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Between Here and There:
Vietnamese Identity Formation in the United States

By
Nancy Vu

A senior thesis
Submitted to the Department of Sociology and Anthropology
In fulfillment of the requirements
For the Bachelor of Arts degree in
Political Sociology

Faculty Advisor: Farha Ghannam

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Ultimately, the insights I have gained from this thesis project, both theoretically and relationally, guide my visions for moving forward as a member of the Vietnamese diaspora and as someone seeking to situate their community in history as more than a moment in time, but something that continues to be remembered and to breathe life into future.

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Abstract

My thesis looks at the processes of identity formation within the Vietnamese diasporic community, who sought refuge in the United States shortly after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. It draws on semi-structured interviews with Vietnamese community members from Arizona and California, textual analysis of Vietnamese magazines and written work by Vietnamese writers, and auto-ethnography informed by my family history and personal experiences in the Vietnamese community. My analysis brings together insights from different scholarly traditions that explore identity, memory, materiality, and migration. After an overview of the histories of Vietnamese migration and integration to the United States, my thesis explores how identity formation is done both through memory work and everyday practices that re-establish their connectedness to one another and their various homelands. It pays particular attention to the role of language, religion, and food in identity formation, positing that embodied food practices communicate cultural knowledge while being easier to share and bridge cultural divides. My discussion shows that Vietnamese identity is created through the interplay between accommodation and differentiation, which connects the here and there, the us and them, the past and present. These processes reveal the aspects of “Vietnameseness” that are given up in the process of integration and those that remain continuous, or are essential to the consolidation of a Vietnamese identity moving forward. I conclude that cultivating solidarity and creating belonging is the pathway to “resist forward” within the community, as they try to situate themselves between two national identities that flatten their complex, globalized realities.

Introduction

My personal experiences within the Vietnamese community strongly connected with readings I did in different classes about identity and immigration. In particular, I became interested in how my community forged a collective identity in the United States. I initially started my thesis planning to argue against hybridization as a means to imagine more expansive memberships; however, I found that this was more a shortcoming of Western integration theories and its terms for citizenship. By hybridization, I refer to the effort to merge differences and preserve social cohesion as the idealized collective identity. This model implies the need for homogeneity and is inevitably riddled with contradictions for the displaced Vietnamese diaspora, given that they are attempting to create a collective without a geographic or locational basis. Instead, this thesis explores how the Vietnamese collective identity has been constructed and reshaped by the diasporic community through the dialectics of accommodation/bridging and (cultural) preservation/resistance to change. My analyses are informed by Vietnamese migration history and respective positioning (social, economic, political, geographic) in the United States.

I am interested in the ways that the Vietnamese identity can be conceptualized and imagined differently between generations, depending on their varying conceptions of what it means to be Vietnamese. Even within my family, there are significant generational differences in perceptions of belonging to the dominant “American” society compared to the Vietnamese sub-section. There are also important differences in privilege and choice between Vietnamese refugees and migrants, which I want to outline briefly. When I refer to Vietnamese refugees, I refer to those who migrated before or shortly after the fall of Saigon in 1975, where there did not exist explicit international programs to accommodate their migration and integration. Instead, they were mostly received on accounts of violence and political vulnerability. Comparatively, I

refer to Vietnamese migrants as those who migrated to the United States during the third (and final) wave of migration through family reunification programs or other sponsorships, which are more centered around economic vulnerabilities. Still, I want to acknowledge that the lines of choice and agency between refugees and migrants remain blurry because of international failures to clearly define the separation between political and economic interests, classify migration motivations according to these poles, and assess their levels of need (especially as political and economic interests are inherently interconnected and mutually reinforcing). Therefore, I opt to use “migrant” in most general cases of international movement across borders.

My goal is to explore how Vietnamese identity is constructed in Arizona and California, given several contradictions and needed sacrifices: what is portable and what is not, what fits in the dominant culture and what does not, what does resistance and redefinition look like for the Vietnamese refugee collective? My analyses focus on the variations in social practice within the Vietnamese community according to their respective backgrounds and priorities. While all communities face this conflict, I explore the nuances of Vietnamese identity formation to figure liberative models for collective identity when the ideal “cohesive” community is not realistic. I propose an approach based on spatial and temporal realities between “here” and “there” and bound by relational memberships, where identity is not framed by tangible categories in transnational contexts. I focus on community efforts toward accommodating and bridging differences for solidarity, as opposed to cohesion, as the goal. I ultimately argue that sustaining transnational ties between the homeland and their renewed lives enable Vietnamese refugees to construct increasingly complex and resilient identities that span beyond the borders of national memberships.

Research Methodology

My methodology combines different methods. First, it draws on semi-structured interviews about Vietnamese social practices and the experiences and sentiments related to said practices and the way that Vietnamese identity is performed. I conducted four interviews: one with Tuyet, a first-generation woman, aged 58, currently working as a finance and grants management specialist and residing in California; one with Brian, a second-generation man, aged 22, currently in search of jobs in California; one with Noah, a second-generation man, aged 24, currently working as software engineer, pursuing acting and dancing gigs on the side, and residing in New York; and one with Kim, a first-generation woman, aged 62, currently working as a nail technician and residing in Arizona. Though Noah currently lives in New York, he grew up in the California Bay area and studied at Stanford University before finding employment in New York. Brian and Noah have not visited Vietnam, but express interest in doing so long-term. Neither of them can speak Vietnamese fluently. Noah is half-Vietnamese and half-Chinese; his mother is a Vietnamese boat refugee. Alternatively, both Tuyet and Kim migrated to the United States in the 1990s and speak fluent Vietnamese. Kim has visited Vietnam since migrating (in 2003), and Tuyet had plans to visit Vietnam with her childhood friends, but COVID canceled her travel plans. All my interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Second, I draw on my own experiences learning how to be Vietnamese through practice and the embodiment of “Vietnameseness” in larger social settings, where I continuously have to negotiate and renegotiate my relationality with others. I supplement my analyses of Vietnamese history with my own family’s migration and integration experiences after the war. Third, I support my argument by textual analysis of three major Vietnamese magazine publications in Arizona: Bút Tre, VietLifestyles, and Saigon Nhỏ (Little Saigon). All three magazines have

publications across multiple states—e.g. Texas, Hawaii, Utah, and New Mexico—though primarily printing for their Arizonan and Californian readers. These magazine publications have been running since the early 2000s. I reviewed issues from 2020 moving forward; therefore, many issues reflect on similar news such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump-Biden presidential race, US-Mexico border conflicts, Russian invasion of Ukraine and the present-day Israel-Palestine conflicts. Within the issues are deeper reflections on local state and community news as well as struggles back in Vietnam, such as political and environmental conflicts at the Mekong River delta and continued reconciliation with the Vietnam War.

Fourth, I visited major Vietnamese social spaces, including Grand Century Mall in California and the Holy Spirit Catholic Church and the Mekong Plaza in Arizona. All three spaces are social hotspots for the Vietnamese community, with varying levels of leverage and influence in both a local and state-wide context. Both Grand Century Mall and Mekong Plaza are cultural hubs, in San Jose and Mesa respectively, where Vietnamese residents can convene with their friends and family and indulge in imported goods and meals from local restaurants that remind them of Vietnam. The Holy Spirit Catholic Church is frequented by Vietnamese folk living in the surrounding Tempe and Mesa areas and through community mobilization has now secured dedicated mass times and spaces for public use. Specifically, the church is regularly used to run Vietnamese and catechism classes on Sundays as well as Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Society meetings (also known as phong trào Thiếu Nhi Thánh Thể).

I chose to focus on the Vietnamese communities in California and Arizona because I am personally familiar with them and their historical significance. One of the four major migration destinations for Vietnamese refugees was California, and from there the largest Vietnamese diasporic community was born in the United States, specifically around Westminster and Orange

County. For some lower-income Vietnamese folk, moving to Arizona was a natural next choice, and similarly there is a relatively active and lively congregation across Phoenix and its neighboring cities. However, I am aware that this also limits my ability to assess Vietnamese identity formation in different geographical and sociopolitical contexts of other regions of the United States—I do not claim that the perspectives and experiences of my interviewees reflects the universal experience of Vietnamese refugees in the United States.

Rather, I hone in on the value of autoethnography to supplement and develop a deeper understanding of my interview and textual data. Alongside my interviewees, I traversed various contexts with my family, where different levels of familiarity and trust were established that framed my connections to people and the spaces I occupied. I utilize these frameworks to capture and expand on the emotional geographies within Vietnamese social practices that community members create and how they inform Vietnamese identity formation.

On that note, I want to preface my analyses with acknowledgements of the limitations of my study and what I aim to discuss. I faced several challenges in the process of collecting interviews and miscellaneous data. The older men I contacted in my Vietnamese community expressed hesitation about participating in my thesis project due to time constraints and work obligations. The younger women that I reached out to did not respond or express interest. This limits the scope of my research, as older Vietnamese men and younger Vietnamese women were not included in my study. Furthermore, because of my small sample size and specific interview framing, I cannot provide robust analyses about classed experiences of migration and integration. My four interviewees come from different class positions; however, it is unclear how their class statuses may have varied in its impact on their lives before and after migration to the United States and thus influenced their resettlement experiences. For the above reasons, I focus my

comparative analyses on cross-generational distinctions, rather than on the classed or gendered experience of migration and integration. It would be fruitful to explore the intersections of class, gender, and period of migration across resettlement experiences in the Vietnamese community in future research for a more nuanced understanding of Vietnamese identity formation. This involves choosing a larger sample size and greater diversity of research participants as well. Despite the fact that my sample is limited, my goal here is not generalization but understanding of some of the ways through which identity is articulated and formed.

Reflections on Personal Experiences of In-betweenness

When I traveled with my family, we only traveled within our large Vietnamese groups, and wherever we went, we sought the Vietnamese community. For that reason, the place we frequented most was California. Despite the fact that we had just visited family in California last summer, we would return for the winter, and the following summer, and the next without considering otherwise. To us, it was a site of community, a safe and familiar space that brought us together with people like us. In a similar fashion, my parents always tried to find Vietnamese medical care professionals to take care of us: our family physician is Vietnamese. Our dentist and his staff are Vietnamese, and some of them attend mass at the same church as us. Ironically, the one time my orthopedist was not Vietnamese, the receptionists regularly mistook us for his relatives because we shared the same surname as him. In this situation, I had to translate for my parents at every appointment to ensure I was receiving proper care for my disability. I also volunteered regularly at my church, teaching Vietnamese and catechism classes because they always invited extra hands and minds within the Vietnamese community.

It was only when I entered formal educational institutions that I began to contend with the American part of my identity. I started learning English the year before I started kindergarten

to ensure that I could adjust to the educational system in the United States.¹ For similar reasons, my parents gave me an official English name, despite calling me otherwise at home. With time, the need to speak English in school created a rift between my siblings, my parents, and I. At home, I started speaking English more regularly with my siblings, and my parents could no longer follow our mealtime conversations. It was during middle school that my parents realized the limitations of maintaining dual expectations for us to Americanize and retain our core Vietnamese values. My parents began setting rules to reprioritize and reimpose our connections to Vietnamese cultural values and practices. Whenever we convened to eat together, we spoke Vietnamese so my mother and grandmother could be included in the conversations. We learned Vietnamese cooking and caretaking practices to ensure that we would know how to return to our families in their late lives.² We talked semi-regularly about the homeland and our rich history, so we would not forget the conditions we rose from and compromise the sacrifices made.

