders who came to Black April planning meetings voice "our" collective stake in challenging the celebration of April 30 as a day of liberation and victory over foreign imperialists (as it is celebrated in Vietnam) rather than a day of "national mourning" as it has become for Vietnamese refugees.

participate in the planning process of Black April in order to voice their political interests and police the bounds of Vietnamese American community and identity.

Slowly, I came to understand, and even appreciate, the distinct rhythm that the elders had in their community work. Not all members of the Viet Fed work at the same pace and differences have arisen on numerous occasions, but taken as a whole the BoD had a certain cohesiveness and predictability. This cohesiveness can be attributed mainly to their actual and/or ideological location as refugees and opponents of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Members may not agree on how to run meetings or events and what programs should be privileged throughout the year, but they all "chống cộng" [oppose communism] to varying degrees. In her notes on a community forum to bridge the generation gap, one young Vietnamese American activist suggests that elders are "not anti-Communist just to be anti-Communist," but rather they see anticommunism as a vehicle for continuing struggles for freedom in Vietnam. In fact, they see anticommunism as in sync with a "pro-Vietnam" stance and continue staging protests as a way to make visible the injustices still occurring in the homeland. The activist quotes an elder's explanation: "The hatred is over," a woman says, "I can live here in this land, enjoy the things I have, and never remember those terrible days. I can put my past behind. What I cannot put behind, what haunts me and urges me to be active, is not my own memories – it is the knowledge that my people still live like that."[104] Like this woman, many of my respondents suggest that their own activism is a consequence of "caring too much" about their countrymen, of a sense of their good fortunes for leaving Vietnam when so many

[104] From an email article circulated by Yen-Khanh Vu, "To my Vietnamese friends who hate the way our community protests" 27 April 2005.

could not or died in their attempts. Thus, the commitment to anticommunism, for many, is not merely about preserving memories of the past but about coping with the pain or guilt of surviving and thriving when so many did not.

Một chổ đứng tại dắt Mỹ/A Place to Stand in the US

> "Cô muốn giúp cộng đồng mình phát triển và có một chổ đứng tại dắt Mỹ… Mình nen cố gắng giữ gìn văn hóaViệt vị đó là sức mạnh của chúng ta."
> [I want to help our community develop and have a place to stand here in the United States…We need to try to preserve Vietnamese culture because that is our source of strength.][105]

During an interview a female Viet Fed board member, Lam Thị Phương, who regularly attended meetings and actively helped organize numerous events, described her community work objective as helping Vietnamese Americans to find a place to stand in the US. I find this statement compelling because of the way in which she connected this struggle for belonging in US society with an ongoing struggle to preserve Vietnamese culture and history, particularly an awareness of ourselves as tị nạn cộng sản [refugees of communism]. Later in the interview, she says, "Cô biết…trong cộng đồng mình có một số Việt Cộng muốn phá…nen mình phải cố gắng giáo dục giới trẻ, cho họ biết tại vì sao cha mẹ bất chấp khó khăn mang gia đình đến đây" [I know there is a communist contingent in our community wanting to disrupt (our work)…so we must try hard to educate the (Vietnamese American) youth, let them know why their parents disregarded

[105] Lâm Thị Phương 2004. She works for the Union of Pan Asian Communities as a health outreach coordinator for Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian communities in San Diego. Translation of the interview transcriptions are my own.

all hardships to bring their families here (to the US)].[106] Through this statement, Cô[107] Phương locates one of the many functions of anticommunism in the Vietnamese American community. It serves as a pedagogical tool for the second generation to learn their parents' (and community's) immigration story; about the sacrifices of the first generation as a means of understanding the reason they are in the US.

This immigration story is intimately linked to a model minority discourse for Asian American immigrants. My interview with Lam Thị Phương speaks to the inherent contradictions of the model minority discourse because of the expectation that Vietnamese Americans will be able to (in fact, they deserve to) find a "place to stand" in the US after all the sacrifices made by "heroic" Vietnamese refugees who escaped communist tyranny. Lisa Sun-Hee Park explains that the discursive construction of Asian Americans as the model minority hearkens back to a longer tradition of the "American myth of national origins" whereby immigrants escape political or economic oppression with little or nothing and ultimately achieve the American dream. Yet this "patriotic drama" is truly paradoxical for Asian Americans because "According to this narrative, the role of the good Asian American is that of the perpetual foreigner/victim who must be rescued, welcomed, and domesticated again and again."[108] In order to stake a claim to the US nation-state as the "good immigrants," Asian Americans must continually

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[106] Ibid.
[107] Throughout the dissertation, I refer to my interview subjects by respectful "kinship terms" that my interviewees and I used during times spent doing community work as well as while socializing outside of Vietnamese Federation events. The terms used are either Cô = "Aunt," Chú = "Uncle" or Bác = either aunt or uncle, but designated for those with more seniority.
[108] Park 2008, *forthcoming*.

acknowledge their foreigner status.[109] If, like other Asian immigrants, Vietnamese Americans have a stake in this model minority myth, how do their refugee narratives corroborate or complicate the existing configurations of this troubling paradigm? I suggest that anticommunist discourse simultaneously relies upon *and* disrupts the model minority paradigm by asserting the primacy of homeland concerns and an attachment to a tị nạn [refugee] identity. Parallel to Cuban American community and identity formations (often considered the model minority of Latino groups), Vietnamese Americans' vexed relationship with their homeland and their tokenization as deserving refugees in the US set them apart from their Asian American peers.[110] It is, thus, important to understand how the refugees themselves make use of anticommunist discourse in their everyday practices, and to interrogate how these practices may enable us to understand the construction of "refugee" identities beyond state-sanctioned narratives.

The other issue Cô Phương brought up, the concern that Việt Cộng infiltrators are disrupting the elders' task to educate Vietnamese American youth about their history, has been a recurring theme in a majority of my interviews with Viet Fed members. The notion of Việt Cộng infiltration, which I initially dismissed as extreme or paranoid, can actually be contextualized historically by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation's aggressive campaign in the mid-1990s to recruit Vietnamese Americans to support their effort of detecting and capturing communist spies from Vietnam. In 2005 and 2006, I

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[109] In Leland Saito's work on Asian American, Latino, and white communities in suburban LA, he argues that certain Asian American groups invoke the "good immigrant" image which serves to distinguish them from other racialized minorities and the negative connotations associated with their communities. See Saito 1998 and 2001.

[110] Cheris Brewer Current recently argues that Cuban refugees have been "ideologically valuable" in the US during the 1960s and 70s as a means of demonstrating America's moral position against communism. See "Normalizing Cuban Refugees: Representations of Whiteness and Anti-communism in the USA During the Cold War," *Ethnicities* 8:1(2008): 42-67.

received numerous scanned or photocopied documents through various Vietnamese community and politics listservs that attempted to re-ignite the issue about communist infiltration. I followed these leads and found they were documents circulated by the FBI and translated and printed in the leading Vietnamese-language newspaper, Người Việt Daily News in 1996 after President Bill Clinton restored diplomatic relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. In a FBI notice, Vietnamese refugees are asked to assist the US government with information:

> With the increased number of Vietnamese refugees in the United States, we think that the activities of Communist espionage has kept up the pace and multiplied vigorously. To prevent this growth, the FBI is once more requesting the help of Vietnamese refugees, those who had relations with, or who had communicated with the Vietnamese Communist regime in the past…If you want to assist the United States Government and fellow overseas Vietnamese in eliminating the activities, threats, and abuses, etc. by the underground Communist spies, please contact us immediately.[111]

In a 1996 article printed in the *South China Morning Post*, FBI spokesman George Grotz is cited as claiming that Vietnamese agents have infiltrated Vietnamese American communities in California and Texas, home to a large contingent of anti-Hanoi activists. Grotz suggests that these communist spies may be responsible for the home burglaries, gang activities, computer chip thefts, and economic espionage that were of key concern to the FBI at this particular historical moment.[112] Given that the criminalization of Vietnamese Americans by US mainstream media's emphasis on "food, festivals, and crime" [113] during the 1980s and 1990s (particularly on gang activity and home invasions),

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[111] *Thông cáo* [Notice] by U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation. Advertisement on *Nguòi Viêt* Daily, Saturday, February 17, 1996.
[112] Greg Torode, "Visa Bids Delayed by FBI's Spy Fears" in *South China Morning Post* 23 March 1996, pg. 12.
[113] The borrow the triad of "food, festivals, and crime" from Jeffrey Brody, Tony Rimmer, and Edgar Trotter's (2000) study of media representations of the Vietnamese American community, in which they

I suggest that the opportunity to re-cast Vietnamese refugees as the model minority and deserving refugee came by way of the FBI's spy-hunt. If the Vietnamese refugee community responded cooperatively, as they did with 200 leads, they may resist, in some small measure, the dominant media's criminalization of their community.[114] Calling out the "communists," placing blame on communist infiltrators and spies, would distance the "good immigrants" from the undemocratic, un-American enemy alien presumably hiding in their midst. This is mutually beneficial for the state and for Vietnamese refugees, as subjects of the state, in maintaining democratic ideals and preserving national affiliations. Even while Vietnamese refugees are cast as perpetual foreigners just as previous Asian immigrants groups, they may express allegiance to their country of refuge through this communist spy-hunt. Thus, Vietnamese American anticommunism can be understood as a complicated negotiation of political allegiance *and* social belonging.[115]

In many weekly meetings, the concern about "communist infiltration" has cropped up when members assess the organization's strengths and weaknesses in programming for the community. During a meeting on September 1, 2004, the perceived crisis of communist infiltration was the main agenda item. This meeting was well-attended by Viet Fed advisors and concerned delegates in addition to the regular board members. That evening, I showed up late to a conference room filled with first generation

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find that a disproportionate number of articles having to do with Vietnamese Americans focus on one or a combination of these topics.

[114] No arrests were made based upon these anonymous phone calls/leads, but the targets of community suspicion were newspaper reporters and community activists.

[115] Ngo (1997) argues that "The main actor that has been supporting, financing and supplying the rationale for the [Vietnamese American] anti-communist viewpoint has always been the U.S. government." In his conference paper on this topic, he shows how the US government set up a "*Chiêu Hôi* Open Arms program upon the Vietnamese American community [in San Jose]" in 1975 modeled after the one they set up in Vietnam in the 1960s to persuade Việt Cộng to join the US side.

men and several women who discussed the growing tension over the Việt Tân Party, a group that espouses anticommunist ideals but is often suspected of being in concert with Việt Cộng. During the meeting, I made the following observations:

> One of our board members suggest that we need to "fortify" the community (or protect it) from infringing communist elements. No names were explicitly mentioned, but some members made reference to the organization called "Dảng Việt Tân." All members present agree that a committee needs to be formed to see to this matter, that way the Viet Fed will not be directly implicated in any "political interest" organizing. Several advisors share their concerns about the growing contingency of communists in San Diego, providing the evidence of "communist performers" at dinner-concerts given at some local Vietnamese restaurants. Just last week Phương Trang Restaurant had a "communist performer." I want very much to ask why the performer is labeled a communist—is it merely because s/he is from Vietnam or does s/he espouse Socialist principles through music? But I do not ask, for fear of appearing dumb, uninformed, mis-educated by my western schooling. Or maybe it's more about being viewed as a researcher and not "one of us."[116]

In all my community work experience, I was struck by how elders seemed to unanimously agree on criteria for judging communists versus anticommunists at these venues, but in private conversations with me, I hear a slightly different version of their anticommunist politics. Their conversations with me usually revealed a moderate position. For example, one elder said to me in a matter-of-fact way, "I go to protest because I want to show I care about my community and my country. I go but I don't know if that's the right way, you know, the best way to do things because sometimes it make us look bad too."[117] As a community leader, this elder was very cautious about sounding too critical, but it was obvious that he does not always agree with the hard-line position of his peers. However, these personal feelings were usually put aside in the

[116] Field Notes 1 September 2004.
[117] Lữu, N. Toàn 2006.

interest of appearing in solidarity against a perceived threat to their goal of sustaining a refugee identity. This particular meeting resulted in the formation of a committee called Ủy Ban Bảo Vệ và Xây Dựng Cộng Đồng [committee for community protection and development] whose purpose was vaguely discussed as acting as a watchdog of sorts for "communist activity." After several months, the committee informally disbanded due to a lack of participation.

The everyday work of anticommunism: "công việc đấu tranh" [labor of war]

Community volunteer work has often been described as both a labor of love and a form of "đấu tranh [struggle, battle, fight]" by many first generation Vietnamese Americans because of the time, energy, and many personal sacrifices they must make in order to serve the greater good as well as the ideological/political challenges that come with doing anticommunist community work. This labor comes with few tangible rewards. In addition, many members take it upon themselves to finance some of the organization's events out of their own pockets.[118] Indeed, the dedication the elders have to this unpaid work reveals the ways in which affective structures maintained during the routine meetings sustain them in their efforts to strengthen a Vietnamese American community and preserve its "cultural integrity." This cultural integrity has been contingent on an anticommunist politics that is part and parcel of the relationships forged in community work. That the members all align themselves with South Vietnam and a refugee identity allows them to connect deeply and personally with each other and work together to create

[118] Because the Viet Fed does not have a dependable, continuous source of financial support, each e-board must creatively find funding outlets through soliciting donations, putting on fundraising concerts, etc. However, it is not uncommon for the Viet Fed coffers to be empty thus making it necessary for members to use their own resources to fund events. Often, members will not take reimbursements for money they have spent on supplies for the Viet Fed.

a social space where the hurts of history can be collectively healed through active participation and collaboration.

Anticommunism does not just color individual perceptions or influence individual actions in the Viet Fed, but rather serves as the common ground from which to enter into community work. This is, perhaps, the crux of their attempts to recruit young people. The generational difference between "elders" and "youth" for Vietnamese Americans is more than just a problem of language and "Americanization." The generational difference also has to do with their first-hand and second-hand memories of South Vietnam and the war, and thus their emotional proximity to the twin causes of being "pro-Vietnam" and anticommunism. That the membership of the Viet Fed is comprised of Vietnamese Americans who are anticommunist is unspoken but widely accepted. Because of its history as an organization founded by Vietnamese refugees in the difficult years following displacement from the homeland, the Viet Fed has tacitly become an anticommunist organization, similar to many other Vietnamese American *social or cultural* organizations across the US. Vietnamese American social and cultural organizations serve as ideological sites for the dissemination of a South Vietnamese story that parallels the work of political organizations. Kim-An Lieberman's study of Vietnamese American anticommunist activism on the internet reveals how political organizations have used the internet as a new frontier of struggle against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. She argues that, "[t]echnically, the Republic of Vietnam fell with Saigon, but in many senses it has been resurrected on the Internet."[119] In mapping the anticommunist agenda of over two dozen websites devoted to Vietnamese American

[119] Lieberman 2003: 74

anticommunist activism, she discovered many more that may not be political in nature, but closely align themselves with an anticommunist politics. Lieberman's study proves useful in highlighting the role of Vietnamese American organizations in furthering an anticommunist politics within the realms of both the political *and* cultural. Furthermore, the resurrection of South Vietnam (via the use of only Saigon rather than Ho Chi Minh City as place-name and the deployment of the former flag of the RVN) on these internet sites also reveals that anticommunist discourse and practices are not about refugees who are unable or unwilling to let go of the past, but rather a way to write a history of Vietnamese America that must traverse the landscapes of war, loss, exile, and return. Anticommunism proves to be a complicated engagement with these stories.

However, this does not mean that anticommunism is understood or practiced in the same way by all individuals, both in the Viet Fed and beyond. Meanings of anticommunism and modes of relating to the past and to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam vary depending on multiple factors, including time of departure from Vietnam, social status/occupation both in Vietnam and the US, gender, and generation. These differences are made most visible to me at the weekly meetings because this space offers the proximity and the relative safety to air out differences in order to present a coherent message and a cohesive front during community events. While the levels of political participation (in the homeland and the US mainstream) vary among members of the Viet Fed and the ways in which they engage in anticommunist discourse and practices may not always cohere, they do share the fundamental point of view that Vietnamese communists (Việt Cộng) are the main perpetrators of not only the loss of South Vietnam and the scattering of Vietnamese across the globe, but also of continued human rights violations

in Vietnam.[120] Some members charge the US or even the Republic of Vietnam with more responsibility for the outcome of the war and their own fates as refugees while others are more adamant about placing the blame entirely on Việt Cộng. Some rarely or never engage in anticommunist protest and demonstrations, focusing instead on the cultural and social needs of the community. Others orchestrate the protests or turn out to every single one. Some consider writing "news" articles condemning Việt Cộng misdeeds or fiction that portrays Việt Cộng as villains as their contribution to the effort of "đấu tranh." Still others are more proactive and form committees, interest groups, or organizations that explicitly oppose the Hanoi regime. Yet, those who never turn out to protest are *not* necessarily disinterested or apathetic and they certainly *do* have a stake in the anticommunist position, if not the public articulation of anticommunist politics. Therefore, my reformulation of anticommunism as a cultural discourse helps to account for those who have been left out of the politics of anticommunism because they do not identify with its binary and divisive premise or because they have been branded communists for facilitating dialogue on Vietnam in the diaspora.[121]

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[120] As indicated by the international organization, Human Rights Watch, concerns related to Vietnam include the persecution of religious figures, artists and writers, political dissidents, ethnic minorities, and street children and the lack of regulation of human/sex trafficking. See http://hrw.org/doc/?t=asia&c=vietna.

[121] In her discussion of Cuban exile politics at the end of the Cold War, Maria de los Angeles Torres shows how old issues of the Cuban American Right resurfaced during the time when Cuban refugees (rafters, or balseros) washed up on the shores of Miami in the late 1980s. However, the US government continued its no-engagement policy with Cuba. Two exile positions in the Cuban American community emerged which she calls "anti-dialogue" (those who advocated the overthrow of the Cuban government through military action and those who promoted ongoing economic and political embargoes) and "pro-dialogue" (those who called for normalized relations with Cuba). Neither side was for Castro, but the tactics are different. Her formulation of pro-dialogue and anti-dialogue attempts to move the discussion away from pro-Castro or anti-Castro political positions, but it nevertheless casts an ethical dilemma of *having to choose a side* in order to participate in Cuban American community discourse. See *In the Land of Mirrors: Cuban Exile Politics in the United States* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999).

While the leadership of the Viet Fed is comprised of mainly members of South Vietnam's urban elite, the BoD represents a diversity of experiences and perspectives. Past presidents have all held professional titles such as pharmacist, research scientist, hospital administrators, etc. However, on the board there are members who are unemployed (or on disability), an elderly home-maker, a social worker, a photographer, a computer technician, an electrician/photographer, and several other professionals. These individuals bring to the board different levels of knowledge and experience with the Vietnam socialist regime because of their different times of departure from Vietnam; some interact daily with mainstream American institutions while others remain mostly insulated in Vietnamese American family and community life. These individuals represent smaller member organizations, but they also represent the views of those who are not present at these intimate gatherings.[122]

Vietnamese American anticommunism can be understood as a modality for Vietnamese refugees to insert themselves into American society, not just as a reactionary form of homeland politicking.[123] Understood in this way, it becomes a useful conceptual tool for studying Vietnamese diasporic community and identity. I argue that anticommunism has served, thus far, as an acceptable means for Vietnamese Americans

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[122] During an open meeting hosted by the San Diego police department in 2005, I witnessed how Vietnamese elders who do not belong to community organizations were also deeply invested in preserving South Vietnamese history. After a long dull meeting where the elders were admonished by the authorities (the elders were stripped of their own authority in this case) on proper protocol for reporting crime and staying safe and proper ways to discipline their children, elders brought up their own concerns regarding the commemoration of April 30, 1975 during the "Other Business" portion left open at the end of the meeting. During the last thirty minutes, elders who had been silent and unengaged became animated and "authoritative" in discussing their concerns about preserving South Vietnamese history. Field Notes from "Vietnamese Advisory Board Meeting" at the Multicultural Community Relations Office of the San Diego Police Dept (Mid-City) 3 March 2005.

[123] Ong and Meyer (2004) and Collet and Furuya (2005) studies of Vietnamese American community and political incorporation where they discuss anticommunist politics as homeland (or transnational) politics that does not impact address domestic issues for the community.

to stake a moral claim to being in the US as the "deserving refugees" of a US war wherein Americans can still emerge as the moral victor decades later. As Espiritu has compellingly argued, US mainstream press coverage of the 25th anniversary of the "end" of the Vietnam War indicates an active re-scripting of America's loss as a moral victory through offering up victimized Vietnamese refugees as living evidence of US good intention n, humanitarian heroism, and, ultimately, the US's "we-win-even-when-we-lose syndrome."[124] Given this heroic retelling of the Vietnam War story in the US, how do those Vietnamese refugees who lived through the war and endured its consequences construct their own narratives on US soil? How do their narratives conform with, counter, or remain otherwise ambivalent to this heroic historical re-scripting? The next section addresses a popular motif in Vietnamese American public discourse, the "thank you America" position that Vietnamese Americans articulate through community work, in order to unpack the ambivalence that lies underneath such seemingly accomodationist politics.

The "Thank You America" Position and its Contradictions

The BoD is comprised of a mixed group of Vietnamese refugees from the 1975 wave and subsequent ODP or HO categories. However, in the life-span of the Viet Fed (from 1984 to 2006, the end of my term) there have been a total of 8 presidents and all of them came from the 1975 cohort.[125] Consequently, the leadership's perspective has been skewed towards South Vietnam's urban elite. This seems a key factor in determining the continuity of anticommunist ideology in the Viet Fed with pre-1975 South Vietnamese

[124] Espiritu 2006b.
[125] The current president (number 9) is the only president who came to the United States after 1975 and is a 1.5 generation Vietnamese American. He began his term in the summer of 2006, the end of my research and executive board term.

anticommunism, or "non-communism." In his current historical study of South Vietnamese urban society, Tuan Hoang argues that anticommunism (or non-communist perspective) before 1975 was the movement of an intellectual class in South Vietnam who, through experience rather than ideological difference, believed Marxism to be a repressive and counter-nationalist system. Instead, they advocated a "pro-bourgeois non-communist culture" that is distinct from western capitalism for their newly independent country. Hoang's work addresses the dearth of information on South Vietnamese non-communist discourse during the period when the RVN and DRV each fought for their own mode of governance as the US increasingly exerted its power over the South in the late 1950s into the 1960s.[126] That those belonging in the ranks of South Vietnam's leadership have been able to parlay their skills and status to become community leaders in the US explains the extension of this anticommunist movement to differentiate South Vietnamese experiences and perspective from both the communists and Americans into the contemporary diasporic context. Furthermore, understanding the continuities between Vietnamese American anticommunism and South Vietnamese anticommunism keeps us from valorizing the investment community leaders have in maintaining a version of history that includes South Vietnamese as active agents rather than merely puppets of the US. This effort must be understood, in part, as a mission of the bourgeois who have lost their footing since the fall of Saigon. However, I am not interested in evaluating the first generation's motives for holding on to anticommunism, but to understand how it has been deployed and how its meanings have shifted. The context for anticommunism has

[126] Tuan Hoang's (Department of History, University of Notre Dame) dissertation is a work in progress and he has shared a chapter draft with me on the topic of the intellectual and experiential foundation for Vietnamese anticommunism in the 1950s and 60s.

changed dramatically since 1975 and, under new conditions of displacement and loss, I am particularly interested in understanding the work of anticommunism as a modality of remembering.

Nu-Anh Tran's analysis of South Vietnamese identity construction in the 1960s reveals a strong desire among the urban intelligentsia to solidify a national identity that would stand apart from their American allies, particularly as the American presence appeared to be a corrupting force in Saigon society. Elaborating on the effects of the American presence in South Vietnam, Tran argues that South Vietnamese urban elites sought a precarious nationalist identity that remained always anticommunist and often anti-American. By examining reader responses in a popular Vietnamese newspaper in response to a US navy serviceman's racist caricature of Vietnamese, Tran shows how the "simultaneous expression by letter-writers of gratitude, on the one hand, and defensive anger, on the other, reflects the contradiction inherent in the Republic of Vietnams' reliance on American military and economic power and its formal status as a postcolonial independent state."[127] The contradiction has changed for South Vietnamese as they have become even more dependent on the US nation-state in their new roles as refugees after 1975, but the desire to preserve an identity unique from Americans and in contradistinction to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam remains a driving force in community work. The prior contradictory and conflict-ridden relationship with the US nation-state and the ongoing negotiation with their refugee status add another dimension to Vietnamese Americans' anticommunist position. Perhaps in exile the sense of gratitude Tran refers to has become compounded while the defensive anger has mitigated, resulting

[127] Tran, N.A. 2006: 170

in what I call a "thank you America motif" pervasive in Vietnamese American public demonstrations. However, in my community work I found that this "thank you America" public statement papers over many differing and ambivalent perspectives.

The "thank you America motif" must be understood as part of a complicated history of South Vietnam-US relations that has implications for how Vietnamese Americans imagine community and identity today. For example, Viet Fed members responded quite differently to a "thank you America" advertisement our organization put out for Thanksgiving 2005. Several months after the thirtieth anniversary of the "Fall of Saigon," several independent delegates came to a Viet Fed weekly meeting to garner support for their idea of posting an advertisement in the San Diego Union-Tribune newspaper to thank the American people for accepting Vietnamese into the fold. The idea was to mark 30 years of exile with this gesture of gratitude. After the small advertisement was published over the Thanksgiving holiday, the following week's BoD meeting agenda did not include an agenda item to discuss its impact, but it nevertheless came up as a topic of interest to all the members present. While the idea to raise money and buy an advertisement did not originally belong to the Viet Fed, as an umbrella organization that attempts to represent the interest of the Vietnamese American community at large, the advertisement was credited to our organization.[128] Thus, over the holiday weekend the president received numerous phone calls from his friends on the city council as well as other "người Mỹ [American people]" giving him positive feedback. Some people thanked him for posting the ad, some people praised us for being grateful rather than the

[128] Printed at the bottom of the advertisement was a contact phone number belonging to the Viet Fed President.

"typically ungrateful" immigrants who only criticize the government. In my field notes, I recorded the discussion as follows:

> So, over the Thanksgiving weekend, Bác Mạnh's phone rang off the hook, he said. He told the rest of us that the ad was a hit with city officials (big surprise there!) and "Americans" in general. I wasn't sure who he meant, but he said "người Mỹ [American people]" called him to say "thank you for posting that ad," or we did good, or they were happy to see it because it shows that Vietnamese Americans feel grateful to the US because all we ever hear is criticism of the US from immigrant groups. Bác Mạnh also said he got a call from a US Vietnam vet and they had an hour-long conversation about the war and the communists.[129]

Interestingly, city officials and other "friends of the Vietnamese community" (as one board member referred to the callers) saw this as an opportunity to reward the "good immigrant" with praise and compliments. This actually happens quite often with city council "proclamations" at our cultural events and even a resolution that named a day after our president. However, the alliance forged between the US veteran of the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese refugee community also reveals another dimension to the work of anticommunism. At our large-scale community events, we usually see several US vets and a few use our listserv to continue their own anticommunist activism. Bác Mạnh's hour-long conversation with a veteran about the war and the communists, however, reveals that the "thank you America" position, in line with anticommunist practices, enable personal connections to be established between the American vet and the Vietnamese refugee community.

This discussion of how the public responded favorably to the president as a representative of the "grateful" Vietnamese refugee community compelled Bác Mạnh to

[129] Field Notes. 30 November 2005.

bring up a comparison of the "disastrous consequences" of the Vietnam War to the current war in Iraq:

> Bác Mạnh then said that this war in Iraq is going to yield the same disastrous consequences, but he blames the media for swaying public opinion *against* the war. To this, Bác Liêm jumped in and said he thought that the media wasn't doing that. In fact, there's less coverage than during Vietnam. He said he doesn't think public opinion is against the war, but did not comment on whether or not the war is just. He merely said that he thought refugees would get the same unfair treatment as he saw in 1975. Americans don't want us/them, Bác Liêm said. They have to receive refugees to uphold an international humanitarian image, but it's their fault that Iraqis are going to be homeless refugees. They may fare worse than us. Several people nodded in agreement to this prediction, but everyone did not seem to agree with Bác Liêm's views. It seems as though there is a big split between those in favor of the war in Iraq and those against it, but the subject was brushed aside by the more interesting topic of the thank you America ad. It seems like whenever a touchy subject crops up during the meetings, we somehow get steered back to a subject that ties us together as a "refugee" community, thus averting the danger of getting torn apart by other political differences.[130]

Bác Liêm and Bác Mạnh were both former presidents around the same age and socio-economic background, but their feelings toward the US are quite different as demonstrated by how they discussed the war in Iraq. On many different occasions I have heard Bác Liêm openly express his critique of the US government's foreign policy, but he supports the "thank you America" efforts because he views it as a strategic way of earning trust and political clout in the US in order to get legislation passed such as the flag resolution recognizing the former South Vietnam flag. In part, Bác Mạnh's pro-America stance is a consequence of his close and successful working relationship with Americans in South Vietnam where he served as a hospital administrator (a job he was

[130] Ibid.

able to resume after some time in the US) whereas Bác Liêm did not have very much contact with Americans prior to entering the US. Furthermore, Bác Liêm's work in the US is quite insulated in the Vietnamese American community—he has a pharmacy that serves primarily Vietnamese American clients whereas Bác Mạnh, prior to his retirement, worked for large American companies.

In an interview, another Viet Fed member I call Chú Châu explained his pro-America perspective:

> I am pleased with the way my family is today, both in terms of financial and social status…In fact, if I die tomorrow, I have nothing to regret. In fact, I have a lot to thank America for. A lot to give credit to the 1975 event because that's the mark that changed my life completely. And I think it's for the better. But as you know, America is not a simple society…[131]

He continued talking about the citizenship process and the ways in which immigrants have to work hard in order to succeed. For this first generation Vietnamese American man, the loss of his homeland and separation from his family, which he poignantly shared earlier in the interview, is made bearable by the tale of personal success and sense of indebtedness to America. Thus, the "thank you America motif" we see in public may be viewed as a collective gesture for Vietnamese Americans attempting to make sense of the senselessness of war and the losses endured in its wake. Many of my respondents have similar views about the US because they compare their lives to family or friends in Vietnam and believe that they are the fortunate ones, the ones who left.

Profiles of the ones who left

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[131] Ngô, C. 2004.

The ones who left Vietnam carried with them memories of a country that ceased to exist after 1975. Its capital toppled under the invading communist army and the victors abruptly changed Saigon to Hồ Chí Minh City. More than thirty years later, many Vietnamese refugees continue to hold on to the hope of return, but return to a homeland free from communism. In a poem written by Lee Pham, a Vietnamese expatriate and close friend of a Viet Fed board member, sentiments of return abound:

> Thirty years later we are proud freedom seekers,
> Who braved the perilous jungles and mighty seas,
> Seeking asylum in oversea shelters
> And havens of happiness for refugees.
>
> Thirty years later anger and hatred are still boiling,
> Blaming the communist aggressors and allied betrayers,
> For sowing sadness, aching and biting,
> In the hearts of Vietnamese country losers.
>
> Thirty years later we solemnly murmur
> Motherland, with God's grace someday
> We will return and determine anyway,
> To build a new Vietnam, better and greater?[132]

Once Vietnamese who lost their nation entered the US as refugees, they must find ways to carry on, to cope with their new lives. The participants in my study told their life stories to me willingly, some with more flourish than others. They shared with me their hopes of return to Vietnam, but they also expressed great concern over creating and sustaining a strong sense of Vietnamese identity and culture in the US. In the following four narratives, paraphrased, translated, and shortened from the life histories I gathered in the study, I wish to show the multiple ways Vietnamese refugees think about the

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[132] From a poem by Lee Pham, circulated by email, "Thirty Years Later: A Tribute to the Memory of Thirty Years of National Shame." 28 April 2005.

homeland, their lives in the US, as well as their views on community work. I do not mean for these four narratives from members of the Viet Fed to stand in for the totality of first generation experiences, but rather as illuminating examples of how some negotiate this awkward concept of "refugee." These four narratives help contextualize the lived experiences and beliefs of Vietnamese refugees in the US.

Bùi N. Thanh[133]

> I was born in Hue, in the central region, in 1933. I left Vietnam in January of 1991 because after the South fell, I was imprisoned from 1975 to 1985. After I was released at the end of 1985 I got help from the United States and came through "vien H-O" which is Humanitarian Operation.
>
> When I was in Vietnam, I studied Law but did not finish my education. I joined the military and served for twenty-three years as Sĩ Quan Võ Bị Quốc Gia [Officer of the National Guard]. I specialized in telecommunications. I can speak French and English, but my French is better. In 1956, I got married and we had twelve children. They are now living all over, one in France, two in Canada, two in Vietnam, some are here…four passed away…it's normal to have many children in Vietnam. I almost resettled in France to join one of my children.
>
> I came to San Diego in 1991, but I have been to the US before, in 1956 as a student when I studied in New Jersey for some time. But I resettled in San Diego in 1991 because of my wife, who came to the US before I did. Today I am retired, but I remain active in community work. I used to do all types of work though. I've been a salesman, I've worked for Goodwill, then I worked for the city doing outreach for environmental issues.
>
> Right after I came to San Diego, I began participating in community work. Right away, so around 1992. First, I was chairman for the organization to free political prisoners in Vietnam. I have solicited money for "thương phế binh [disabled veterans]" from individuals and companies to send to the people in Vietnam. I used to have the position of Vice President of External Affairs of the Vietnamese Federation. I was a member of the Đại Việt party in Vietnam and we've continued our organization here in the US. I've been an advisor for many other organizations in the community and now I'm on the board of advisors for the Viet Fed. Another community activity I do is to write for the local newspapers, stories about the political situation in Vietnam.

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[133] Bùi, N.T. 2004. Interview was conducted in Vietnamese.

The most important issues for me are political and cultural because those two things work together. You cannot speak of the political without including the cultural. I have participated in many protests and I always feel a powerful sense of solidarity and pride in my community during those events. But it is not always necessary to protest. Sometimes there are other means of achieving a goal to get our issues recognized. And sometimes you just can't go, you have to take care of business at home. I participate in community activities sometimes with my grandkids. The goals I have are first, to preserve and strengthen Vietnamese culture here, number two is to fight for freedom in Vietnam, number three, to expose the reality of the people's plight in Vietnam, how they continue to suffer under the oppressive communist regime. We should work for Vietnam to realize the saying, "Dân giàu nước mạnh [Prosperous people, strong nation]." Today over here, we are gaining an education in the US but it's our responsibility to preserve our culture and heritage so that we can improve Vietnam. We need to remember, "You are Vietnamese" no matter how long you have been here. Even if you've lost your country, you should not lose your roots.

Vietnamese language is the most important thing to focus on with our youth and we can do it through the churches, temples, cultural centers, and organizations such as the Viet Fed. It doesn't matter if you get your US citizenship, you should still keep your sense of identity by maintaining your language. That's what our ministers should preach in church. I am Catholic and I think the Catholic organizations should take up more responsibility to teach the youth Vietnamese.

I have not been back to Vietnam and I won't go back as long as the political regime is still communist. I am anticommunist. My activism in the US makes it unsafe for me to travel in Vietnam. I am not scared, but I will not go back there.

Lý Đức Mạnh[134]

I was born down in the Delta in the city of Cần Thơ, which is like the capital of the Delta region. It was 1939. I obtained a B.A. from Singapore at the Southeast Asian Union College in Singapore. And then I went to Bangkok, Thailand for 3 years to take the Medical Technology and X-Ray Technology diploma.

I left Vietnam toward the end of April, 1975. The reason I left Vietnam was because the South was falling into Communist hands. I was with Americans so much and so they think that I might be in danger with the Communist coming so we evacuated out. I was married at that time and we had two daughters. They were able to leave, but not with us because we were not sure whether we can leave or not and as a precaution

[134] Lý 2004. Interview was conducted mostly in English.

we sent them a couple of days ahead of us in one of the evacuation planes. We landed in El Toro Marine Airbase. But then they bussed us to Camp Pendleton, but we stayed only one night. We were taken out because we belong to the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which is a large organization and we have arrangements that they can take us all out to Loma Linda University.

Well, they took us to Loma Linda and in our group we have about 200 people. I was working with the authorities that were trying to relocate all the people there. I stayed there for about a week in Loma Linda helping them to relocate all the people. And then I came to San Diego We were able to go together. We had met up with our girls in Guam.

My wife was a nurse in Vietnam and when she first came here she went to special training to take the board exam for nursing. And she worked as a nurse in a hospital for a year or so. Then my wife decided that she doesn't want to do nursing and she was a good cook, so we said why don't we open a restaurant and see how it goes. So, we look in the paper and we saw a place, small place in North Park that they want to sell for ten thousand dollars. It was a Vietnamese restaurant, one of the first Vietnamese restaurants in town. It did well and we even moved to a better location in Mid-City.

At the same time, I was working at Paradise Valley Hospital as the Director of Material Management while my wife and the rest of the family run the restaurant. I would say that I'm a regular, middle class American. It is a lot different when I was Vietnam. Even though when I was in Vietnam I was an assistant administrator for a hospital, but at that time I receive the top salary of, equivalent to 75 dollars a month.

I was involved in the community for a long time. I don't know how long it was, but shortly after I arrived here I started getting involved in the Vietnamese community. I was the first president of the Indochinese Chamber of Commerce here in San Diego. Now they change it to the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce. I was involved with the Vietnamese Federation for a long time. I was Vice President. I was the Chairman of the Board of Delegates and I worked in many other capacity with the community. When I moved my business into Mid-City, not only did I get involved in the Vietnamese community, but I'm involved in the community at large too. So I get involved with the Mid-City Redevelopment Corporation and I get involved with City Heights Business Improvement District, many other programs. I was on an advisory board for small businesses for the mayor of the city for six years. And I was on the advisory board for the Police Chief for a long time. So, a lot of involvement in the community.

My thinking is, the Vietnamese community is a group of people that came to this community. We need to understand the community here and we need to make them understand us. It is only true understanding hat we can have a good relationship. We can avoid a lot of misunderstanding.

I want the community to know that we come here, we contribute to the community, we don't want the people to look at us as a group of refugees. In reality we are refugees, but we are a very industrious, hard-working group of people and we can do anything if we set our mind to do it. My main goal of my community work is to preserve the Vietnamese culture at the same time to have our community assimilate to the whole community.

I've been back to Vietnam once in 1999, just to bring my wife's father's body home. He died here and he wanted to be buried at home so we made arrangements to bring his body home so I accompanied him to go home. So, the whole trip is just about ten days. Take care of the funeral and everything and then we came back here. I haven't been back there and I don't think I will ever be back as long as the communist government is still there.

Lâm Thị Phương[135]

I was born on September 14, 1954, which was the year of the migration of Vietnamese from North to South Vietnam. My family came from the north that year, from Hanoi. We're a Catholic family that just could not live with the communists. I know it was hard for my family to leave because for many generations they have built their lives in Hanoi. But all I know is the South. I lived with my family in Saigon. There were ten of us children. One now resides in Germany and the rest are in San Diego. I would describe us as a very close-knit family.

I graduated from high school and then had three years of law school. I studied French and today I can speak it quite well. Sometimes I would throw in a French word when I speak English. In Vietnam, when one graduates from high school, one can take a test and enter law school. We left Vietnam on April 24, 1975 due to the communist invasion of South Vietnam. My uncle worked for the U.S.-South Vietnam military so we were able to evacuate by airplane. I was 20 years old at the time and did not realize that I would be going to the U.S. My uncle deceived me. At the time, I had a boyfriend in Vietnam and my family was worried that I would refuse to leave if they told me their intentions. I had no knowledge of English, no preparation for coming to the U.S.

We arrived in Indian Town Gap, Pennsylvania in May of 1975. We only stayed one month in the refugee camp and then we were sponsored to San Diego. We made the decision to come to San Diego because of this opportunity that just opened for us.

Currently, I am a Health Coordinator for Union of Pan-Asian Communities (UPAC). I've been working for them since 1991. Prior to this position, I was a student teacher at Hoover High School teaching

[135] Lâm 2004, 2006. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese primarily.

French. Prior to that, I was an elementary school teaching assistant. I got my Associate's degree.

Since I came to San Diego, I have been involved in the Vietnamese American community. First I started by volunteering with parents in Linda Vista at the daycare center. Then at Linda Vista Healthcare Clinic. I was teaching at the time, but wanted more. So I went to school to study Electronics/Technology at American Business School. I applied for a technician job at Gremlin Industries. And so I became a personal assistant for 2 years. I brought in many Vietnamese into electronic positions.

Then I went back into teaching for about a year. At that time, my boyfriend from Vietnam managed to escape by boat and come to the US. I found him through friends and we got married, had kids. I've been married since 1982 and we have two daughters, a senior at UCSD (21) and a junior at SDSU (20). My husband is in the landscaping business. He was a lawyer in Vietnam and came to the U.S. in 1981. My husband and children do not really participate in the activities that I do in the community but they are very supportive. Sometimes I cannot do too much because I have an elderly father to care for and I have to be sure to keep an eye on my girls' education. But my girls are very good.

I started out volunteering at schools and clinics, then went to UPAC. I have always loved charity work. Now I work with the Vietnamese Federation on cultural and educational programs. The most important thing for me is to retain Vietnamese culture, because children who grow up here are becoming too American and forgetting their roots. It's necessary to give them guidance, especially with language. I am not too concerned with politics, like the protests. They are a way for some people to voice their ideas and I have been to many of those before, but not too much anymore. I think we need people to focus on social issues, health, education. That's how we can strengthen our future generations and maybe they will be the ones to go back to Vietnam and improve the situation.

I have only been back to Vietnam once, to close a chapter in my life. I probably will not go back there. Most of my family is here now. There are still people we have contact with and we help them out when we can, send money and presents during special occasion. But I cannot stand to go back and see how my countrymen are still poor and the country has not shown much progress. Maybe if things are better, and there's no more communism, I would go back to visit often, maybe for vacation. I accept that my life is here now and my kids are Vietnamese American.

Ngô Châu[136]

I was born in the North and moved South with my parents in 1954 when the communist took over Hanoi and North Vietnam. I came to the US in 1975 with my fiancée. We were evacuated by the helicopter the last minute before the fall of Saigon. We were lucky to get out. When we first arrived, we had the choice to go to several different refugee camps. We chose California because we knew that the good climate would be more suitable for new immigrants like us, you know Vietnamese. I happened to have a job offer from a sponsor who lived in Rancho Bernardo and it was within my technical skills.

I came here when I was 28 years old. We didn't have relatives. Just me and my fiancée and a few months later she became my wife. We married in Rancho Bernardo. So it was quite some experience that the two of us we had to figure out how to survive then adapting to this new society.

I consider myself not a typical Vietnamese because I did go to school in New Zealand before 1975. I got 2 degrees, bachelors and masters, before I went back to Vietnam in 1972. So when the 1975 incident happened, I was more westernized and I feel that I'm better equipped than other Vietnamese at my age. I finished high school in 1965 and was selected into what they call Colombo Plan,[137] meaning scholarship for high school graduates.

I was privileged with 2 English-speaking degrees. I was very well catered to when I got back. And in fact I got a top-notch job with the government. I worked in economic development and my boss was the Deputy Prime Minister. So, in 1972 I worked for the government until 1975 when the communist approached Saigon. I was rescued in the last minute by helicopter as I said in what the Americans call Operation "Frequent Wind." The helicopter picked us up and transported us to a carrier in the Bien Dong, South China Sea. They dropped us off in one of the two bases in the Philippines, Clark Air Base and Subic Base. And then there was a military plane that took us to Midway Base in the Pacific Ocean and then from there to the United States.

In Midway we had a choice, between California and some other camp. We stayed [in Camp Pendleton] between May and like 2 or 3 months. It was a very boring time because we didn't know what happen to our relative. We don't know what the future is going to be, in terms of job and where we're going to live, what kind of life we're going to have, you

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[136] Ngô, C. 2004. Interview was conducted in English, with occasional Vietnamese.

[137] The Colombo Plan originated in Colombo, Ceylon in 1950 for Commonwealth countries to achieve security, but its means were mainly economic assistance to underdeveloped countries in South and Southeast Asia. Original member countries were Australia, Canada, Ceylon, India, New Zealand, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom but have since expanded to include Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaya, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, the United States, Malaya, and Singapore.

know. I remember when I was in that helicopter flying out of Saigon, looking down, the smoke look very tragic, very sad, and I told myself and my fiancée, "Are we doing the right thing?" Because I was not convinced that we are losing our country. We are getting out for good. It's very emotional and very stunned kind of moment. I did ask myself, "Am I doing the right thing here?" This look like I am deserting both my job and my country, and is it the right thing and the right moment to do it? I just can't think that I can drop everything off and you know I didn't feel it was the right thing to do at the time. Now looking back it was the right thing to do because some of my coworkers and friends uh they were not as fortunate as myself getting out of the country at the right moment. Some of them were sent to reeducation camp, meaning prison… So both my and my wife's family, we left them and we didn't know what happen to them and that's why when we were in the camp we keep thinking about that and there's no way to contact them. So it was a tough time.

While I was in the camp there's a delegate from Canada who had an office inside the camp and he said "Listen refugees, Canada's a big country and we need people, more people, especially skilled people with English-speaking degrees." I happen to have an English-speaking degree, so I am qualified to be one of those they recruit. "If you would like to move to Canada we're going to make it be easy for you. We would fly you to Canada right away, like tomorrow. We will help you to find jobs, because Canada needs skilled people." And I almost took their offer because I thought "These darn Americans, I cannot trust them anymore, you know. They have abandoned us and why should I? I don't have to need their help now? "Ăn nhờ ở đợ [Taking handouts, you become a servant]." They already failed us. And because of them, because of their policy, I'm like this. Not knowing about my loved ones, what happened to them. I always wanted to go to America, but not like this. As a refugee, you know.

When I first came here, I realized the kind of life I have is dual-faced, meaning part of, half of me is trying to survive here and then integrate into the mainstream. The other half, I still look back at Vietnam. But for me, politically I am very clear. I've never been back to Vietnam, even though I would love to go back to visit my birthplace and Hanoi. I left when I was six years old. I still remember Vinh Ha Long very vividly in my mind. That's why when I left with my parents and I saw Vinh Ha Long at that time, that's the most beautiful place I had ever seen in my life and I've seen many other places in the world—New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore. So, it's not because I'm Vietnamese I am saying that part of my native country is beautiful. But I think I have an unbiased comparison.

For me, the problem between me and Hanoi's still there, still valid. That's one of the reasons I haven't been back even though I'd love to be

> back. Hopefully, I could do that before I die. That's my dream, if you will, my resolution, whatever you want to call it.

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For these four individuals whose lives in pre-1975 Vietnam, migrations from Vietnam, and experiences in the US were all different, social science literature often groups them into the category of the South's urban elite.[138] Yet, even among the educated urban elite, their approach to anticommunism and the Vietnamese American community in the US are shaped by a range of experiences. Out of the four, Bùi N. Thanh was the only veteran of South Vietnam's armed forces. The other two male subjects, Lý Đức Mạnh and Ngô Châu, were civilian employees of government-related industries and affiliated with Americans through their high levels of education and executive-level occupations in Vietnam. My only female subject featured, Lam Thị Phương, had relatives in the military.

I highlight these four narratives in order to show a variety of ways refugee subjectivities are constituted at multiple sites, including the 1954 uprooting of North Vietnamese Catholics into the South, subsequent journeys out of Vietnam in 1975 via different first asylum camps in Southeast Asia where they were yet unable to absorb the shock of leaving their homeland, or the government initiatives such as the Humanitarian Operation program that sanctioned the migration of re-education camp survivors. In each instance, the notion of being a refugee is structured not *only* by the state, but also by the emotional attachment to their ancestral homes (e.g. Lâm Thị Phương and Ngô Châu) or a

[138] See Kelly 1977, Montero 1979, Portes and Rumbaut 1996, Rumbaut and Portes 2001, Takaki 1995, and Vo 2000b,

commitment to improving the homeland, and a strained desire to return. For my participants, the strained relationship Vietnamese refugees have to their homeland is enunciated best through their compassion for the suffering of their countrymen who remain. Thus, the economic underdevelopment, political corruption of the government, and the increasingly apparent contradictions between socialist ideals and capitalist practices in their homeland help strengthen their moral high-ground as refugees fleeing an oppressive regime. Thus, the injustices some feel they have suffered in the past are coupled with a "pro-Vietnam"/pro-democracy cause in the present. Therefore, when they express a desire to return, or a story about an actual return visit, my participants will usually insert a critique of the Hanoi regime. For many Vietnamese refugees, then, the problem with Hanoi is still relevant.

Tình Cảm/Sentiment

One of the ways anticommunism has functioned within the space of the Vietnamese Federation meetings is as a portal, an entrée, into a collective remembering of South Vietnamese lives, places, and intangible sentiments tied to them. For example, in the summer of 2005, then Prime Minister of Vietnam, Phan Văn Khải came to the US for a meeting with President George W. Bush amidst protest from many groups in various Vietnamese American communities. This was a hot topic at our weekly meetings during the mealtime ritual. At one of those meetings a Viet Fed member turned towards another and commented that he thought is was a shame that someone born in the South and possessing so much potential should fall into the Communist Party so willingly. The other member responded that Phan Văn Khải is Russian-educated, as though that should

explain his socialist tendencies. Everyone else seemed to quietly agree. The conversation then turned into a swapping of stories about personal experiences with post-1975 Vietnam government reforms such as Đổi Mới [Renovation policy] and vùng kinh tế mới [New Economic Zones] which several members used to demonstrate how the political system, education, and economy became bankrupt after the communist takeover.[139] From narratives about friends who lost family fortunes and land to more personal tales of struggling to escape Vietnam, the conference room was awash in recollections about a time and place that still haunts the elders' lives. One member, a woman in her fifties, shared a story about her intent to use rat poison on herself and her younger siblings during the hours when news of North Vietnam's forces entering Saigon came to her family. "I would have rather died and taken all of them with me than let the communists seize everything. I heard about what they were doing to southerners they called 'traitors.'"[140] Others present at the meeting nodded in mutual sympathy and understanding. Not everyone at the meeting actually experienced life under Vietnamese communism having left the country promptly after the "Fall of Saigon" in 1975, but all could relate through their connections to loved ones and friends who had. I was the only one in the room who had no direct recollections of South Vietnam, and I knew instinctively that these memories were called upon partly for my benefit. Except for my new husband, I was the only second generation Vietnamese American there and some of the "uncles" nodded in my direction when telling about their stories of suffering. I felt the

[139] Đổi Mới is the set of new economic reforms instituted by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1986 in which they abandoned the older policies of collectivizing agriculture and industry in favor of permitting free-market enterprises into Vietnam. Vùng kinh tế mới were previously undeveloped areas in Vietnam where the new Socialist government sent former Republic of Vietnam leaders to work after 1975.
[140] Field notes. 21 July 2005. Comments are translated from Vietnamese by author.

burden of being privy to such stories, as an ethnographer who must then translate their meanings to an academic audience and as a "youth" who must then integrate this knowledge into my future work with the community. Even while the food made the post-meeting chats pleasurable for me, I sometimes felt pained by these expectations, worried that I would ultimately fail in both capacities. Why I keep coming back, then, must have something to do with the lure of food.

Food was an important, though never acknowledged as such, aspect of the weekly meetings. Immediately after the formal business discussions, members who remained share an informal meal prepared by the president's wife.[141] She also catered for many Viet Fed events, particularly the inauguration ceremony and the Tết feast. Despite the relative invisibility and marginality of women in leadership positions in the Viet Fed, their behind-the-scenes work has been crucial for sustaining the organization through the years. During my two terms on the BoD I noted that women's labor was nowhere more apparent than in the actual sustenance prepared by the president's wife. According to Angie Yoonkyung Chung in her study of Koreatown organizations, "Cooking has become one critical way in which 1st generation and 1.5 generation women have made their mark on organization-building processes, particularly in an ethnic culture where food is central to bringing together members for social, political, religious, and cultural occasions."[142] Interestingly, in her assessment of 1.5 and 2nd generation organizations, Chung contrasts the "Korean-style gatherings" of one organization that included many first generation members with a 2nd generation organization that was more

[141] The president of the Viet Fed and his wife once owned a Vietnamese restaurant in San Diego and her culinary skills are well-known and appreciated in the Vietnamese American community here.
[142] Chung 2001: 316.

"Americanized" and businesslike. In this younger organization, members did not rely on the social space called into being by sharing food since everyone brought their own sack lunches. Chung's observations correlates with my assessment of the "Vietnamese way" of conducting meetings that elders upheld, which was made obsolete once the BoD turned over to 1.5 generation leadership after my last term. I attended several meetings with the new board since the 2006 turnover and noticed the "unnecessary" mealtime was no longer a part of meeting rituals.[143] During several conversations with the new president, a man in his mid-thirties, he explained to me that his goal for higher efficiency and a more business-like environment. I mourned the disappearance of the "Vietnamese way" of doing community work on numerous occasions when my husband, my sister and I would talk about the changing face of the Viet Fed.

For first generation members I worked with, the mealtime ritual seemed to open up a pleasant social site for affective structures of community work to emerge. If, following Raymond Williams' multivalent interpretation of culture, we take culture to mean both a process of whole ways of life *and* the inner process of intellectual life, it is plausible to discuss anticommunism as a structure of feeling defining a distinct Vietnamese diasporic culture. From the silent haunting of refugee memories in the home to the public scripting of those memories at community events, the sense of community and identity are very much structured by affect and certainly traverses everyday life as well as the intellectual and artistic life of Vietnamese Americans. This structure of feeling is spontaneous, unrehearsed, and most apparent to me during the mealtime ritual at the

[143] The term "unnecessary" was used by the new Viet Fed president (2006-2008) to describe the old e-board's practice of eating in the conference room.

Viet Fed meetings. During this hour, members were much more at ease and brought up all kinds of stories. That is, members shared with each other stories about their families, gossip about others in the community, jokes, and advice/ideas on a range of topics from health to hobbies. At mealtime, the atmosphere of the conference room (equipped with a microwave oven and disposable dinnerware) was relaxed and congenial. While I initially dreaded the long meetings in the beginning of my field work, I quickly came to enjoy the meetings precisely because of the mealtime when both my appetite and my curiosity about these men and women as real, relatable people (not community leaders) would be filled.

In an ethnographic study of everyday life in a middle-class Indian American community, Keya Ganguly discusses the meaningful role of food and the practice of food consumption. She contrasts immigrant Indian and western "practices of social nicety" or being polite—that is, the Indian practice is to accept and offer food and hospitality while the western practice is "to listen to one's interlocutor, not to talk all at once, to maintain established boundaries of space between persons, and so on."[144] Ganguly explains that the sensory relationship differs remarkably because western culture privileges the individual (specifically, the individual's sense of seeing, hearing, and speaking) while Indian immigrant life privileges the collective as demonstrated through cooking and eating at weekend feasts.

> Culinary activity functions as a sort of 'technique of nearness,' gathering up into present space the magic of the past and permitting the imagination of ideas, objects, and events that are no longer available or repeatable

[144] Ganguly 2001: 135-6.

> except in a relay through food matters. Eating well and in the company of others, then, is about not paradise lost but paradise regained.[145]

Following Bordieu and de Certeau's work on everyday life and the place of food in French culture, Ganguly offers a reading of the collective eating ritual of Indian immigrants as a way to reflect on their anxieties with negotiating American bourgeois life.

I find this work useful for understanding how such a seemingly mundane act as eating served an important function at the Viet Fed weekly meetings. More than just a practical task for meeting-goers after a long day at work followed by a long meeting, the mealtime ritual provided a social space that bridged the awkwardness of meeting as organization associates to gathering as friends (and family). The Vietnamese food itself evoked feelings associated with South Vietnamese home-cooking and comfort food. The president's wife usually prepared several of her specialties that varied each week such as cháo gà [rice porridge] and gổi [salad], bánh canh [noodle soup], and cà ri [curry].

In this space the gender roles were made most apparent as men wait to be served by the two female members regularly in attendance. Even while the president brought the food—obviously a sign of hospitality he took upon himself as the "man of the house," so to speak—he started off the mealtime with serving himself and inviting others to partake of the food. Following his cue, the two women (one an elder in her late seventies and the other a woman in her fifties) usually got up and served the food to the men sitting around the conference table. I usually helped them, feeling like an unnecessary fixture in the corner most of the time anyway. I often felt at a lost as to how to conduct myself in these

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[145] Ibid.

circumstances. While I am obviously younger than the other members, I also held the position of vice president for the last term which prompted more respectful treatment than some other elders received. I was expected to perform various brokering roles with youth and the American mainstream, and the elders often made exceptions for my not fully understanding etiquette or formalities.

One of the women who regularly attended meetings explained to me how she views her role in the Viet Fed, "Cô không quan tâm đến vấn đề chính trị. Những việc chính trị rất phức tạp. Cô để cho mấy ông lo việc đó…Việc cô làm là những việc xã hội và văn hóa. [I am not interested in political issues. Politics is very complicated. I'll leave that to the men…My work focuses on social and cultural issues.] [146] This explanation was given to me after I asked for her views on Vietnamese American community politics, particularly why anticommunism continues to be a driving force behind the events I have witnessed. Despite having just energetically condemned the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and sharing with me her suspicions of communist infiltrators in the community during the course of our three hour interview, she backed away from my direct question concerning politics, retreating to the safety of her "social and cultural" work. I initially thought it odd that she would choose to characterize her work as only social and cultural when a large part of her concerns for the Vietnamese American community revolved around the deeply politicized issues of "communist infiltration" and the "loss" of subsequent generations of Vietnamese Americans to socialist, leftist politics. Her full-time job is in the area of healthcare, so she serves the

[146] Lâm 2004.

Viet Fed as the health representative. During our interview, we spent a great deal of time chit-chatting about the flag resolution, what is at stake in recognizing only the South Vietnam flag as the symbol of Vietnamese Americans, as well as various protests and demonstrations going on in different Vietnamese American communities across the US. I thought our conversation focused heavily on politics—whether we choose to label it as politics of exile, the homeland, or the community.

Cô Phương's answers actually reflects the contradictions of Vietnamese American community and subjectivity that cannot be easily folded into narratives about "culture" or "politics" alone, but must necessarily encompass and interrogate both simultaneously. The difficulty which Cô Phương has with the notion of "politics"—as an isolated practice for the men in her community—suggests that we need to redefine "politics" to encompass the cultural and social practices that create meaning for Vietnamese Americans. So too, "culture" needs to account for the historical and political trajectories that define the limits of a Vietnamese American diaspora. Furthermore, re-conceptualizing politics and culture in this way also gives due importance to women's work, particularly first generation immigrant women who tend to carry out the invisible labor that helps sustain their male counterparts in their public roles as community leaders.

Beyond victimization (which is a community discourse that demands retribution as well as reparation) and agency (which is too simplistic a formulation that considers Vietnamese Americans as heroic in their struggle to contest national erasure of their history), I wish to approach anticommunism as a continually shifting discursive terrain that enables as much as it delimits first (and even subsequent) generation Vietnamese Americans in their efforts to forge meaningful relationships in diaspora. In the meeting

space, I argue that anticommunism has many different functions, including as a way to recollect stories of a shared (imagined) past in South Vietnam, as a means to silence dissent, as a means of mobilizing and energizing those doing volunteer work, and as a means of making sense of their struggles as refugees in the US. In the following chapter I examine the work of mourning and remembrance in for Vietnamese Americans during the annual "Black April" commemoration to illuminate how anticommunism functions as a "technology of memory."

CHAPTER TWO

Commemoration and Mourning: The Cultural Politics of "Black April"

> Nếu chúng ta khong tượng niệm Ngày 30 Tháng Tư…để ghi nhớ ngày ta mất nước…để nhớ những người [Việt] đã hy sinh cho tự do dân chủ, thì ta khong có gì cã. 30 Tháng Tư là ngày lịch sữ…rất quan trọng cho người Việt tị nạn.
> [If we do not commemorate April 30…to inscribe into memory the day we lost our country…to remember the (Vietnamese) people who sacrificed for freedom and democracy, then we have nothing at all. April 30 is a historical day…very important for the Vietnamese refugee community.][147]

> Public commemoration is a form of history-making, yet, it can also be a contested form of remembrance in which cultural memories slide through and into each other, merging and then disengaging in a narrative tangle.[148]

In this chapter, I focus on commemoration as a generative site for exploring the cultural politics of anticommunism as articulated, contested, and negotiated across the generations for Vietnamese Americans. I examine the cultural meanings of anticommunism in war memory and public commemoration for the Vietnamese American community. Echoing the sentiments of a majority of my first generation participants, Trần Bảo suggests in the first epigraph that commemoration plays a vital role in Vietnamese refugee communities. This chapter explores the public commemoration of the Vietnam/American War by Vietnamese Americans, focusing on how anticommunism functions as part of such practices. My analysis of Vietnamese American commemoration dialogues with current scholarship that explores how memory-practices may complicate our thinking about history.[149] As Marita Sturken

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[147] Trần Bảo 2006.
[148] Sturken 2002: 357.
[149] Scholarship on memory, commemoration, and memorialization in the West has been dominated by studies of the Holocaust and survivors. See, for example, Halbwachs 1992, Hartman 1994, Hirsch 1997, LaCapra 1998, Young 1993.

insists in the second epigraph, commemoration can be understood not only as a mode of writing history, but as a narrative entanglement that exposes the contested nature of such meaning-making practices. The end of the twentieth century has seen a proliferation of scholarly interest in public commemoration practices as collective engagements with history in the present.[150] In part, the passage of the two World Wars from survivor memory into cultural memory has spurned new interest in examining how the traumas of the past emerge in public arenas. War commemoration, in particular, has relied on "raising the dead," notably as an instrument in the development and bolstering of nationalism.[151] Commemoration, I argue, is a particularly compelling form of remembrance as it relies upon the embodiment and materiality of memory, an active performance and invocation of the past. If, as Paul Connerton suggests, commemorations belong to the "theatre of memory" that reinforces national and social identities, what particular identities are reinforced by the public staging of South Vietnamese memories?[152] What are the ethical dilemmas of mourning and remembering South Vietnamese pasts through public commemoration?[153]

For Vietnamese Americans, commemoration raises the dead not only for nationalist endeavors but also to mourn for that which is not there in historical discourse. Thus, the community's commemoration narrative must be seen as entangled with, simultaneously shaped by and shaping, dominant narratives about Vietnam and its refugees. During "Black April," the day slotted to commemorate the "fall of Saigon"

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[150] For expanded discussions of commemoration as a field of scholarly inquiry, see Ashplant et al 2000, Gillis 1994, Yoneyama 1999, and Young 1993.
[151] Grant 2005: 509.
[152] Connerton 1989.
[153] I take up with Nguyen-vo Thu-Huong (2005) and Viet Thanh Nguyen's (2006) queries into the ethics of mourning and representation in Vietnamese American communities.

(April 30, 1975) Vietnamese Americans enact a public ritual of remembering South Vietnam, the fallen soldiers of the war, and the refugees of that war—subjects largely erased in both Vietnam and US national narratives. By closely analyzing the thirtieth Black April commemoration event in San Diego (2005), I explore how first and second generation, the elders and youth, perform memories and enact visions of Vietnam and diaspora through and against historical erasure and co-optation. In order to show how Vietnamese refugee discourse can become co-opted in the service of an American developmental narrative, I provide an example of how the mainstream news media absorbs Black April into a version of the rags-to-riches immigrant success story. Then, I examine how memory can be both burden/responsibility as well as power/authority by examining the controversy among elder and youth community leaders, based on my observation and participation in planning meetings leading up to the thirtieth anniversary Black April commemoration (2005) in San Diego. To complicate this representation, I address how Black April becomes a space for imagining a "moral community" contingent on an updated human rights discourse by analyzing first and second generation skits featured at the event. [154]

A Day of "Disparate Remembrance": Tô Vân Trí's Story

Every year as the end of April draws near, I notice the yellow and red-striped South Vietnam flag displayed in shop windows and on main thoroughfares wherever there is a strong Vietnamese American community. In San Diego, if you drive along El Cajon Boulevard (an area known as Mid-City) and Linda Vista Boulevard (Linda Vista)

[154] I borrow this term from Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick's *City on the Edge* (1993) where they describe Cuban Miami as a "moral community" that has hinged on a shared experience of exile and a common political purpose of opposing Castro's Cuba.

in April, you will see the flag displayed as a part of the commemorative efforts for Black April. Commemoration events are held in diverse locations, from university campuses to churches and temples to the community library parking lot. As disparate as the spaces may be for commemorating the "fall of Saigon," the periodization of public commemoration remains markedly uniform across differences of region, religious affiliation, generation, gender and class for Vietnamese Americans. In other words, April 30, 1975 remains the *official* day marking the end of the Vietnam/American War and the beginning of refugee dispersal, each year further reified in popular imagination by Vietnamese American commemorations. Vietnamese refugees attest to the importance of April 30 for structuring collective memory and identity. This date has certainly been formally recognized as such in official chronologies in the US as well.