Still, being Vietnamese was one of, if not the most, salient aspects of my identity in the spaces I occupied. I faced external pressures to speak and act American³ to fit in with my school friends, but there were parts of my Vietnamese culture that separated me from my peers. On numerous occasions, the food that I brought with me for lunch would be a source of intrigue for my classmates, who often mistook my ground pork patties for apple slices (I do not know how) and commented on the smell and color of my packed lunches. Moreover, many of my classmates

¹ My mother, who now knows very little English, actually taught me English. Today, the full extent of my family's history of integration into American society is a surprise to many of my peers, including my father's accumulation of various certificates to seek employment. He is certified to teach people how to drive and was my driving instructor, be a nail technician (though he abandoned this work due to the gendered nature of service work), and does home repairs for many of my relatives and community members.

² Sending family members to nursing homes in their old age is very taboo in the Vietnamese community. It is a big source of shame for any family to not be able to care for their elders. Instead, multigenerational homes are the norm.

³ To me, acting "American" involves performing many classic archetypes, like playing American sports, listening to American music on the radio, and socializing in popular spaces according to American social norms. In contrast, acting "Vietnamese" involves performances of hierarchy and humility. This is complemented by national cuisines, music, and holidays (and ways of celebrating like karaoke, hosting festivals, and gathering in various spaces).

found it strange that I had no middle name. I remember coming home the first time I had to explain to my peers that I was not given a middle name, asking my mom why she did not give me one. She was surprised to hear my disdain, and to satisfy my concerns, she told me to use my Vietnamese name. Symbolically, this represents the shift in my prioritization of my multiple identities: while learning to live in American society, my Vietnamese identity was wedged somewhere in between, always separating me from my peers with their embarrassing, but typical middle names like Patrick.

These divisions even penetrated into my regular spiritual and celebratory practices. I had grown up attending mass in predominantly Vietnamese churches and attending Lunar New Year festivals with the Vietnamese community. After coming to Swarthmore, I struggled to participate in mass because I only knew my prayers and gospel songs in Vietnamese. I did not know how to seek penance from our priest who could not understand the Act of Contrition stumbling out of my mouth. Similarly, I struggle to find a dedicated space to celebrate our major holidays on Swarthmore's campus and often spend time alone off-campus (e.g. in Chinatown or Little Saigon) trying to retain my cultural roots. In these ways, I am reminded of my Vietnameseeness ironically because of the continuous displacement and marginalization of that part of my identity in my everyday life.

Despite these conflicts, being Vietnamese is a source of pride for me. I feel that my parents' learned methods to adapt to US society have similarly taught me how to carve out my own spaces in predominantly white institutions. Furthermore, my background has given me additional resources to consider the global context we exist in that give me leverage over my peers whose perspectives are constrained by the boundaries of United States citizenship and the Western narrative. As I grew older, I grew more motivated to showcase this culturally unique and

special part of my identity to my peers. During spirit weeks in high school, we would sometimes have to dress up for “Throwback Thursday”. While some of my peers would dress up as their parents or their child selves, I celebrated my Vietnamese heritage by coming to school in Vietnamese traditional dress, specifically with the traditional áo dài combination. For my high school graduation potluck, I brought homemade bánh patê sô that I made with my parents to share with my peers. Today, I am more intent on speaking about the Vietnamese refugee community and on issues pertinent to my people in my day-to-day political engagements.

Ultimately, as I traversed through casual spaces and formal institutions that sought to categorize me, I learned how to center my American and Vietnamese identities as they fit into the social schemes imposed on me. My Vietnamese peers learned to do the same in various ways and with varying degrees of success. Some of my peers are active in the community and our yearly activities, including our Tết dance performances and áo dài and Miss Vietnam beauty pageants. Others engage through the consumption of good Vietnamese food and participation in our rambunctious late-night karaoke sessions while primarily living the “American” way otherwise. There is an ongoing struggle within my community to prioritize Vietnamese language acquisition in the second- and third- generations while they struggle with their various identities and sometimes reject prominent Vietnamese values and practices altogether in order to fit in with the American mainstream.

Literature review

Before I begin my own analyses, I want to discuss the existing frameworks for identity formation, especially in the context of immigration and integration, then narrow the focus on the experience of Vietnamese refugees in the United States. There has been extensive sociological and anthropological research on identity, the process of identity formation, and its implications

for social organizing and self-representation within marginalized communities. Specifically, I review immigrant identity formation and integration within the larger contexts of nation-state formation and globalization. Moreover, I review social mobilization theory to analyze the ways that the Vietnamese collective is able to occupy and redefine the spaces they occupy, especially as it is informed by a new, liminal, diasporic experience, rather than one informed mainly or only by the bounds of nation-statehood.

Immigration and Integration Processes

Immigration and integration research have been contentious fields of study given the context of an increasingly industrialized and globalized world. I refer to the analyses of authors like Patrick Wolfe (2016), Mae Ngai (2004), and Edward Said (1978) to consider how migrants have historically been classified and located in the Western hegemonic framework for borders and migration. Edward Said (1978) foundationally introduced the “Orient” or Orientalism as a framework for understanding how the Western world defines itself through what it is *not*. He specifically views how the Muslim world is positioned against the West to classify them as depraved, backwards, and in need of enlightenment. Similarly, Mae Ngai (2004) and Patrick Wolfe (2016) consider how the categories of race were constructed and applied to Asian and African groups in the United States to orient them against their white counterparts. In America, it was utilized in two primary ways: to highlight differences for labor exploitation (in the case of African groups) or invisibilize differences (in the case of Indigenous populations) to stake claims to land and sovereignty. In other cases, race is simultaneously invisible and hypervisible depending on the desire to co-opt or exploit as it was for Asian migrant laborers, otherwise referred to as coolies (Lowe 1996; Kang 2002; Jung 2016).

In the above examples, identity, particularly for the marginalized, is assumed to be fixed and defined by binaries or dualisms, e.g. “American” and “Vietnamese,” that are in actuality not predetermined or well-defined. Several thinkers have called for a shift away from teleological analyses of historical marginalizations, as they take the social categorizations for granted and risk perpetuating narrations of their inevitability (Paolucci 2006; Fanon 2008; Wolfe 2016). In fact, history is considered a reference point to understand the flawed bases of these false and constructed assumptions to deconstruct them and imagine new possibilities for identity formation and social organization (Haraway 1988; Césaire 2000; Fanon 2008; Fassin 2011).

I similarly analyze the historicization of Vietnamese refugees in dominant American and communist Vietnamese narratives to consider how they are employed to satisfy political objectives. I also view their mainstream historicization as a context to frame and guide the community’s present-day activities toward the consolidation of a Vietnamese identity away from predominant models for integration. I expand on these racial frameworks to consider how the Vietnamese refugee community engages in various forms of memory work to contest the “truth” behind these narratives and nuance the experiences of Vietnamese refugees against the American colonial project hidden behind interventions against communism in Asia. In particular, narratives of the communist threat reflect not only common assumptions of Chinese ideologies as reserved in the backwards, Oriental “past”, but also something the West is responsible for converting.

The Vietnamese diasporic community is also a racialized, mobile group that is scrutinized and subjectified for their crossing of national borders. Jørgen Carling (2018) and Tim Cresswell (2010) demonstrate that mobility and the politics of mobility is a reflection of existing power hierarchies within society, as bodies are unequally free to move and move through different channels depending on the institutions imposed upon them. Regardless of the operations of

(dis)empowerment, Liisa Malkki (1992) acknowledged the inevitability of migration and movement and considered people inherently “international”. She emphasized the need to study the various contexts that induce (continuous) displacement for vulnerable groups. I refer to and expand on these theories to consider how migration routes also inform migrants’ pathways to integration in ways that are compulsive and demand a degree of assimilation. The role of the state as a standardizing and regulating power is more clear when tracing the procedures through which migrants are made legible and illegible from migration to integration (Ngai 2004).

I consider Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” to be most foundational to conceptualizing the national boundaries that migrants cross in the first place. Imagined communities are distinctly constructed national collective identities that assume a simultaneity between its constituents. This simultaneity allows for constituents to assume a collective identity through their everyday practices. Moreover, there are many symbolisms that construct national identities from the “complex ‘crossing’ of discrete historical forces... capable of... be[ing] merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations,” establishing rigid boundaries for national identity based on historical, cultural, and everyday connectedness (Anderson 1983, 4; Levitt and Schiller 2004).

Billig (1995) and Hamilakis (2007) explain how these formulations are constructed and reaffirmed in national political projects to naturalize the incompatibility of migrants with their host countries and exacerbate polarizations between various social groups and identities. This can take the form of more mundane, everyday breaches as well as systematic, institutionalized conceptions of misalignment that create thresholds to belonging (Jones and Krzyżanowski 2011). Firstly, everyday incompatibilities are made apparent through forms of “banal nationalism,” or everyday symbols of nationalism that often go unnoticed by the constituents of the nation while

being glaring symbols of exclusion to others (Billig 1995). Moreover, migrants are systematically excluded from the national narrative through calls to shared religion, value systems, history, and tradition, through which migrants are routinely externalized. This is experienced within public discourse but is also embedded in the social environment through iconographic and archaeological projects (Hamilakis 2007).

I similarly focus on everyday significations of membership to assess how the Vietnamese collective identity is formulated. I add that banal nationalisms are not only performed by the hegemonic West to establish barriers to membership, but that it can be a tool for marginalized groups to situate themselves in the mainstream and carve out exclusive (counter) identities for themselves. I position the Vietnamese collective identity and its incompatibilities with American society to reveal the tensions in the consolidation of a cohesive and coherent American identity amidst increasingly complex, diverse, and globalized identities. The inability to reconcile with and incorporate Vietnamese people reveals contradictions in the naturalization of American hegemonic societal norms and structures and calls for a broadening of space for other memberships and identities.

I also refer to the works of Nicholas De Genova (2004), Aihwa Ong (1996), and Grace Chang (2000) to inform my contemporary understanding of the illegality of migrant bodies under state regulation and the naturalization of law to create exploitable, domestic bodies. The authors expand on historical analyses and conceptualize how nationalistic logics are extensions of racist, colonial projects in the globalized capitalist world. Racial categorizations disenfranchise migrant groups by universally labeling them as welfare-dependent, unproductive, and ultimately detrimental members of society (Ong 1996; Rytter 2019). All these racializing processes explain how migrants are not inherently illegal but “illegalized” (Bauder 2014).