I would like to suggest that if commemoration often participates in the writing of history in service of the nation, as others before have argued, demarcating April 30, 1975 as signifier (a "historical day," as Trần Bảo suggests) for the beginning of Vietnamese refugee history poses a major narrative dilemma. Hinging our history on April 30, 1975 as the original moment of "the fall" and from whence mourning and remembrance ensues works in the service of a dominant history engendered through the masculinist site of military maneuvers, as much as our efforts at commemoration also attempt to challenge the historical erasure of South Vietnam. What are the dangers of insisting, as we have done so adamantly through our cultural productions[155] and commemorations, on April 30, 1975 as the decisive marker for our understanding of history and passing of knowledge

[155] For example, *Journey from the Fall* (2005) is a film about a refugee family's escape from Vietnam and their struggle to rebuild their lives thereafter.

on to later generations this way? What does such a rigid periodization foreclose? First, others have argued that the temporal location of the "beginning" of Vietnamese American history in 1975 overlooks an important contingent of Vietnamese who came to US prior.[156] Secondly, framing Vietnamese American history this way places North Vietnamese as the sole perpetrators of South Vietnamese suffering and loss. The US is made less culpable in such a narrative, because despite their abandonment of South Vietnam, they did not "invade" and "conquer" the South in 1975 as the North Vietnamese did.[157] Finally, anchoring Vietnamese American history with April 30, 1975 reinforces a patriarchal nationalism that privileges military moments, thus the "fall of Saigon" becomes the backdrop in a memory theatre that props up the fallen soldier as sacrificial icon and hero to be mourned for, to be respected. I argue that even while Black April may open up a public space for Vietnamese Americans to narrate their version of the Vietnam/American War and South Vietnamese pasts, this space has always already been circumscribed by a view of Vietnamese American history as sharply divided between an idyllic pre-1975 South Vietnam and a post-1975 resurrection of South Vietnam in diaspora. Can we move beyond such rigid markers of Vietnamese American history that forecloses multiple and nuanced visions of the past? I offer a story below that interrogates the very premise of a commemoration day on April 30, 1975.

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[156] See Pham, V. 2003.

[157] Rather, they invaded Vietnam much earlier when the French were defeated in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu, or even prior to France's retreat from Vietnam when the US sent military "advisors." In thinking about how Vietnamese American commemorations leave out a critique of the US, I wonder what if we were to commemorate the My Lai massacre (the murder of more than 500 South Vietnamese civilians by American soldiers in 1968) publicly each year in March? Or, if we were to combine commemorations of war crimes specific to Vietnamese with other US colonial subjects? What might such cross-referential practices yield?

Tô Vân Trí, a participant in the study who I became good friends with during my fieldwork, is from the central region of Vietnam. He speaks with a thick Huế accent that I found difficult to understand at the beginning of our acquaintance. During one of our interviews, I asked him to share with me his memories of the final days before Saigon fell. I asked him to tell me why April 30, 1975 is such an important day in Vietnamese refugee history. He had an abundance of vivid memories and spoke earnestly and openly to me, but he described the last days of March, which for him were much more memorable and worth noting. Although April 30 is relevant because we recognize this as the official day when the North Vietnamese communists declared victory over a toppled RVN regime, he explained, the central region where he lived saw the chaos of defeat earlier in March. As a Marines petty officer stationed in Đà Nẵng, March 29, 1975 epitomized disorder and defeat for Chú Trí who witnessed and endured a great deal in the span of those last hours. He kept repeating March 29 in his story—a story told with a look of disbelief, out of order, sometimes with a smile to conceal the horrors. I summarize what he told me about March 29 briefly as follows:

During the final hours before the approaching communist soldiers arrived to overtake Đà Nẵng, everyone was trying to escape. Because he received intelligence from an airport official the day before, he was able to get his family and extended family of fourteen aboard the last departing C130 aircraft out of the Đà Nẵng military airbase. He recalled the way they boarded: as the aircraft continued moving along the tarmac, rapidly picking up speed, his family members jumped on and were pulled up by officers on the plane. He made sure every last person in his family got on board before he jumped off to

resume his duties. He would not be a deserter. Staying behind, what he witnessed thereafter was total chaos and disorder—the masses of people trying to leave the central region by any means, the looting, the trampling of bodies at the Mỹ Khe beach where people sought a sea route down to the south. He kept repeating the words "kinh hoàng" [horrible] and "kinh khủng" [horrific] to describe what he witnessed. On March 29th he confirmed with his superiors that they were defeated and gathered his men, giving them two options: they could leave on their own and would not be considered deserters, or they could remain with him as he sought a way south to join their fellow ARVN soldiers. Several of his loyal men remained with him and, at one point, he and his men directly confronted the enemy. He recalled only one thing about the Việt Cộng soldier who stabbed him in the torso: one of his arms was covered in watches. Were they the product of lootings or were they trophies of those he killed? With the help of one of his men, he managed to escape his assailant with a heavy wound and headed toward the beach that he described was covered completely with people—and dead bodies. One example of the many "cảnh đau khổ" [agonizing scene] he saw was a pregnant woman about to go into labor who could not get any help. Without any medical skills himself, he directed her to the Mỹ Khe temple, but wondered still whether she made out alright. He called it a miracle that he made it onto a Navy ship when so many people drowned trying to get on board. This was the way he lost his home. Not on April 30, but on March 29 when he made his way out of Đà Nẵng.[158] This story points to another dimension of the

[158] Tô Vân Trí's story continues, of course, as he reunited with his family in Saigon and endured years of imprisonment after the round-up of South Vietnam officers by the communists. After 6 years, they released him to work in "vùng kinh tế mới [New Economic Zones]" and he had resigned himself to life as a laborer,

iconographic status of April 30 in collective refugee memory. Although April 30 remains a significant day to *collectively* commemorate South Vietnam, individuals live with various personal memories of the "end" of their Vietnam, an "ending" that actually led to a whole new world of struggle.

The South fell for Chú Trí not on April 30th but in the final days of March. The iconographic image of the last US helicopter hovering over the US embassy in Saigon is offset by his own iconographic images: the display of watches on the Việt Cộng soldier's arm, the Mỹ Khe beach covered with dead bodies trampled by frightened evacuees. There were no Americans there, no photographers, nothing to confirm his recall of the collapse of his home. If his is just one among thousands, perhaps millions, of possible fragmented memories that may serve as counterpoints to the dominant narrative of South Vietnam's final days, why do we continue to stake a claim on April 30, 1975? The purpose of a commemoration day for Vietnamese diasporic communities has been to unify diverse and dispersed people under a common identity, tied to the memory of a nation. But what stories are forgotten so that this prevailing image of South Vietnam may be staged?

If, according to Benedict Anderson, newspapers and novels previously served as mechanisms of nationalism, so too do days of commemoration. By examining the performative aspects of the Day of Holocaust and Heroism in Israel, or Yom Hashoah,

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he told me. But what he could not accept was that his children's life chances would be limited because of his past. Not only his children, but the next two generations, he explained. Thus, the trauma did not end with his release. He made many futile attempts at escape and endured captures and attendant beatings, his family kept moving, changing their identity. Thus, the memories of trauma are abundant. As I listened to him, I grew increasingly uncomfortable at the strange calm and peacefulness in his demeanor. He sometimes smiled while telling me about terrible things.

James E. Young suggests that the nation depends upon rituals of commemoration to unite a very diverse polity. Yet what are the nuanced implications of commemoration for those whose nation is no longer there? Young posits that we differentiate between "unified forms of commemoration and the unification of memory itself, between unified meanings and unified responses to memory. For despite unified forms of commemoration, memory in these shared moments is not necessarily shared, but in fact varies distinctly from person to person. This is not a day of shared memory, but rather a shared time of disparate remembrance." [159] Following his work on memorials and commemoration practices as nuanced by the multiple perspectives that are suppressed on that chosen day, I also view Black April "not as a day of national memory so much as a nationalization of many competing memories."[160] Liberation Day in Vietnam may very well serve the purpose of nationalizing competing memories. However, for Vietnamese refugees sundered from the nation, I emphasize the ways in which their embodied memories contend with official history and how, even among Vietnamese Americans, competing memories vie for a place in community discourse.

Vietnamese American community events such as Black April allow for Vietnamese refugees to stage a public history of South Vietnam and mourn for the war and refugee dead, while simultaneously making their presence in the US matter through the pro-America/pro-democracy discourse of international human rights. Focusing an ethnographic lens on the day of commemoration for Vietnamese refugees from the standpoint of a participant/organizer and observer allows me to ask questions about the

[159] Young 1993: 280.
[160] Ibid.

process of working through differences in order to present a particular refugee narrative on Black April. Because the war and refugee dead for which Vietnamese Americans mourn at Black April are part of a nation no longer there, the commemoration practices of Vietnamese refugee communities confound and complicate the ways in which war commemoration has been appropriated for nation-building.

Rescuing Refugees for the US Nation: The Media Spin on Black April

Different from the year prior or the year after, the Black April event in 2005 actually garnered much more mainstream media attention because it was the 30th anniversary observance. A young, female African American news reporter from NBC News arrived with their news van around 4:00 p.m. while organizers and volunteers were still setting up. The reporter, who appeared to be in my twenty-something age-group, thought she was among Korean immigrants reporting on a Korean War commemoration. I was asked by some elders to speak with this reporter and provide her with some historical context for understanding this event, but she did not even bother to feign interest. I recall being irritated with her continued pronunciation of Vietnamese as "Viet-*man*-ese." The NBC news-van did not stay until the opening ceremony, abandoning our story for some dog show going on elsewhere in San Diego. Fox 6 News also sent a news van complete with a Vietnamese American reporter, Andrea Nguyen, who had just relocated from Houston, Texas. She spent several hours taping the event and interviewing attendees and I worked with her on translating one of the interviews. My English translation was layered over the interviewee's Vietnamese response in the final clip that appeared on the 10:00 o'clock news that night.

The brief 3-minute news segment juxtaposes grainy black and white documentary images of the war with the commemoration in Linda Vista, historicizing the event for a public that has most likely forgotten Vietnam. Fox 6 Evening News anchors, a white male and female, Jim Patton and Jennifer Brandt, introduce the commemoration as a newsworthy item: "It was 30 years ago today that America ended its involvement in Vietnam. Vietnamese immigrants and war veterans are marking the day all over the country, including right here in San Diego." The field reporter, Andrea Nguyen, situates the Black April event within an American context, stating that thirty years ago Americans felt "huge relief" for the end of a long, protracted engagement in Southeast Asia. So, while Vietnamese Americans mourn on April 30, 1975, she suggests that Americans might feel quite differently. On-scene interviews are spliced in with two prior interviews. The first pre-taped interview with a US veteran, Paul Fusco, conveys the good intentions of Americans in Vietnam. Fusco expresses regret over the US abandonment of South Vietnam: "Our feelings… were feelings of emptiness and abandonment. We had abandoned this country and that's why it's falling." Immediately after this veteran's statement, Nguyen explains the Vietnamese American attitude towards Americans as only good will. In fact, she claims that "the only resentment they hold is against the communist regime. They say the purpose of this day is to raise awareness of the human rights violations which are still going on in Vietnam." This is followed by a pre-recorded interview with a Vietnamese American doctor who urges us to let go of the past. From the commemoration site, a number of Vietnamese American voices are featured, both first and second generation, expressing sadness over the loss of their homeland, resentment towards Việt Cộng, and the need to come together as a strong, united

community. For the wrap-up, Jim Patton brings up Andrea Nguyen's personal proximity to the story, prompting her to reveal herself as privy to "insider" knowledge and emotionally connected to this story. As I watched this exchange, I wonder how many reporters are asked to shed their "objective" mantle and assume a vulnerable position while reporting on a story. In response to Jim Patton's inquiry, Nguyen tells her story in lightening-quick speed by reciting her family history—the version most readily falling from the lips of many other Vietnamese refugees: My mom was in Saigon when it fell, my dad, a South Vietnamese soldier, was imprisoned for six years, but now we are here in the US and we are grateful for freedom, for a better life. This is the quintessential Vietnamese refugee story, made ever more convincing coming from the mouth of a refugee herself.

Mimi Nguyen suggests that complex figurations of the refugee subject have indeed incorporated the performances of the rescued, liberated, and grateful Vietnamese refugee. Tracing the discursive genealogy of the refugee subject, Nguyen proposes that this figure should be located within historically contextualized intersections of race, nation, gender, and class formations. Attentive to how the Vietnamese refugee, as a relatively recent American ethnic, has become "emplotted" as the new figure of model minority success, I follow Allen Feldman's argument in analyzing Andrea Nguyen's brief "biography,"

> When a biographical narrative is processed through prescriptive expectations—that is, expected to produce healing, trauma alleviation, justice, and collective catharsis—it is emplotted. Emplotment is advanced quite frequently from outside, even if this is an exteriority or expectation

> that is internalized by the author so that biography can be transmuted into moral currency.[161]

The moral currency, in this instance, stems particularly from the family's proximity to the war and the reeducation camps, and internalized by Andrea Nguyen and then re-presented as a means to resolve the Vietnam/American War and explain the Black April event for the audience. For this particular Fox 6 narrative, Andrea Nguyen's biography falls neatly into the "scenario" of rescue and liberation that bolsters American imperialist ventures abroad. In fact, it can be linked to the ideology of Manifest Destiny, where the US is furthering a pre-ordained mission of freeing savage others from their primitive ways. Following Diana Taylor's conceptualization of the potential of scenarios to make "visible, yet again, what is already there; the ghosts, the images, the stereotypes," I read Andrea Nguyen's refugee biography as the embodied performance of a scenario of rescue and liberation (in comparison to Taylor's example of the scenarios of discovery).[162] She embodies the rescued and liberated (and grateful) refugee subject par excellence. Her story also serves as a means for the audience to visualize what immigrant success looks and sounds like, through the perfect English and well-groomed appearance of their very own field reporter.

While Andrea Nguyen's story can be read as a challenge to the "objective" premises of the news, what it fundamentally did was showcase yet another immigrant success story, another tale of why America is great because it has opened the door to the world's poor and downtrodden. As Espiritu persuasively argues, the United States' "we-

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[161] Feldman 2004: 170.
[162] Taylor 2003: 28.

win-even-when-we-lose syndrome" gets reified through casting Vietnamese as perpetual victims next to their heroic American rescuers.[163] In this rescue and liberation scenario, Vietnamese refugees' sense of indebtedness to the US is coupled with a strong anticommunist opposition to the Hanoi regime. Thus, their anticommunist activism legitimates them as deserving refugees, and ironically, as a model minority. Yet Vietnamese American indebtedness and their anticommunist/human rights activism are presented on Fox 6 News only as a means to convey America's resolution of its Vietnam problem. Veteran Paul Fusco embodies US goodwill and he is forgiven by the Vietnamese American community, thereby absolving American guilt over abandoning their Vietnamese allies. Rather, the blame is re-routed towards the Việt Cộng.

One of the most productive aspects of the Fox 6 coverage is in emphasizing how Black April, in fact, has multiple audiences. More than a site of struggle over history and memory between Vietnamese Americans elders and youth alone, this site also reveals a moment of rupture in the construction of US national history. The Fox 6 narrative attempts to absorb Black April into its schema of History in service of the nation-state. Black April may seem, at first glance, like an insular Vietnamese refugee community event, but its emergence as a fleeting spectacle in the evening news points to the ways this refugee discourse may provoke difficult and necessary questions regarding the ethical role of the community and the nation-state in commemorating Vietnam's forgotten.

The Burden of Refugee Remembrance

[163] Espiritu 2006b.

On April 25, 2007, I attended a dinner meeting to plan for the annual Vietnamese community health fair, held each year in June at the Vietnamese Federation of San Diego community center.[164] Differing from years past where the planning committee was primarily comprised of first generation healthcare professionals (besides me, of course), this year's committee included new young faces—medical and pharmacy students from the University of California, San Diego. I was pleased to see other young faces at the dinner table alongside the first generation doctors, pharmacists, and community leaders I was accustomed to working with in the past.[165] As we went around the table for introductions, the former Viet Fed president, an energetic 71-year old man who I call Bác Mạnh, apologized that his predecessor (a 1.5 generation man) could not attend since he had to be at another committee meeting to plan the annual Black April event coming up in a week. At the mention of Black April, one of the female UCSD students who did not speak Vietnamese asked, "What's Black April?" A male student turned to her and quickly explained that it's the "fall of Saigon" when "we lost our country and had to come here." After this explanation, another male student turned to the elders at the table and commented, "I notice that the Black April events are becoming less and less important. I guess the community doesn't care as much anymore. Maybe the next generation, there won't even be Black April. They'll forget." To this comment, Bác

[164] The meeting was held at Jasmine Restaurant (in the Asian business district of Kearny Mesa, San Diego). I have been a part of the organizing committee for this event since 2003. The health fair is a collaboration between the Vietnamese Federation and Asian Pacific Health Center (APHC), a clinic run by a Vietnamese pharmacist and doctor. They run the medical end of the event and we (Viet Fed organizers) run the administrative end.

[165] Present at the meeting were 2 general practice doctors, 1 pharmacist, 1 psychologist, the former president of the Viet Fed, myself (as former Vice President of the Viet Fed), my sister (a current Viet Fed member), and 4 medical and pharmacy students from UCSD. The ratio was 5 first generation to 6 second generation Vietnamese Americans, which is very different from how these meetings were constituted in the past. I was usually the sole young face (unless my husband joined me).

Mạnh replied, "Well, I guess that is our responsibility to educate you guys so that you will not forget." He used the phrase "mấy Bác [us elders]" to denote himself and his peers. The other elders nodded in silent and respectful agreement and the themes of memory, pedagogy, responsibility and intergenerational relations were dropped in favor of lighter conversation topics.

This brief exchange exemplifies the many instances of unspoken presumptions about who rightfully bears the burden of memory for the Vietnamese diaspora. The second generation student suggests that a general apathy comes from "the community" in abstraction and that later generations ("they") will forget, exempting himself and his generation from the burden of remembering. Elders present at the meeting readily take on responsibility for safeguarding memories of the homeland. Bác Mạnh's wholehearted acceptance of first generation responsibility to educate youth about Vietnam reflects Espiritu and Thom Tran's analysis of how overseas Vietnamese elders derive some of their power and authority over their children through "their ability to claim to be guardians of 'authentic' cultural memory—that is, to claim to have had direct ties to Vietnam."[166] While my example is outside the immediate realm of family per se, intergenerational relations in community work have often been framed as a type of familial relationship. Furthermore, Vietnamese tradition dictates a general acceptance of the power and authority of elders over youth. The way Bác Mạnh discusses his generation's pedagogical responsibility toward Vietnamese American youth is in keeping with the beliefs and attitudes of my other first generation participants as well. Time and

[166] Espiritu and Tran 2002: 391.

again during our interviews and private conversations, elders espouse the desire to teach Vietnamese American youth about their homeland, their language, and their values in order to offset the enormous power and authority that mainstream circuits of education and representation have on Vietnam. According to one respondent, Trần Liêm,

> The second generation, they do not fully understand the culture and traditions of Vietnam. They don't even know much about the Vietnam War, that it was a war between north and south, not Vietnam against America. There is an abundance of 'tài liệu [documents]' that serve to influence them. For example, Vietnam War documents [in the US] tend to be slanted one way, it is always about what the Americans did in Vietnam or about how Vietnamese communists challenged the Americans' power. One area that is under-researched is the refugees' escape from Vietnam. This would show the South Vietnamese side of the story at least. The second generation needs to understand *why they are here*.[167]

What is at stake for elders is not only the loss of language and ethnic identity, as is the concern of other immigrant groups, but also the loss of a South Vietnam that has been erased from the map since 1975. Thus, commemoration takes on multiple meanings for Vietnamese Americans as they give shape and form to the losses they live with everyday. Mourning, here, is not about paying proper respect to the past as in the tradition of ancestor-worship in Vietnamese culture; in diaspora it becomes a contentious force-field of still un-reconciled feelings and beliefs, competing discourses on Vietnamese refugee identity.

Among Vietnamese American communities in the United States, April 30, 1975 is known as "Black April" and solemnly considered a day of mourning, marked each year

[167] Tran 2004. Italics mine.

by synchronized commemoration events across the country.[168] Yet in Vietnam the day is celebrated as "Ngày Giải Phóng [Liberation Day]" when the South was liberated from foreign (US) control and the divided country became re-united under the communist banner.[169] This drastic difference in the day's meaning for Vietnamese nationals and overseas communities signals the tension between homeland and diaspora that poses a challenge to what Basch, Glick Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton define as "deterritorialized nation-states."[170] Rather than functioning as extensions of the nation-state proper, Vietnamese refugee (or exile) communities remain vigilantly opposed to the Vietnam government even after the United States normalized diplomatic relations with Vietnam in 1995 and reached a Bilateral Trade Agreement in 2001.[171] However, virtually all my interview subjects carefully differentiate the Vietnamese people from the nation-state in order to explain that their loyalties still remain to their homeland regardless of their rejection of its governing body. For example, Võ Tân energetically condemned the Hanoi regime during our interview, but he reminded me that, "Chú không nghĩ là người Việt trong nước là kẻ thù. Họ chỉ là những người bị chính quyền đàn áp. Họ không có tội. [I don't think the Vietnamese nationals are my enemies. They are just those who are

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[168] "Black April" is also observed in other parts of the world where there is a sizable Vietnamese refugee community, such as in Sydney, Paris, and Toronto. Black April is also referred to by several other phrases: Ngày Quốc Hận [Day of National Resentment] or Ngày Mất Nước [Day of losing the nation]

[169] In Vietnam, April 30 is also called Ngày Chiến Thắng [Victory Day] or Ngày Thống Nhất [Reunification Day].

[170] See *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (1994). In a later study, Glick Schiller and Georges Fouron coins the concept of "long distance nationalism" to explain the ongoing emotional attachment that immigrants have to their homelands which compel continued political activism around homeland politics. I find this discussion much more productive for thinking about the formation of Vietnamese diasporic communities, rather than as "deterritorialized nation-states." See *Georges Woke Up Laughing: LongDistance Nationalism and the Search for Home* (2001).

[171] Manvin 2005.

oppressed by the government. They have not done anything wrong.]"[172] In effect, for the "free" Vietnamese American community, the logic of mourning and commemoration requires identifying a perpetrator and locating Vietnamese in the homeland as the current victims, "those who are oppressed by the government" or "defeated and maltreated by the victor" thus in need of salvation via the human rights activism of overseas Vietnamese.

Black April is a generative cultural site for engaging the public discourse of anticommunism, as opposed to the protests, demonstrations, and boycotts that have happened in the last thirty-three years in overseas Vietnamese communities, for two main reasons. First, the protests, demonstrations, and boycotts erupt in response to specific "communist" infringements on the refugee community and thus can be viewed as contingent on context and locale, whereas Black April is a recurring annual event that is staged consistently among refugee communities across the United States. Black April has by now become an important community ritual, helping to define the criteria for Vietnamese refugee identity and community. Secondly, Black April is a rich site for addressing questions about the multiple meanings and effects of anticommunism, as well as its affective economy, because the event itself has multiple objectives beyond "chống cộng [opposing communists]." Over the years, the event has become a reliable site for coming together and reconnecting with friends and comrades from the old country and the refugee camps, enjoying live music and entertainment, staking a political position as refugees of communism and, most importantly, commemorating the loss of South Vietnam and mourning for the war and refugee dead. I address how mourning and commemoration are bound up as the debt or burden that người tị nạn [refugees] must

[172] Võ Tân 2005.

bear because they are the fortunate ones who left, the ones who survived. As Ngô Châu explained to me, "So you know, I believe that those hundred and fifty thousand that got out of Vietnam at that time [1975] was the lucky one and we have a better life, a safer life at the expense of millions of South Vietnamese who suffer as the…the… defeated and maltreated by the victor…"[173]While I critique the linear periodization of "Black April" narratives, I also argue that the site enables remembrances and tributes to South Vietnamese and refugee pasts silenced in other public arenas. Thus, I emphasize the need to read differently the work of anticommunism at Black April.

Setting the Scene: Black April 2005 in Linda Vista

In 2005, the Vietnamese Federation along with the Vietnamese Student Associations (hereafter referred to as VSA) from the University of California, San Diego and San Diego State University organized an evening of performance and commemoration to mark the importance of April 30, 1975 as a signifier for death and loss, freedom and continued oppression, and ongoing struggles over claiming the past in Vietnamese refugee communities. During the planning of Black April, organizers met weekly over a two-month period to work out the details and plan for ancillary events such as art and essay contests and radio talk shows in order to educate the community about the meaning of Black April.[174] Because 2005 marked a significant thirtieth anniversary, Vietnamese American organizations across the US sought a larger national-scale

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[173] Ngô 2004.

[174] Separate campus programs occurred at UCSD and SDSU that were tailored to college student and faculty constituents, such as panel discussions and film screenings. I am more interested in how Black April is observed on a community-wide scale and how the different generations interact through the planning of and during the event, thus I focus my attention on the Viet Fed Black April rather than campus events.

commemorative effort that would bring geographically separated groups together, a Washington D.C. commemoration rally was organized and many San Diego Vietnamese Americans attended the national event rather than the local one. I chose to stay local rather than follow some of my twenty-something friends to D.C. for practical and ideological reasons, but kept informed about the happenings in D.C. through email, websites, conversations, and correspondences. As a planning committee member for the local event, I was able to go behind the scenes of the commemoration effort in San Diego, whereas in D.C. I would have been a small observer in a big arena. The most remarkable difference I noted was how the D.C. commemoration was apparently organized to address the national news media and speak to US mainstream politics more so than the local event. Despite this, the local news media did show up to San Diego's Black April. Only English-language banners were displayed by the Vietnamese Americans who assembled on the Washington Mall, thus addressing a younger and more mainstream audience. Asplant et al argue that in recent decades anniversary events and commemorations have become increasingly high profiled media events. In fact, they argue that in many instances "war commemoration is *transformed* into a media event" by event organizers and fueled by the public communications media's drive for upping the ante in cultural production.[175] For Vietnamese Americans, the ethnic and mainstream media serve as vehicles for widely disseminating representations of South Vietnam, bringing their stories to multiple audiences including the American public. However, in the local scene, the commemoration was distinctly bilingual in order to address the loyal attendees, the first generation refugees whose stories matter in this community space. The

[175] Ashplant et al 2000: 4. Emphasis mine.

commemoration occurred in Linda Vista, a neighborhood in San Diego highly diverse along racial, ethnic, and class lines where a great many of the Viet Fed events took place during my field work. The simultaneity of national and local commemorative efforts work together as a means of asserting refugee identity and affiliation within and with the US nation-state, as well as asserting political positions that goes beyond the US nation-state through a transnational human rights discourse.

On the day of the 2005 Black April commemoration, the seven-foot tall bright yellow Republic of Vietnam flag and matching yellow event banner provided an eye-catching backdrop for the outdoor stage, concealing the Linda Vista Library entryway. RVN and US flags and streams of miniature replica flags swayed in the cool late-April breeze. As the last signs of spring daylight faded into the horizon, the stereo speakers continued blasting pre-1975 nhạc chiến tranh [war music] and the crowd settled into their seats, some holding miniature paper flags in hand. Elder men in their crisp Army, Navy, Marine, and Paratrooper uniforms stand out among the crowd. Some of them served as flag or rifle bearers during the opening ceremony and others acted as unofficial security officers for the event.[176] A handful of organizers and guests congregated at the periphery of the cordoned-off parking lot, talking in pairs or groups. Small children stood close to their parents and teenagers hung out on the library lawn or near the community room doors right-stage waiting for their organizer friends inside. Singers swayed onstage, women in aó dài[177] and men in suits, to melancholy melodies with the occasional upbeat

[176] During community events, particularly Black April, Viet Fed volunteers serve as additional "security" on top of the formal security officers required by the city. The logic for having our own security is to look out for potential communist disturbers.
[177] Vietnamese traditional long dress, for both men and women.

performance to tango or "cha cha cha." One female singer sported flashy military fatigues saturated in rhinestones and platform army boots, styled for the occasion. Much later in the program, she transformed into a Vietnamese peasant in a purple aó bà ba[178] and black pants, carrying the conical nón lá[179] as prop.

At the event's peak, there were about 150 to 200 people in attendance, with many familiar faces from years past. The commemoration took place in a familiar community space, the Linda Vista Library parking lot bordering Viễn Đông Market, close to Holy Family Catholic parish and the Bayside Community Center, was once the center of the Vietnamese refugee community in San Diego. This site is located about half a mile away from the Viet Fed community center.[180] The event site itself was decorated simply with flags and banners—perhaps the reason those outside the Vietnamese American community mistook this event for another anticommunist protest. As I stood near the street-side observing the crowd and performances, a Latina driving through the parking lot hollered a question from her car, "Hey, what are you guys protesting?!" "No, this is not a protest," I replied. "It's a commemoration of the Vietnam-American War." My answer did not seem to make an impression on the driver and she gave an abrupt, "Oh!"

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[178] Vietnamese peasant shirt, with side splits and buttons up the front.
[179] Conical hat worn by Vietnamese peasants to shield them from the sun.
[180] The Viễn Đông Supermarket is a grocery store franchise owned by a Vietnamese American family. There are two locations, one in East San Diego (54th and University Avenue) and the other in Linda Vista. The Linda Vista Library has a relatively sizable collection of materials in Vietnamese to cater to the neighborhood's large concentration of Vietnamese Americans. It is also where many Vietnamese American children come during the after school hours to do homework and utilize resources. The Holy Family Catholic Parish has a separate Vietnamese American congregation and mass in Vietnamese. Vietnamese American youth from Holy Family have always been involved in Viet Fed programming, particularly during the annual Tet (New Year) Festival. Bayside Community Center in Linda Vista serves as a multicultural center offering social services, education, and cultural programming. I have been a guest speaker for a lecture series held there to foster cross-cultural understanding for the local groups. The Vietnamese Federation is located at 7133 Linda Vista Road, San Diego, CA 92111.

and sped away. The brief parking lot exchange between me and the Latina driver illuminates the ways in which Vietnamese American anticommunist discourses and practices brush up against other racial/ethnic histories as well as an official history that has obscured the stories of South Vietnamese refugees. Wherever this "subaltern" history erupts in public, it creates a visible rupture with the teleological narrative of the nation. In Linda Vista's diverse and multi-ethnic enclave, home to the annual "multicultural fair and parade" in San Diego, Vietnamese Americans staged an alternative history through their commemoration that is in visible tension with official historical consciousness about the Vietnam War and the refugee population in the US. If dominant history has been framed as a progressive march through time, following Walter Benjamin's critique, we need to conceive of Vietnamese American commemorative practices as a means to "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" in order to imaginatively re-think refugee subjectivity as it has been constructed from the top.[181] The commemoration in Linda Vista may not have been of special interest to the Latina, but she paused, foot on the brakes, to acknowledge the prominent display of the South Vietnam flag signaling how multiple Vietnams exist and how subjects of the US nation are speaking back, embodying their stories through their community rituals.

Yet despite my insistence to the Latina that Black April is not a protest, the event *did* incorporate a "protest" objective. During the event, organizers screened a slideshow depicting human trafficking of women and children in Vietnam.[182] The desperate faces of Vietnamese women and young girls implore viewers to condemn the perpetrators of their

[181] Benjamin 1969: 255
[182] Elsewhere I have argued that the deployment of women and children as the innocents in need of patriarchal protection is in line with a nationalist rendering of Vietnamese diasporic identity. See Vo 2003.

suffering. A majority of the speakers who stood up at the podium that evening also reminded the audience to continue struggling against human rights violations in the homeland. Several of the event banners explicitly express a challenge to the Hanoi regime, calling them out for the impoverishment of Vietnam's citizens. Allen Feldman suggests that contemporary human rights discourse has become a universalizing narrative, creating universal subjects through the assigned role of victim and/or witness. Interrogating the emergence of biographical narratives (life histories, oral histories, testimonies) within institutional structures, he argues that human rights frameworks allow for an archiving of experiences of war, violence, and terror for "eventual overcoming through redemptive survival, recovery, and restorative justice."[183] Mark Philip Bradley and Patrice Petro argue that such progressive notions of human rights as articulated in policy and scholarship adapt a transcendental argument found in Western philosophy (e.g. Locke and Kant). They insist on exploring the "transnational and diasporic forces shaping human rights claims" in order to understand how the intersection between local and global structures shape, mediate, and transform human rights discourse.[184] As such, Feldman looks to "residual and nonsynchronous" practices of witnessing, to the possibilities that survivor's stories, resisting closure and resolutions, may afford us. The integration of human rights activism with mourning and commemoration at Black April can help us rethink human rights as universalizing and state-centered. In this instance, the demand for justice for the war dead as well as the end of suffering for countrymen in Vietnam can be read as an assertion that commemoration is not about closure or healing

[183] Feldman 2004: 165.
[184] Bradley and Petro 2002: 2.

for Vietnamese refugees. This war is not over, the struggle continues via human rights activism. In fact the anticommunist/human rights activism at Black April, where the US and South Vietnam flags are coupled prominently, brings up the unfinished business of the US-South Vietnam alliance that may have *appeared* to end in 1975. Commemoration and mourning at Black April deploys human rights discourse, on one level, to continue implicating the US as deeply entangled in Vietnam, still held responsible, still not absolved. In fact, the articulation and visualization of this human rights discourse, while directed at the Hanoi regime, is certainly not as visible in Vietnam due to tight government censorship of the media.[185] However, it is clearly audible and visible here in the US, thus I argue that the human rights discourse of Black April addresses multiple audiences and, in fact, is necessarily inclusive of the US public as a partner in this agenda.

What's in a Name?: Elders and Youth Debate Over "National Resentment" and "Commemoration"

This annual local event in San Diego has provided community organizations the opportunity to convene, perform, produce cultural texts (such as press releases, songs, speeches, stories and scholarly articles, artwork, banners, slideshows, and skits) to educate a maturing Vietnamese American community about the war and its effects. During one animated planning meeting, a debate erupted over the elders' choice of the term "Ngày Quốc Hận [day of national resentment]" to use in the event banners and publicity literature. This term has been in use since the first small-scale Black April

[185] For a report on media censorship in Vietnam, see the 2001 Human Rights Watch World Report, http://www.hrw.org/wr2k1/asia/vietnam.html. Current and available as of 25 April 2008.

commemoration in 1976, according to one knowledgeable elder, Trần Liêm, who has been involved in the San Diego Vietnamese American community since 1975. The college students representing the two VSAs were worried that the term would be off-putting to, or scare off, younger Vietnamese Americans leading to lower attendance from this population. They reasoned that the term has too much of a political edge. Instead, they suggested using only "Ngày Tượng Niệm [day of commemoration]" because this would be more universal, a better marketing strategy. The logic, for the youth, is that "commemoration" opens up the space for everyone while "resentment" only implicates those who suffered under the communists. Resentment is about wounds that remain gaping, hatred that still consumes, and a persistent looking back—and the event should be about healing and moving forward if it is to appeal to a younger generation who do not have firsthand experience living under the Hanoi regime. This logic suggests that the primary goal of commemoration should be about uniting the community towards healing the wounds of war. If, as I suggest in this dissertation, the war persists on a symbolic level for those of the refugee generation, can the past be reconciled so that Vietnam and its diaspora (rather than Vietnam and the US) reconcile with each other through the pain endured on both sides of the 17th parallel? Is reconciliation even possible?

To the youth's argument, the elders (although not unanimous, but a strong majority) countered that Quốc Hận must be used if we are to accurately and respectfully represent what the day means for Vietnamese refugees. In fact, if we are to obliterate Quốc Hận, one man in his sixties suggested, we might as well erase the term tị nạn [refugee] because Vietnamese who lost their nation in 1975 carry the burden of Quốc

Hận with them as refugees. For this elder, tị nạn and Quốc Hận are interlinked concepts, inseparable and therefore must be understood as a part of the political purpose of this commemoration event.[186]

In a conversation with one of my respondents, a Western-educated woman in her late sixties I call Cô Nga, she helped me understand why Quốc Hận remains an appropriate term for April 30. I asked her to tell me about the significance of April 30 and clarify for me the different meanings of other terms I have heard used by both elders and youth in the community such as: 30 Tháng 4 [30th of April], Tháng Tư Đen [Black April], Ngày Mất Nước [day we lost our nation], and Ngày Quốc Hận [day of national resentment].Cô Nga explained as follows:

> Thì phải, người Việt mình thường hay sử dụng những câu này để nói đến Ngày 30 Tháng 4. Nhiều người họ chỉ dùng 30 Tháng 4 thôi tại vì mình chỉ cằng nói 30 Tháng 4 thì sẽ nghĩ đến những câu kia. Tích là khi người tị nạn đã mất nhà mất cửa, và nhiều người mất cã gia đình, khi họ nghe câu 30 Tháng 4 thì sẽ thấy rất là đau lồng. Họ sẽ nghĩ đó là ngày mà ta mất nước…Con biết không, đó là một nổi đau rất khủng khiếp…Rồi mình phải bỏ nước ra đi, chạy Cộng Sản…Cô đồng ý với mấy Bác trong Hiệp Hội là mình nen dùng câu Quốc Hạn trong ngày lễ 30 Tháng 4 vì đó là cảm giát của chúng toi. Câu đó rất có ý nghỉa.
> [Yes, Vietnamese use all of these in reference to April 30. Most people will just call it 30th of April, because that's all you have to say to bring to mind all those other terms. I mean, when a refugee who has lost his home, maybe his family, hears 30th of April, that's enough to make him sad in his heart. He knows it means the day we lost our homeland. You see, to lose your nation is a terrible thing…And then you are forced to run away from

[186] Quốc Hận also has a masculine connotation, as Quốc can be a male name. While the youth did not critique Quốc Hận as a masculinist construction that reinforces the patriarchal premise of the military and the nation, I suggest this may be one critique viable as an argument to move beyond Quốc Hận as a trope for commemorating South Vietnam and the war/refugee dead. However, there is something to be said for maintaining the "Hận" for cannot "resentment" or anger be effective and productive as a means of resisting closure and absolution? I am thinking about feminist Audre Lorde's essay "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,"in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom: Crossing Press, 1984).

> the Việt Cộng …I agree with the people in the Vietnamese Federation, how they use "Ngày Quốc Hận" at the 30th of April event because that's how we really feel in our heart. That term is very meaningful.][187]

Another female respondent, Cô Hương, suggested to me that because so many of the community leaders (who are mostly male) were affiliated with the South Vietnamese military, they use Quốc Hận as a way to show their "patriotic" feelings towards South Vietnam and continued commitment to overthrowing the current regime.[188] Throughout our conversation, she alluded to the militarized and patriarchal undertones of anticommunist events, including Black April, where the presence of a ghostly military regime is felt through the aged, uniform-clad bodies of former ARVN soldiers. The attachment Vietnamese expatriates, particularly military men whose lives were spent in service of the nation, have to South Vietnam influences their desire to stage public commemoration as a new battlefield for their ongoing war to reclaim the nation lost in 1975, Cô Hương suggested. The shoring up of nationalism and patriotism for those in exile, however, is never merely about reifying the nation-state, for which nation-state would they claim today? Vietnam has denied South Vietnamese narratives while the US has strategically re-deployed the figure of the Vietnamese refugee as a means to assert its moral victory.[189] Thus, Vietnamese refugee commemoration is also layered with a struggle to define a place for oneself among other Americans and a struggle to represent the erased and forgotten stories of South Vietnamese lives. As such, the patriarchal construction of diasporic commemoration by Vietnamese refugee men may be a vehicle

[187] Nguyen Phuong Nga 2005.
[188] Thai Ngoc Huong 2006.
[189] See Nguyen-Vo 2005 and Espiritu 2006b.

to reassert a masculinity that has been de-stabilized and fundamentally transformed through losing one's country and "running away" to America.[190]

One of those former military men, an interviewee in his mid-seventies, explained the nuances of the term Quốc Hận to me by sending me a paper he wrote to commemorate 30 years of exile. I translate an excerpt from his article as follows:

> [Ngày] 30-4 không những là một ngày đau thương cho hàng ngũ quân-cán-chính Việt Nam Cộng Hòa mà còn cho toàn thể nhân dân Miền Nam. Lý do đó, đã từ ba mươi năm qua cộng đồng người Việt hải ngoại đều gọi 30-4 là Ngày Quốc Hận, ý muốn nhắc nhở nhân dân Việt Nam, đặc biệt là Tập Thể Tị Nạn Cộng Sản phải luôn luôn ghi nhớ biến cố đau thương tang tóc này để làm bài học cho tương lai. Không một ai chấp nhận đổi tên Ngày 30-4 dù với bất cứ mỹ từ nào.
> [April 30 is not only a painful day for the comrades-in-arms but for all the people of South Vietnam. Because of this, we have called it The Day of National Resentment for the past thirty years to remind the Vietnamese people, especially refugees of the Viet Cong, to always remember the horrific events as a lesson for the future. This is why we cannot accept changing the name of April 30th no matter the pressure to Americanize.][191]

Thus, while multiple words, phrases, and descriptions have been used to capture what April 30th means for Vietnamese refugees, Cô Nga seems to suggest that, ultimately, what matters is not the official terms deployed and disseminated to represent the day, but people's feelings on that day—their profound sadness, which perhaps can never be accurately named.

The elders present at the planning meeting argued that South Vietnamese losses were too great to simply use a "soft" term such as "commemoration" on this date. Their argument implies how the war may not be over, thus commemoration, signaling healing and closure, would not capture the interminable suffering among refugees or other

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[190] For a discussion of gender relations in Vietnamese refugee families, see Kelly 1990 and Kibria 1993.
[191] From a paper emailed to me by one of my interview subjects, Bùi N. Thanh, "Ba Mươi Năm Nhìn Lại" [Looking Back on 30 Years]"

"victims" of the communists. Nguyễn Vân, an elder who had been at the forefront of numerous battles during the war and considers his participation in community work the new arena for his ongoing war, wore his uniform proudly to all the Black April commemorations each year. During the debate, he stood up and reprimanded the youth leaders for being ignorant of their history and disrespectful towards their elders.[192] The discussion took on a very personal and emotional turn after this indictment and I watched in confounded silence as the next speaker made her statement.

A female youth leader from UCSD's VSA, Quỳnh, spoke up against the "uncle's" attack in broken Vietnamese peppered with English words, telling her father's story. She began her statement with an apology for her shaky Vietnamese. Then, Quỳnh said she disagreed with Nguyễn Vân's assessment of her and her friends as disrespectful for wanting to use commemoration rather than Quốc Hận because they were not trying to disrespect their parents' suffering and loss. She claimed that her family knows all about loss. Her father was in a reeducation camp for ten years and they came to the US only to struggle with poverty and her father's disability. She continued by saying that she may not have any experience living under the communists, but her father did. Her mother suffered as well, all those years while her father was away in prison. Quỳnh's eyes quickly filled up as her voice broke. She told the elders that she is offended by such an accusation, arguing that she and her generation are not blind, deaf, and dumb to the

[192] Nguyễn Vân is a re-education camp survivor and a delegate to the Viet Fed. He is part of the Vietnamese Veterans organization in San Diego. I was never able to formally interview Nguyễn Vân despite numerous efforts to set up interviews. He was skeptical of my intentions in the beginning. Then, after a few years of seeing my face at community events, he began to warm up to me, but still declined to be interviewed and tape-recorded. There are a handful of others who responded to me like he did.

history of "their people." After her tear-filled testimony, a strained silence fell upon the conference room as I looked around to gauge the elders' reaction to Quỳnh's story. No one met my gaze. In fact, no one looked directly at Quỳnh either. It was as though we had all taken in a collective gulp of air and were waiting to exhale.

Finally, in what seemed like a million years but must have only been a few seconds, another elder, Trần M. Quân, spoke up and gently apologized to her for his colleague's hasty indictment. He re-routed the emotional and awkward conversation back to the topic at hand by validating her family's experience as evidence for why Quốc Hận should remain in the event's banners and literature. But, more importantly, he reminded her that she was in the presence of those of her father's generation. Chú Quân continued by explaining that while Quỳnh may have witnessed her father's pain, she did not live through what the elders had lived through, did not know first-hand the kind of loss and pain they endured then, they endured still. He spoke in broken English, no doubt to show that he can be sensitive to the linguistic gulf between the two generations in the room. After Chú Quân spoke, the room seemed to expand a little, as if exhaling after a breath held in for too long. Some elders nodded in silent support of Chú Quân, some looked like they were still hashing out philosophical issues in their minds and remained unwilling to take a position.

In this brief exchange, the issue that made elders and youth in the room uneasy was not necessarily the public relations task of naming the event as Quốc Hận or as commemoration, but rather the burden or power of memory and the question of who can rightfully claim a Vietnamese refugee identity. The young woman attempted to

affectively link her family's story to her elders as a "witness" to the *effects* of the Vietnam/American War via the route of her father's suffering, but her second-hand trauma narrative was made insufficient by Chú Quân. The elders articulated their position as the rightful bearers of South Vietnamese memories, thus they felt themselves to bear the burden of representing the fall of Saigon as Quốc Hận. But they also argued from the location of survivors and firsthand witnesses, thus affirming their moral position as "authentic" Vietnamese refugees. The elders derive their authenticity and authority from having been there, having witnessed the Vietnam/American War and surviving, thus they carry a burden of a fallen nation and the burden of guilt for leaving. Whether they were engaged in combat or made strategic military decisions, lost their loved ones to the war, struggled to escape Vietnam or were imprisoned in the camps, made to work in new economic zones, or witnessed other "cảnh đau khổ [scenes of suffering],"[193] the elders could all claim some form of traumatic proximity and experiential knowledge, some directness that the youth born after the war and/or in another country just could not claim. In *Witness and Memor*y, Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler suggest that "The notion that authority and authenticity are grounded in traumatic stories has become so pervasive that all of Western culture can now be seen as a post-traumatic narrative."[194] In this instance, it is not only the authority and authenticity provided by first generation proximity to the trauma of war, but also the paternalistic presumption of the authority of elders that circumscribe this community space. Authority and authenticity are not only constructed vis-à-vis experiential knowledge, but also as a gendered discourse where

[193] I borrow this phrase from an interview subject's description of what he witnessed in the final days before the end of the Vietnam/American War.
[194] Douglass and Vogler 2003: 11.

male elites from South Vietnam become the purveyors of knowledge about the past in diaspora. As a second generation woman, Quỳnh's narrative is made inauthentic not only because she was born too late and knew too little, but also stems from her location as a feminized subject in diaspora, a subject of South Vietnamese representation whose body serves as a screen for nationalist desires.[195]

Quỳnh seemed to speak for the rest of her second generation peers in resisting the elder's stifling of their opinions with a shorthand assertion of his generation's authority over the past. Initially, I also felt stifled by Nguyễn Vân's accusation of youth disrespect and ignorance. This seemed to directly contradict what elders told me in interviews, of wanting to work towards increased understanding between the two generations:

> Thành ra phải có một cái điều thông cảm và mở rộng tấm lồng để đón nhận ý kiến mới...Hai mươi năm rồi, những đứa trẻ đau có biết gì về lịch sử Việt Nam cho nên phải có độ lượng. Những người lớn phải có độ lượng với những đứa nhỏ. Nhất là những đứa nhỏ phải…đật biết là mấy đứa nhỏ màsinh hoạt ở các chùa các nhà thờ, thì những đứa đó cũng dễ để hòa họp. Nhưng mà có đứa lại là không có tôn trọng những ý kiến của người lớn và không có considerate, không có biết người lớn là kim chỉ nam mà mình có thể modify mà mình có thể sửa đổi được. Và đó là một sự thiếu sốt giửa thế hệ thứ nhất và thế hệ thứ hai.
> [So there needs to be sympathy and open-mindedness towards new ideas…Twenty years already, the youth do not know anything about Vietnamese history so we have to have a degree of tolerance. Elders have to have tolerance for the youth. In particular, the youth have to…especially the youth who participate in temple and church activities, those are the ones who are easy to collaborate with. But then there are those who are not considerate, who do not understand that elders are like magnetic needles that cannot be modified, or changed, or fixed. And that is one of the greatest challenges between the first generation and the second.][196]

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[195] See Lieu's discussion of Vietnamese American pageantry and the projection of nationalist upon female diasporic bodies. See also my work on Paris by Night representations of South Vietnam as a feminized landscape.

[196] Thái Ngoc Hương 2006.

As a "youth" myself, I was torn between wanting to speak up and validate Quỳnh's emotional rendering of her family's story and nod in sympathetic agreement with Chú Quân's argument about the elders' pain and loss. I refused to choose a side, however. I merely sat quietly and looked at Quỳnh, willing her to read my mind, wanting to tell her that it is alright to cry as she quickly brushed her tears away and struggled to recompose herself. By this time in my experience in the Viet Fed, I had become accustomed to how some elders used the moral argument of suffering under the communists to validate their anticommunist community organizing principles and practices. In this case, these principles emerged via a divisive line between the generations with the elders claiming both burden and authority over the past at the expense of the youth's eagerness to learn about that same past and channel their knowledge towards new ways of being diasporic Vietnamese. Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone suggest that, "Contests over the meaning of the past are also contests over the meaning of the present and over ways of taking the past forward."[197]In this example, the contest revolved around a name that accurately captures the political stakes of the event, but ultimately revealed the struggle over representing the past for the present and future of the Vietnamese diaspora.

Quỳnh was the only one who actually displayed her emotional attachment to the subject of commemoration through her tear-strained narrative, while everyone else seemed to keep their feelings in check. I was struck by the force of her emotions, this twenty year-old born a full decade after the war had ended. I began to think about how

[197] Hodgkin and Radstone 2003:1.

refugee silences about the Vietnam/American War has produced in the next generation what may appear like apathy on the one hand and a deep, heart-wrenching sadness and affinity towards refugee history on the other. A part of the deep, heart-wrenching sadness lies in the second generation's inability to fully know their parents stories about Vietnam, thus making their mourning "as determinative as it is interminable and ultimately impossible."[198] Marianne Hirsch describes the second generation, children of Holocaust survivors, as having a deep attachment to a past and a home that they never knew. Their desire for home is out of reach, serving to further exile them "from a world we have never seen and never will see."[199] If not sharing their stories about the past is meant to spare their children the pain of knowing, I suggest that not knowing has been painful in its own way. In Sucheng Chan's edited anthology of 1.5 generation Vietnamese American writings, one anonymous writer who has personal memories of her family's difficult migration nevertheless feels disconnected to her parents and describes her immense sadness for them in the following ways:

> The way my parents live their lives still saddens me. I don't know why but every time I think about that I cry and cry. Maybe I am crying for two people who eat and breathe but are, in fact, dead. They died the instant they left their native land. Perhaps I am also crying for two people whom I call my parents but who are alienated from their children simply because they refuse to accept the fact that America is their new home and not merely a temporary refuge. I cry because I do not really know what my parents feel and think. The most important reason I cry is that I have to watch my parents die a little each day and there seems to be nothing I can do about it.[200]

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[198] Hirsch 1996: 664.
[199] Ibid: 661.
[200] Chan 2006: 227.

Without an "authentic" means to assert her right to the conversation about commemoration, Quỳnh, like the 1.5 narrator above, may be speaking from a position of helplessness. Can youth find ways to participate in commemorations of South Vietnam and the war/refugee dead without being stripped of their power and authority by the elders, stripped of their right to generate a public history about the Vietnamese American community? This question I pose engages with Nguyen-vo Thu-Huong's and Viet Thanh Nguyen's formulations of the question of ethics in refugee history. Nguyen-Vo argues that mourning and commemoration are not merely nostalgic practices that signal Vietnamese refugees' unbroken loyalties to the nation no longer there, but rather political and ethical acts. She writes:

> In such an economy of mourning, Vietnamese Americans as refugees occupy the position of self-mourners because no one else mourns us. The accounts of boat people starved, drowned, raped at sea have been our own. We reenact them in plays at commemoration ceremonies, in photo-timelines that we exhibit, in stories that we write.[201]

Nguyen-vo compels us to think about productive and *ethical* ways to mourn and commemorate the forgotten of the Vietnam War rather than to "appropriate the dead for our own agendas."[202] Viet Thanh Nguyen elaborates on the problem of ethics, suggesting that what is at stake for Vietnamese American communities is precisely the "problem of mourning the dead, remembering the missing, and considering the place of the survivors in the movement of history."[203] I consider the ethics of mourning and commemoration in my analysis of Black April because of how community conversations about Quốc Hận

[201] Nguyen-Vo 2005: 170.
[202] Ibid: 159.
[203] Nguyen, V.T. 2006: 8.

fundamentally bring this issue to the fore. Through a debate about the naming of the event, I suggest that how elders delineate authentic refugee history and how youth appeal to their elders through affect and secondhand memories reveal the very crux of the "generation clash" that occurs at the level of community organizing. As survivors, elders wish to keep their stories alive through staging public commemorations each year that address the mainstream and the younger generations, but they have been (quite often) narrowly vigilant about how to do so—what term is appropriate to use and who can fully participate in the construction of a diasporic discourse on Vietnam. The youth, wishing to learn about their history, imbue commemoration with new meanings. They wish to fashion war commemoration as a cultural space for learning about their history and strengthening a sense of Vietnamese American identity, particularly for those who do not have direct memories of the war. In a brief interview with Fox 6 appearing on the 10 o'clock news on April 30, 2005, Thao-Chi Pham, a second generation organizer of the Black April event stated that her desire is to show the strength of the community, that "we are still united, still strong." War commemoration, in this context, becomes more than a site of nation-building or universal mourning, but rather a multivalent site of struggles over cultural identity and representation that traverse a transnational terrain of memory and national histories.

In the final compromise, organizers used both terms in the large event banner that was placed prominently as a frame for the outdoor stage. They named the event as follows (in three rows): "Cộng Đồng Người Việt San Diego/Tượng Niệm 30 Năm Quốc Hận/30/4/1975—30/4/2005 [the Vietnamese Community of San Diego/Commemorates 30 Years of National Resentment/April 30, 1975—April 30, 2005]."

Fig. 2.1 Black April 2005 banner

The following year, elders and youth met to form a committee to organize another Black April event. A similar debate ensued, this time among a larger crowd of the newly formed Vietnamese American Youth Alliance (VAYA) and the elders of the Viet Fed member organizations. Words such as phản bội [betrayal] and mất mát [loss] were thrown around by the elders. During this debate, an elder with a thick Huế accent provided a metaphor for youth in the room to consider so that they may have a better understanding of elders' attachment to the term Quốc Hận. "If your parents forced you to leave your home, how would you feel?"[204] This question analogizes the Vietnamese diasporic experience as one of banishment, or forced removal. It frames the departure of Vietnamese refugees as a form of exile from the family home, presupposing that the home was always a site of nurturing and abiding love. This family from which the

[204] Field Notes 12 March 2006.

Vietnamese refugee has been forever banished is the imagined site of belonging and unconditional attachment. Framing the Vietnamese diasporic experience *exclusively* as one of banishment from the natal home precludes the experiences of those impelled to leave Vietnam for other reasons, those who may not find affiliation with a refugee sensibility. Are they, then, not allowed to claim South Vietnam as home and excluded from practices of commemoration and mourning for the war and refugee dead? Thus, the questions that Vietnamese American scholars need to address include: where is home and who can lay claim to this space? How do we commemorate the war, the South, and the dead while remaining critically alert to how calling attention to the historical erasure of South Vietnamese pasts may rely on a troubling embracement of victim-hood? How do we respect the dead and pay tribute to their lives when we do not have access to their stories? As the different generations of diasporic Vietnamese continue the debate over Black April as commemoration or national resentment, the boundaries of community and identity continue to shift, expanding or contracting with each movement to locate ourselves in history.

Performance and Commemoration: Elders and Youth Acts

My analysis of the two performances during Black April follows Diana Taylor's insightful work which argues for understanding performance as an episteme, or a way of knowing, rather than merely an object of study. She advocates transmitting knowledge through "embodied action." In particular, I adapt Taylor's framework in order to "explore how performance transmits memories, makes political claims, and manifests a group's

sense of identity."[205] This section addresses a public ritual of commemoration understood to be anticommunist in nature, but asks how anticommunism can be understood beyond the obvious protest rhetoric deployed on this occasion. How does anticommunism function as a cultural discourse in this community space? What other cultural or moral purposes do war memory and practices of commemoration serve for a refugee community? How does an understanding of the elders and youth acts as embodied memory and postmemory, respectively, expand our dialogue about refugee histories?

The two live performances by elders and youth, scheduled into the evening's program, are productive cultural sites for the purpose of understanding how South Vietnam emerges in the diasporic imaginary and how anticommunism provides a *cultural* mode for engaging with the forgotten, the dead, and the missing from history. I take anticommunist protests, demonstrations, and practices to be embodied performances that trigger collective memories of war, nation, and refugee migrations. This argument follows popular culture and performance studies scholarship that insist on moving beyond the theatres of high culture in order to trace genealogies of subaltern knowledge. In *Time Passages*, George Lipsitz suggests that "cultural forms create conditions of possibility." [206] While culture may seem at times like a substitution for politics, or even a rehearsal for real politics, Lipsitz argues that culture *is* a form of politics. Peggy Phelan also recognizes the possibilities of culture; in particular she addresses how performance "implicates the real through the presence of living bodies."[207] Tracing the migration of

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[205] Taylor 2005: xvii. Taylor suggests that live performances are fleeting or "disappearing acts," thus this transient quality becomes useful for thinking of performance as a "repertoire" that may offer an alternative to the inherent power of the archive.
[206] Lipsitz 2001: 16.
[207] Phelan 1993: 148.

performance, or what he calls "orature," Joseph Roach conceives of a triad including performance, memory, and substitution. He furthers his concept of "surrogation" which he defines as the process of substitution that occurs "actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric" of a group or culture.[208] My interest in the elders and youth "acts" at Black April stem from a belief in the very real political weight that such acts carry; that they are constitutive of the production of knowledge about the Vietnamese refugee subject and further implicate the US and Vietnam nations in the ongoing social drama of refugee community formations.

The first act is a dramatization of a popular war song by first generation elders.[209] While recordings were made of the event, I was unable to track down a copy of a DVD (after exhausting all my contacts) in order to review this performance. I only have the notes I took from watching the live performance. In choosing to discuss this performance anyway, I keep in mind Diana Taylor's explanation about the fundamental differences between the archive and the repertoire. She suggests that the repertoire requires presence and an embodiment of memory that proffers potentials heretofore unrecognized by Western culture's emphasis on the archive as a repository of privileged knowledge.[210] Most importantly, Taylor argues that the archive and repertoire are dialogical, they implicate each other in the construction of knowledge, in the production of history. She includes among what she defines as "repertoire" performance, singing, dancing, orality, gestures and movement, and insists that the "live performance can never be captured or

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[208] Roach 1996: 2.
[209] I do not have the name of the song performed, but the group who performed this act is called Ban Vân Nghệ Liên Hội Chiến Sĩ VNCH, or The Union of Soldiers of the Republic of Vietnam Band.
[210] Taylor 2003.

transmitted through the archive" despite the videotaping of it.[211] The recording can never stand in for the live, fleeting performance although it may come to represent it in the archive. Thus, while I may not have a confirmation of "what really happened" in the performance through securing a recording, I argue that the ephemeral quality of the elders' act and its staging at Black April is significant because it is part of a larger repertoire of refugee performance coming from the Vietnamese American community.

While the melancholic song played in the background, a troupe of amateur first generation Vietnamese American actors presented a dramatic enactment of its theme, which conveys a wife's sadness when her husband goes off to war (a popular theme in nhạc chiến tranh, or war music). The skit showed how, following the soldier's return home at war's end, he was imprisoned in a communist re-education camp. Unable to bear the propaganda and abuse of camp life, the faithful South Vietnamese soldier committed suicide (with honor) as a means of defying his communist captors, leaving his wife mourning over his lifeless body in the last scene. In this act of remembrance, the grieving wife articulated the refugee community's grief for the loss of the nation and the deaths of millions of Vietnamese during the war and in its aftermath. Under the dark evening sky with just a few flood lights casting shadows against the yellow banner, the performers enacted a tribute to the dead, inscribing on their own bodies the material traces of war and displacement. The elders' act relies on a dialogue with the "archive" of knowledge on the "Vietnam War," presupposing that the audience already identify with a refugee sensibility. In this performance, mourning was embodied as an act of suffering that has

[211] Ibid: 20.

not ended, for the new widow gestured toward the audience with what can be understood as an interpellation of their political stakes in the project of mourning and remembering.

Fig. 2.2 Elders Act

Drawing from Bonnie Honig and R. Clifton Spargo's work on the economy of mourning, Nguyen-Vo insists that remembering and mourning are ethical as well as political acts. In this performance by Vietnamese refugees, the nameless war dead, those whose names are not etched in black granite along the Washington Mall, were given momentary respect and honor, were mourned for and missed. As a dramatic communion with the past, this performance calls South Vietnam into being. It forces a reckoning with the multiple Vietnams that collide over and over again within American society.

The elders' act came from a performance group that has been active in Black April since the first commemoration in 1976. Thus, they did not need to run their skit past the planning committee prior to the event. Their authority and authenticity was assumed,

in this instance, not only because of their long-time involvement but because their organization's political stakes have always been clearly anticommunist. The youth representing the Vietnamese American students at UCSD, on the other hand, had to submit their skit for approval several weeks prior to the event. Organizers were worried about allowing youth, who may not be too knowledgeable about South Vietnamese history, present something that could undermine the anticommunist tenor of the event. This was especially important given the struggle over the naming of Black April as Quốc Hận or commemoration. After the committee members had each reviewed the skit, we met to discuss how to best incorporate it into the program. While elders at the meeting were vociferously enthusiastic about the active participation of youth, particularly their commitment to producing cultural texts Black April, they were concerned about the skit's ending. The skit, titled "Bên Đường," furthers a Việt Kiều critique of Vietnam's corrupt government. The ironic display of Vietnam's socialist message at the end of the skit may be taken as an endorsement rather than critique, elders were afraid. After a long debate, the elders' worries were put to rest when the writer suggested having the ending narrated specifically as critique.

The youth performed a skit with a different version of the anticommunist rhetoric, incorporating an updated human rights dimension rather than a affective appeal to mourning. The performance by UCSD students was also less melodramatic than the elders' act. In fact, they incorporated humor throughout. Their skit was written by a bilingual UCSD junior who also starred in it. He played a protagonist name Tuấn, a Việt Kiều who has recently graduated from college and, in the self-indulgent American

tradition, embarks on a journey to Vietnam to discover his homeland. What he finds is disillusionment instead. His childhood friend, Minh, gives him a tour of Hồ Chí Minh City (the former Saigon). Not only does Minh show him the sights, but alerts him to the dangers of expressing himself freely as he is presumably used to doing in the US. During his visit, he encounters homeless beggars and street children and he witnesses the corruption of the communist regime through the story of a street kid name Hải whose family lives at the mercy of a rich government official. These encounters result in the awakening of his political consciousness and Tuấn vows to fight for freedom for Vietnam. This consciousness-raising tale of second generation selfishness turned into a commitment to homeland liberation depends upon a human rights discourse often deployed at Vietnamese American public demonstrations.

Fig 2.3 Youth Act

The youth act was effective (and affective) when read together with the elders act because it depends upon the historical positioning of the refugee figure as victims of communism, as moral and righteous. The elders act thus sets up the youth act by providing them with a story of beginnings, how we came to be a displaced community, how we must remember the dead. For the elders act, anticommunism is a mode of narrating the South Vietnamese past and gesturing towards the wounds that remain. Departing from this framework, the liberal discourse of freedom, democracy, and human rights in the youth act marks a shift in anticommunism from a focus on the past to an imperative for coming together as a community and working in collective resistance to the communist regime. While quite subtle, understanding this key shift in anticommunist discourse allows us to see how a "homeland politics" is not only about the homeland, but also about staking a claim to the US as liberal subjects as well as about negotiating a cultural identity for the future.