This is relevant to my thesis because these processes of illegalization simultaneously remove responsibility from host societies to engage in reciprocal relationships with refugee and migrant populations and be sensitive to the migrants' respective ways of living, traditions, and contributions (Rytter 2019). My thesis focuses on integration processes, rather than migration, to illustrate how "integration" expectations from host countries are, in actuality, homogenizing demands for migrants to assimilate to their new host societies, even when they are proposed otherwise. At the same time that integration is posed as desirable, it is posed as impossible so long as migrants possess characteristics that host societies deem incompatible with their social norms. In this way, unless they abandon their previous ways of living and formally assimilate, they remain a perpetual specter of all societal ills. These narratives have a particularly naturalizing effect when the socioeconomic outcomes of migrants, despite being heavily constrained by systemic inequities, reaffirm their failed integration or sometimes outright refusal to integrate (Fadiman 1997; Chang 2000).

Similarly, I argue that the essentialization of Vietnamese experiences of war and political persecution to place them in a paternalistic relationship with the US government and subject them to increased levels of scrutiny in exchange for "liberation" from political violence. Similar to other Asian communities, Vietnamese refugees are essentialized as vulnerable and docile; therefore, their mobilization efforts are often framed around the contestation of these narratives while limiting the possibilities to reimagine themselves beyond these categories. Furthermore, the racialization of Vietnamese refugees makes it impossible for them to truly become "American"; instead, they remain second-class citizens.

At the same time, I reference Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) habitus, taste, and embodiment to consider avenues for identity (re)formation and resistance. Bourdieu defines the habitus as "a

subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (Bourdieu 1984,).

More colloquially, the habitus is a lifestyle that reflects the social and cultural norms of larger society. Taste is the "generative formula of life-style, a unitary set of distinctive preferences," that projects what I consider to be the cultural hegemony that shapes the social body and its preferred way of existing through bodily expression and presentations (Bourdieu 1984, 173). Embodiment grounds the body as the point of interaction between the individual and society to produce social categories and the knowledge that undergirds the "reality" of those respective categories—the embodiment of particular traits and values materialize into the appearance of natural qualities of particular bodies and classes. Judith Butler's (2008) performativity expands on Bourdieu's theories and explains how repeated stylized practice consolidates the illusion behind the coherence of hegemonic social categories and simultaneously resignifies the norms undergirding the societal structure to rethink and destabilize those categories.

Saba Mahmood (2001) further establishes the relationship between agency and resistance by centering the embodiment and internalization of personal desires as the frame for action. She considers how what seems like an acceptance of societal norms is part of a process to inhabit the dominant societal context and produce new meanings of identity and belonging from the embodiment of their desires above and informed by hegemonic power structures and their rigid impositions (e.g. resignifying the practice of veiling). Desire, then, expands on Butler's performativity by considering how "passivity" itself is an act of resistance, as it constructs and conforms to an alternative habitus away from the predominant models for identity expression.

Additionally, some studies review the concept of legibility in state subject-making and the ways that many marginalized groups can complicate and redefine dominant value structures

such as forms of citizenship based on exceptionalism, neoliberalism and subjectification (Khabeer 2017; Foucault 1975). While I similarly acknowledge the agency of the Vietnamese diasporic community to act under oppressive hegemonic models, I also argue that enactments of neoliberalism and exceptionalism can itself be isolating and ostracizing, while reaffirming hegemonic structures that run counter to their interests. I challenge the assumptions of unified resistance that can be achieved through the aforementioned models by moving away from assumptions that all diasporic people participate in group activities with the intention to resist or redefine hegemonic structures. In fact, within diasporic communities, there exist many competing interests that can limit prospects for solidarity.

Lopez and Espiritu (1990), Espiritu (1992), and Lien (2001) complicate social mobilization theories by reviewing panethnicity as an essentializing racial category that stifles Asian-American social mobilization. Espiritu (1992) asserts that panethnicity is a political process by which racial identity formation is done by lumping together diverse ethnic groups into one racial framework. This allows for the racialization of Asian-Americans while there exist stark divisions between and within Asian-American groups that destabilize Asian-American identity as “cohesive” simply because of shared origins to the Asian continent. Rather, class stratifications between Asian groups (primarily between East Asian migrants and other Asian groups) as well as political tensions between “divided homelands,” (Lien 2001, 48) like North and South Korea and North and South Vietnam stifle prospects for solidarity and collective organization. While literature on panethnicity focuses on racial and class divisions between Asian-American ethnic groups, I look at fractures within the Vietnamese community that similarly limit in-group solidarity and social and political mobilization. I add to these frameworks for interpreting migrant identity formation and liberation against the assimilation

pressures of American society by favoring transnationalism as an avenue for migrants to destabilize rigid national members and also contest the notion of hybridization as purely “productive”.

Malkki (1992) explores the concept of “transnationalism” and how it expands on understandings of nationalism and national identity by considering the possibility of allegiances to multiple localities and expanded understandings of identity in a globalized context. This expands on narrow theories of multiculturalism and assimilation by allowing migrant communities to maintain a sense of connectedness, or simultaneity, with their “home” countries and maintain relationships transnationally. Moreover, it allows for the construction of hybridized or hyphenated identities, the latter being more common in the United States than other parts of the world, where migrants, particularly second-generation, identify themselves with both national groups (Bhalla and Singh 2024). This provides many displaced communities with a source of resilience through their connections with the “homeland” and the social, cultural, and economic resources those connections provide them. Despite all this, many migrants also experience a profound liminality where they struggle to fully belong in either society, thus feeling perpetually displaced. This may come as a result of statelessness following displacement as well as difficulty being accepted by either society due to perceptions of being a little *too* integrated and simultaneously not enough (Gilman 2001). Sara Ahmed (2010) explains how, even with citizenship, migrants fail to achieve a sense of belonging to their host societies due to continued experiences of racial discrimination and subordination. Additionally, Ahmed poses a “happiness test” that supplements Mahmood’s emphasis on desire as agency: the successes that migrants celebrate reveal where their allegiances lie, which often transcend the hegemonic concept of borders. Rather, proposals of happiness (or similar feelings of pride, familiarity,

comfort, and security) establish collective identities in a transnational context, or transnational citizenships, not limited by the nation or the state.

In response to these cases, I argue that, alongside transnational frameworks, there needs to be greater attention to the everyday practices of creating belonging between members in diasporic communities. Underpinning my observations are many expectations for inconsistencies and tensions that are necessary for cultivating solidarity between multiple identities and dispositions rather than detrimental to the collective goal.

Vietnamese Refugee Identity Formation in the United States

The literature on Vietnamese identity formation reflects similar themes. There existed various challenges that the Vietnamese community faced after migrating to the United States, and they varied greatly between generations. When Vietnamese refugees arrived in the US after the Vietnam War, their primary mode of social mobility was working within their communities running nail salons and small businesses (Pham 2018; Tran 2021). They spent a significant time struggling to integrate because most did not speak English and the skills and degrees they earned in Vietnam were not transferable in the US economy. For that reason, their employability outside of their small communities was quite low (Le and Nguyen 2015; Tran 2021). Moreover, they faced multiple instances of racial discrimination and exclusion from the White neighborhoods they moved into (Lieu 2011). Vietnamese refugees were subjected to various forms of racial animosity to uphold the dominance of whiteness as “indigenous” to the space (Ong 1996). Specifically, they were subjected to narratives of welfare dependency, laziness and incompetence, and cultural backwardness. It was not until they significantly revitalized the local economy that they received positive public recognition and were given space to establish their own identity within the cityscape of California (Lieu 2011).

This economic and cultural revitalization within the Vietnamese diaspora in the US is a large part of the community's pride today. To many Vietnamese refugees, they feel that they have significantly changed the US as a nation, even though they simultaneously acknowledge the ways they have been excluded from national narratives (Nguyen 2019). Moreover, many point to their cultural values and traditions as a key component of their survival. They cite family values and education as the primary source of their collective resilience; within the community, there is a strong duty to support and maintain respect for elders, such that everyone is cared for (Le and Nguyen 2015; Pham 2018). It is with reference to this continuous community-based effort to establish themselves that I choose to focus on Vietnamese identity formation as a primarily social process, rather than a set of individualized practices that construct the Vietnamese identity.

A part of their integration process also involved cross-racial collaborations within the US. The *Nailed It* documentary covered the history of Vietnamese nail salon monopoly and revealed that actress Tippi Hedren led a movement in 1975 to give Vietnamese women basic skills for employment. Throughout this time, Tippi and the Vietnamese community had close relations, and they were able to successfully establish family-run nail salons in the United States. As they expanded, many relationships between the Vietnamese and Black communities also developed, including a nail salon called "ManTrap" being run by collaborating Vietnamese and Black women seeking to serve their own communities (Pham 2018). Similarly, I review cross-racial collaborations in my analysis to consider the bridges between Vietnamese and other racial group interests for coalition-building and future political action. However, I reflect on the existing limitations of Vietnamese political activity and consider the need for additional intra-community coalition-building across regional and generational variations. Their different lived realities therefore guide different political interests that must be leveraged for grounded mobilization.

Second-generation Vietnamese-Americans have faced their own set of challenges. Within family-run businesses, there has been significant pressure for the children to continue the business against their own desires (Pham 2018). As the second-generation had more educational and occupational opportunities, they faced additional pressures to be socially and economically mobile to demonstrate their independence and ability to integrate into American society. Additionally, the second-generation struggled with the reality that their integration to the United States was incomplete, but they could also never find a “home” back in Vietnam. The two generations differently struggled with the aftermath of the war; while the older generation opted to move on by not speaking of their trauma, the second-generation felt the void of their silence (Lam 2006; Nguyen 2009). I engage with this rift between generations and the silences that perpetuate cycles of trauma and isolation; however, I also consider how these generational divides are based on and exacerbated by various membership pressures between the United States and Vietnam. Current literature often assesses socioeconomic differences within the community without consideration of the histories that frame hegemonic discourse and societal infrastructure. Therefore, I also contextualize my analyses by interrogating the Vietnamese and American histories, how the Vietnamese community is situated in these histories, and how that frames their current avenues for collective identity formation and possible liberation from essentialism.

Kaus (2016), Nguyen (2022), and Duong (2020) explore the various efforts of the Vietnamese diaspora to contextualize their narratives of war, displacement, and resettlement in resistance to the multitude of ways their traumas have been appropriated in international discourse to supplement the United States and Vietnamese national narratives. This has been a rising phenomenon being explored by second-generation Vietnamese-Americans who seek to

redefine the Vietnamese collective identity as a source of pride and challenge their colonial subjectification according to essentialized histories. These current efforts foreground my own observations of key issues in the community that guide their memory work (which I explore in Chapter 1) and enactments of identity through social practice (Chapters 2 and 3).

Through the exploration of various forms of Vietnamese media, ranging from karaoke and nhạc vàng to engagements in literature and autobiography to grand media productions reflecting on the nostalgic and modern Vietnamese collective, Vietnamese creatives reimagine what it means to be Vietnamese outside of the Western colonial gaze. Firstly, they fill in the silences in their history to re-establish ownership of their stories, media representations, and oppose American selective memory of their experiences of suffering. Writers recall their often untold experiences with torture in re-education camps, with political persecution and poverty, as well as resilience and community that has contributed to their survival (Kaus 2016). Their stories are documented through their survival, with their bodies acting as records of their history that would be lost if they did not search for and preserve their often untold, “unofficial” experiences (Gusain and Jha 2022).