Both these performances work together as complements to evoke a moral position against the communist government in Vietnam and circumscribe a moral community in diaspora.[212] Michael Lambek suggests that memory is never neutral or innocent and proposes that both remembering and forgetting are "moral and identity-building act[s]." Following Charles Taylor (1989), Lambek suggests that if "our life narration and our sense of self are inextricably linked to our sense of the good, the chronotope of memory must be a moral space."[213] The moral space forged in the collective remembrances at Black April has certainly drawn clear boundaries for a Vietnamese American

[212] I follow from Guillermo Grenier's discussion of the construction of a moral community for Cuban Americans in Miami. See Grenier 2003.
[213] Lambek 1996: 249.

community—this history has been deeply divided between those who can rightfully claim this history. Must one be against Vietnam to be for the refugee community? What are the ethical dilemmas of only remembering South Vietnamese and refugees as the victim and representing contemporary Vietnam as a nation crippled by its own socialist regime? In "Speak of the Dead, Speak of Viet Nam," Viet Thanh Nguyen provides a compelling critique of "minority discourse," particularly refugee discourse that depends upon the over-simplification of power—that is, the refugee embraces her status as victim and only sees herself as such.[214] This forecloses the ability to recognize herself as potentially able to do harm as well. Nguyen's insights on the power that victims may potentially wield (particularly in the realm of representation) is helpful for understanding how such a marginalized history such as that which belongs to Vietnamese refugees may, in turn, inflict harm on other Others. Nguyen points towards other Southeast Asian countries and groups in the US who were also devastated by the wars over there, but have largely been subsumed by the more recognizable discourse on Vietnamese refugees. We could further point to other silenced stories such as the Amerasian children born during the war, particularly those whose fathers were African American or other minority soldiers fighting in Vietnam. What insights could these memories lend us about the entanglement of US empire within Vietnamese refugee discourse? Thus, while anticommunism has offered Vietnamese refugees with a language, a discourse for recalling the past for the purposes of building a "stronger and united" community, it has proven to be a limiting one. As I have approached anticommunism as a discourse of possibility for gesturing at that which is not there in historical discourse and embodying the past as a means of

[214] Nguyen 2006.

negotiating the present conditions of displacement, I also acknowledge some of its limitations and continue to search for alternatives, for other means of conveying silenced stories.

CHAPTER 3

"Freedom and Heritage": Anticommunism and Articulations of "Denizenship"[215]

> "We're guests in this country. And good guests don't upset their hosts," I had been told. I was not ignorant of history. We would have to go through the motions and float harmlessly as permanent guests, with no more impact on our surroundings than the mild, leisurely pace of an ordinary day. We would have to make ourselves innocuous and present to the outside world a mild, freeze-dried version of history.[216]

> To an overwhelming majority of Vietnamese-Americans, the red-and-star flag is an insult to their past and their identity as victims of the communist regime. The flag that represents the Vietnamese part of their Vietnamese-American heritage, to them, is the yellow-and-stripes flag of the former Republic of Vietnam. Although it doesn't represent any country any more, it does represent a sentiment, and that is what they want to use to represent the Vietnamese community.[217]

In Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997), the young Vietnamese American narrator observes that in the late seventies and eighties Vietnamese refugees in the United States were expected to act as "good guests" who mustn't upset their hosts by making any kind of impact on their surroundings. Her mother admonishes her to keep quiet, to "hide your true self," and through these pearls of wisdom passed on from a refugee mother to her Vietnamese American daughter Cao explores how refugees, even more so than other immigrant groups, have to become masters of "shape-shifting" in order to survive in their new environments.[218] But more than thirty years after the first cohort of Vietnamese were evacuated from the country and relocated in the US, Vietnamese Americans refuse to

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[215] I borrow the concept of "denizenship" from Rachel Buff's work on West Indian carnival and American Indian powwow as cultural sites for staking a claim to place and belonging, de-stabilizing prior ideas about citizenship as the ultimate form of belonging. See *Immigration and the Political Economy of Home* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2001).

[216] Lan Cao, *Monkey Bridge* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 42.

[217] Quoted in *The Bolsavik: All Viet, all the time* (http://.bolsavik.wordpress.com) The editor of this news-blog is Hao-Nhien Q. Vu whose previous job was Managing Editor of *Nguoi Viet Daily News* "until controversies [in 2008] over the photo of a pedicure tub forced him out."

[218] Cao 1997: 41-42.

merely "go through the motions and float harmlessly" but are impressing upon their locales the very visible markers of their presence. Vietnamese Americans continue to uphold a public image of the "good guests" but they are nevertheless presenting a challenge to dominant history by demanding for formal recognition of the South Vietnam flag. Rather than simply interpreting the political activities of Vietnamese Americans as an indicator of their "Americanization," I consider how the navigation of mainstream political channels by Vietnamese Americans at this moment may be a form of "shape-shifting" that reveals how marginalized groups may pose a veiled challenge to hegemonic institutions, a "polite critique" of the US nation-state veiled by its clear-cut anticommunist message.[219]

On July 3, 2006, *Progressive Magazine* published a story by Howard Zinn calling for Americans to "Put Away the Flags." The thrust of his argument is that national symbols such as the flag have fueled violence and terror both historically and in the contemporary moment. Zinn rhetorically questions, "Is not nationalism -- that devotion to a flag, an anthem, a boundary so fierce it engenders mass murder -- one of the great evils of our time, along with racism, along with religious hatred?"[220] While I generally agree with Zinn's critique of national symbols and its bedmate, nationalism, as they are deployed by hegemonic nation-states, I would like to suggest taking a second look at *other functions* of national symbols, particularly for a community whose forgotten history

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[219] I thank Rosemary M. George for her insightful suggestions regarding the notion of politeness as a form of critique for certain groups whose culture, class, gender, or other variables disallow a straightforward or blatant critique. Vietnamese American political activism has been studied primarily through the lens of assimilation and "political incorporation." See Ong and Meyer 2004, Collet and Furuya 2005, and Collet 2008 for examples of political science analysis of Vietnamese American political activity as a form of "incorporation" into mainstream structures. I offer a cultural studies method of analysis in examining the political activities as an indicator of alternative community practices.

[220] Zinn 2006.

is so vitally linked to its defunct flag. As Elaine H. Kim has urged us to not dismiss nationalism but re-think what nationalism may enable for those on the social margins, I suggest we not dismiss the flag entirely, but rather ask what work it does in producing *affective affiliations* as well as in allowing for critical interrogations of the forms and shapes subordinated histories assume.[221] As the second epigraph by a former Vietnamese American newspaper editor reminds us, the defunct South Vietnam flag remains significant because of the *sentiments* it invokes among Vietnamese Americans. Since the yellow flag has come to represent heritage for Vietnamese Americans and the red flag has become its arch-rival, symbolizing their victimization under Việt Cộng, must the sentiments invoked always be unconditionally linked to a victim status in community discourse? Can we find alternative ways to read and relate to the South Vietnam flag so as to not reify a totalizing narrative of South Vietnamese as the perpetual victim and North Vietnamese as the spited enemy?

This chapter charts the cultural discourse of anticommunism as manifest in the Flag Resolution movement across the US, focusing on San Diego as a hub of Vietnamese American efforts to have the former South Vietnam flag recognized by US municipalities. I examine the multiple meanings of anticommunist discourse and practices in my analysis of the "Freedom and Heritage Flag," or the yellow flag with three red stripes representing the former Republic of Vietnam, still embraced by overseas Vietnamese who imagine themselves as part of an exiled community. Rather than taking up with scholarship on nationalism that figures flags as rhetorical, metaphoric, or

[221] While Kim does not develop her argument for the potentialities of nationalism for the Korean American community, she does encourage scholars to keep in mind how nationalism has been deployed differently by displaced and racialized groups. See Kim 1993.

symbolic visual instruments of national identity, I ask how they may signal ambivalence, tension, and unresolved sentiments.[222] While in the previous chapter I focus on commemoration as a site of anticommunist remembrance, here I show how a contemporary minority political movement can be read as another way to remember the past. I insist that not only does the Flag Resolution reveal an ongoing struggle to produce narratives about South Vietnam in the US, it is also a mode of performing refugee identity and claiming "denizenship." As an alternative to institutional (both governmental and disciplinary) parameters for belonging to the "national romance" via the route of citizenship, Rachel Buff argues for a concept of *denizenship* which she defines this way: "the ways in which inhabiting a place, as much as the officially defined boundaries of that place, lead people to make claims on that place."[223] Thus, I join together scholarship on memory and history, immigration, and performance studies by reading a refugee community's political lobbying process as a cultural performance and act of remembrance that stakes a claim to localities in the US. How does the South Vietnam flag serve as a "technology of memory" for Vietnamese Americans?[224] What memories are articulated by the yellow flag? How does the Flag Resolution serve the purpose of claiming a place [tìm chổ đứng] in the US for Vietnamese Americans?

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[222] For example, Anthony D. Smith includes among the instruments of nationalism "flags, anthems, parades, coinage, capital cities, oaths, folk costumes, museum folklores…" See *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991: 77). Other scholars of nationalism, including Benedict Anderson, Ernest Renan, and Walker Connor have suggested how the nation depends upon a sense of "imagined community," collective memories, and shared symbols for constructing itself and making itself meaningful. Michael E. Geisler has a useful explication of what national symbols do and what they can tell us about the process of constituting and contesting national identities. See his edited volume, *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative* (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2005).

[223] Buff 2001:4.

[224] I borrow this phrase from Marita Sturken's work on the Vietnam War in American memory. See *Tangled Memories* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1997).

Flags play a crucial role within the discourse of nationalism, particularly during moments of perceived national crisis. For example, Americans responded to 9-11 and the "War on Terror" with demonstrations of patriotism by deploying the US flag in a variety of ways.[225] In the wake of 9-11 the flag took on a multiplicity of meanings and relevancy across the nation. The use of the flag as a signifier for freedom, democracy and the "American way" obscures other ideological reasons for a deployment of this national icon. Racially marked others who have historically inhabited the margins of the US nation and those who were immediately suspected as "enemies of the state" based on their religion or appearance deployed the flag for different purposes, namely as a protective measure against the very real threat of violence against their bodies.[226] I cite recent appropriations of the American flag to illustrate how a national symbol may be read in alternative ways. The South Vietnam flag, as an object upon which many politico-ideological battles have been and continue to be waged here in the US, should be examined as a "mnemonic device," or a memory-prompter. As the generation that lived and fought during the Vietnam/American War are dying, the desire to leave behind material and symbolic traces of their lives become ever more urgent. Thus, I situate my analysis of the "Freedom and Heritage" flag and the Flag Resolution within this important historical juncture, the passing on of South Vietnamese survivors and witnesses and subsequently the passing on of their memories into cultural lore. The need for mnemonic devices at these times becomes more pervasive and morbidly certain, thus

[225] While 'nationalism' and 'patriotism' are often used interchangeably, Walker Connor states that they "refer to two quite distinct loyalties: the former to one's national group; the latter to one's state (country) and its institutions." See Connor 1996.
[226] Grewal 2001.

even more fraught with the tensions that underlie Vietnamese American community formations.

To further elucidate how fraught the yellow and red flags have become as symbols of nations and identities, I share a personal experience struggling with my own ambivalence about the flags. Having grown up in a refugee household and inundated with Vietnamese American media where the yellow flag was the only flag recognized, I came to adopt his symbol as "our" flag. Thus, when I attended a summer language program at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 2003 where Việt Kiều students mixed with non-Vietnamese students, either Area Studies scholars or military personnel, I had to confront my own strong sentiments about the two flags. A white graduate student in the program who had been to Vietnam numerous times and often wears his leftist politics on his sleeve (literally) came to an event wearing a red t-shirt with a yellow star in the middle, the official flag of Vietnam. He was critiqued by several Việt Kiều students who were shocked at his insensitivity to their history as children of refugees and their strong feelings against the red flag. At the time, I opted to stay out of the debates that ensued. The white student made an assessment of how Việt Kiều students are unable to sensibly engage in critical dialogue because of their "anticommunist blinders." The Việt Kiều students challenged the white student for not only being insensitive, but dismissive of Vietnamese American community discourse as illegitimate historical knowledge.[227] At the time I was only a year into my ethnographic fieldwork and felt very anxious about

[227] Interestingly, a similar debate was revived in 2007 on the Vietnam Studies Group listserv when a non-Vietnamese academic dismissed Vietnamese American community (and Vietnamese American scholars to an extent) in the same way. I joined the Vietnam Studies Group precisely because of this email dialogue, feeling like I had to make a necessary intervention in challenging white, male, elitist thought about Vietnamese subjectivities.

"speaking for" the community. I was also still trying to grapple with the meanings of both flags for myself. Additionally, I felt the need to appear like an "objective" scholar who can critique my own community's politics. But in hindsight, I probably acted irresponsibly by standing on the sidelines when I could have launched a much-needed argument about the value of re-thinking fixed categories and meanings, moving the conversation beyond blame in order to talk about how the flags have been wielded (by community leaders, second generation, scholars, policy-makers, etc.) and whose interest are served by such appropriations of the flags. As a symbolic marker of identity and a visual bookmark of history, the South Vietnam flag specifically dialogues with other symbols and images, namely the current Vietnam and US flags. What does it mean for Vietnamese American communities to continue coupling the US and South Vietnam flags, all the while adamantly resisting the red flag of socialist Vietnam?

The "dangling signifier"

A bold yellow background with three horizontal red stripes across the center constitutes the South Vietnam flag. These stripes represent the three distinct regions of Vietnam, connecting the geographically separated "yellow-skinned" Vietnamese by the same red blood.[228] The yellow flag originated during the rule of Vietnam's Emperor Thành Thái (1890) of the Nguyễn Dynasty who is credited with abolishing the former flag with Chinese characters and designing this one for the newly independent nation. The flag went through several aesthetic changes to suit different political regimes. However, it resumed the original form from 1948 until the fall of South Vietnam and

[228] Another explanation for the three horizontal stripes on the South Vietnam flag is that they form the ideogram for the Chinese word meaning "south." Vietnam means "south land" or "people of the south." However, the Vietnamese elders I worked with argued for the popular explanation that the red lines are the life blood connecting the three regions of Vietnam.

continues to be deployed by overseas Vietnamese to this day to represent their cultural legacy, their commitment to the ideals of freedom, and the history of a nation no longer there. Once Vietnam was reunified under the socialist regime, the entire country assumed the red flag with yellow star, the symbol of North Vietnam since 1955. This flag, however, has been rejected by Vietnamese refugees, who argue that it symbolizes Vietnamese people's suffering under communism since 1975 as well as a totalitarian state's agenda of wiping out South Vietnamese history. In Vietnamese diasporic cultural productions, the red flag has been termed lá cờ máu, or the blood flag, to connote the lives lost during war and the escape from Vietnam in the decade after.

In diaspora, the yellow flag has become weighted with moral, sentimental, and political imperatives. It serves as the sign through which contests over the meanings of the past in service of present and future goals are waged. Karen Cerulo suggests that national icons for nations no longer there can be thought of as "dangling signifiers," explaining that "although the dangling signifier exists in the present, its referent is confined to either the past or the future."[229] She provides an analogy of the wedding band representing an existing marriage versus one that represents a dissolved marriage, the latter being the "dangling signifier" because its meaning has not lost its power despite the loss of the marriage (the referent or signified). For Vietnamese refugee communities, the yellow flag as dangling signifier has been at the forefront of public struggles over the writing of history as well as over the terms of identity and belonging. As Nguyễn Đình Sài suggests in an article explicating the nuanced meanings of both red and yellow flags:

[229] Cerulo 1995:150-151.

> From April 30, 1975 to present, millions of Vietnamese have sought many ways to leave the country, not wanting to live under the Vietnamese Communist regime. Within the last three decades, in all the free countries in the world, the Yellow Flag has always been used to represent the Vietnamese people in all celebrations and meetings. From the Tet celebration to the commemoration of April 30th, the Yellow Flag is always raised; regardless of the organizing committee's political affiliation or social organization.[230]

Implicitly, Nguyễn Đình Sài suggests that the flag is more than a political symbol, more than a nation-state's ideological tool for circumscribing national identity and citizenship. If Vietnamese American organizations, regardless of their politics, raise the yellow flag at every public event, they imbue the flag with multiple other meanings and foreground the urgency of memory for diasporic Vietnamese.

While the creation of the yellow flag under Emperor Thành Thái at the end of the 19th century signaled liberation from Chinese imperial rule for Vietnamese, the yellow flag in diaspora has come to signal multiple objectives, including the preservation of a Vietnamese cultural identity, a struggle over writing history, a claiming of both symbolic and actual space, and an explicit opposition to the Hanoi regime based on their continued human rights infringements. These objectives that the flag represents certainly obscure other meanings people might attribute to the yellow flag. In particular, the new form of cultural nationalism in diaspora forgets the yellow flag's emergence as a nationalist symbol against foreign rule, as a symbol uniting Vietnam against its northern colonizers. As much as proponents of the yellow flag wish to remember the symbol as a signifier for freedom *in opposition* to the red flag, the red flag has actually served to unify the Vietnamese people against foreign rule as the yellow flag did long ago. However, my

[230] Nguyễn Đình Sài, "The National Flag of Viet Nam: Its Origin and Legitimacy"

work addresses the four previously mentioned facets of the yellow flag as part of an anticommunist discursive terrain upon which Vietnamese diasporic identity is negotiated.

That both the red and yellow flags remain potent symbols more than thirty years after the exile of the yellow flag from Vietnam suggests how anticommunism continues to structure community formations in the US. "Flag controversies" have erupted all over the US in the last thirty-three years and staged in various sites such as private homes, community parks and streets, local businesses, and large university campuses, ranging in intensity from symbolic gestures to forums to community-wide protests and demonstrations that attract the interest of local and national media. Besides the personal experience I had in the language program, I have heard about many other "confrontations" between Vietnamese Americans and the red flag from friends, acquaintances, and community members I came to know through my fieldwork. A colleague recently gave me an anecdotal example of a "small-scale" flag controversy: about ten years ago, a group of graduate students living in East San Diego displayed a Vietnamese communist flag in their living room (along with flags from other nations) which was visible to the street when their blinds were open. One day, they came home to find their front door plastered with newspaper clippings about communist atrocities in Vietnam, which they assumed an elderly Vietnamese woman who often walked past their home had been responsible for. In this case, a private space became the site of contests over memory and representation. Of course, the elderly woman did not have a right to plaster their door, but as a denizen of East San Diego where Vietnamese refugees have left a visible mark on the landscape with their businesses, she attempted to declare the right to claim the space as a "communist-free zone" of sorts.

While waged in a semi-private space in the above example, most "flag controversies" are controversial because they are waged in the public eye and meant to be pedagogical performances of history and identity, instructing both Vietnamese Americans and American society at large about the history that has been largely forgotten. Thus, when a recent foot bath controversy erupted in California over a UC Davis graduate student's artwork, a photograph of three foot baths painted yellow with three red stripes, the opportunity to re-ignite conversations about the meanings of the yellow flag drew both first and second generation community members. While the artist meant to pay tribute to her parents' toils in the US as refugees working in the beauty industry, the message was received differently by community critics who saw it as disrespectful towards their flag and their history.[231] When the photograph was printed in the Người Việt Daily News, the oldest and most established Vietnamese American newspaper, protest against the paper ensued for months after its January 2008 publication. Spurred by this controversy, ethnic presses gathered at a roundtable on April 13, 2008 to discuss the theme "A Challenge for Ethnic Media: When Coverage Provokes Threats from Your Own Community."[232] Thus, one of the unexpected outcomes of the foot bath/flag controversy was in enabling a cross-ethnic dialogue for those whose stakes are in preserving "freedom of press."

Following the foot bath incident, a flag controversy developed at the University of Southern California over the school's display of the red communist flag outside of one of its buildings. Such instances have occurred all over the country and Vietnamese

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[231] Le, C.N. 2008.
[232] Kim, K. 2008.

American community responses to them have been swift and decisive. Anticommunist activists usually approach the offending institution and ask for the communist flag to be removed, sometimes offering a South Vietnam flag as replacement. Irvine Valley College also recently removed a miniature display of international flags upon the insistence of Orange County activists and elected officials.[233] In the USC example, however, the forum that took place between the Vietnamese Student Association (VSA, Vietnamese American students), Vietnamese International Student Association (VISA, international students from Vietnam), and USC officials and professors after the call to take down the flag. The VISA students explained that the red flag, which is so despicable to Vietnamese Americans, does not stand in for the communist party because the party has its own flag. The flag represents Vietnamese nationals. The Vietnamese American students declared that, given their family's history as refugees, they cannot accept the red flag, but will continue to honor the yellow flag. To the surprise and pleasure of those on all sides, a compromise between VSA and VISA students was reached, each side promising to respect the other's flag.[234]

By far the largest flag controversy for Vietnamese Americans was the 1999 Hi-Tek protest in Little Saigon (Westminster, California). Just days before the Vietnamese Tết celebration, video store owner Tran Van Truong displayed a communist flag and portrait of late communist leader Ho Chi Minh in his shop, located centrally along the Bolsa Avenue strip in Little Saigon. During the "54 days and nights" of candle-light vigils, protest, prayers, speeches, and cultural performances staged along Bolsa Avenue

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[233] Bridgeford 2008.
[234] "Viet students at USC meet, talk flags" in *The Bolsavik: All Viet, all the time.* 22 April 2008.

in response to the red flag and portrait, Vietnamese Americans performed a solidarity in a capacity never before seen for this community. [235] In particular, the reputedly fractured Orange County Vietnamese American community came together and put old group quarrels aside in order to protest the display of perceived symbols of communism in their "unofficial capital," their stronghold. In a media analysis of the controversy, Cam Vu and I closely examined the Vietnamese-language press coverage of Hi-Tek and suggest that,

> The old South Vietnam flag appears throughout the Vietnamese language articles as a dominant icon in the protest. One Vietnamese American journalist claims that a remarkable aspect of this protest is the ways in which the South Vietnam flag has emerged as a "heavenly" symbol, indicated by how the protestors showed an immense respect for this flag by never letting it fall to the ground, be trampled on by the masses, or discarded in garbage bins as it had been in previous protests.[236]

The Hi-Tek protest lasted for more than two months and, at its height, involved over 10,000 people. This flag controversy provided a public stage for Vietnamese American women and men of different religious, regional, generational, class, and even political backgrounds to engage in large-scale dialogue and define the parameters of community and identity.

I provide examples of the myriad forms that the flag controversy has assumed in order to suggest that actions taken in response to "communist offenses" are actually quite varied and have recently resulted in surprising conversations and directions. All occurring within the last decade, the elderly woman's encroachment on personal property, the foot bath artwork, the college campus activism, and the Hi-Tek protest display the mixed emotions that the two flags invoke. Importantly, the actions taken in each instance

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[235] "54 days and nights" is a translation of "54 Ngày Đêm Little Saigon," *Van Hoa Magazine's* title for their special issue (March 1999) dedicated entirely to the Hi-Tek protest.

[236] Vo and Vu 2005. In our paper, we cite Vietnamese American journalist Nguyễn, Ngọc Oanh, "Nhật ký Bolsa đấu tranh: Một tuần lễ sôi sục lòng dân,"

demonstrates how anticommunism involves some kind of "acting/activism" and claiming of symbolic and literal space no matter how large or small the measure. For the lone elderly Vietnamese woman, the act of papering a stranger's door with news clippings suggests a desire to disseminate her perspective on the war and her vexed relationship to the Hanoi regime. At the same time, it can be read as her claim to the neighborhood in East San Diego, a claim to denizenship. The foot bath controversy, involving not only an artist's expression but the community's chastising of its own media, demonstrates how anticommunist battles are symbolically waged over material symbols. The college campus activism highlights the ways in which youth, a generation removed from the war, have come to adopt the yellow flag as their own. And finally, viewing the watershed Hi-Tek episode as a "transformative moment" when Vietnamese Americans loudly claimed their place in the US, in particular Little Saigon, allows us to understand how signifiers can dangle in urgent ways. They do not dangle to merely signify that which was lost. They dangle in the here and now to remind us that signifiers may be deployed to write history and claim space, but those who have wielded them without critical attention to binaries and essentializing categorizations may in fact be creating problematic new meanings around the flag for posterity. The USC "compromise" may be a productive place to start thinking about how to negotiate mixed emotions and multiple meanings of the two flags in order to move forward.

"Freedom and Heritage"

Ever mindful of the need to compromise in order for those divided by different backgrounds and perspectives to work together, or at the very least to inhabit the same space, I nonetheless insist that the ways in which Vietnamese American lives have been

constituted through uneven power relations require that we foreground their memories, actions, and sentiments as a strategy for understanding how refugee communities make meaningful the legacies of war. Vietnamese Americans and the yellow flag they wave may tell us more about how signifiers may be re-appropriated.

Nguyễn Phương Nga, an attractive soft-spoken woman in her late sixties, explained to me the nuances of her position towards the former South Vietnam and current Socialist Vietnam flags. Our interview took place over tea and biscuits in her dining room in Bonita. As a community educator and care-taker for her elderly mother, she finds time for community work only because she has remained single all her life, thus unburdened by the demands of a husband and children. Yet she has devoted her career to working with Vietnamese parents and children and tended to re-route our conversations back to topics of education. For her, the defunct South Vietnam flag should be seen as a pedagogical tool:

> Theo Cô thì dĩ nhiên lá cờ Việt Cộng là lá cờ chính thức được Quốc Tế công nhận, nhưng mà cái cờ vàng ba sọc đỏ là tượng trưng cho những người tỵ nạn ở bên này. Thành ra những nhà trường cũng nen biết điều đó để mà họ cách nghĩa cho học sinh. Mình cũng không nên là bắt họ hòng toàn chỉ dùng cờ vàng mà không mention cái cờ kia thì cũng không đúng, vì cờ kia là cờ của Quốc Tế nó công nhận. Chỉ cách nghĩa cho học trò biết là cơ đó của Việt Cộng và bay giờ họ đang cai trị Việt Nam. Còn cái cờ này là của những người Việt Nam họ đang tỵ nạn tại ben Mỹ, họ không công nhận chế độ Cộng Sản. Thì lá cờ này phải cho họ biết.
> [Of course, I think that the Viet Cong flag is the official flag [of Vietnam], recognized by the international community, but the yellow flag with three red stripes represents the refugees over here. So, the schools should know about this so they can explain it to the students. But we shouldn't force them to only use the yellow flag and not mention the other flag, that wouldn't be right because the other flag is internationally-recognized. But we need to explain to students that the other flag belongs to Viet Cong and currently they govern Vietnam. And this flag belongs to Vietnamese who

> are refugees in the US, who do not accept the communist regime. We need to let them know about this flag.][237]

Her explanation about the Việt Cộng flag and the former South Vietnam flag underscores how governments can sanction "official" national symbols but also suggests how these national symbols may stand in for alternative identities and stories, those that may contradict the romantic ideals of national belonging. If the flags and images serve as "technologies of memory" for Vietnamese Americans, how do our changing relationships to them reshape the memories invoked? Sturken suggests that, "Cultural memory is produced through objects, images, and representations. These are technologies of memory, not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides so much as objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning."[238] For more than thirty years it has been the symbol over which a collective memory of Vietnam is contested and also serves as a cultural marker through which many Vietnamese Americans imagine diasporic identity and community. To keep this flag in circulation where there is a significant number of Việt Kiều means not only to keep refugee history alive, but to stake a claim to the places where Vietnamese Americans live.

Since 2003, Vietnamese American communities across the United States have successfully lobbied city, county, and state legislatures to pass a flag resolution that recognizes the "Vietnamese American Freedom and Heritage Flag" as the official symbol of the Vietnamese American community. Currently, there are 113 cities or counties and

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[237] Nguyễn Phương Nga 2005. Translations mine.
[238] Sturken 1997: 9

11 states that have passed the resolution.[239] In a commentary for the *Northwest Asian Weekly*, political consultant Viet Nguyen suggests that the flag resolution is a "nationwide phenomenon that is reflective of the critical mass of Vietnamese American voters."[240] Nguyen provides eight persuasive reasons for why the flag resolution is important, including the contributions of Vietnamese Americans to US political economy as well as the community's significant growth and influence in the regions they inhabit. In particular, he views the resolution as a means for Vietnamese Americans to exercise "building our democratic and political skills" by defining ourselves rather than letting others define us.[241] This resolution would allow for a display of the yellow flag wherever there is a Vietnamese American community. Each city or state writes their own resolutions according to the conventions of their governing body, but the tenets of the resolutions are the same. Not surprisingly, the first resolution was passed in the city of Westminster, California on February 12, 2003.[242] Situated only about a hundred miles south of Westminster and home to the third largest Vietnamese American community in California, San Diego offers an illuminating example of how a coordinated effort by first generation Vietnamese Americans brought forth the flag resolution. It was not until nearly a year after Westminster that the resolution was passed in San Diego, after much lobbying by Vietnamese Federation leaders.

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[239]. For a listing of the cities, counties, and states that have passed the resolution, go to http://www.fva.org/vnflag/

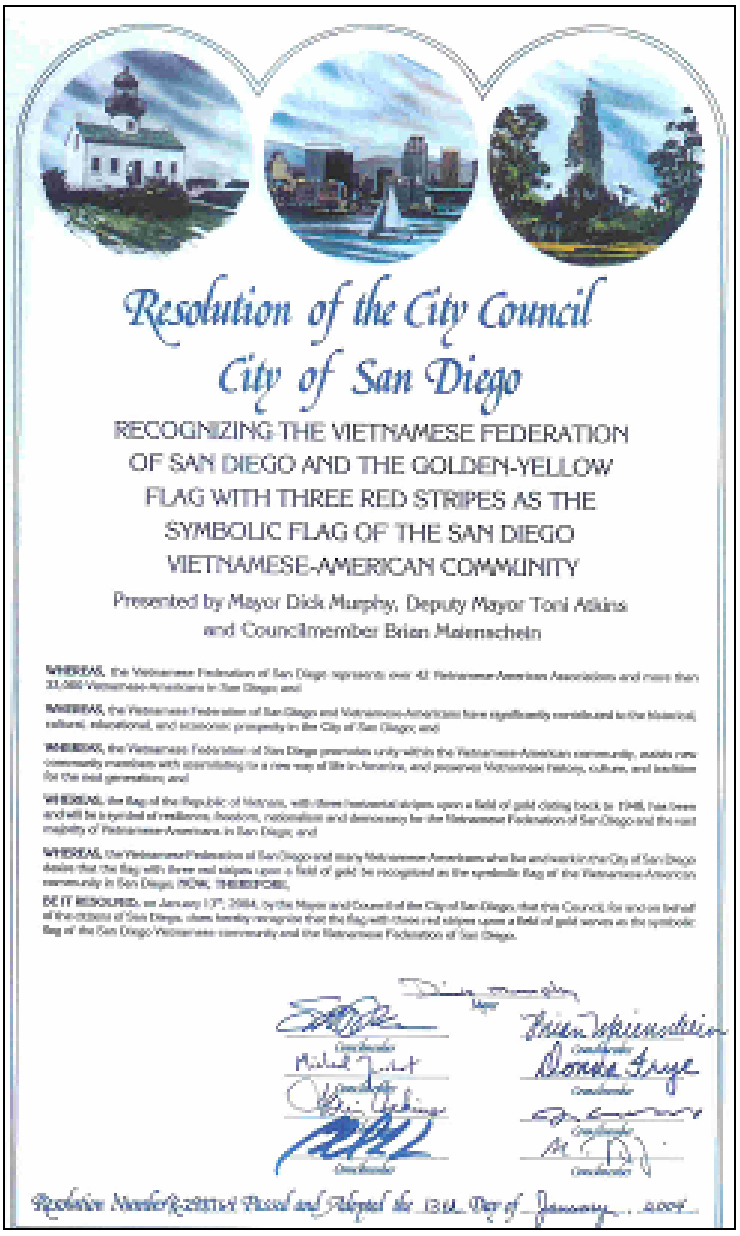
[240] Nguyen, V. 2004.

[241] Ibid.

[242] As the unofficial capital of overseas Vietnamese, Orange County is also home to Assemblyman Van Thai Tran, the first Vietnamese American elected into a state legislature. Van Tran represents California's 68th Assembly District (Anaheim, Costa Mesa, Fountain Valley, Garden Grove, Newport Beach, Stanton, and Westminster).

On January13, 2004 then mayor Dick Murphy and the City Council formally acknowledged the yellow flag as the "symbolic flag…of resilience, freedom, nationalism, and democracy" for the Vietnamese American community in San Diego (R298764).[243] The flag resolution does not change the status of Vietnam-U.S. or Vietnam-diaspora relations since the yellow flag does not come to replace the red flag of Vietnam. However, the resolution is often considered a symbolic victory over the Vietnamese communist regime by community leaders I worked with. Wherever a South Vietnamese history is acknowledged, the hegemony of Vietnam's socialist government is contested. According to the terminology of the resolution, the "Freedom and Heritage Flag" is entirely compatible with American ideals of "resilience, freedom, nationalism, and democracy." Thus, the technical language on the resolution would not only appease Vietnamese American constituents but simultaneously reaffirm the ideals of the US nation-state.

[243] Quoted from the Resolution shown in Fig. 3.1.