Musicians, as well as everyday Vietnamese folk, engage with creative mediums to express their yearnings for a future beyond the colonial imagination of liberation through neoliberal capitalism (Lam 2006; Nguyen 2022). Though they make many efforts to employ their status as equal participants in the globalized world, these are primarily projections against the communist regime of Vietnam (Lieu 2011). Otherwise, music and literature are utilized to express their grievances and dissatisfaction with American society. Simultaneously, they invest in a “geopolitics of memory” that transcends national borders to bridge Vietnamese people

between Vietnam, the United States, and other parts of the world and broaden the limited colonial imagination of a Vietnamese future (Liu 2015; Duong 2020; Gusain and Jha 2022).

While I explore similar dimensions of memory work and Vietnamese identity formation in new American contexts, I find that existing literature on Vietnamese identity formation tends to consider social practices independently of one another, rather than a set of practices that aim to construct a collective identity. Moreover, analyses are predominantly made based on secondary sources, e.g. reviewing various forms of Vietnamese media, such that there are few avenues to qualify the meaning and boundaries of “Vietnameseness” according to community members themselves. I opt to look at several Vietnamese social practices such as food making and consumption cumulatively to view their identity formation as a continuous process that involves several layers of cultural maintenance and resistance to assimilation pressures.

Structure of thesis

My analyses are grounded by Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) habitus, taste, and embodiment, wherein Antonio Gramsci’s (1929) concept of hegemony grounds the societal norms through which the habitus is oriented and the body is stylized. I reference Bourdieu’s concepts to frame the dominant frameworks, American and Vietnamese, in my thesis and consider Vietnamese knowledge-production as ways to participate in and complicate the discursive economies of race, class, and other essentialized categories. In my analyses of the reworkings of identity and power hierarchies, I refer to Judith Butler’s (2008) performativity and Saba Mahmood’s (2001) agency, desire, and resistance to assess how the Vietnamese collective aligns itself with hegemonic discourses and contests them in their everyday performances of identity.

My approach incorporates the aforementioned frameworks by focusing on how the Vietnamese identity is distinctly *performed* in society, in both public and private, Vietnamese and

non-Vietnamese social spaces. In this way, I give emphasis to the individual choices of the Vietnamese constituency to represent themselves through the *accumulation* of their activities, whether mundane or not, and create spaces for storytelling and vitalization away from national narratives of the Vietnamese diasporic community.

I refer to Mahmood's conception of agency to focus on desire as a basis for conceptualizing resistance against predominant societal norms. Most importantly, I echo Mahmood's call to consider more nuanced models for resistance beyond Western frameworks for liberation and imagining lifeworlds. It is only through this transcendence that I believe that marginalized people can actually carve out a space for themselves, not coded by Western hegemonic ways of imagining and mobilizing which only reshape existing hegemonic structure. For example, empowerment through outward expressions of femininity is not the only way to resist gendered subjugation; in fact, some misguided expressions of empowerment can become sources of subjectification under oppressive structures.

Part of this is recognizing how knowledge production is deeply intertwined with the production of power. The everyday repeated practices of marginalized groups, based on their internalized understandings of and efforts to cultivate themselves, allow them to refashion norms and delegitimize hegemonic normalization toward other embodied identities, overtly subversive or not. My analysis is similarly informed by key symbols and thematics across Vietnamese ways of surviving, celebrating, and ultimately embodying their collective identity. This includes paying close attention to details about the ways in which the body is trained by linguistic and religious cultural education and deployed, the ways food becomes a tool for cultural *and* historical preservation, and the various forms of storytelling and memory work employed by my interviewees.

I also utilize Sealy's conception of nearness-distance to consider how their proximities to the Vietnamese versus American habitus inform their sense of belonging and reveal the existing tensions in "hybridized" identities and memberships. I expand on these analyses with Ahmed's "melancholic migrant" to conceptualize the persistent limitations to coherent "hybridized" identities when migrants fail to achieve happiness, defined by the state as true integration to American society, regardless of their efforts. I utilize her frameworks to assess how all forms of emotional attachments to Vietnam while living in the United States create relational geographies that support collectivity on a globalized scale, as opposed to being wholly defined by national citizenship. I conclude that the goal should be the cultivation of organic solidarities, defined by Maurice Bloch (1999:135) as "people who are joined by their dissimilarity," rather than mechanical solidarities that support egalitarianism without care for nuance to create belonging.

In Chapter 1, I briefly review the history of Vietnamese migration to the United States and the respective international reception of boat refugees as essentialized victims of war. I discuss the integration experiences of Vietnamese refugees, stratified by period of migration, to assess how Western hegemonic structures impose power hierarchies between the host society and "guest" refugees. I then explore the ways that the Vietnamese diaspora engages in memory work to formulate an alternative conceptualization of the Vietnamese collective outside of predominant national narratives and power structures. I focus on how memory work is done through iconography and the construction of exclusive Vietnamese spaces even while living in the United States. I utilize iconography (through object employments like flagging and architecture as well as employments of the body) as an essential frame of reference for cultural reproduction and the materialization of national identities. In this way, memory work becomes a form of everyday transgression in the lives of Vietnamese refugees, who refuse rigid identity

markers and categorizations and call for more nuanced accounts of Vietnamese experience with settler colonialism, transnational capitalism, and (racial) border politics.

This memory work and historicization frames my analyses of Vietnamese embodied practice and intentionality throughout the rest of my thesis. In chapters 2 and 3, I expand on my previous discussion by exploring how Vietnamese identity is *done* in daily life and how everyday practices construct new conceptions of identity and belonging that are fluid and mobile rather than fixed. I center on embodied practices to consider alternative ways to express and formulate identity when language and symbolisms are not accessible. Additionally, I explore the limitations of their hybridization of practices, as several variations in practice between community members complicate avenues for cultural preservation and cultivating community and solidarity. Specifically, I view how experiences of belonging to the Vietnamese and American identity groups vary across generations.

In Chapter 2, I focus on Vietnamese language employment and religious practice as forms of cultural education, preservation, and reproduction to expand existing identity projects. I start by considering language as a signifier of membership that establishes rigid boundaries to Vietnamese identity. While exploring the regional variations in language and how language is employed in everyday life, I explain the consequences of this exclusivity for intragroup solidarity and collective identity formation. Then, I explore religion as a more universalizable form of knowledge-production that grounds Vietnamese philosophies for engaging with the world at large. Again, I reflect on the limitations for identity formation given divisions between Vietnamese beliefs in Catholicism and Buddhism, their respective histories, value systems, and integrability in new American contexts. I conclude by establishing language as the site of knowledge-production, religion as the knowledge structure that stylizes the Vietnamese social

body and informs embodied practices, and introducing food as a cultural object and commensality as the embodied practice through which knowledge (language and religious) and intimacy is imbued and reproduced.

In Chapter 3, I focus on food as a form of dialogue that transcends the previous barriers presented by language barriers and religious differences. I specifically refer to Bloch's and Abbots' theories of commensality and the dialectics of food and kinship that are essential to migrant identity formation. Firstly, I explore how food is a visible, tangible form of cultural knowledge that encourages engagement with Vietnamese culture as a whole. Then, I consider how food is part of the compromises made as the Vietnamese collective traverses new spaces. Then, I present discussions of food as distinct from other practices through the ways it fosters connection as a communal activity and supports coalition-building both between Vietnamese folk as well as their American counterparts. Ultimately, I argue that food is the site of conversation to create more expansive conceptions of Vietnamese identity and reconcile with divisions within the collective by encouraging collaboration and creating organic solidarities.

Embedded within all chapters, I consider how identity is performed differently in space and time (as relational contexts) to signal different formulations of membership that are aggregated by manifolds of belonging and membership. This enables me to consider the fluid boundaries of Vietnamese collective identity formation and how it has accommodated the desires and interests of all its members through many adaptations and compromises that symbolize greater Vietnamese collective dreams. Language, religion, and food, this thesis shows, mark boundaries to Vietnamese identity through different levels of relationality; embedded within the spatial composition of everyday practices are enactments of intimacy and social hierarchy.

By the conclusion of my research, I argue that Vietnamese collective identity is performed to create a symbolic space between the United States and Vietnam for people to re-establish a sense of belonging while searching for opportunity overseas. Though they do not escape the grasp of hegemonic social organization, still orienting around some dominant framework and alternative “Other”, they are able to create a collective identity that is not limited to the borders of the nation and the state. Ultimately, I push for additional consideration of specific models for creating belonging between members in diasporic communities alongside existing transnational frameworks. For this reason, I focus my thesis on the dialectics of accommodation/bridging and cultural preservation/resistance against assimilation pressures to survive in new contexts, thereby “resisting forward” into a world beyond national boundaries.

Chapter 1

Finding Our Little Saigon: Envisioning Vietnam Beyond the Sea

Clément Baloup: “Each country tends to write history from its point of view, erasing those facts that don’t fit into how dominant storytelling traditions simplify history. The reality is that there are about 4.5 million people forming the Vietnamese diaspora, and yet no country officially acknowledges their history.” (Gusain and Jha 2022, 48)

In this chapter, I review Vietnamese history of migration to the United States and the integration experiences that follow to illuminate the breadth of the uncertainties and (repeated) displacement that Vietnamese migrants experience. I preface my analysis by reviewing two colonial narratives: the American and communist Vietnamese narrative. In the United States, there are two discursive constructions of Vietnamese refugees: they were simultaneously “wards of state” transformed into “model minorities” while Vietnamese war veterans were depicted as the “wounded subject of war and history”. I center on the concept of the “American Dream” to qualify the rhetoric in US integration policies that subjected Vietnamese migrations to essentializing narratives of welfare dependency and failed integration (due to the generational differences in language acquisition and education outcomes). On the flipside, the Vietnamese government rejects refugee history as part of the nation’s history and identity (Kaus 2016; Duong 2020). Instead, they view Vietnamese refugees as traitors of the state that need to be re-educated and reintegrated. I argue that these two narratives guide Vietnamese identity formation as they redefine themselves and cultivate new forms of solidarities away from the colonial narratives that reject their humanity for continued exploitation and violence.

I consider the various ways that Vietnamese refugees reckon with their displacement and historicization through memory work and making meaning out of alternative conceptions of history, space, and the homeland. I observe that memory work is done in two primary ways: through nostalgic expressions and imaginations of the homeland and through iconography in the form of object symbolism (e.g. flagging and architecture), the inhabiting and presentation of the Vietnamese body, and the creation of iconic spaces. Nostalgic recollections contest predominant histories and attempt to rewrite history, while iconography celebrates and creates visions of a thriving Vietnamese collective identity against American norms.

Ultimately, I explore how the Vietnamese diasporic community restores familiarity, connectedness, and solidarity as their primary effort to counteract their experiences of displacement during migration and after resettling in the new American context. I argue that through symbolisms, they establish themselves in the United States while maintaining connections to the homeland— they create exclusive spaces for themselves that project ideas of Vietnam and Vietnamese identity based on what they lost and seek to restore. I emphasize the importance of space and negotiation of spaces to situate themselves amidst their multiple identities— through continuous processes of bridging and accommodating changes, they establish symbolic and physical spaces between the US and Vietnam to reenact their identities.