Resolution of the City Council
City of San Diego

RECOGNIZING THE VIETNAMESE FEDERATION OF SAN DIEGO AND THE GOLDEN-YELLOW FLAG WITH THREE RED STRIPES AS THE SYMBOLIC FLAG OF THE SAN DIEGO VIETNAMESE-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Presented by Mayor Dick Murphy, Deputy Mayor Toni Atkins and Councilmember Brian Maienschein

Fig. 3.1 Flag Resolution of the City of San Diego

However, by framing the flag as not only a symbol of "freedom" but also one of "heritage," I suggest that the political quest for freedom is coupled with a drive to sustain Vietnamese heritage and culture in diaspora. Thus, the flag becomes more than a political

symbol for national identities. For Vietnamese Americans, this symbol has come to signify finding a political voice, inscribing a refugee history, preserving a cultural identity, and claiming a place as denizens and citizens of their new homeland.

In an interview with a first generation Vietnamese American community leader I call Trần M. Quân, we talked at length about the various anticommunist protests, demonstrations, and other types of political actions taken himself and his peers. He mentioned the flag resolution, referred to in Vietnamese as Nghị Quyết Cờ Vàng, as a key demonstration of "our success as a community organization." I asked why he thought the flag resolution was an important project to pursue and he replied:

> All the people who left Vietnam because you are looking for freedom…The flag resolution represents you are not a communist…You are a person who got out of Vietnam because you don't want to live with communists, so you got no reason to respect the communist flag, so you have to keep the old flag to represent the freedom of the Vietnamese. I left Vietnam and I cannot respect the communist flag at all because they're not my flag…they're not my flag.[244]

For Trần M. Quân, the yellow flag gives purpose to Vietnamese refugees' displacement and exile from Vietnam. As a token of "freedom," the yellow flag affirms the choice that they made to leave Vietnam. Beyond the question of allegiance or loyalty to the nation, the yellow flag may stand in for the "good" and "right" choice made by Vietnamese refugees, and therefore becomes a stand-in for the stories they may be unable to articulate at this time.

Another community leader, Lý Đức Mạnh, described this political measure as having a "psychological effect" on the Vietnamese American community because, "The

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[244] Trần M. Quân 2005.

people that fought under that flag can be proud that the flag is recognized as the symbol of our community."[245] He went on to explain to me how the flag represents the "sacrifices" South Vietnamese made during the war, sacrifices that have been largely unacknowledged. The sacrifices include the deaths of millions of people during the war and in the refugee "escapes" from Vietnam, thus the "psychological effect" that he referred to involves not only building morale around a "victory over the communists," but remembering the past and respecting the dead. When the dead are remembered and respected, as they are by the yellow flag, Vietnamese refugee lives are given purpose and meaning. This struggle over symbols is also a contest of memory since the flag is one of the most visible technologies of memory for Vietnamese Americans working to maintain and disseminate their version of Vietnam's contentious history. Viewing the flag as a technology of Vietnamese American cultural memory allows us to move beyond the question of "truth" and righteousness and refocuses the discussion on what political purpose the particular memories serve in the present.

Lý Đức Mạnh also elaborated on his views regarding Vietnamese American anticommunist activism, insisting that efforts such as lobbying for the flag resolution is much more effective than anticommunist protests and demonstrations. While he acknowledged that protests and demonstrations may be effective in sending a strong message across to the mainstream population, these venues often do not affect real change. He said to me:

> I think my way of thinking is, you see, the protest and thing like that is kind of a venue for people to vent their frustration and anger but I think that there are other effective ways of doing things by using the political

[245] Lý Đức Mạnh 2004

> process. That's what I prefer. By lobbying, by making people understand the situation. Making the people understand the type of government that they are. You know, the protest and thing like that, it is thing that you do it and you go home and nothing happen. I mean there's no effect. It's not that no effect, but it's you know…But I know these people if they hear I'm saying that they be very angry with me [laughs]. Yeah, that is one of the thing I'm really concerned about. I don't want our community to be painted a group of you know creating problem for the community, you know. My way of thinking is we probably have a better way of, a better more effective way of fighting the communist.[246]

If the yellow flag and the flag resolution work as "psychological" tools for first generation Vietnamese Americans to define the boundaries of community and identity against Vietnamese communism, what are the implications of inserting "homeland politics" into mainstream political spheres? This flag resolution illustrates how the work of anticommunism is never a clear-cut path of resistance against Vietnamese communism, but should be viewed as a multi-stranded narrative about the imbrication of Vietnamese American lives in US national and transnational regimes of representation. I suggest that by using the language of democracy in lobbying for the flag resolution Vietnamese Americans show themselves to be savvy and successful in mainstream politicking while injecting a version of South Vietnam history into US politics, forcing (Vietnamese) Americans to consider the implications of South Vietnamese memories, stories, and bodies on US soil. The Freedom and Heritage Flags flying in San Diego and other parts of the US signal that more than one Vietnam exists and further serve as a counter-story or memory to official historical discourses about the Vietnam/American War. That South Vietnam continues to exist in diaspora makes it impossible to dismiss the unruliness of the war and its continuing effects on (Vietnamese) Americans.

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[246] Ibid.

Since the passage of the San Diego resolution, the Viet Fed president and other politically active members formed a task force to work with organizers in Santa Clara (with second largest Vietnamese American population in California) and Orange Counties to pass a California state legislation, under the bill SCR 17. Vietnamese Americans number nearly 500,000 in California, the highest concentration of overseas Vietnamese anywhere. Democratic California Senator Denise Moreno Ducheny (San Diego District 40) authored the bill after working closely with the Viet Fed president who has been her long-time friend and supporter.[247] Contrary to popular opinion that such a bill would only be supported by conservative Republicans,[248] the introduction of SCR 17 by a Democratic senator shows the way in which Vietnamese American leaders have learned to navigate US politics through bi-partisan lobbying, acquiring allies on both sides of the two-party system.

As the movement picked up momentum in the winter of 2005, Vietnamese American elders from San Diego bussed or caravanned up to Sacramento almost monthly to meet with state senators and assembly-members and attend hearings in order to push SCR 17 forward. I was invited to attend many lobbying trips, but due to my teaching responsibilities and a desire to maintain a low-profile, I did not join my elders on these 8-hours long trips. I followed the movement through the news brought back from Sacramento that was excitedly discussed along with other business at the Viet Fed

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[247] During my 4 years working for the Viet Fed, I have been to two campaign fundraising dinners hosted by the Vietnamese community for Senator Ducheny. Ducheny has, among her supporters and friends, many former Viet Fed presidents who have provided her opportunities to be visible among Vietnamese American constituents.

[248] See Aguilar-San Juan 1998 and Ngo 1996. Additionally, The Republican's "fervent anti-communism has made it the dominant party for some minority groups from current and former Communist states, in particular Cuban-Americans and Vietnamese-Americans." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republican_Party_(United_States)

weekly meetings. I was also kept abreast of the developments of SCR 17 through emails and articles in the local Vietnamese language papers. What impressed me was how devoted and tireless the elders were in their commitment to the flag resolution. They paid for the cost of transportation and lodging in Sacramento with their own money. I overheard an elder with more means offer to pay for his peers. I have seen how the long car rides, the late nights, and long days of meeting and waiting around took a physical toll on some elders' health. From my position in the Viet Fed, I saw how the flag resolution movement was a labor of love and a performance of the elders' ongoing commitment to their history and to each other. In a summary article, Chân Nhân addresses the achievements of their community leaders and calls for Vietnamese Americans to continue engaging with state politicians through letters, emails, and phone calls.

> Từ nhiều tháng qua, việc vận động của đồng hương khắp nơi trong Tiểu Bang California ủng hộ Nghị Quyết SCR 17 như gởi thư, email, gọi điện thoại …đến các TNS trong Ủy Ban đã dấy lên một sinh khí sôi nỗi cùng với các hoạt động nhân ngày tưởng niệm 30 năm Quốc Hận 30-4.
> [For the past several months, the movement of our fellow Vietnamese Americans everywhere in California in support of Resolution SCR 17, through letters, email, phone calls…to the members of the senate rules committee has resulted in an exciting climate, including the activities around 30 years of National Resentment, April 30.][249]

On June 1, 2005, the California State Senate passed SCR 17 with a bipartisan vote of 22-0.[250] However, later that summer, SCR 17 was blocked from the Assembly vote

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[249] Chân Nhân, "Ủy Ban Tư Pháp Định Chế Thượng Viện - Quốc Hội Tiểu Bang California Đình Hoãn Bỏ Phiếu Nghị Quyết SCR 17 Công Nhận Cờ Vàng [Senate Rules Committee – California State Legislature Considers Dismissing SCR 17 Recognizing the Yellow Flag]" document circulated via email, 10 May 2005.

[250] "Senate Passes Resolution Recognizing Former Vietnamese Flag." Press Release from the Office of Senator Ducheny, 2 June 2005.

due to active lobbying by the Vietnam embassy in San Francisco.[251] In the California State Senate's analysis of SCR 17, under the "arguments in opposition" section, the opposing viewpoint was stated as such:

> According to the Consulate General of Vietnam, 'Vietnam and the Untied States have enjoyed the bilateral growth not only in business and trade but also in cultural and educational exchange and many other social aspects. Vietnam has received numerous high ranking delegations, officials, Senators, Congress persons and business communities from the U.S., as well as from the State of California. Such kind of resolution, once voted, will certain harm the multifaceted relations between Vietnam and the U.S. and thus the trade and business between the State of California and Vietnam might receive a negative impact. Moreover, the U.S. Administration and U.S. State Department are consistently committed in recognizing the only Red Flag with Golden Star of the unified nation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and are against any kind of resolution recognizing the flag of the former regime of South Vietnam.'[252]

Opponents of SCR 17 framed their argument as motivated by a desire for strengthening diplomacy and trade between Vietnam and the US, processes that had been severely stagnated since the America's decade-long embargo on Vietnam. I take the perceived "threat" of the yellow flag (despite its "dangling" status) to Vietnam and "leftist" groups to indicate the very real currency that symbols have, nationally and internationally. Beyond merely "symbolic" value, as drafters and supporters of SCR 17 have couched the resolution, I argue that *what* it symbolizes creates a real threat to the order of things—the rapidly increasing ties between the US and Vietnam, seemingly a fast track to

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[251] This is not to say that only the Vietnam government opposes the Flag Resolution. There have been several vocal Vietnamese American and American professors who have spoken out against SCR 17. See Cohn 2005. In fact, an organization called "Veterans for Peace" has publicly organized against SCR 17, framing the resolution as a blockade to restoring diplomacy and trade between Vietnam and the US. See Veterans for Peace 69th Chapter, "Opposing Senate Concurrent Resolution 17 in the California Legislature." http://www.veteransforpeace.org/Board_resolutions_2005.vp.html. Another group called Vets for Friendship with Vietnam put out a press release on Flag Day opposing the resolution, "Vets Mark Flag Day by Calling on California Assembly to Vote No on Saigon Flag," 14 June 2005.

[252] Senate Rules Committee Bill Analysis, 1 June 2005. http://info.sen.ca.gov/pub/05-06/bill/sen/sb_0001-0050/scr_17_cfa_20050601_102536_sen_floor.html

reconciliation. The *what* I am concerned with here is how refugee histories that have no home and therefore cannot be reconciled demand that we critically challenge both sides of the resolution battle to consider whose interest these political moves are meant to serve.

In response to challenges from the Vietnam consulate and American dissenters, Vietnamese American community leaders enlisted the support of their allies in office and the five democratic Assembly-members who identified themselves as co-authors of SCR 17 signed a letter authored by Tom Umberg (69th District) requesting the Assembly Speaker to consider allowing them to vote on SCR 17 before the end of session that summer.[253] The letter made a case for acknowledging "our state's growing Vietnamese-American constituencies" by voting for the flag that "represents the proud history and heritage of most of the community and is an expression who [*sic*]they are and where they came from."[254] In his response letter Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez explained that there has been an "overabundance of Members' Resolutions regarding foreign policy issues during this busy time. All of these resolutions engender deep and strong emotional feelings. While appropriate, I am concerned that at this time the importance of California's business take precedence [*sic*] over foreign policy matters."[255]He ended the brief letter with a promise of considering the resolution upon the Assembly reconvening in the fall. Consequently, the movement was deterred for another year.

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[253] The other four democratic Assembly-members who signed the letter were Juan Vargas (79th District), Rudy Bermudez (56th District), Dave Jones (9th District), and Sally Leiber (22nd District).
[254] Umberg to Nunez, 31 August 2005.
[255] Nunez to Umberg, Varagas, Bermudez, Jones, Leiber, and Members of the State Assembly. 1 Sept. 2005.

While Umberg's letter framed the flag resolution as an important domestic issue for some of California's constituencies, Nunez's response reframes the resolution as a foreign policy matter, thus less urgent than other issues affecting the state. The ways in which drafters of flag resolutions have skirted the "foreign policy" dilemma was to make a case for the flag as a symbol of the Vietnamese American community's heritage. In fact, Vietnamese American community leaders have been very conscientious about the language they use in seeking support for the flag resolution so that policy-makers would not misconstrue their intentions. However, once the Vietnam embassy got involved, the matter could then be relegated to foreign policy, and thus too controversial and easily dismissed by a state legislature.

In response to this decision, Vietnamese American community members (part of an action committee formed to work on SCR 17 called Ủy Ban Vận Động Cờ Vàng Tiểu Bang California/The Heritage and Freedom Flag Committee) disseminated their own press releases and news articles in local newspapers as well as on email listservs and websites to keep the momentum going until the next opportunity to bring the vote before the Assembly. In a press release dated December 12, 2005, the committee's president (also the former Viet Fed President) stated the following:

> Công tác trước mắt là vận động thành công thông qua Nghị Quyết SCR 17 sắp đưa ra Hạ Viện California vào năm 2006. Một trong nhiều hình thái vận động sẽ là cuộc biểu dương lực lượng trươc tiển đình Quốc Hội Tiểu Bang đầy ý nghĩa, thể hiện ý chí son sắt của mỗi chúng ta để nói tiếng nói từ con tim, tiếng nói của lẽ phải là bảo vệ ngọn cờ quốc gia màu vàng ba sọc đỏ. Đó khong những là biểu tượng thiêng liêng của chính nghĩa, mà còn là căn cước của những người tỵ nạn cộng sản chúng ta.
> [The task before us is to get the Senate Concurrent Resolution 17 passed, as it is scheduled to be considered by the California State Assembly in

> 2006. One of the most important aspects in this effort is to demonstrate our critical mass and the importance of this issue before the state legislature, to speak up, to speak from the heart, the voice of righteousness that seeks to protect the flag of our people, yellow with three red stripes. That is not only a divine symbol of just cause, but also the emblem of our community as refugees of communism.][256]

Intended for Vietnamese American supporters of SCR 17, the press release gave a brief update as well as re-asserted the importance of the flag as the symbol of a morally righteous refugee community seeking to be heard.

The following summer, the flag resolution cleared the Assembly and was signed as an Executive Order (S-14-06) by California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Many Vietnamese Americans proudly and loudly rejoiced over this piece of legislation that did not have any fiscal impact and did not change relations between Vietnam and the US, nor did it make Vietnam any more responsible in attending to the human rights concerns voiced by the international community.[257] So what did it really do? How did if affect Vietnamese Americans? Beyond what the governor may have signed as an "Executive Order," I insist that the movement itself mattered more than the outcome. In other words I see the journey as having more value to Vietnamese Americans than the actual destination. While community leaders would probably disagree with me on this point, I suggest it matters little what a state "symbolically" recognizes so much as how the people organized and asserted their perspectives. They created forums for telling their history. And they made claims to the cities and states where they reside. The movement was a

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[256] The Heritage and Freedom Flag Committee, Press Release, 12 December, 2005. Translations are my own.

[257] Critics of the Flag Resolution also argue that the movement is a waste of time because it does not address any of the urgent concerns for community empowerment (health, education, work, etc.).

performance of a refugee story that has yet to end as Vietnamese Americans continue to dramatize their struggles in national and international memory theatres.

Performing Identity at Tết: Civic Engagement and the Flag

For Vietnamese Americans in San Diego, the passing of the flag resolution by the San Diego City Council required a prominent acknowledgment at the Tết Festival that year. [258] The 2004 Tết Festival in City Heights was the most well-attended and purposefully-organized among the four that I attended during my years of fieldwork because it not only celebrated the lunar New Year, but the passing of the flag resolution in San Diego, recognizing the yellow flag as the emblem of Vietnamese Americans in San Diego. Thus, this "cultural" site became infused with political symbols and personnel, such as the South Vietnam and US flags, Vietnamese veterans dressed in their regalia and San Diego city council representatives.

In an article titled, "Lễ Hội trong Đời Sống Dân Việt," former Vietnamese Federation President Đỗ Như Điện (from 1990-1994) suggests the historical and continued importance of Tết for Vietnamese nationals *and* diasporics:

> Tết Nguyên Đán là ngày lễ quan trọng nhất, linh thiêng nhất và cũng được chuẩn bị kỹ càng, chu đáo nhất trong các lễ hội tại nước ta. Người Việt tỵ nạn ở hải ngoại tuy dã gần 30 năm làm quen với những lễ hội tại những xứ dịnh cư, nhưng tầm quan trọng của ngày tết vẫn không suy giảm.
> [Tet is the most important, divine, most anticipated and planned for holiday of all holidays in our country. Despite almost thirty years of

[258] The festival took place at the newly-constructed City Heights Urban Village Performance Annex, next to the new public library, completed in Fall of 2003. The goal of building a new "urban village" was to reduce crime by centralizing police, recreation, education, and civic activities. The Performance Annex has a large stage and grassy area ideal for outdoors concert venues. City Heights is located in east San Diego and home to a many immigrant and refugee communities including East African, Latino, and Southeast Asian. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_Heights,_San_Diego,_California

> acclimating to other host countries' holidays, the high regard for Tet has not diminished for Vietnamese refugees living overseas.][259]

Đỗ underscores the significance of Tết as a Vietnamese tradition, a space for maintaining a sense of Vietnamese cultural identity, which he views as particularly difficult for those living in the margins of dominant culture. In the article, he discusses how this tradition offers continuity with the past and fosters collective identity. Yet, he also discusses how Tết has transformed as a result of migration. Đỗ reinforces the notion that "traditions" are mediations between the collective past and present political desires through his emphasis on the urgency of bridging the past and present for a community displaced by war. Expanding Hobsbawm and Ranger's concept of "invented traditions," I view the Tết Festival in San Diego as a tradition invented through the particular circumstances of refugee displacement and ensuing desires for a meaningful narrative of identity and community invested in "freedom and heritage." "'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past."[260] The way Tết is celebrated overseas certainly warrants the question of what political purpose it serves for communities estranged from their country of origin, the place where such "tradition" must necessarily reference and return to. How might Tết, as celebrated by diasporic Vietnamese, transform our understanding of identity and community? In San Diego, Tết Festival organizers explicitly express their primary objective as "cultural preservation."

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[259] This article was published two years in a row in *Giai Phẩm Xuân* 2003 and 2004 by Đỗ Như Điện. Translations are my own.
[260] Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 1

Tết can be understood to be the key annual event that defines the boundaries of Vietnamese diasporic cultural identity because it provides Vietnamese Americans the opportunity to gather in ritualized celebration and interface with others in their "community." It has become an important space where the traumatic rupture of migration can be cushioned by the familiarity and pleasure of being amongst those "like you."[261] Tết festivals feature dance, song, martial arts, and other such theatrical performances that provide Vietnamese Americans with a space of pleasure and suspension from the everyday grind of life and work.

In the introduction to *Feasts and Celebrations in North American Ethnic Communities*, Genevieve Fabre argues that festivals and celebratory performances "can be simultaneously a threat to, or a warrant of, the social order" therefore they serve as productive sites for the study of ethnic identity and power relations.[262] The creation and performance of group identities within this social space makes visible the contradictions that people inhabit and negotiate through symbolic practices. Rachel Buff's work on West Indian carnival and Native American powwow suggests that Black cultural forms have been widely perceived as both threatening and exotic while Native American culture is seen as "vestiges of a dying race."[263] Asian American and other "ethnic" or "multicultural" festivals and celebrations are usually viewed as simultaneously quaint and exotic spectacles of otherness *and* evidence of America's rich multiculturalism. Since Victor Turner's seminal work on ritual, historical and anthropological studies have

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[261] See Sanjoy Mazumdar et al. "Creating a Sense of Place: The Vietnamese-Americans and Little Saigon" Journal of Environmental Psychology (2000) 20, 319-333
Colette Marie McLaughlin and Paul Jesilow "Conveying a Sense of Community along Bolsa Avenue: Little Saigon as a Model of Ethnic Commercial Belts" *International Migration* vol. 36 (1) 1998.
[262] Fabre 1995: 2.
[263] Buff 2001: 118.

seriously examined festivals for their role in cultural reproduction and community-building.[264] In the space provided by the collective celebration of Tết, Vietnamese Americans articulate their self-definitions as refugees and ethnic Americans and make a claim to the neighborhoods and cities they live in. Thus, staging an "acceptance ceremony" for the flag resolution during Tết not only makes sense in light of the yellow flag as a marker of heritage, but also illustrates what Vietnamese American elders seemed to already know so well: that culture and politics are mutually constitutive.

In San Diego Tết celebrations has a history that predates the Vietnamese Federation's founding in 1984. Several of my interview subjects corroborated the story that Tết has been celebrated in San Diego since the first Vietnamese refugee group settled here after April 1975. Thus, in 1976 Tết was celebrated modestly at the University of California, San Diego campus, but it was quite meaningful and emotionally-charged for a group who had only recently become displaced and exiled.[265] One interview subject, Nguyễn Châu, explains to me that he was "very moved" during the first Tết celebration in San Diego because of a combination of sentiments—missing loved ones in Vietnam, feeling uncertainty among new people (other Vietnamese refugees and foreigners), and being displaced in a "xứ lạ[strange land]" [266] Thus, the initial motive for observing Tết was to gather Vietnamese refugees together during a difficult time and provide the

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[264] For example, Kurashige (2002) examines transformation of Nisei Week celebrations in Los Angeles between 1934 and 1990, arguing that the celebration serves as a site for the ongoing negotiation of Japanese American identity through and against internal conflicts and external stereotypes such as the model minority myth. Bodnar (1992) looks at local celebrations as pathways towards forging national identities.

[265] From email correspondence with Lý, Đức Mạnh on 4 March 2007.

[266] Nguyễn Châu. Email correspondence. 8 July 2007.

attendees with a "taste of home."[267] Since then, the goals for celebrating Tết have shifted more towards cultural maintenance and education and instilling in the younger generation a sense of pride in their heritage.

Since the beginning of its inception in 1984, the Vietnamese Federation has taken over the task of organizing this community event with the collaboration of its member organizations. Some of the key players each year include the Vietnamese Veterans Organization (whose name changed officially in 2004 to Liên Hội Chiến Sĩ Việt Nam Cộng Hòa [Association of Warriors of the Republic of Vietnam]) who are responsible for the flag ceremony and the Vietnamese Elders Association who lead the Tế Lễ Cổ Truyền [Traditional Ceremonial Offering] portion of the opening ceremony. Various social service, religious, student, athletic, and business groups also contribute with song, dance, and exhibits. The event kicks off officially with an opening ceremony around the noon hour of the first full day. The opening ceremony has three main components: the flag ceremony and national anthem headed by veterans, the traditional ceremonial offering headed by elders, and the welcome and awards presentation given by the Vietnamese Federation president. During the flag ceremony, veterans of the former Republic of Vietnam military dressed in their regalia (some bearing ceremonial rifles) escort the yellow flag with three red stripes to the stage area. After a series of salutes, the audience is asked to participate in the singing of the South Vietnamese national anthem while speakers blast the song in the background. The anthem is always followed by a Phút Mạc Niệm [moment of silence] where the audience is asked to remember the fallen

[267] Ibid.

soldiers, the boat people lost at sea, and countless others who died for tự do [freedom] and dân chủ [democracy]. Throughout the day, entertainment in the form of lion dances, traditional and modern dances, songs, skits, and talent demonstrations take place onstage while festival-goers peruse the vendor and food booths. Some vendors advertise a service or product and entice attendees with giveaways, but many booths are manned by non-profit groups.

Buff makes a compelling case for examining cultural performances as sites that reveal how historically aggrieved groups create "traditions" that establish connections to past cultural forms as well as claiming place ("denizenship") in their new homes. Buff critiques terms such as "immigrant," "refugee," and "illegal alien" as state-centric and disabling, showing how they are used in US policy as a means of drawing lines between citizen/alien, legal/illegal, and belong/un-belonging. Rather than using these top-down terms, Buff refers to her subjects as "denizens" who actively negotiate their place in the US and define belonging via alternate routes other than those authorized by the state. They do so through cultural performance. Drawing from Buff's work, I view Tết Festivals as a key site for negotiating the terms of denizenship for Vietnamese Americans, particularly through the deployment of the flag at this site. That this cultural event (like other less public events) has always incorporated a political symbol, the South Vietnam flag, is itself a telling maneuver about the intersection of culture and politics. What Tết festivals also reveal is the way that an "authentic" and legitimate Vietnamese refugee identity is negotiated on the ground.

To celebrate the passage of the flag resolution in San Diego, the Tết festival site was decorated with rows upon rows of yellow and red-striped flags of various sizes. The newly-built City Heights Urban Village Performance Annex was transformed into Vietnamese American festival grounds, decorated with vendor banners in both English and Vietnamese and cordoned off by chain-link fencing that claimed the space between the Weingart Library, the Annex's outdoor stage, and Fairmount Avenue. All festival attendees were handed small South Vietnam and US paper flags at the main entry gate, which was painted bright yellow and arched like the entry of a pagoda facing west towards the main thoroughfare. Event organizers set up a canopied seating area with about twenty to thirty rows of fold-up chairs facing the large outdoor stage. This canopied area was filled to capacity (approximately 300 people) and overflowing during the opening ceremony that began around the noon hour on January 25, 2004.

Fabre suggests that within ethnic festivals and celebrations, "The use of familiar images and symbols, drawn from the ethnic traditions and values, helps to explore and define problems with which groups are confronted; in the process, new modes of representation are created which, in turn, engender new meaning and a better understanding of the situation of each community."[268] During the opening ceremony, for the flag salute, a large South Vietnam flag was ceremoniously carried to the foot of the stage by six Vietnamese Americans of first, 1.5, and second generation—community leaders, veterans, students, men and women.[269] While the resolution was being handed over on stage, the crowd applauded and cheered, waving their miniature flags. From my

[268] Fabre 1995: 8.
[269] A few minutes prior to the flag ceremony, I was enlisted to be one of the flag bearers because I can represent the younger generation and I was formally dressed in the ao dai, the Vietnamese traditional dress.

view in front of the stage as one of the flag bearers, I surveyed the audience and saw that some older Vietnamese Americans in the crowd had tears in their eyes while others seemed cheerful and triumphant. Vietnamese American youth were respectful of the seriousness of the ceremony and kept quiet, but I wondered how many were quiet because they did not know why the flag had to be so ceremoniously displayed and celebrated. Or, failing to make the same sort of emotional connection as their elders, were they just disinterested? Most audience members remained quiet, somber, perhaps respectful, or maybe they felt ambivalent. I could not know the range (and depth) of people's feelings on this occasion, but I recall my own feelings as twinges of awe and pride. I was in awe of the crowd more than the proceedings in front of the stage and I was proud of what those of my parents' generation had accomplished in their city. A hush fell over the audience that had gathered in a half-moon arrangement close to the stage. Standing at the foot of the stage in my red and black aó dài clutching the bold yellow nylon fabric, the flag, with both hands, I felt simultaneously self-conscious and inconsequential. While I knew that the crowd would be staring in my direction, I also knew that I mattered little next to this massive flag loaded with so much meaning.

As I observed the crowd and saw the variety of sentiments displayed on their faces, I understood that this moment may mean many different things to Vietnamese Americans on the personal level, but it can be understood as a ritual of subject-making for the group. Displaced here by a war many Americans and Vietnamese wish to forget, individuals in the community continue to be haunted in variously personal ways, but a collective conjuring of the ghosts of South Vietnam took place in front of the yellow flag. That the war has not ended for many Vietnamese Americans is reinforced when the past

and present collide in a collective act of tribute to South Vietnam. According to Van Tran, California state Assembly member, "The war may have ended for the United States, but for many Vietnamese refugees, the war still continues at another level, at a political level."[270] This continuance of the war for Vietnamese refugees on a political stage can perhaps be understood by the way many elders I spoke with use the term "đấu tranh" [fight, wage war] when referring to their work in the community. The war's effects come to the fore through the collective remembering of South Vietnam and the staging of their (successful) anticommunist activism at the 2004 Tết Festival.

The Breen Park Example: Mixed Messages and Polite Critiques

In October of 2005, the new Breen Park in Mira Mesa (a San Diego community) was officially "opened" by the formal ribbon cutting ceremony by City Council member Brian Maienschein.[271] In Maienschein's November 2005 newsletter, he stated his pride in the new 10-acre park, especially in "the country flags embedded in the ground. They really represent the diversity that exists in Mira Mesa and how we continually strive to embrace such diversity."[272] Vietnamese Federation members were invited to attend the humble ceremony because the yellow flag was among those painted into the cement. My sister and I came to the park, not knowing what a ribbon ceremony for a local park would be like, and found six other Viet Fed members already there. Those six were all elders who had been involved with the lobbying for the yellow flag rather than the red flag to be etched next to the word "Vietnam."

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[270] Tran is a conservative republican who has been a major supporter for SCR 17.
[271] Breen Park is located at Polaris Drive and Capricorn Way, San Diego, CA 92126
[272] "Maienschein Opens Breen Park in Mira Mesa," *News from MAIENstreet: A Neighborhood Newsletter from Councilman Brian Maienschein*. Vol. 5, Issue 8 (November 2005): 1.

Fig. 3.2 Etching of Vietnam Flag at Breen Park

The ceremony was quick and casual, with the council member giving some remarks about his district as well as his investment in community development.

In Mira Mesa the largest populations of Asian Americans are Filipinos and Vietnamese, indicative of the demographics in San Diego County.[273] However, Mira Mesa is increasingly becoming a suburban stronghold for Vietnamese Americans.[274] While the yellow flag next to the word Vietnam would be considered an international faux pas, the grounded history of Vietnamese Americans in this locale resulted in the grounding of this symbol for Vietnamese American constituents here, demonstrating what I have explained as a move to situate history and claim space. Children playing at the park and others who happen upon this etching might give pause to the presumably

[273] According to the 2000 US Census, Vietnamese Americans numbered 33,504 (approx. 2.5% of total SD population). Filipino Americans numbered 75,197 (approx. 6.15% of total SD population)
[274] According to Wikipedia, "The Mira Mesa area has attracted a large Filipino and Vietnamese community, and Filipino and Vietnamese grocery stores (as well as other ethnic markets, including Indian and Chinese) have been opened in Mira Mesa."
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mira_Mesa,_San_Diego,_California

simple display of diversity, of local color. The mixed message of the yellow flag and the word Vietnam requires we interrupt the multicultural narrative, even if ever so briefly, to ask whose Vietnam? Whose America? Thus, I read the yellow flag and the flag resolution movement as indicating veiled challenges or polite critiques (the only kind possible coming from "good guests") of the conflicting, contradictory, and sometimes outright hypocritical premise of American citizenship and belonging because it calls our attention to the absence of South Vietnamese and refugee narratives. On the ground, Vietnamese Americans continue to negotiate the terms of "inclusion" through fighting for the yellow flag and the memories and sentiments for which it dangles.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Unfinished Business": Silence in Vietnamese Refugee Homes

> **Thúy Võ Đặng:** Nhiều người trẻ nói với con là cha mẹ không nhắc về chiến tranh, những câu chuyện quá khứ.
> [Many young people tell me that their parents do not talk about the war, the stories from their past.]
> **Thái Ngọc Hương:**[275] Không thích nhắc không hẳn là thân thiện. Không thích nhắc có nghĩa là kỹ niệm đâu đớn người ta không thích nhắc, nhưng mà nhắc một cách gián tiếp. Khi nói không thích nhắc là nhắc một cách gián tiếp. Không muốn *remind* đó là indirectly họ muốn *remind* trong gia đình có cái hận thù như vậy cho nên không muốn nói.
> [Not wanting to mention (the past) is not necessarily charitable. Not wanting to mention (the past) means that those painful memories are recalled in an indirect way. When we say they do not want to recall, that means the recall is indirect. Not wanting to remind means that they actually indirectly remind the family about the resentment and animus which cannot be spoken.][276]
>
> While the importance of voice is indisputable, pronouncing silence as the converse of speech or as its subordinate can also be oppressively univocal.[277]

Through a series of formal interviews and spontaneous conversations with a 60 year-old Vietnamese American woman who has been active in community work since the early 1980s, I began to see that the ways in which we have come to understand silence and forgetting as well as the tension between telling and not telling as structured in much too rigid and binary terms. Rather than thinking about silence as an absence and forgetting as necessarily opposed to remembering, I suggest that silence can act as "indirect" provocations of the memories that are too painful to mention within

[275] The names of my interviewees have all been changed to maintain their confidentiality.
[276] Thái Ngọc Hương 2006b. Translations are my own.
[277] King King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

Vietnamese refugee homes, memories that may be traumatic. In this chapter, I veer away from psychoanalytical perspectives on trauma in order to make an argument for how war and migration, as moments of profound rupture, establish the trauma motif for my participants' representations of their life stories. Consequently, I show how the silence in refugee homes necessitates an alternative "vocabulary" for Vietnamese refugees to articulate their identity and history. Anticommunism has thus far offered such a vocabulary yet it remains understudied as a cultural discourse. My dissertation has addressed how anticommunist discourse and practices enable the production, dissemination, and performance of South Vietnamese and refugee stories. This chapter addresses what remains unexplored, unspeakable.