The Fall of Saigon

It has been 49 years since the fall of Saigon to North Vietnamese communist forces and the end of the Vietnam War. To this day, the date, April 30th, 1975, represents one of the most catastrophic events in Vietnamese history, particularly for South Vietnamese refugees to the United States. This day represents a complete restructuring and displacement of their lives, as

they now exist in a limbo between their nostalgic longing for the homeland and their desires to start over on new soil.

There were three waves of mass migration from Vietnam: one mass exodus took place immediately after the fall of Saigon in 1975, and the other two occurred in the late 1970s into the 1990s. One of the most resonant recollections of the aftermath of the Vietnam War for American audiences were images and narrations of Vietnamese boat people, who in 1954 and between 1975 and 1992, sailed the seas with few resources and extremely unsturdy boats to find refuge in other parts of the world, away from the threat of political persecution. The boat refugees took on intense, volatile, and unpredictable journeys in search of liberation and security in a new country. These journeys took on many routes depending on available support that they received, as well as barriers to their movement that they encountered.

During and after the end of the Vietnam War, there were no routes to flee into neighboring countries due to ongoing conflict in Southeast Asia between Vietnam, Cambodia, and China. Laos had a similar government to the Vietnamese communist government and therefore supported the North Vietnamese in capturing and returning runaways. The best route for escape was through the South China Sea. Because of the urgency to migrate, most boats were not built to travel very far. Most boats headed to nearby countries like Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Hong Kong; some were able to make it to Japan and Australia (Greenberg 1997; Quach 2019). In other cases, boat refugees would be stranded in the ocean until they were picked up by European humanitarian ships or left to sink and die. In these ways, migration is not free from global contexts: it is channeled by the institutions imposed upon human bodies to regulate their movement and personal agency (Cresswell 2010). The routes that Vietnamese boat people took to arrive in Western countries were often not straightforward. Rather, Vietnamese boat

people had to comply with immigration procedures and leave their security in the hands of the Western powers who were expected to protect them from political persecution. After 1975, the US government only accepted Vietnamese refugees under three conditions under the Orderly Departure Program (ODP): family reunification, former US government employees with a minimum of one year's service after 1962, and persons with close ties to the US beyond the first two categories, like those studying in the US, those having been persecuted due to their association with the US government, and Amerasians. This shows how only a select population of individuals were protected by the US government and granted refugee status. Otherwise, they had to receive sponsorship from generous American families, generally working with volunteer organizations and churches (Rutledge 1992, 66).

Four of my relatives were boat refugees who underwent traumatizing encounters with death while fleeing Vietnam before being picked up by a Danish trade boat. My uncle, my aunt, her husband, and her daughter boarded a boat with three others in 1992 to flee the communist regime. My cousin at the time was only two years old, and my aunt was pregnant with her second child. They were at sea for a total of eleven days. My aunt recalls their final days, where she was convinced they were going to die: everyone was so famished, they all laid flat on the boat like corpses drying out in the sun. Because of the scarcity of resources, they rationed water between the seven people by only drinking a bottle cap's worth of water each day. By the last two days, there was no food or water to spare. It was by the stroke of luck that they stumbled upon a Danish trade boat that took them to Denmark after making their rounds. To this day, this memory is seldom retold, and my cousins have built their own families in Denmark with little recollection of their battles with death.

Comparatively, my parents migrated to the United States through family sponsorship, where this process was equally riddled with uncertainty. My maternal grandparents and my mother's nine siblings migrated in the early 1990s, where they first stopped in the Philippines for a few years before getting accepted into the United States. My mother, as the eldest daughter, stayed behind because the filing processes took so long that she had grown too old to be sponsored to the United States with her siblings. She stayed in Vietnam alone for ten years before my grandmother could get her American citizenship and sponsor her to the United States. During those ten years, my mother's only resource to reunite with her family was hope, which was entirely dependent on my grandmother's ability to pass the citizenship test despite knowing little to no English or American history prior to migrating.

All of my interviewees' migration stories reflect similar levels of precarity and volatility in their routes to the United States. Noah, age 24, recalls his mother's similarly perilous journeys as a boat refugee to start anew. To his mother, escaping Vietnam was a "sort of miracle" after she and her brother forfeited most of their money to escape to the United States in their teenage years. Gratefully, they were received by a kind American family, studied in American schools, and were able to sponsor their other relatives later on, but the stakes were clear.

"...she has talked about it many times, like oh how she was... it was kind of some sort of miracle that she was able to escape Vietnam and they basically gave most of their money so she and my uncle (her brother) could escape to Thailand and then they moved to the US and then they got adopted by this very kind American family and after they got settled and went to college and everything then the rest of the family could come over."

Moreover, all of my interviewees describe migration pathways that involve multiple instances of displacement before resettling in the US. Brian recalls his parents' migration journey

to the US through family sponsorship. He starts by describing his mother's journey, which he is more familiar with.

"...there is a large Methodist community here, like a Christian, the denomination of Christianity and they were big supporters of sponsoring Vietnamese refugee families during the 60s and 70s, during the war in Vietnam...they had like three families from the Methodist Church here that sponsored them here...the most difficult part was getting to the refugee camp in, I believe, Malaysia. Pulau Bidong, I believe. It's like a small island...a lot of refugees went through that island because it was way too overpopulated...they from there were sponsored and flew to California and then Michigan."

He elaborates on his dad's journey, which has a similarly regulated but unconventional route.

"All I know from my dad's side, I think he flew to Thailand...and then to Michigan and then very similarly, they also were sponsored by a Methodist family. That's why there's kind of a small microcommunity of Vietnamese refugees here or Vietnamese-Americans in Grand Rapids, Michigan."

Both journeys involve travel to an intermediary location in refugee camps before being officially admitted into the US. It is well-known that these refugee camps were overcrowded, poorly managed, and sometimes even subjected many families to military brutality. Still, families like Brian's had to accept these conditions to find refuge in the US. This reflects the limited agency, as defined by Saba Mahmood, that migrants have in their migration journey, despite previous studies assuming that the choice to migrate is a privilege itself (Carling 2018).

Mahmood (2001) qualifies agency as the capacity to act under hegemonic systems that subordinate othered identities. More interestingly, this is a response to inquiries about his family's decision to live in Michigan, which he notes that many people have been curious about, given that most Vietnamese refugees settled in other states like California and Texas. This shows

that even through the perspective of Americans, migration routes are neither predictable nor reasonable; rather, they are often entirely based on the discretion of those who choose to sponsor Vietnamese refugees, leaving them in highly precarious situations where their only resource is hope.

Kim and Tuyet, ages 62 and 58 respectively, both migrated to the US with their family members after the end of the war. Their journeys are intertwined with many others, including family members and those from their community, who influenced their migration pathways and settlement. Tuyet describes her migration journey before she officially settled in California long term:

"I came to California in 1978...I think I only lived one year in Arizona, one year in Virginia, and a few months in Texas, because that is where I first settled. When I first came to the States, I was sponsored to San Antonio, Texas, but we moved to California because my mom— we brought a son— her friend sent a son with us...He is my age. At the time, we were 13 and they tried to escape Vietnam and they got caught so they only released the wife and children and they kept the husband. But because during that time, the wife was worried that the eldest son might be enlisted for the army, they sent the son to escape with us, and his grandparents on his mother's side lived in San Jose. So that's how we end up moving to San Jose from San Antonio instead of Houston. I mean we had two choices, so (laughs). We didn't know anyone, so they said 'Since you brought our grandson here, why don't you come to California and we will help you resettle.' So that's how we ended up in California."

Like previous recollections, Tuyet's migration journey involves multiple migration decisions before settlement. Specifically, it is notable that they had strictly two choices for resettlement, one being entirely framed by their relationship with another family who depended on them to protect their son from the Vietnamese government. It therefore becomes clear how

precarious circumstances create urgency in ways that severely delimit the options that people have to choose from. Their migration is primarily involuntary and forced.

Kim similarly describes how her father made migration decisions for the family as they appealed to the US government for sponsorship.

“The first time when they interviewed us in Vietnam, my dad wanted to come to Texas because he had a lot of friends over there and the weather over there in Texas looked like Vietnam, because they’re tropical—they’re humid. It looked like tropical climate, but my dad’s brother escaped out of Vietnam from 1984. He was here [in Arizona] and had one aunt, she married a pilot, she came here from 1965 so both of them are in this state, and this is a new state, so they send us here and we come here.”

Again, they search for familiarity, both in climate and in people. Ultimately, it is shown that their prioritization of community and kinship outweigh their search for a seemingly “tropical” climate, which would remind them of home and possibly be easier to adjust to. Kim describes how some people’s sets of options are constrained by the pressure to balance their most essential needs during forced migration. Through this, it is clear how urgency relates to the reorientation of their priorities from short-term relief to long-term security abroad: they sought options that would guarantee their survival in the United States rather than comfort.

In the above cases, we witness how their migration pathways were contingent on and deeply intertwined with US sponsorship prospects. A substantial part of securing sponsorship into the US was undergoing several medical screenings and interview procedures to be classified as either a family reunification case, a sponsorship case, or political refugee. These processes involved extended waiting periods in crowded and poorly resourced asylum camps, reflecting common migration experiences of uncertainty and displacement, also called the “waiting game,” where migrants’ prospects are severely diminished under state authority over their bodies and

movement, especially across borders (Wei and Fortugno 2018). Their decisions were constrained by their need to find security while facing the profound uncertainty of abruptly settling in a new country, whether that involved relying on church communities or kinship networks from Vietnam to resettle.

I claim that this volatility, or continued experiences of uncertainty, creates a lived reality where uncertainty becomes the currency through which the state regulates migrant bodies. Mainstream American narratives recall the trials and tribulations that the Vietnamese community experienced in migration but fail to capture the details behind their motivations to migrate, the fundamental sacrifices they had to make, and their struggles with the United States upon arrival. Their experiences of war and poverty have continuously uprooted their feelings of safety, breeding a dependency born from uncertainty of future security. Through narrations of the state's ability to save powerless refugee dependents, the state is able to affirm its power to establish strict standards for refugee resettlement, many of which are naturalized by law (Ngai 2004, Chang 2000).

At the same time, there is also a continuing trend where migration decisions are guided by where they can receive support from their Vietnamese community members in the US. In this way, some levels of uncertainty are counteracted by their familiarity with Vietnamese sponsors in the US, who can possibly leverage their adaptation to a new society.

Once the Vietnamese refugees arrived in their new countries, they underwent various integration processes to ensure that they could find educational and occupational opportunities in their respective host countries. In the US, those with refugee status received federal assistance in the form of social welfare programs for their first few years as well as access to English as Second Language (ESL) courses to help with the language acquisition. Furthermore, according

to the US Dispersion Policy, housing programs dispersed Vietnamese families across the country to “lessen the social and economic impact of Vietnamese refugees on any given region of the country” and rapidly resettled them so they could quickly become self-sufficient due to low economic competition (Dang 2014, 935). Most Vietnamese refugees were able to demonstrate high levels of successful adaptation into the US economy. Within five years, the majority of Vietnamese refugees were employed and no longer relying on federal financial assistance programs (Rutledge 1992). Still, many struggled to learn English due to the stark differences between Vietnamese and English. Moreover, the dispersion policy failed to accommodate the social, cultural, and spiritual needs of the Vietnamese community (Dang 2014).

As a result, Vietnamese refugees adapted by moving to urban areas where they could find support within their communities. As mentioned earlier, my interviewees received support from their community members. This is a well-studied phenomenon in Vietnamese migration literature; it has been shown that Vietnamese communities in the United States are “strong pillars for assisting refugees in their adjustment economically, spiritually, psychologically, and symbolically. Their communities are supportive through continuing many of the traditional practices of Vietnam, while simultaneously encouraging changes necessary to adapt successfully” (Rutledge 1992, 58). Today, about 40 percent of all Vietnamese Americans live in California, the largest concentration of overseas Vietnamese in the world (Batalova 2023).

Kim reflects this sentiment in her pursuit of the Vietnamese community wherever she goes. She explains,

“Everywhere I go, I find the Vietnamese community to join over there because working with the Vietnamese is more comfortable for me...everywhere, every state they have the Vietnamese community but it depends big or small...I feel comfortable with Vietnamese community because my first language is Vietnamese so it’s easy to talk to them and easy to get along with because we

have the same culture, traditions, same language and a lot of things we can share to each other like the difficult times or the happy times.”

This excerpt demonstrates how Vietnamese refugees focused on consolidating their community in order to integrate into American society; it brought them semblances of familiarity and capacity to expand from their humble beginnings where the American government did not.

Tuyet also describes how community members worked together to adapt to the new cultural environment and its lack of familiar foods and resources in the early years before the development of Vietnamese cultural hubs in San Jose.

“Back then, you pretty much had to make your own, whatever you want. I remember on weekends usually my mom would go to the market and we would buy stuff to make Vietnamese food. For example, like chả giò [egg roll], chả lụa [Vietnamese ham, pork roll], you know. We would make them and we would keep them in the freezer. So everybody...pretty much it was really common back then. Everyone had food in their freezer because you can’t really buy them at the market. Or there’s not too many stores, so we would usually...we would make things and share among family friends.”

In her reflection, Tuyet illustrated how Vietnamese solidarity was essential to their survival in new contexts, where their access to their food ingredients was limited. The continuity of finding refuge in and strengthening the Vietnamese community from migration to integration illuminates the core value of solidarity and its importance for Vietnamese resilience overseas, especially against integration pressures that create divisions within the community. Tuyet explains how it is maintained through processes of sharing and accommodation to create levels of connectedness and reciprocity.

Simultaneously, they also built relationships with their American counterparts, who assisted in their language acquisition process and adaptation to American culture. When Kim

first arrived in the US, she struggled to adapt to her first few jobs. Within a few years of studying nursing in the US, she grew sick, and suddenly the profession became a source of anxiety for her. From then on, she switched to accounting but struggled to find stable employment. Finally, Kim explained her experience settling into her job as a nail technician and learning from clients at her nail salon: "...when I worked in the nail field, I feel happy because I met, I learned more English and my client fixed my English and helped me a lot with English and I see somebody different every day." Moreover, she expresses that she finds fulfillment in the beauty industry because she can make others feel pretty, describing some of the ways she contributes to the broader American culture in her work life. Similarly, she volunteered at a convent for her first ten years in the United States. There, she worked at an addiction center and learned about social problems with addiction and how the problem was being addressed spiritually, which similarly helped her cope with her new environment and empathize with the people she encountered in her day-to-day life.

Tuyet similarly befriended many Americans from work, who she describes as people who, despite coming from different cultural backgrounds, share similar values to her.

"I also sometimes have American friends and they involved...in a church group where they volunteer to teach kids after school, especially those underserved populations, so I would go to those and kind of like educated myself. You know, volunteer, whatever I could, and sometimes I would...campus would have activity like we have [a] reserved area on campus that sometimes they need extra help to go cut down the wildberries to preserve the land for the lizards that live in the pond, for example. So yeah, I do all kinds of stuff...I try to [be] aware of their practices when I go out with my non-Vietnamese friends and I try to compare how because they have some similarities right. Maybe not in practice, but in theory, in thinking, we share... So I do share with my...because one of my best friends is also American so I, you know. She is very curious about my culture and she was supposed to go to Vietnam in 2020 with me too and then we ended up not

going (laughs). Um, so, I always like try to explain to her what we do, why we do it, and how we do it in the social circle of how we do it in our community and how it is and how it's different now than it used to be."

In the above excerpts, Tuyet explains how she built relationships with others by bridging differences and finding common understanding to create semblances of familiarity and belonging. Then, her relationship with her American friends connected her with volunteer organizations and fulfilling opportunities to give back to her community and educate herself. Moreover, she expresses the value in sharing cultural and value systems with her friends to build a deeper understanding of the underpinnings of each other's beliefs and ways of living. It has been shown that mutual engagements between the Vietnamese and American communities improved refugee adaptation and cultivated positive reception from the larger US society (Rutledge 1992). I add that making connections outside the community bridges differences to create common spaces for action that support the cultivation of expanded identities, not limited to Vietnamese or American concepts of the self.

Overall, the Vietnamese community's high levels of employment, financial independence, collective resilience, and proactive bridging efforts within US society characterized them as an immigrant "success story" in American narratives. Though the above recollections explore some of the successes of the Vietnamese community after resettlement, it also recalls many of the struggles that community memberships encountered with American policies and extended periods of neglect. These realities disrupt the coherence of American narratives; rather, the American "success story" emphasizes the war traumas of Vietnamese refugees to gloss over the traumas they experienced at the hand of the American government during the war and after resettlement. The reality is a continuation of colonial paternalism.

Colonial Traumas and “Healing”

After the fall of Saigon, South Vietnamese folk, especially those who had collaborated with US forces, were persecuted by the Vietnamese government. Many were sent to “re-education camps”, where they were indoctrinated by the communist regime. In most cases, these camps stood as a guise for torture and punishment for betraying the state’s interests (Pham 1983; Pham 2011). Moreover, during the final weeks of the Vietnam War leading up to the fall of Saigon, the United States initiated the humanitarian effort to evacuate South Vietnamese orphans to the US and other Western countries. This military operation, formally called Operation Babylift, evacuated over 3,000 South Vietnamese children. Despite good intentions, this military operation was controversial because the goal was to evacuate Vietnamese orphans, but there were no guarantees that they had evacuated only children without families. The reality is that many families offered their children up for evacuation to ensure their survival without any guarantee of future reunification, creating a generation of children with untold sacrifices and glaring gaps in their histories. Noah reflects on this experience of having missing people in his ancestry and how it has separated him from his peers.

“I have this grandma who died when I was at a very young age, and I never really got to meet her, so I only know her through pictures. And so my mom would talk about her a lot though because as her mom, she had a really big influence on not only her but all the other aunts and uncles who basically were children... And there were also other relatives that I, you know... for me I feel like it is normal to have relatives, sort of grandparents, like missing, and I realized that that is not always the case for a lot of families, especially in America. A lot of people have a full set of grandparents... I’ve since come to realize that there are gaps in the story and it’s... I also feel like a lot of my culture, it does come through my mom’s stories, like I think honestly if I had to do some reflection on it, having a mom who was a refugee and having that sort of Vietnamese boat

story has made me very different from a lot of other um... uh... a lot of the other immigrant children."

He adds that his experiences with his mom have made him grow up to approach life differently from his peers; while others may value escaping poverty, he learned to value "making bold choices for a better life" from his mom. Though this is a source of pride for him, it is notable that risk and sacrifice are elements of his mother's life that he has come to adopt as his modus operandi. Within Vietnamese refugee families, this intergenerational trauma passes down and heavily influences the worldview of every involved member. For some, the influence is not as positive; in Brian's case, his family's story is filled with silences that have created barriers for the generations to mutually overcome.

"I feel relatively connected to family, like I more recently started talking to my grandma and my grandpa more, who are the oldest members of my family and I feel like, obviously also growing up, as I've gotten older too, my mom has shared a lot more about the experiences of being a refugee family. The trauma and the horrors and difficulties of war and this diaspora that her and particularly her family has dealt with. My dad's side, they...well, one, again, they don't speak English well but my dad really doesn't talk about it and from what I know, his experience was a lot easier coming to the US, whereas my mom's side of the family had a lot more difficulties that they experienced. So I feel, while there's not—I don't know everything, like just this weekend I learned new stuff about my mom that I didn't know about. My mom's family and stuff. Like pretty heavy stuff, but for me, that family history is really important to know, like my family history, where I come from, and to kind of just take those reflections into how we want to change our family and our community for the better and really sit with that, those difficult things, whereas my mom is kind of like the only one who would talk about it."

Brian elaborates on how the trauma experienced by his family, especially passed down from his grandparents continue to influence his life today and is a history to be reckoned with as a part of the family's healing process.

"I guess just like obviously the influences of that journey that I still feel today, just that intergenerational trauma I kind of mentioned or talked about, like the heavier stuff that trickles down, right? I won't get into it now, but yeah. Just I definitely feel the effects of like knowing how my grandparents treated my mom's siblings and her and how that trickled down to us too, my brother and I and some of our other cousins, like it's all very real and things I still very much experience. I've been very fortunate enough to work through a lot of it, um, like luckily I'm pretty close with my mom despite a lot of rockiness before. You know, it's still rocky at times, but it's a lot healthier than what it used to be."

Brian's grandparents' communication styles, especially while dealing with impoverishment and war trauma, have guided the persistent silences or bitterness in his family today. Even within my own family, there is difficulty speaking about the war and experiences of poverty and political persecution without tension or anger. Therefore, second generation Vietnamese like Brian and myself struggle through attempts to communicate with and understand the first-generation Vietnamese refugees about their experiences. In some cases, inquiring about these traumas even subject the next generations to additional placements of blame and guilt for their ignorance.

When comparing these two anecdotes, it is clear that family histories of migration and refugee adaptation to the United States are not straightforward or uniformly positive experiences, especially when reconciling with deeply troubling histories of foreign encroachment, displacement, and being uprooted. Rather, these experiences have consequences that manifest

themselves in generational silences or disjunctions between family members who struggle to meet each other in between their disoriented worlds.

Living the “American Dream”

Beyond traumatic experiences resulting from being wedged between Vietnamese and American government interests, many refugee families struggled after arriving in the United States with getting established and adjusted. This was a reality for refugees who arrived following the second and third waves of mass migration. The third wave of mass migration took place during the 1980s, where many Vietnamese people gained citizenship through sponsorship from US organizations or family members who had arrived earlier. At this point in history, the reception of Vietnamese refugees was on the decline. By 1978, the American economy had sunk into a recession, and therefore the continued migration of Vietnamese refugees was perceived as an economic burden. The American government grew overwhelmed by the continuous influx of migrants into the country and struggled to properly accommodate the adjustment needs of the new wave of refugees. Furthermore, because most incoming Vietnamese refugees were approved through family reunification, their refugee status was reduced from protections from political persecution to a class of “economic refugees” escaping poverty (Rutledge 1992, 63). Cumulatively, the pressure to be economically self-sufficient was heavier for families during this time. Their lower levels of education and social capital compared to the first wave of South Vietnamese elites (who were rescued immediately after the war alongside American veterans), paired with their lower levels of federal and public assistance, limited most of their employment opportunities to small businesses within the community.