I interviewed Cô Hương three times over the span of two years and sat down many more times talking casually with her about community politics, current issues and controversies in San Diego, or gossip about people we both know in the Vietnamese Federation of San Diego. Cô Hương's youthful appearance belies 60 years of life experience. Behind her bright eyes and bursts of spontaneous laughter lie an impressive store of memories of a Vietnam I long to know and an intimate knowledge of San Diego's Vietnamese refugee community I am only beginning to understand. When I gingerly approached the topic of the Vietnam/American War with her, she recited a well-rehearsed history of South Vietnam's fall to communism and the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, including the boat people. I wondered how many times she had spoken these same words and who her audience had been before. But she never spoke to me from a personal, intimate place. I asked her if she tells her children about the war and she hesitantly acknowledged that she does not tell them too much because of a desire to

move on from the past, a popular assertion among all my interview subjects with children. Subsequently, I asked why elders do not share these stories with their own children but invest so much in educating "the community" about this refugee history, as the Vietnamese Federation does. In her explanation, Cô Hương reveals the delicate tightrope first generation Vietnamese Americans walk in wanting to teach their children about the past while simultaneously protecting them from the traumas of that same past.

This chapter explores the dimensions of forgetting, burdened silences, and the indirect transmission of South Vietnam memories in the domestic space by Vietnamese Americans of the refugee generation. Through observation and interview data as well as my personal reflection on growing up in a refugee home, I explore how first generation Vietnamese Americans have latched on to anticommunism as a discourse for *indirectly* articulating stories about the traumas of war and migration to their children. Cathy Caruth suggests that the prevalence of trauma in the twentieth century demands new consideration of how history must be understood beyond the traditional model of experience and reference. Expanding Freud's psychoanalytic theory on trauma, Caruth insists that the unassimilability of trauma in the human psyche makes it necessary to explore how and in what form trauma returns in memory and representation. She argues that trauma may enable new modes for engaging with history by not only viewing history as mediated by relations of power but also by considering the question of ethics. In her analysis of *Hiroshima mon amour*, Caruth shows how "The possibility of knowing history, in this film, is thus also raised as a deeply ethical dilemma: the unremitting

problem of *how not to betray the past*."[278] This ethical dilemma is particularly relevant to scattered Vietnamese refugee communities whose histories are marginalized or forgotten in Vietnam and in nations of resettlement.

Viet Thanh Nguyen makes a convincing case for why the problem of ethics is crucial to engage when addressing the "double disappearance" of Vietnamese refugees in war and then subsequently in memorialization.[279] He suggests that:

> The ethical challenge for the artist working with and among refugees cast out of their homeland is to suggest memory's incompleteness, especially in the presence of furious desire, the contradictory yearning to imagine one's memory as whole or to forget altogether, as is too often the case in any nationalist imagination.[280]

Here, he suggests that memory is never seamless, complete, or coherent reference to that which really happened in the past, but mediated by the needs and desires of the present. While Nguyen deals with the problem of ethics for the artist and cultural critic, focusing specifically on dramatic performance, literature, memorial, and art in his work, I extend his analysis to the ethnographic—including both the testimonials of my interviewees as well as their performance of refugee identity. In order to engage the dilemma of "how not to betray the past" in the telling of refugee stories, I argue that we must not only acknowledge the silence in refugee homes, but explore its dimensions and trace its effects. Thus, to understand how and why anticommunism has become an entrenched cultural politics for Vietnamese refugees, it is necessary to explore the dynamics between a desire to tell and the will to forget stories about the Vietnam/American War as well as

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[278] Caruth 1996: 27. Emphasis in original. Caruth adeptly analyzes the ways in which the film indirectly tells a story of the nuclear decimation of Hiroshima through the love story between a French woman and Japanese man in the postwar years and insists that the indirectness of the telling allows for the film to explore "the possibility of a faithful history."
[279] Nguyen, V. 2005: 22.
[280] Ibid: 30.

its aftermaths. King-Kok Cheung's provocative analysis of silence in textual representations by Asian American women writers can thus be extended to consider how *embodied* invocations of silence by Vietnamese refugees may further elaborate the dynamic and relational nature of memory and history as well as the struggles over identity and representation.

Self and "Subject"

In thinking about the resonant silences in refugee homes, I suggest that silence is both an invocation and a provocation. Silence invokes postulations about what might have been and what is yet to come. Silence provokes inquiry into what is unknown and, perhaps, unknowable. Silence also begets further silence as we continue to structure our lives around the gaps, sometimes forgetting that those gaps are even there. I do not have any memories of Vietnam or my family's departure from Vietnam. What I do have are memories of the many layers of silence in my home, silence surrounding the Vietnam/American War, silence about the lingering effects of war, the layers that run deeply and intensely through the fabric of my everyday family life. This experience prompts me to ask, what are the stories parents do not/cannot tell their children about Vietnam?

That my scholarly objective to understand refugee silence is complicated by my emotional proximity to the research question points to the ways in which the interviews and data presented as "evidence" are always mediated, contingent, colored by my own struggles with silence. The complex nature of conducting ethnographic study in a community of one's own requires self-conscious and continuous attendance to the

multiple ways researchers are imbricated in and made "subject" to their research.[281] But beyond engaging social science debates about the ethnographer's dilemma, I mention my own familiar familial struggle with silence in order to call attention to how the Vietnam/American War and the experience of displacement may be stories incongruous with the domestic space of the home. There is a vulnerability in telling about pain and sadness that may subvert the authority of the parents over their children, unless these stories are used as a means to claim moral authority over the past (as it is used in the community events I analyze in previous chapters of this dissertation). The parent-child/elder-youth paradigm indicative of my fieldwork experience has had enormous implications for my ability to address the stories of my parents' peers and affects the ways they respond to my questions. For example, when I asked my participants what stories of Vietnam do they tell to their children, several of them spoke vaguely about school days, family life, and cultural values, expecting me to be able to relate and know similar tales about my own parents. One interviewee used the phrase "Chắc Cháu cũng biết…" [You probably know…] repeatedly in telling me about his life. I found this a bit confusing until, after having many more off-the-record conversations with him, I figured out that he had certain preconceptions about the "educated" family I must have come from since I am pursuing a doctorate. Having been well-educated in Vietnam and raising his children to be well-educated in the US, he expected that the level of dialogue in my home would be similar to his, that my family probably intellectualizes the war as he does

[281] For in-depth reflection, critical analyses, and examples of the ethnographic dilemma of insider fieldwork and writing, see Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture" (1994), Narmala Halstead, "Ethnographic Encounters: Positionings Within and Outside the Insider Frame" (2001), Linda Trinh Vo "Performing Ethnography in Asian American Communities: Beyond the Insider-versus-Outsider Perspective" (2000), Robert R. Alvarez, *Familia: Migration and Adaptation in Alta and Baja California 1850-1975* (1987), and Bea Medicine, *Learning to be an Anthropologist and Remaining " Native"* (2001).

in his home. He explained to me, during on of out informal chats, that he held high standards for his children and is very strict about discipline and education, thus they have all been successful as a result. While he does not talk about his personal experiences as a Navy officer to his children, he does share historical knowledge about the major events and the theories behind Việt Cộng, South Vietnam, and US engagement in the war. Contrary to his beliefs about me, my family shares neither history nor memory. After this particular interview, I began to qualify my questions by explaining that my parents tell me very little about Vietnam, that silence is most present in my recollections of childhood.

As interviewer and inquisitive "youth" (as I was perceived by many of my participants), I, in turn, have been transformed by their stories, by the act of listening. Writing about the "risks and vicissitudes of listening" as a psychoanalyst when dealing with trauma victims and witnesses, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub suggest that "He or she must *listen to and hear the silence*, speaking mutely both in silence and in speech, both from behind and from within the speech. He or she must recognize, acknowledge and address that silence, even if this simply means respect—and knowing how to wait."[282] Similarly, I understand the stories of my interview subjects as "testimonies" that contain layers of silence which must be carefully tended to with respect and patience. Although my subjects are not always referencing direct and explicit trauma, I insist that the continued presence of the Vietnam/American War in their consciousness serves as

[282] Felman and Laub 1992: 58.

traumatic motif for their disclosures and burdened silences, whether or not they actively choose to remain silent.

Representations of Refugee Silence

The idea of "indirect mention" that Cô Hương presents, that is, of parents not mentioning as a way of indirectly mentioning stories of South Vietnam and the Vietnam/American War to their children, resonates with new films about the refugee experience by Vietnamese diasporic film-makers, particularly Victor Vu's *First Morning* (2003) which I will analyze briefly here in order to provide an example of how Vietnamese diasporics deal with themes of silence.[283] Silence in the refugee home is central to the film's exploration of Vietnamese American family life. I read Vu's film next to my interview data and personal experience with silence in the home in order to show how the Vietnam/American War and its aftermath present a crisis of narration for the refugee generation. This crisis is due, in part, to the lack of language available to represent the traumas of war and migration. In my interviews, elder community leaders often reveal their pressing concern over language loss and the attendant gaps in understanding between the generations. Viet Thanh Nguyen mentions how the Vietnamese tradition of orally transmitting memories from one generation to the next was severely disrupted by migration so that the "generation gap" might be understood in this context as more than just linguistic barriers and misunderstanding, but also a loss of the direct means to tell. I take the problem of language for Vietnamese refugees to mean more than a problem of translation, but also as a tension between the need to tell and the

[283] Another recent film by Vietnamese diasporic film-maker, Ham Tran, that addresses the silence in refugee homes is *Journey from the Fall* (2005). I choose to focus on Victor Vu's *First Morning* not because it is more compelling or deals with silence more effectively, but because of the integral role that art plays in helping to express the inexpressible.

desire to forget. Nguyen suggests that "visual memories" has thus replaced the oral transmission of memories, but I believe that the visual and oral are always in dialectical relation, as my reading of *First Morning* will suggest. My ethnography has provoked questions about the ways Vietnamese refugees "indirectly mention" South Vietnam and the war in the home through material culture and in the public sphere through anticommunist discourse and practices. Thus, refugee memories that are suspended at the periphery of spoken language also rely on the visual, whether art or artifacts, in order to gesture toward profound loss and longing.

In this first feature-length film, *First Morning* or *Buỗi Sáng Đầu Năm*, director Victor Vu presents a story about a Vietnamese American refugee family whose domestic space is haunted by the ghostly presence of the war. The film's most interesting element is how it grapples with refugee silence through the use of suggestive visual metaphors. The synopsis on the film's official website reads:

> A young man returns home on the threshold of the Lunar New Year and finds himself a stranger within his own family. The cold silence surrounding the disappearance of his younger sister forces him on a quest for answers. Through his search, we are given a glimpse of the family's fragmented past. From their perilous escape from Vietnam, to their separation, to their struggle with marred relationships, the family continues to endure the tragedies of false expectations.[284]

The twenty-three year old female protagonist, Linh, lives in a household filled with a burdened silence regarding the family's experiences during the war and in its aftermath. Linh's Uncle Nam, a South Vietnam military veteran who is confined to a wheelchair as a result of communist reeducation camp, serves as a daily reminder of the war's lasting effects. Linh's parents are fixated on the task of setting their painfully shy and quiet

[284] See http://www.firstmorningthemovie.com/film.html

daughter up with a suitable mate, meanwhile attempting to keep some traumatic events in the past from disrupting the shallow peace of their domestic lives. We learn during the film's final moments that *the* traumatic event was Linh's rape by Thai pirates during their boat passage from Vietnam. Tuan is the only family member who does not know about his sister's trauma, but the others (mother, uncle, and father) consciously bury the event in confusing metaphors and evasive tactics. In a scene when Linh experiences a mental breakdown and is found huddled on the bathroom floor by her mother (Kim-Anh) and father (Minh), Kim-Anh pleads with Minh to get professional medical help for Linh. Minh, more concerned with saving face, replies that help is not necessary. He tells his bewildered daughter, "Linh, it's best not to say anything. No matter how much it hurts or makes you sad, don't show it."[285]

Although the film's narrative reinforces a predictable trope of Vietnamese refugee tragedy turned into resolution and redemption, I suggest that the film's meaningful contribution lies in how it portrays silence and the effects of trauma in the refugee domestic space. In his notes on making the film, Victor Vu suggests that, "As refugees of a war-torn nation, [Vietnamese Americans] continued to live with the emotional and psychological scars of violence. Haunted and forever changed by their past, many chose to remain silent about the torments of war. While some have found recovery, others are still searching for peace, hoping to, at last, reveal their buried secrets."[286] Vu poses that silence is a willful act as many refugees "chose to remain silent about the torments of war." But what if that silence is not merely a matter of choice but a consequence of the

[285] From the film's English subtitles. *First Morning/Buoi Sang Dau Nam*. Dir. Victor Vu. Perfs. Tri Johnny Nguyen, Cathleen Luong. DVD. Illuminaire Entertainment, 2003.
[286] See http://www.firstmorningthemovie.com/story.html

failure of language (in the traditional sense of speaking and hearing) to register the past trauma that haunts the present? For example, when Kim-Anh finally reveals to Tuan the reason for his sister's "issues" in a melodramatic narrative from her sick bed, she actually never articulates the rape as the buried trauma but only alludes to it in her speech. She vividly describes the night of their encounter with the Thai pirates, giving a detailed description of the pirate with the long hair who took Linh away and the screams from the young female victims aboard the pirate ship. She finally tells Tuan that Linh had to be carried back to their boat because her ravished, frail body could not stand on its own. During the narrative, Kim-Anh never actually names the brutal violence that occurred as rape, but through her allusions we know this is what happened. The horror of such an act render its naming impossible in the domestic space, a space so hard-won for this particular family, thus Kim-Anh can only refer to its actual occurrence through the surrounding details, through allusion.

In order to emphasize that Linh's trauma cannot be articulated in speech, the film relies on art to articulate the unspeakable loss and suffering of the whole family. Uncle Nam is the family artist who, confined to a wheelchair because of the abuse he suffered during reeducation prison, paints his days away but is never satisfied with the outcome of his art. He shares a special bond with Linh, which seems to be forged through pain and silence about their different traumas. Linh retreats into herself and paints images of fish and water. The painted canvases also contain terrifying images such as a long-haired demonic figure and bloodied bodies seemingly rising from the ocean. The paintings, both Uncle Nam's and Linh's, play an important role in the film, acting as co-narrator of sorts while Kim-Anh tells Tuan about the pirates. Uncle Nam paints layer after layer onto the

same canvas, illustrating the layers of imperfections in stories told of the war and refugee experience. Herein lies the film's most compelling approach to the Vietnamese refugee story—as layers of imperfect images on an already tainted canvas.

Vu layers another story about the way in which war and migration create ruptures in the family narrative that can never be wholly contained by an artificial peace in the refugee home. Outwardly, this refugee family seems to be in tact, but we learn that this peace is indeed hard-won. Through early hints at a tension in Minh and Kim-Anh's marriage as well as Linh's spite towards her father, we eventually discover that Minh and Tuan had migrated to the US first and Minh started a new life with another woman. A betrayed Kim-Anh fights to migrate to the US years later with Linh and Uncle Nam, working tirelessly until they became the owners of a Ph ở restaurant. After he is all grown up, Tuan unexpectedly runs into his mother while eating at her restaurant and facilitates a reunion with Minh, who by now has been abandoned by his lover. The fractured family is made whole after this chance encounter, but the wounds have already run much too deep. This other layer reflects one of the most painful aspects of war and migration that tends to be neglected in scholarly studies. The family's fragmentation, the acts of betrayal, the contingent truce and suturing that happens in the "safety" of the home are tales that reveal how the traumas of war and migration are lived and negotiated by people everyday. In the following section, I provide an example of how circumstances of war and migration produce a burdened silence in one Vietnamese refugee family and how the conditions for the partial articulation of the buried story is contingent on the alignment of time and space.

The Village, the Woman, and the Child

This is a story about Thanh Đỗ. Thanh is a Vietnamese American born in 1979 in a tiny Vietnamese village called Bến Kinh, so small that it cannot be found on any map of Vietnam that Thanh ever studied. Born well after the war had officially ended in Vietnam, Thanh would only come to know about it through overhearing cognac-induced conversations between Ba[287] and his friends, from watching bloody war films in "Vietnam" classes, and eventually, through haphazard undertakings in research and writing. While all Thanh's childhood and adolescent years were inflected with these men's drunken stories about serious (or, at times silly) exploits during the war—places they had visited and people they met along the way, the physical destruction they saw, Việt Cộng they encountered and/or fought with—Thanh could never really piece together a coherent narrative about the war or the Đỗ family's relationship to it. The war cast a barely detectable shadow in their home life. It seemed to intrude only when visitors came and rehashed old conversations at their second-hand dining table. Without these visitors and the liquor that animated their conversations, Thanh wonders if the miscellaneous scraps of knowledge about the war as it was experienced by Ba and his peers would have surfaced at all.

Thanh's large family was transplanted from the rural southern delta in Vietnam to sunny southern California when Thanh was about 5, much too young to recall Bến Kinh or any of their extended family still living there, the "dangerous" (because Ba had always described it that way) escape by boat, the series of refugee camps they lived in, or their introduction to America via a snowy white suburb in upstate New York. At 25, Thanh

[287] Father

took a trip to Vietnam with Má,[288] Ba, and a younger sibling. This was not Thanh's first trip to the "homeland" but it was this trip that made learning about one particular family secret, probably meant to be left buried there, possible.

On a humid July morning road trip, Thanh attempted, without much success, to nap in the xe tốc hành[289] that Ba had rented to take Thanh and younger sibling, Kim, up to Saigon. The five hour road trip through uneven roads where ten bodies were crammed in to a vehicle meant to carry only six or seven was only bearable because they stopped intermittently—to eat, stretch their legs, and let the engine rest. Along the way, Má pointed out familiar places they drove past and told stories about them. Many of the villages in the Mekong held memories for Thanh's mother. There, that town is where your sister-in-law's family lives, that market is where I had my aó dài made during my last trip, that's the hospital where Ông Ngoại[290] stayed when he was terribly sick last summer. Thanh and Kim feigned interest and asked a few questions to make their mother happy. Then as their van maneuvered past a small village in the Cần Thơ countryside, Má's tone changed almost abruptly from pleasant and engaged to a soft, distant monotone as she said, that's where your father's other woman lived. Her voice sounded like a hollow echo coming from somewhere outside her body, eyes fixated on something far in the distance outside the window, her face a veil of indifference. The van's engine continued puttering and the cousins, uncles, and nephews in the car continued with their chatter. Ba, who was sitting in the front passenger seat, made no indication of hearing this

[288] Mother
[289] Van or road-trip vehicle
[290] Maternal grandfather

comment. He and the driver, a trusted long-time friend from the village who always drove the family to Saigon, were engaged in conversation.

Thanh and Kim both snapped out of their heat-induced lethargy and stared in dumbfounded perplexity at their mother. What? What other woman? Thanh's voice remained hushed despite the mounting impulse to scream. Má turned her face farther away so that only her profile was visible to Thanh and Kim as they both craned their necks to see her face, to see past her face into the fleeting rural landscape that until that moment had seemed so idyllic and serene. The other woman who cared for him while he was injured and hospitalized in Saigon. That was during the war. She came up to visit him all the time. She had his child too, was all she offered in response to Thanh's mounting dismay. Still not satisfied, Kim pressed on…well, what happened to them? How come we don't know them? They died, was all Má said, her voice full of finality. That was when Thanh and Kim both knew to stop asking.

Even now, some four years later, Thanh has not had the nerve to ask Má (and certainly not Ba) anything more about the other woman, the child Ba had with her. Their large refugee family of eleven certainly must have other buried secrets, but *this* secret in particular and the context for its revelation, demonstrate how some memories linked to the war and the life before migration may have no place in the life they built in the thereafter.

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Years after that revelation, I remain baffled by the story of my father's other

woman and my half-sibling (would it have been a sister or a brother?).[291] They may, in fact, *not* be dead. But as far as my mother is concerned, they are dead. They are ghosts that she and my father live with, ghosts that have haunted our family in the life after Vietnam. My father could not talk to us too much about the war, lest these dangerous stories accidentally spill from his liquored lips. I can only speculate on the hurt he, my mother, the other woman, and our families must deal with if we are to hear the stories. By avoiding the topic of his service in the army and all that he must have witnessed, endured, experienced during the war, my father leaves a hole in his story, our family's story. This absence produces very real affect/effects such as my shock and confusion when my mother brought up this "family secret" in such an offhand way. I saw how her memories are spatially-bound, that this particular story could only be told in that fleeting time-space as the van carried us past a "haunted" village. The secret could only be partially revealed in the context of the present; from the distance afforded us by our relatively "safe" and "stable" lives in the states and our "successful" return as visitors to Vietnam. The "ghostly presence" of this other woman and child, and the context for how my mother mentioned this story has shaped my understanding of refugee silence.

I gave a third-person account (that poses as fiction) of my experience to experiment with the norms of ethnographic writing as well as to absorb, and even absolve, some of the anxieties I have of writing about my family/home in a space meant for "objective" analysis and critique. Additionally, I show how acts of telling and not telling are rather mutually constitutive by illustrating how my mother's telling comes

[291] I chose to represent my experience with silence and revelation in a fictionalized form because this seemed to be the most enabling way for me to tell about this deeply personal moment that I have yet made full sense of. And in choosing the name Thanh Đỗ, I wanted to make this "character" a gender-neutral Vietnamese American equivalent to John/Jane Doe.

after years of silence. And even the telling is strained by what remains unspeakable. Stories such as this one, culled from an intensely personal place, help to show the effects of war on everyday life and give texture and complexity to the term "trauma." I argue that these stories often cannot be told because the telling would hurt other family members or reveal another dimension of a person that people never knew about. Further, I came to understand how transgressions that are not forgivable under "normal" circumstances can be absorbed, if not wholly explained away, during times of war and under the strained conditions of migration. In *First Morning*, Kim-Anh takes Minh back in order to rebuild their lives in the US despite his abandonment of the rest of the family in Vietnam, against Uncle Nam's angry objections. Minh's choices must be understood through the distorted prism of a war that made their lives in Vietnam unbearable and a pattern of migration that forcefully tore their family asunder. In my parents' story, my mother seems to accept that the other woman could "nuôi [care for, nurture]"my father (coincidentally his name is Minh too) during a difficult time when she could not. Because during my father's deployment, she was bound to our small village caring for four young children and her aging mother-in-law and the vast distance to Saigon made it impossible for her to be with him while he was injured; this "other woman" was the one who nurtured him. While I could not know, perhaps never know, what really happened and how they negotiated their relationship back then, I do know that this cannot be discussed in the home we have created in the US.

Productive Engagements with Silence and Pain

> These are stories of separation and loss. These are stories of pain. My response is emotional: it is one of discomfort, rage, and disbelief. The

> stories hit me, hurtle towards me: unbelievable, too believable, unlivable and yet lived.[292]

Sara Ahmed, in the above epigraph, describes her reading of Australian women's narratives about the "stolen generation." The stories she hears and reads are of wounded bodies and psyches, about the pain of women whose children were taken away, stolen from their homes. Unable to express the women's pain, she reflects on her own mixed emotions about the narratives. Is there ever a language adequate to capture one's pain? Following Elaine Scarry's theory of bodily pain as a barrier and challenge to representation, I argue that language (in the form of words and speech), whether Vietnamese or English, cannot fully represent the traumas of the Vietnam/American War. Departing from medical conceptions of pain, Scarry insists that bodily pain resists linguistic expression, but that this may be potentially productive as a site for understanding the limits and possibilities of human knowledge and social existence. By examining the structures of torture and war as they inflict real bodily pain, Scarry shows our human ability to "un-make" or "deconstruct" the world which she suggests may lead to a theory of imagination and creation "that is not here and there, now on, now off, but massive, continuous and ongoing…forfeits its own immunity and is self-revising."[293] Scarry's suggestion resonates with my work, helping me to think about the stories that remain untold and unintelligible within Vietnamese refugee communities, despite the avenues afforded us through anticommunist discourse and practices. How can we imagine and create spaces that enable an ethical engagement with the past? Privileging the body as a legitimate site of knowledge, Scarry suggests we begin by deconstructing

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[292] Ahmed 2004: 36.
[293] Scarry 1985: 325.

institutionalized regimes of truth by exploring the potential of pain endured by bodies, the pain that can never be named. Elaborating on the work of pain in connecting bodily and social "surfaces," Sara Ahmed suggests that:

> Pain is evoked as that which even our most intimate others cannot feel. The impossibility of 'fellow feeling' is itself the confirmation of injury. The call of such pain, as a pain that cannot be shared through empathy, is a call not just for an attentive hearing, but for a different kind of inhabitance. It is a call for action, and a demand for collective politics, as a politics based not on the possibility that we might be reconciled, but on learning to live with the impossibility of reconciliation, or learning that we live with and beside each other, and yet we are not as one.[294]

Ahmed's formulation of pain depends upon the understanding that pain and other emotions are contingent and animated in culturally and socially specific contexts. In particular, she asserts that to address the pain of others requires a politics that resists absolution or closure. Ahmed provides a useful metaphor of the scar: if our pain can be visualized as a bleeding wound, then we should consider the "good scar" one that covers over the wound to stop the bleeding but continues to stick out as a visible sign of the wound. This "good scar" reminds us that "recovering from injustice cannot be about covering over the injuries, which are effects of that injustice; signs of an unjust contact between our bodies and others. So 'just emotions' might be ones that work *with* and *on* rather than *over* the wounds that surface as traces of past injuries in the present."[295]

How have diasporic identities, communities, and futures been imagined in the past thirty-three years against (or alongside) the pain and silence in refugee homes? How can parents tell their children stories that may undermine dominant historical narratives in

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[294] Ahmed 2004: 39.
[295] Ibid., 202.

Vietnam and the US? What are the consequences of such silence and ghostly haunting in the home?[296] War and migration, in their potential to dramatically rupture ordinary life, are two different traumatic events that are difficult to discuss in concrete ways in the home. The impossibility for children of immigrants to inquire about the trauma of migration has been addressed by new scholarship. Lisa Sun-Hee Park's study of the children of Asian immigrants finds that stories about migration experiences are often not divulged in detail by parents when talking to their children. Park's analysis suggests that the trauma of migration may pose a narrative impossibility within the family space, thus children of immigrants often piece together their own version of why and how they came to be here:

> In line with an implicit "don't ask, don't tell" policy of family interaction, the children know not to ask about certain, potentially traumatic events—and migration is one such topic…To talk about migration has the potential to raise painful events and perhaps even question the parents' decision to emigrate. This is dangerous familial terrain given the tenuous circumstances that immigrant parents may experience. The intense push for economic and social stability by immigrant parents is a direct reaction to the daily insecurities and stresses that plague new immigrants as they endure a marginal existence. To probe further could raise issues that disturb the American Dream and potentially create an uncomfortable situation in which the parents feel compelled to explicitly hide their experiences. Instead, immigrant parents divulge as little as possible and in strategic ways. The children, then, string together bits and pieces of their memories to create a familiar story of immigrant struggle.[297]

Park shows how the well-rehearsed and relied-upon narrative of immigration allows immigrants a way to elide stories about leaving homelands and loved ones and enduring

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[296] I engage Avery F. Gordon's call for new ways to address historically silenced and marginalized communities through using the ghost as a category of social analysis. She tells us, "To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories. To write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects" See *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 17.
[297] Park 2008, *forthcoming*.

hardships as racialized others, experiences that may be too "traumatic" to mention. For their children, those who have no direct experiences with migration, the narrative allows them to imagine their story within a larger American national romance. For Vietnamese refugees the horrors experienced and/or witnessed during the war and in the aftermath of prison or perilous escape left a traumatic mark, thus speaking about those experiences may be a narrative impossibility. Felman and Laub suggest that silence should not only be viewed as an unfulfilled potential or defeat, but also a means for "speakers about trauma" to protect themselves for fear of being heard, of hearing themselves.[298] Silence, according to Laub, can be a refuge and a willful act that belies the power of speech. For the refugee whose conditions of migration and return are both precarious, taking refuge in silence may be a measure of self-protection as much as it is a repression of the memory of suffering and loss. Understood as such, silence can be as productive as speaking; it can sometimes be speech's ally rather than its diametric opposite.

Language constitutes more than speech, but can also include nonverbal gestures and bodily cues. Put another way, silence is not necessarily the absence of speech, but the complement to speaking, working to co-narrate a more deeply entangled and multivalent tale of refugee lives. However, some critics suggest silence is a result of the futility of speech, the inability for language to register and represent the trauma. In her analysis of Korean comfort women's stories fifty years after World Ward II, Chungmoo Choi argues that their silence is a result of the unavailability of a language that can speak to their pain. Following French feminist Helene Cixous, Choi argues that official language, that of the

[298] Felman and Laub 1992: 58.

nation, is essentially male-dominated and retains a "grammar of hierarchy."[299] Forcefully silenced by the nation for fifty years, Korean comfort women have been denied a language to speak of their traumatic and painful past subjected to masculine, imperial power. Yet to say that they do not have a language to represent their pain does not mean that language *can only be* conceived of as a site devoid of possibility for resistance, or speaking. Choi relies on Adrienne Rich's notion of "speaking silence" to analyze how comfort women address their bodily and psychic wounds in an attempt to heal. Speaking silence involves being attentive to how patterns of silence or speechlessness can be read in marginalized narratives. This analytical strategy allows us to deploy the "healing power of language(s) outside the circuit of hierarchical masculine language" which "can be useful not just for the healing of comfort women or women at the margin, but for all those whose psyches have been damaged by war and silenced war memories."[300]

How might I follow Rich and Choi's suggestion to listen for the silences and omissions as I examine the private lives of the Vietnamese refugee generation? Is this a real possibility? As I write about this generation, I think what a risky business this is, writing about loss, trauma, pain, and sadness. I worry that the fragments of their past I analyze may be taken as indicative of their whole lives and that loss, trauma, pain, and sadness will stand in for the entirety of their experiences. Keeping this in mind, I tread carefully and respectfully in this realm, conscious of the partial nature of my knowledge of any one of my participants' lives. My participants' general tendency of not mentioning the traumatic and painful aspects of their past or dwell on their losses is offset by a few

[299] Choi 2001: 400.
[300] Ibid: 407.

instances when a subject tells me more or shares with their own children a little bit more than others. I am also cognizant that some interviewees will tell me what they hope to be true rather than their actual experience talking to their children at home.

To Mention or not to Mention

To mention or not to mention the war and postwar aftermaths has been a prevailing issue in a majority of my interview subjects' families.[301] From my oral history interviews and interactions with first generation Vietnamese Americans, I came to understand that most *do not* talk about the unmentionable tales of suffering, loss, and heartbreak to their children. Instead, they focus on stories of childhood and school-days, memories of family and friends, depictions of home and places in Vietnam. These stories are usually meant to keep their children culturally connected to Vietnam and the loved ones still there, motivate their children to do well in school, and instill a general gratitude and appreciation in their children for their "comfortable" lives in the US. Often, the stories can be a disciplining mechanism, reinforcing a sense of guilt in the children for the sacrifices their parents made.[302] These stories also serve to authenticate the parents' connection to Vietnam, as real, tangible, and thereby indisputable by the next generation.