At the same time, the successes of the previous two waves of migration to the US overshadowed the new challenges that the refugee population faced with changing definitions of

their membership status by the US government. When decontextualizing the difference in socioeconomic outcomes between generations of Vietnamese immigrants, their failures are individualized, rather than reflective of structural failures to meet the social and economic needs of the new wave of immigrants. In this way, we realize how the “success story” narrative, similar to the model minority myth that classifies particular minority groups as well-adjusted and self-sufficient, flattens the nuances of the socioeconomic outcomes of many Vietnamese refugees who struggled to integrate into American society. Both narratives operate to emphasize the possibility of achieving self-sufficiency and naturalize socioeconomic disparities as consequences of individual incompetence rather than the lack of federal and local support. Ultimately, the models relieve the American government of responsibility for supporting the struggling members of the community by invisibilizing their struggles and highlighting the overall success of the larger collective.

I claim that this narrative basis is constructed through rhetorical appeals to the idea of the “American Dream”. Fundamentally, the “American Dream” presupposes that the United States is built on a meritocracy such that every citizen is given equal opportunity to achieve social mobility so long as they work for it. By extension, the desired refugee is the “exceptional”, socially mobile refugee who meets neoliberal capitalist expectations through their hard work both economically and in building their networks beyond the Vietnamese community. Those who struggle to exemplify this through their unemployment or welfare dependency therefore bear the burden of individualized responsibility for their economic instability. Furthermore, their struggles are more reflective of personal character flaws, e.g. laziness, ungratefulness, or willingness to be reliant on government services, rather than larger social issues with language barriers and finding employment as well as managing finances during economic recessions.

Ultimately, this results in the naturalization of dualisms between “good” and “bad” refugees and a singular model of reciprocity within host-guest relationships while wholly ignoring the larger structures influencing their socioeconomic and integration prospects (Rytter 2019).

Post-war Integration Struggles

In actuality, Vietnamese refugees struggled due to several instances of federal neglect and outright discrimination that restricted their prospects to find financial and social stability within their communities. Grand Century Mall is a well-known cultural hub for the Vietnamese community in San Jose. It is a large shopping center featuring hundreds of small businesses run primarily by Vietnamese families. Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese folk from across the country visit the place to experience authentic Vietnamese food from every region and relish in specialty goods from Vietnam that cannot be easily found elsewhere in the United States. I grew up frequenting the shopping center with my family, and I had the pleasure of visiting it again this winter for the first time since COVID. Shockingly, despite arriving at a generally busy time of day, the shopping center was almost vacant, and many of the stands I used to purchase food and drinks from were closed down.

It turns out that since COVID, many businesses were struggling to stay afloat due to lower foot traffic in the mall and lack of federal support to lessen the economic burden of COVID (Tran 2021). Federal funding resources that were available were poorly advertised to the community members, who primarily listened to news from Vietnamese radio stations. Moreover, many business owners struggled to fill out applications and complete complex procedures that were poorly translated, or not translated at all. The responsibility rested on the Vietnamese community to mobilize for their survival, despite the poor communication and extensive bureaucratic hurdles they faced to achieve even footing with other American businesses.

Kim similarly experienced troubles with the housing market in the early 2000s when she tried to buy a new home in Laveen, Arizona around the time of the market crash. She sought support from her bank multiple times to lower the mortgage points on her loan (it had increased by 18 points) because she could no longer afford it by selling her current home. She was only able to resolve this conflict when she coincidentally ran into a Vietnamese young woman when attempting to modify her loan once more, and they exchanged phone numbers. She recalls her moments of turmoil and relief: "...she called me and told me to call this number. I took the number and called to modify my loan immediately. At the time, there was a limit of 600 minutes on phone calls, so I woke up early and called them or else my phone would not have enough minutes. I would not be able to call because it would be too expensive. So I woke up at 5am, and I called and I was the 16th person in queue and I was able to modify my loan. So now my loan is only 2 points." Through such anecdotes, we see how Vietnamese refugees struggled with changes in socioeconomic trends with little to no federal support. Instead, it is shown that they often found relief through the Vietnamese community, reflecting past trends where refugees found the best resources for themselves within their own communities.

Beyond socioeconomic struggles, the Vietnamese community grappled with early experiences of racial discrimination and segregation that affected their integration efforts. Kim recalls her father's multiple experiences of racial segregation while serving the United States during the early periods of the war.

"The bus has two sections right? One for white people in the front and then Black, or I mean colored people in the back. My dad and his crew were colored people and they would not let him eat in their restaurant. Even when they were hungry, they always had to eat in the back. My dad hated it. He would say that they look down on colored people very much and so he didn't go to

the military. And he was so afraid of the Communist party he tried to flee and was in prison for 10 years before migrating.”

She expands on this assertion by explaining how this affected her father’s perception of serving the military during the war and later on migrating to the US. Ultimately, he made the decision to migrate to the US due to the political persecution he faced from the communist regime after the war for his associations with the American government. Kim’s father’s sentiments reflect Sara Ahmed’s conception of the “melancholic migrant”, whose integration efforts are severely limited through their realization of their conditional membership in host societies. More broadly, this refers to Sara Ahmed’s “happiness duty,” or expectations for migrants to find “happiness” (whether through security, comfort, or the like) in the integration process, that migrants are subjected to but unable to wholly embody because of persisting perceptions of discrimination and displacement regardless of their efforts (Ahmed 2010, 158). I consider this an especially relevant framework for the experience of Vietnamese refugees who feel that their abandonment during the war and existing contributions to American society go unnoticed because they do not serve the Western narrative that assumes the robustness of integration models and its prospects for long-term elevation of life outcomes or happiness.

More contemporarily, Brian cites experiences with racial discrimination growing up in a predominantly white neighborhood and how it affected his, and his Asian-American peers, experiences with American educational systems.

“I went to school in Rockford, MI, which was very very different. It’s much more rural, it is predominantly white, as in like, you could count the students of color on two hands at my high school, so very very, very white school that I went to. So that experience was very interesting, I think during the time, I would say I had a pretty decent schooling, but that experience...reflecting back on that experience, I realize how not great it was, how bad it was growing up in a

predominantly white school, lots of microaggressions, lots of internalized racism that a lot of me and my...like one of my closest friends, he is Chinese-American, um, and so like we have talked about it and we have reflected on it like, ‘Man, that was kind of bad.’”

He goes on to explain that he only found genuine community, or belonging, with his Buddhist Vietnamese peers as well as when he started studying at Stanford University, which has a much more diverse set of demographics and beliefs. Interestingly, he also explains the dissonance between his reflections back to those times with his perceptions of his experiences at the time; in a way, those experiences were so naturalized he did not realize the injustices until he entered more diverse and inclusive communities where racial prejudice was not the accepted norm.

Ultimately, the above anecdotes illustrate the contemporary struggles of Vietnamese refugees to truly establish a place for themselves, on their own terms, in the United States. Rather, many of their experiences are still framed by American expectations for them to achieve the status of the socially mobile, secure, and happy or fulfilled migrant. Even more so, these expectations gloss over the structural violences imposed on them by the American government, including US involvement in escalating the Vietnam War in the first place.

Rising Above Colonial Legacies

Today, the aftermath of the war leaves deep scars in many South Vietnamese families' lives, yet the brutal experiences of re-education camps or the sacrifices made during Operation Babylift and the US's transgressions are rarely told in American history. The emphasis on the salvation of the boat people serves as a story to obfuscate the government's involvement in and responsibility for many of the tragedies that the Vietnamese experienced. Moreover, it was a narrative mechanism to bring comfort to the American citizen's mind and relieve national guilt

for their involvement in escalating a civil war and the abandonment of the people they promised to serve. This narrative blindness persists in society through conceptions of the selective acceptance of “good” or well-adjusted Vietnamese refugees relative to their less socially mobile counterparts. The “success story” of a selective group of Vietnamese refugees is a self-affirming story that simultaneously vilifies economically unstable, welfare-dependent, non-English speaking refugees and deems them inherently non-integrable. I want to further emphasize how these integration expectations become assimilation pressures to acclimate to a specific model of citizenship: the self-sufficient, “Americanized” refugee who demonstrates happiness following their salvation from the specter of communism. This is distinctly understood by Vietnamese refugees themselves, when they encourage their children to learn English and participate in “American” activities to fit in with their peers.

“My mom pushed me— both my parents were like “he needs...”, you know, for my brother and I, they want us to speak English, they want us to be as American as possible, you know, right? Wearing American clothes and doing American things like sports and playing in the band and doing those things.” (Brian, 22)

Brian, age 22, differentiates his parents’ pressure to Americanize with his Vietnamese side, who were less imposing. He explains, “I felt like the Vietnamese side was less intentional about it because they... just because for them it’s like what they carry with them.” In this way, they internalize pressures to perform American values and customs, while their Vietnameseeness is something internal that did not need to be explicitly performed to be understood.

I suggest that this reflects the mechanisms of the colonial project: by first emphasizing the neediness of Vietnamese refugees, paternalistic models for integration are self-substantiated as natural and necessary. The power of these impositions is seen by the way these pressures are internalized both through self-imposed need to perform “Americanness”. Furthermore, this

internalization ignores the differentiated valuation of American and Vietnamese ways of life in American society, with their Vietnamese identity always implicitly reserved for the backstage. In his discussion of a relationship between racialization and embodiment, Fassin (2011) explains ascription as a limiting mechanism that eliminates alternative possibilities for identification among marginalized groups, especially those who seek to occupy multiple identities. I claim that the Vietnamese experience is similar: before any other qualifier, Vietnamese people are racialized refugees or migrants and treated as such in white America.

In the same paper, Fassin considers subjection and subjectivation as a dialectical process where the “subjected” simultaneously create new subjectivities through their self-ascriptive identities while those in positions of power, e.g. state powers, impose rigid categorizations on them. At the outset, this internalization of the need to Americanize demonstrates how Vietnamese refugees are complacent with the Western hegemonic discourses, privileging a certain model for the American citizen, and more broadly, “deserving” human. At the same time, I claim that by realizing the different valuations of identity groups in the United States, Vietnamese refugees are able to leverage their power to build networks and achieve substantial social mobility in order to occupy multiple identities and spaces fluidly. Rather than assuming that Vietnamese refugee families uncritically endorse the “Americanization” of the second generation, I argue that Vietnamese refugees are well aware of the power dynamics in American society and tap into them for their own self-realization.

An example of this phenomena can be observed through Noah’s visions for the Vietnamese-American community in Western film and media. Noah is a 24 year old software engineer that I interviewed who pursues dance and acting on the side in hopes of establishing himself in the creative space. I specifically refer to this example because some of the logical and

emotional bases behind Noah's desires are embedded within our discussion, such that we can clearly establish the larger goal of his desires beyond "wanting to fit into Western culture". In this way, similar to Mahmood's assessment of agency and resistance, it is clear how his desires are not unchallenging dreams but guide a larger internalization of where he should fit in society as a person. This is well-established by his observation that following his "unconventional path" is part of becoming "more consistent with [his] values" rather than a divergence.