Cô Hương's illuminating explanation about silence augments what others before have shown as Vietnamese refugees' tendency to forget or keep silent on their traumatic past in their familial relationships. In *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from all*

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[301] I never expected to deal with the topic of silence in my dissertation, but while doing my interviews, I was struck by how my interviewees, who had collectively worked towards sustaining a South Vietnamese consciousness in diaspora, usually did not bring their children in to their community work and even talked less to their children about the Vietnam/American War and the process of migration.

[302] In "Thoughts on the Vietnamese American Immigrant Experience" in *Nha Magazine* (Jul/Aug 2006), pp.122-124. I give examples of what I call "Immigrant Guilt" from my own experience negotiating my role as a second generation Vietnamese American trying to fulfill familial obligations.

Sides, Christian G. Appy recounts an interview with a South Vietnamese refugee who was a "lost commando"[303] during the war:

> Captured by North Vietnamese soldiers in 1966 at the age of thirty-three, Luyen Nguyen was imprisoned for twenty-one years, eleven of them in solitary confinement. In response to my confusion about how his feet had been shackled during imprisonment, he leaves the room and returns with a rod to demonstrate. He places his heel on top of the bar. "Just like this." Then he turns his ankle to show the scar produced by the shackling. Later, perhaps a bit astonished by all he has revealed, he says simply, "I have never told my wife or children about these experiences." [304]

As Appy demonstrates through his retelling of Nguyen's story, the horrors many suffered during the war and thereafter cannot be told to loved ones, cannot be spoken in the safe space of the family. This trauma, situated in the homeland or in the high seas, is at odds with the relative peacefulness of their daily lives in the US. Where and when can such trauma take form? In their conspicuous absence from the family, the stories that cannot be told are ever more pervasive, more haunting, more of a presence. What Cô Hương suggests is that not mentioning actually works to call into being that which is unmentionable. First generation refugees who are survivors and witnesses of the war may not want to share some of the things they know for fear of the damage these memories can do.

One 69-year old interviewee tried to explain to me why telling may be difficult. Lý Đức Mạnh admits that he does not talk to his children too much about the war, despite their direct experience with risky trips to the Southern countryside where they would hide away from the main roads ravaged by mortar-fire.

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[303] "Lost commandos" were the 500 South Vietnamese soldiers who were sent into the North by the U.S. on top secret missions. Most were captured and there are few survivors.
[304] Appy 2003: 94-95.

> We didn't talk too much then about the war. My older daughter, she did experience a lot of thing about the war. Ah, we used to, we used to go to the Delta…we lived in Saigon…we used to go to the Delta to visit her grandma, her grand-dad. And when we come back, the road was blown up and car cannot pass through, so we had to go through the rice paddy, to go around, under the rain, and hiding under the truck and things like that. And I think all those things she would never forget. And one thing, you remember, I do not know if you remember or not, but one time when Saigon was bombarded with rocket. At that time we had a rocket landed close to our house…In Saigon…and we can hear the rocket flew by and I told my wife that this is too close. And sure enough it landed really close and all the debris was falling on the roof of the house and we quickly you know, big explosion, we quickly grab the children, they were sleeping, we grab them and run downstairs and you know, I think they know something about the war, but we didn't want to tell them too much…Some people, they just don't want their children to ah [pause]…what should I say, to be disturbed by their experience. They want their children to kind of grow up as a normal kid without any...some people, their experience is too severe that they just want to shut it off and don't want to bring it up, don't want to talk to anybody about it. They just want to forget about it. They try, in their minds, they try to block it out but it's very difficult. Very difficult to block it out. And you know, I came here…Five, six years after I came here I still had dreams about terrible things.[305]

The "terrible things" that Bác Mạnh alluded to included bombings of the streets near his home in Saigon and the sudden death of family members and friends who never received proper burials. Although he mentioned these tragedies to me, he did not want to elaborate. He always alluded to pain and suffering but maintained a safe distance from the painful details, only letting me know enough to see that Việt Cộng were "evil" in their dealings with South Vietnamese. The suppression of details and the refusal to remember particular moments are common among survivors and witnesses of traumatic events. Writing about Holocaust historiography and memory, James E. Young suggests that the "deep memory" of survivors and witnesses is "that which remains essentially

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[305] Lý, Đức Mạnh 2004.

unrepresentable."[306] Following the revered Holocaust survivor and historian, Saul Friedlander, Young suggests that the memory of trauma survivors is incompatible with historical narrative in its refusal of the linearity of historical time. If, as Young suggests, official history cannot harbor these unmentionable stories, where (and when) can they surface? How can we learn to decipher pieces of the "essentially unrepresentable" within the silences, omissions, and hesitations? I often pressed Bác Mạnh, and others who answered my questions about the war and their transmission of memories in elusive ways, to elaborate, asking questions such as "Bác có thể nói cho con biết thêm về…[Can you tell me more about…]?" Bác Mạnh's responses were generally, "Thì chỉ có vạy thôi [That's all there is]." Occasionally, he will counter in English, "Well, what do you want me to tell you?" in a manner that suggests that he only has that much to say. But, the clear message I receive from him, as with most other interviewees, is that as survivor and witness, he would like me (and by extension the younger generation) to know about the South Vietnamese perspective on the Vietnam/American War in order that we may sustain refugee history despite our inability to fully and intimately know their stories.

One re-education prison survivor, Lê Hảo Điệp, who came to the United States via the Humanitarian Operations (HO) program[307] without children of his own was reluctant to talk to me about the details of his imprisonment. After spending an evening in his home for the interview and sharing dinner with him and his wife, I realized that they

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[306] Young 2003: 276-7.

[307] Vietnamese Americans refer to re-education camp ex-prisoners who have been able to emigrate to the U.S. via the Humanitarian Operations Program "H-O." These two letters (pronounced in Vietnamese) connote a persona slightly comparable to the American "crazy vet" stereotype.

viewed me as a daughter-figure—their own lost baby whose blurry photograph stands out among the aged faces on the living room altar would have been around my age. The couple often looked longingly at me, closely scrutinizing my face and hanging intently on my words. I had never felt the attention or interest of my elders as intently as I did in their presence. After the formal part of our interview, the couple invited me to stay for a modest dinner of bún Hànội, a northern Vietnamese noodle dish. We eased into comfortable seats in the eat-in kitchen and they became the interviewers, asking me about my family, my schoolwork, my interests, interrupting my responses here and there to give approving nods and encouraging remarks. They encouraged me to call them and visit often, to make this a home away from home if I feel inclined. Weeks later I came back bearing a tropical fish and plant as a gift to the couple for their hospitality and we spent time sitting outside in their garden sharing more stories.

During the formal interview, Chú Điệp only grazed the surface of the story of his twelve-year detainment, throwing me the bare bones of dates, locations, and generalized feelings of longing for home and family. I read in his reluctance to tell a ghostly presence of the days turned into months and years lost in prison and of his baby girl born much too late to aged parents. His wife quietly explained to me that by the time Chú Điệp was released from prison and they reunited in the US, she was too old to have a baby but they tried nonetheless. Their child suffered major complications at birth and died a few weeks later. I refrained from asking the follow-up questions racing through my mind: What complications? Could your child's complications be a result of other factors, such as the chemical defoliants used during the war? How did you feel when you lost your baby? I

dared not even ask her name. I knew from their halting speech and the hollowness in their voices that it was best to lay the subject to rest. Yet, by not directly mentioning the traumatic past, skirting around it, not letting himself wallow or get lost in it, Chú Điệp has indirectly gestured towards the trauma that cannot be mentioned. In trying to write about what was not mentioned—what I imagine as painful separation from loved ones over more than a decade, perhaps feelings of despair, anguish, mourning a loss so profound that I am now only barely able to fathom what it could mean since calling upon my own experience growing up in a refugee family during the writing of this dissertation—I think that it is quite impossible, and perhaps unproductive, to articulate what I could not know. Rather, I must attend to how this silence is engendered by the circumstances of war and displacement.

Perhaps this is what Jenny Edkins refers to as "encircling the trauma," which she explains as a way of marking the impossibility of language to truthfully and adequately represent trauma. Trauma is "outside the realm of language, and to bring it back within that realm by speaking of it, by setting it within a linear narrative form, is to destroy its truth."[308] Following Benjamin, Edkins suggests that sovereign power relies on a linear narrative of nation-building as progress (of homogenous, empty time) that purposefully forgets the violence of its own construction. She proposes the idea of "trauma time" as a disruptive force to this hegemonic narrative structure. When a traumatic event such as the Holocaust or the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are remembered by the survivors and witnesses, their stories are usually co-opted and de-politicized by institutions such as museums and the media. Thus, when dealing with memories of

[308] Edkins 2003: 214.

traumatic events the only real possibility to preserve the integrity of survivor/witness memories is not to narrate, but to gesture towards that which is not there in historical discourse. "We cannot try to address the trauma directly without risking its gentrification. We cannot remember it as something that took place in time, because this would neutralise it. All we can do is 'to *encircle* again and again the site' of the trauma, 'to *mark* it in its very impossibility.'"[309] Edkins avers that the dominant and oppressive force of linear time (history) is disrupted, even if only briefly, by trauma time and in that moment we can imagine other possibilities, other ways of seeing and knowing. Marking the emptiness and silence of Vietnamese refugees in regards to their trauma, the trauma of war and displacement, may perhaps allow us to view them as more than losers, victims, or "refugees" for that matter, but as subjects finding means to live with loss. I am not writing about their triumph over loss, but rather the everyday ways they carry on with the memory of their losses, whether it means they actively choose to remain silent or to let their silence do the speaking.

A Means to Convey their Stories

I became aware of the tendency among my participants (and elders with whom I did not conduct formal interviews) to divert their eyes or smile when telling me about being imprisoned or their dangerous feat of escaping Vietnam by boat or by foot. One evening while I was having a quiet dinner with Tô Văn Trí, a Vietnamese Federation member I grew close to, we began talking about my "silence" chapter and he wanted to tell me about his experience trying to escape Vietnam. Chú Trí insists that his story can top any other refugee's story in San Diego because his family made, in total, more than a

[309] Ibid: 15.

dozen attempts before they actually left Vietnam. After being in re-education prison for six years, he tried to escape by foot and by boat (unsuccessfully) many times and each time he was caught, he was thrown into prison and interrogated by the military police. Finally, in 1986 he successfully escaped with his 9 year-old son, leaving behind his wife and three children who split up into two more groups and escaped after many other unsuccessful attempts. Chú Trí told me each person had to pay five gold bars for a place on the boat without any guarantees. Each time they were caught, the children were released, but the adults would be interrogated brutally by the police.

> Nhưng mà qua những kinh nghiệm hơn một chục lần rồi, con biết không,…Đi mà bị bắt vô đó rồi…bị bắt, bị đánh trước mặt vợ con, rồi khổ lắm con biết không…tan thương lắm…
> [But, you know, I've had experience, over ten times…If you go and are caught and taken there (prison)…captured, beaten right in front of your wife and children, it's very painful you know…very miserable.][310]

He then described the incredibly long and terrifying journey he endured with his son, telling me about the pain of hunger, the fear of being caught and brought back to prison in Vietnam, and the fear for their uncertain futures. As he described how he managed to steer a small boat out past rows of Việt Cộng patrol boats, he would shake his head disbelievingly, and even insert an ironic story about an encounter with a North Korean boat:

> Không có ngờ là chiếc tàu nhỏ như vạy mà ban ngày mà chạy ra vượt biên. Hay chưa? Hmm? Thành ra Chú chạy…chạy…chạy luôn. Côi như 22 tiến đồng hồ sau. Vào lúc khoảng 7 giờ sáng đó…Nhưng mà mình đốt đèn, có đủ cờ, mình đánh hiệu S.O.S. gì nó cũng không dừng lại, con hiểu không? Thì đến khi Chú chạy đến Indonesia đó, đảo Galang, Indonesia đó, thì Chú gặp tất cả là 40 chiếc tàu. Mà không có chiếc nào

[310] Tơ, Vân Trí 2006

> vuốt…40 chiếc. Mà chiếc nào giống như là khổ đói, con biết không…Mà có điều mà minh thấy cũng rất vui [laughs]…Là một chiếc tàu Bắc Hàn nó ngừng lại. Thì mình quá mừng, con biết không, quá mừng đi. Nhưng mà khi thấy đuôi có cờ đỏsao đỏ, cờ của Bắc Hàn đó, đâu dám sắp gần nữa…Cái đó, là độc nhất là cái tàu mà ngừng đợi cho mình là tàu Cộng Sản Bắc Hàn…cái đó là một cái đáng nhớ cho Chú. [It's hard to believe that such a small boat could escape by daylight. Impressive, huh? Hmm? So I just went…went…went. About 22 hours later. About 7 a.m…And despite lighting all our lights, hanging all our flags, sending the S.O.S. signal, no one would stop for us, you understand? So when I made it to Indonesia, the island Galang, Indonesia, I had seen 40 boats already. But one would pick us up. 40 boats. But each one looked like they were starving and suffering, you know…But one thing I think is very funny [laughs]….A North Korean boat did stop. And I was so excited, you know, so very excited. But when I saw the tail of the boat with the red flag with the red star, the North Korean flag, I didn't dare come any closer….That encounter, remarkable that the one boat that stopped and waited for us was the Communist North Korean boat…That is one very memorable moment for me.][311]

In the parts of the conversation when he talked to me about leaving Vietnam, he seemed to remember very precise details such as the times of day, the weather and current conditions, the number of boats he counted passing them by without offering assistance. Like an expert storyteller at my urging, he told me as much as he could remember and peppered the stories with anecdotes such as the memorable encounter with the North Korean boat, expecting me to understand the irony of the situation. Each time the story became difficult, he would smile, or even laugh, as if to draw my attention away from the event he was describing. He would also divert his eyes from my face during those times whereas he would usually look at me when we talk about community issues. I then asked him if his other children know about this journey and he simply said no. "Không có thì giờ mà kể [When would I have the time to tell]," he said very simply. At a complete loss

[311] Ibid.

for a response to his rhetorical question, I realized that as much as parents cannot or do not mention these stories at home, their children may be unable or unwilling to hear them. If as Lisa Sun-Hee Park suggests, the "'don't ask, don't tell' policy" that structure immigrant familial relations poses a narrative challenge for the immigrants/refugees, it also poses a barrier to hearing and understanding the traumas of war and migration by the next generation. Perhaps, then, the family/home is not the most enabling site for the transmission of refugee memories.

During formal interviews, I would be at a loss as to how to proceed when my subjects smiled through their traumatic stories or looked away from my inquisitive gaze. For instance, a high-ranking Naval officer, Hoàng Thanh Đạt, would laugh and shake his head, almost as though he did not believe his own story about Việt Cộng atrocities even as he told me about them. He explained how he saw human carcasses hung up in seaside villages by Việt Cộng as a message to the ARVN and American forces. Chú Trí also did not focus on the fear he felt as much as details that are emblazoned into his memory, such as the VC soldier with a row of watches worn up to his elbow, which signified to Chú Trí the number of people he must have killed and pillaged from. As much as I needed to hear the stories, I knew they came at an emotional and psychic cost. I usually kept quiet, unsure of the reaction I should have to such stories and hoping that my own silence would be a sign of respect to my elders' stories. What their smiling or looking away may indicate is the emotional detachment that comes when a past event is remembered and retold for an outsider (interviewer). Maruska Svasek suggests that emotions can be evoked, remembered, or re-experienced and that these processes are different but

dialogical. Evoked emotions are most immediate responses; for example, the worry, sadness, fear, or anger felt as refugees leave Vietnam. Remembered emotions are "*memories* of past emotions" that do not have the same affect/effect, such as Chú Trí smiling while telling of his fears during the escape. Finally, re-experienced emotions are feelings "remembered *and* re-experienced in the present" and when the event is traumatic, the feelings are usually re-played over and over in the person's mind but nuanced by his/her changing reality. Svasek uses the idea of re-experienced emotions to show how trauma can bind people together into political communities towards processes of healing and political action.[312]

I cite Svasek's explanation of the different forms that emotions may take in order to consider the spaces that enable or prohibit such emotions and recollections. Telling a family outsider may be possible whereas telling his children directly would be much too close to home, so to speak. In other words, the emotions Chú Trí felt on the boat are intimately linked to leaving his wife and three children behind and risking life and death with his 9 year-old son. The home-space they inhabit today is built from the sacrifices and hardships they endured, thus these painful stories lurk in the shadows of family life, but they cannot be expressed there. These emotions are part of an anticommunist discursive terrain, working to bind Vietnamese refugees together into a community of memory.

Edkins' compelling argument for refusing to bring traumatic memories into the linear structure of narrative may be a way of paying proper respect to refugee memories. Since placing traumatic memories into a narrative structure typically results in their

[312] Svasek 2005.

"gentrification," a more respectful approach would be to mark the silence as a real presence, to analyze the ways in which other frameworks are used to call attention to the silenced stories and their attendant ghosts. Here, I mean specifically anticommunism as a dominant modality through which Vietnamese refugees engage with their anguished pasts. This is not to say that anticommunism is the *only* framework, or even a liberating and healing medium, but I argue that it has been repeatedly deployed over the last thirty-three years to do more than political organizing or defining the limits of diasporic community. It has become a way to engage with ghosts of the war and silenced stories that have no home. Thus, when parents refuse to mention or forget to tell the stories to their children (as mine did), the stories become ever more important to the constitution of that domestic space and they certainly take on different forms at home.

Other Shapes of Memory

Even though participants in my study do not *directly* mention their memories of the war or postwar struggles, most teach their children the significance of their homeland and their native language and they also transmit an understanding of "why we are here" through other means. For example, the South Vietnam flag, three horizontal red-stripes across a field of gold, has served the ideological purpose of uniting diasporic Vietnamese in an imagined community, as I have shown in the previous chapters. It is often hung in a place of prominence inside the homes of many of my subjects. The first thing that caught my eye the first time I entered Chú Trí's home was the large South Vietnam flag that hung above his china cabinet, greeting visitors immediately upon entry. The flag took up the entire wall space from the cabinet top to ceiling and it was decoratively flanked by plastic green plants on both sides. Hanging prominently next to the flag was a faded 8 by

10 black and white photograph, circa 1974, of a young Chú Trí in his Navy uniform, standing upright and proud with one hand on his hip. The photograph was a reproduction of a smaller original, carefully preserved through many different voyages across time and space, its edges show signs of water damage. I admired this photograph out loud, complimenting him on how handsome and distinguished he looked in his uniform. He shook his head modestly and said, "Chú chỉ còn tấm hình này thôi… để làm kỷ niệm [I only have this photograph left…as a token of memory.] And then he remembered that he also has a sailboat which he has fashioned as a tribute to his successful journey out of Vietnam. The rust-colored metal sailboat was a wall-hanging he purchased and carefully inscribed with the details of his successful last escape from Vietnam and arrival in Galang, Indonesia. The white letters and numbers indicated the name and identification number of the boat and the dates of departure from Vietnam and arrival in Indonesia. It hung in a dark corner of his living room, affirming the inscriptions in his own memory (see Fig. 4.1). I asked him why have such an artifact at all when his memory still serves him so well? He expressed to me his concern that he will forget, that memory can be unreliable, especially for elders. I would like to suggest that another purpose the flag, photograph, and sailboat serve may be to teach the rest of the family indirectly about the experience of being a soldier and a refugee, to gesture towards an understanding of why we are *here* and not *there*, why we are alive today. The flag, photograph, and boat each express a different component of refugee identity—the desire for national belonging, the intrusion of the war into the home, and the passages through time and space that are etched into memory and artifacts.

Fig 4.1 Refugee Boat Wall Hanging

Most Vietnamese refugee homes I visited contained other material traces of South Vietnam in the living rooms, dining rooms, or kitchens where interviews were usually conducted. One popular wall hanging is the S-shaped clock, representing the nation of Vietnam, with Saigon (not Ho Chi Minh City) marked as the center-point of the clock. The minute and second hands revolve around the dot that is supposed to be Saigon,

literalizing the connection between time and space, between the past and the present, South Vietnam and the homes in the US where these clocks are displayed. These symbols, clearly visible in the everyday domestic space, invite a continued dialogue with the past that may not happen in a direct manner. They also mark an unresolved relationship with the homeland, with memories of the Vietnam/American war, and with the refugee journeys after the war.

Many of my subjects also indirectly conjure memories of South Vietnam by bringing diasporic cultural production into their homes. *Paris by Night*, *Asia*, or *Van Son* musical productions, pageant shows and tour Vietnam DVDs, newspapers sitting on coffee tables with names such as "Sài Gòn Nhỏ [Little Saigon]" or "Người Việt Tự Do [Free Vietnamese]."[313] In one home I noticed a popular framed portrait of a Vietnamese woman in aó bà ba gracefully sewing a South Vietnam flag, her jet black hair falling over most of her face. I immediately think of Betsy Ross and the first flag for the fledgling American nation, how that image became an iconography of gendered nationalism. The coupling of woman and nation helps us to critically reflect on how diasporic quests to sustain South Vietnam memories are always fraught with multiple tensions.[314] This portrait has also been hung up at the Vietnamese Federation's nhà cộng

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[313] Lieu (2000) examines the role of pageantry in shaping Vietnamese diasporic identity. Valverde (2002) explores how popular cultural products such as *Paris by Night* videos participate in a transnational economy between Vietnam and the US.

[314] My master's thesis (2003) titled "Imagining Community: Vietnamese Diasporic Nationalism and Cultural Memory in *Paris by Night*" explored Vietnamese diasporic cultural production as a means of resurrecting the homeland in the diaspora through a gendered nationalism. Feminist scholarship on nationalism reveals the intimate ways women are linked to, and made to represent, the nation. See, for example, Anne McClintock, "'No Longer in a Future Heaven': Gender, Race, and Nationalism," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), Tamar Mayer, "Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage," in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Natio*n, ed. Tamar Mayer

đồng where I first encountered it and was told of its popularity in the South as a symbol of beauty and freedom. These cultural objects and images in the home help me think about the subtle ways that the war and postwar struggles intrude into the domestic space, how the negotiation of public and private memories happen in Vietnamese refugee homes amidst the pervasive silence.

I sensed the ghostly presence of South Vietnam in the home of Chú Điệp and Có Điệp [315] through the blurry photograph of their baby on the altar and by the many memorabilia of war—the photographs of a young, handsome Chú Điệp and his shipmates in the South Vietnamese Navy, the miniature model ship resting prominently in his study, carefully protected in a glass encasement, the numerous military flags and posters of pre-1975 Vietnam, and also by the hesitations in his speech when he talked about longing for his family and Việt Cộng's inhumane treatment of prisoners during his long years of imprisonment. He used his past experiences as a means of justifying his anticommunist politics and explanation for the amount of time he invests in obtaining and disseminating information in support of democracy for Vietnam on the internet and in his community work. Thus the relics of his former life in the South Vietnam military reinforce his current anticommunist politics. Anticommunism becomes a vehicle for him to make sense of and give purpose to his exile and provides him with a hopeful view of the future.

Conclusion: Why They *Still* Matter

(London: Routledge, 2000), and Zillah Eisenstein, "Writing bodies on the nation for the globe," in *Women, States, and Nationalism: At home in the nation?,* ed. Sita Ranchod-Nilsson and Mary Ann Tetreault, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 35-53.

[315] Interestingly, this couple shares the same first name. I point this out in order to show that I am not following the Vietnamese etiquette of referring to a man's wife by his name.

My youngest interview subject, Lữu N. Toàn (born in 1958), considers himself more in tune with Vietnamese American "youth" than the rest of the members of the Vietnamese Federation. Not only does he tell me this point blank, the events he planned for the Viet Fed demonstrate his willingness to attract younger members by focusing on social events such as dances and athletics. He has also repeatedly directed me to call him "Anh" [brother] rather than Chú [Uncle] as I am accustomed to calling most male members of the Viet Fed. The twenty year age gap between us made it difficult for me to remember to call him "Anh."

As we sat in a diner one spring afternoon in Rancho Penasquitos during his lunch break from his job as a computer programmer, I initiated a conversation about community politics. Despite Chú Toàn's insistence that politics does not hold his interest, evidenced by his avoidance of events and programs that are explicitly political in nature, he had a great deal to say about the community's clear communist-anticommunist demarcations. I asked him when he thinks "our" community's anticommunist politics will change, when the clear-cut line demarcating communist and anticommunist will go away, and he replies, "Time. When all the older people die."[316] Chú Toàn laughed nervously after making this rather ominous statement and quickly began to talk about how this must be true for Vietnam's leadership as well. He suggested that once the generation that experienced war is no longer around to police the communist-anticommunist boundary, the line will fade and we can focus more on the tangible needs of our community and Vietnam's poor citizens.

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[316] Lữu, N. Toàn 2006. This interview was conducted mostly in English.

At this moment in the interview, I remember having a flashback to my conversation with a Vietnamese American social worker in her late 30s some years back while attending a national conference for Vietnamese American non-profit agencies in Houston, Texas. She told me that the elders are only in the US to die. She apologized for sounding morbid, but kept reiterating her belief that nothing else needs to be written about the first generation of Vietnamese refugees since they are forever looking back on the past and lack the foresight to move the Vietnamese American community into the future. She argued that time and resource should be invested in the younger generations instead, a view reinforced by immigration studies scholarship that primarily focuses on the second and subsequent generations.[317]

Chú Toàn and the nameless social worker's comments have given me strong impetus for this project. What happens when the "older people" die? If Chú Toàn's predictions hold true, the anticommunist politics that has heretofore been construed as merely conservative, reactionary, and monolithic will weaken and more "Asian American" issues will take center stage. But I would like to pose the question somewhat differently here. What happens to refugee memories when those of that generation are no longer around? How have they conveyed their anticommunist sensibilities to subsequent generations and how do those generations understand the anticommunist position of their forebears? Will future generations whittle down what I understand to be a complex discourse into a story of war and defeat, loss of the homeland, escape to freedom, and

[317] See, for example, Ruben G. Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes, eds., *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), Pyong Gap Min, ed., *The Second Generation: Ethnic Identity Among Asian Americans* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002), and Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, eds., *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

assimilation's process of "letting go of the past?" I hope not. Rather than allowing refugee memories to be appropriated into this teleological narrative, I hope to move towards an understanding of how memories of Vietnamese pasts filled with trauma, hope, upheaval, and survival are often unspeakable in domestic spaces, but are often created, maintained, contested, and transferred to later generations.

If we follow Edkins and Young's suggestion that the memory of survivors and witnesses remain "unsayable" or "unrepresentable," how can we write about the moments when South Vietnam and the war/refugee dead emerge in diasporic remembrance? This chapter has shown that Vietnamese refugee stories are often kept silent in the home space. However, by not mentioning their experiences, parents have passed on ghostly stories that are themselves stories *about* silence. These stories haunt our narratives about the Vietnam/American War and Vietnamese American lives, resisting closure and absolution, reminding us of the "good scar" we should not be ashamed to flaunt. These stories remind us of the "unfinished business" we have in the present.

EPILOGUE

"To Find the Address of the Present"[318]

In a landmark visit to the US on June 22, 2007, President Nguyễn Minh Triết of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam deliberately glossed over the human rights concerns voiced by thousands of Vietnamese American protestors. What he wanted to focus on instead was the bilateral trade agreement with the US and new economic opportunities with American enterprises. According to journalist John Carey, "A quantitative news analysis of media coverage of Triết's visit showed that fully 70% of news outlets [in the U.S.] highlighted the human-rights issue. In Vietnamese media, however, the topic was almost entirely overlooked and the new trade and investment pact led the headlines."[319] Yet, despite President Triết's evasiveness regarding the key concern of Vietnamese American activists, he made a small effort at addressing his "fellowman" as follows:

> And on this occasion, I also would like to extend my warmest greetings to my fellowman living in the United States. And Vietnamese Americans are part and parcel of the Vietnamese nation. And it is my desire to see them succeed, and hope they will continue to serve as a bridge of friendship between our two countries.[320]

President Triết's message to the Vietnamese American community de-historicizes the relationship between the Vietnam state and the Vietnamese diaspora, a relationship that has been fraught with tension, silence, pain, and violence for the greater part of the last thirty-three years. To include Vietnamese Americans as "part and parcel of the

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[318] From Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* (1997).
[319] John E. Carey, "Two sides to Triet's visit," in *Asia Times Online*.27 June 2007. See http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/IF27Ae01.html
[320] From the transcripts to President George W. Bush and President Nguyen Minh Triet's remarks during President Triet's visit to the White House on June 22, 2007. "President Bush Welcomes President Nguyen Minh Triet of Vietnam to the White House" See http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/06/20070622-2.html.

Vietnamese nation" without adequately calling attention to the wounds that remain between homeland and diaspora is a willful act of historical forgetting. My project has called upon Vietnamese American memories as alternatives to the official discourses of the US and Vietnam nation-states in order to understand the ways in which Vietnamese Americans have sutured their lives through anticommunist discourse and practices.

In *In the Land of Mirrors: Cuban Exile Politics in the United States*, Maria de los Angeles Torres reminds us that:

> Increasingly, there is the possibility for a coherent perspective, for an imagined future that transcends the rupture without denying the pain, without compromising the ethics and principles that in the long run make a difference in history…I am comforted by the thought that, no matter how hard governments may try, they cannot legislate identities; they cannot erase our history.[321]

While her study privileges state structures as a mode of engaging with Cuban exile politics, she ends with an optimistic hope that there are alternative ways of knowing and being in the world that cannot be wholly legislated by the state. I am likewise hopeful for such a future wherein Vietnamese Americans may move beyond dichotomies of political allegiances, winning and losing, victim and perpetrator, good and evil in order to see how all the sides (Vietnam, US, and refugee) are differently implicated in the disappearance of South Vietnamese stories.

The first generation has deployed anticommunism in various ways to serve as pedagogical tools for its own community and to the larger public, to remember South Vietnam and the war/refugee dead, to connect with each other through (imagined) ties to a South Vietnam no longer there, and to inscribe their presence into the spaces they

[321] De los Angeles Torres 1999: 200.

inhabit. By focusing on anticommunism as a cultural discourse, I have tried to move beyond the political dichotomies so problematic and divisive in the community for more than thirty years. In other words, by re-reading anticommunism as a cultural discourse through which Vietnamese Americans craft their sense of selfhood and community, I hope to introduce new, productive critiques of community politics and push us beyond thinking about whether we are for or against Vietnamese American anticommunism. Rather, we can ask more productive questions, such as: What are the alternative ways we can imagine community while remaining attentive to the historical contingencies of Vietnamese diasporic formations? Can anticommunism (if read as a cultural form) be productive rather than divisive or unyielding? Following Lowe, how can we can imagine "different narratives and critical historiographies" in order to promote a more flexible sense of community?

As a second generation Vietnamese American, I never quite assimilated the practices and beliefs of my elders despite the urgent desire to know about them. I remain ambivalent and critical of many of their choices in representing community and identity through the lens of anticommunism. Too often, I felt torn between many different positions, such as between elders and youth and between protestors and non-protestors. For example, in 2004 when Vietnam Ambassador Tôn Nử Thị Ninh came for a talk at the University of California, San Diego campus, I had to choose a side to take.[322] Would I stand at the picket lines with my elders or would I attend the talk to hear what she had to say about diplomacy between Vietnam and the US? The talk and ensuing protest took

[322] Ton Nu Thi Ninh was brought to UCSD by the Graduate School of International Relations/Pacific Studies to give a talk on December 17, 2004 titled "Building a Strong Vietnam-US Relationship: *Unlikely Partners*?"

place just a few feet away from my office on campus. A week prior to the event, I helped some of the elders map their route to campus and pointed out all the nearby parking options and restrooms. But, I did not go to protest with them. Nor did I attend. Instead I met with her at a small, private gathering of scholars a few days later and avoided the guy with the camera snapping happily away. Always trying to keep some kind of objective distance and maintain a low profile. I failed to see, at the time, how I could have gone to the protest or attended the talk and spoken up about my choice rather than slip easily under the radar of elder scrutiny. My fear of being dubbed a "communist" made me take a safer route. In writing this dissertation I have put my ideas, beliefs, hopes, and fears out on the table and wait for the elder scrutiny that it deserves and needs to be better, clearer. I hope that it has conveyed a commitment to my ideals of bridging the academy-community divide as well as the boundaries of community that has been imagined in too rigid and binary ways. In trying to think imaginatively, creatively, and productively about community and belonging, I too am searching for an address of the present as a means of connecting our pasts towards a more hopeful tomorrow.

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