"I don't know if this is limited to Vietnamese Americans or Asian Americans in general, but sometimes I feel like a lot of Asian Americans have some sort of narrowly focused view of what they want to do or can do with their life, and that's something I grew out of quite a while ago, but it is something that does pop up from time to time as an adult. Just like the fact that I'm taking such a different direction that a lot of... I kind of expect to not run into a lot of Asians in my direction. Even though it does feel right to me, something that I think about a lot is that, you know, I went to my dance gig. I can tell you, I went to this dance gig in New Jersey, it was really fun but like when I went there and it was off this casting call that I found on [inaudible], there were like 3 other Asians out of 50 or 60 dancers there. And like, I was the only Asian guy, so I was just like. In my head, I was just like why would that be? Why don't I see more people that look like me in this space? And that's just something I have been thinking about as I kind of go through my sort of... make my sort of life choices that... I have been finding that becoming more and more consistent with my values I just stop seeing quite as many Asians, especially Asian men."

When reflecting on his experiences pursuing the arts alongside a more "conventional" software engineering degree, Noah noticed that there were few Asians in the spaces he occupied. He attributes this to the current reality that Asian Americans are limited in their imagination of the spaces they are entitled to and can belong in as their own agentive person. This is an implicit criticism of the demands of neoliberal capitalism which makes certain occupations (engineering)

inherently more valuable than others (dance and acting). More specifically, this demonstrates that the boundaries of the “American Dream” are closed to very specific occupations and, more narrowly, types of people in society.

In a different section of our interview, Noah explicitly mentions the hope to make these creative spaces feel more accessible or viable to the Vietnamese community through his example. In essence, by occupying these positions commonly reserved for white Americans, Vietnamese-Americans can project themselves onto Noah and envision futures where Vietnamese-Americans are more present in Western film and media. In this way, the desire is not simply to “fit in”, but to situate Vietnamese-American culture in the larger fabrics of Western culture— it is not a displaced extension but an essential component to complete the story.

Finally, I add to this discussion by reviewing Nhi T. Lieu’s assessment of Paris by Night shows, which are musical variety shows run by Thúy Nga Productions⁴, featuring a diversity of musical performances and comedy sketches. Lieu emphasizes the performance of opulence in Paris By Night shows, paired with memory making through the mourning of a nostalgic past and a cultivation of a future away from the communist regime (Lieu 2011). The Vietnamese diaspora employs capitalist motifs of excess to express themselves to the greater world, where they have come since the fall of Saigon, and how they will continue to rise above adversity and thrive. When decontextualized, the nuance in the diaspora’s desires and its connections back to their struggles in Vietnam are lost; rather, their collective struggle and grief is misinterpreted as a passive, blind acceptance of exploitative structures that demand their acculturation into a productive body. The reality is that their own aspirations are oftenunnarrated, such that their

⁴ This is a Vietnamese entertainment company founded in Paris in 1975 (shortly after the war). Its first versions of Paris by Night featured exiled artists from Vietnam and served as a significant memory project for the global Vietnamese diasporic community. Today, it is headquartered in Westminster, California, where the largest overseas Vietnamese community resides. (Source: https://thuynga.com/en_us/about/)

rejections of hegemonic desires are unheard. The title of Lieu's book itself, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, centers the process through which American neoliberal capitalism is adopted by South Vietnamese refugees and rewritten in their own language, culture, and way of life.

Memory-Work and the Creation of a New Saigon

Clément Baloup: "As I have said before, this story isn't officially written or recorded, so if nobody records it, people will die and all these memories will be lost. It's quite disturbing not knowing where you are from, what your family story might be, why you're labelled a minority? The urge to know about your roots is just human, I guess." (Gusain and Jha 2022, 50)

Previous research has considered how Vietnamese creatives utilize various mediums to regain ownership of their own history, its narration, and create new forms of knowledge and expression for themselves. Vietnamese musicians have generated a new genre of music called "nhạc vàng," or yellow music, that merges parts of traditional Vietnamese music with Western mainstream forms (wartime American-style rock and French dance bands generally reserved for the French and Vietnamese elite) that refugees carried with them as they migrated between Vietnam, France, and the United States. In this way, they utilize music as an act of resistance by unsettling Western forms of music and reusing them for their own purposes. Nhạc vàng is a cultural expression that invoked in its listeners a particular resistant emotionality which Nguyen describes as "gloomy, embittered, impotent and cynical mood towards life, an attitude negating youth's desire to be cheerful, a sensation of being drowned in loneliness in a withered and desolate world" (Nguyen 2022). This cynicism toward American life directly contradicts the refugee's obligation to express happiness and gratefulness for their opportunities in the Western

world; rather, they express a cynical denial of their new life and the reality of their loneliness after continued displacement from what they would consider “home”. This genre of music has been popularized and reworked by Vietnamese refugees after the fall of Saigon to “preserve a culture that was shattered” following the war and “fill it with new meaning for new generations of overseas Vietnamese” (Nguyen 2022). Moreover, this form of music directly resists the control of the Vietnamese Communist party which formally banned sentimental pop music. Subversively, performers and listeners within Vietnam continued to disseminate this revolutionary music to encompass new sentiments regarding loss and the desire for preservation. Ultimately, this music form expands on others originating in Vietnam (e.g. red music in the North) to create “hybrid identities” that are fluid, anti-colonial, transnational, and serve as a source of intercultural exchange within the diasporic “soundscape” (Nguyen 2022).

I will discuss the cross-cultural exchange of knowledge in greater depth in chapters 2 and 3 on repeated, embodied practice and the construction of a Vietnamese “habitus” against Western hegemonic culture. Here, I introduce the community’s agency through their continued professions of pride and nationalism for Vietnam even after losing their homeland, which demonstrates the depth of the citizenships that they cultivate beyond nation-state conceptions. I start by considering how my interviewees’ continuous pursuit of the Vietnamese community is an expression of their allegiances beyond survival interests. One of the most resonant portrayals of Vietnamese collective resilience can be seen through their persistence throughout multiple periods of colonial imposition, beginning with Chinese imperial rule to present day exchanges with the Western world. Kim (62) specifically attributes the Vietnamese collective’s resilience to their “solidarity” or “unity” throughout continuous periods of colonial encroachment.

“Looking at Vietnamese history is the same. We only won because of our solidarity. When we were able to defeat the Chinese and send them back to their country, I recall they had control of

Vietnam from [some regions] and I remember the leader of the Vietnamese was very amazing. They were always prepared to feed their people with bánh tét during the war— they would move in groups of three where the person in the middle would eat while the other two held guard. And it only took 5 days before they moved to the Chinese territory and were able to push them out of the country. And they lost to us because they didn't think we would move that fast. Moving like that, our solidarity/unity was very strong, nobody was left behind."

In this statement, Kim acknowledges the various mechanisms that the Vietnamese people utilized to take advantage of their existing resources and overcome their colonial oppressors. Their highly organized coordination through simultaneous movement and surveillance of their surroundings reveal not only their quick wits but their meticulous care for one another. The passage of bánh tét during their journeys reflects ongoing themes regarding the Vietnamese people's prioritization of their community members above everything else. Additionally, she notes the importance of good leadership to establish strong alliances among the people amidst periods of turmoil and confusion.

This precedes Kim's explicit assertion of the wrongs they have experienced because of American global imperialism and continued domestic colonialism. I define "domestic colonialism" as the continued exploitation of minority groups under the state through political and economic inequalities, naturalized by law (Chang 2000). For instance, the weaponization of Vietnamese migrant socioeconomic instability after resettling subjected them to state control.

When Kim reflects on the South Vietnamese loss during the Vietnam War, she first considers the assassination of Ngô Đình Diệm, who she considered a strong leader.

"In the past, our first president was Ngô Đình Diệm. He was a really good leader. It was only after some of his staff cared about money that they helped the Americans and they killed him

because he was too good, and they were worried that he would... I don't know, but they killed him and I say that we lost our country because we didn't have unity/solidarity."

Kim attributes their loss to the *lack of* solidarity, continuing her previous thread about the resilience of the Vietnamese people explaining how the loss thereof of a strong leader can compromise the solidarity that is essential to colonial resistance efforts. She elaborates on this assertion by explaining that it was not a failure of the Vietnamese people themselves, but of the American military for making unkept promises that disorganized the entirety of the South Vietnamese resistance forces. To her, the South Vietnamese military was entirely capable of defending themselves, and this may have come to fruition had their supposed allies not abandoned them at the last minute, leaving no resources behind.

In 1975... actually, it wasn't our fault. In 1975 when the US pulled out, they took all the ammo that could have been used for our defense. If we have guns but no ammo, how can we shoot? Our military was strong. In Southeast Asia, our military, our republic was very strong in the region, but then it collapsed because we had nothing to defend ourselves. When I work in the nail salon, I meet many people. I met this one American soldier who said "I'm sorry, it is because of us that you lost your nation". And I said "That's right. If you're going to pull out, at least leave some supplies for us so we can defend ourselves. Without them, how can we? We lost because we had nothing." Our military was much stronger than the communists, but we didn't have any resources."

This discussion distinctly parallels her previous discussion of their colonial involvement by establishing the following idea: their solidarity and command of resources was fundamentally disrupted by colonial encroachment. In this way, Kim highlights the power of Vietnamese independent agency and rejects Western impositions on the Vietnamese community as an impediment to their resolution of local conflicts. In fact, she reorients American involvement as

the unwanted and harmful element for the Vietnamese community and their consolidation, or fundamentally the abject Other.

Ultimately, her observations precede common sentiment among the Vietnamese community about the “glorified hero” figure that the US is portrayed as for welcoming Southeast Asian refugees into their country. To Vietnamese refugees, the American government owed them for the violence they escalated in Southeast Asia, even involving the Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian communities, and their acceptance into American society was the bare minimum extension of grace. In fact, many Vietnamese folk assert that they are entitled to stay and build their lives in the United States. In Christine Nguyen’s interview with Mr. Ngoc Trần at Grand Century Mall, she finds the following themes:

“...the Vietnamese people are here to stay. Even if they lost the war, they positively shaped a nation — even an expatriate nation. He bragged about the first Vietnamese general in the U.S. Army. For him, every Vietnamese who succeeds in American business, education, law, or medicine is an example of how our people have persisted. Like most expats, these men remember the fall of Saigon as “the day we lost our homeland.” For a long time, they dreamed of taking it back. Over the years, those dreams have changed — from taking Vietnam back, to going back one last time.”

On the point of (changing) attitudes toward the recovery of the homeland, a significant part of memory work in the Vietnamese diaspora centers around harkening back to and reimagining geographies and the rootedness of Vietnamese identity in those localities. Magazine publications play a large role in producing active discourse within the Vietnamese diasporic community. One of the primary themes I encountered while perusing magazine publications was the memory making of Saigon compared to their present-day experiences in the United States. On Saigon Nhỏ’s website, there is a subheading focused on reflecting back on Vietnamese

history. Significantly, the two primary subsections of Vietnamese history are reflecting on the day of the fall of Saigon and 9/11.

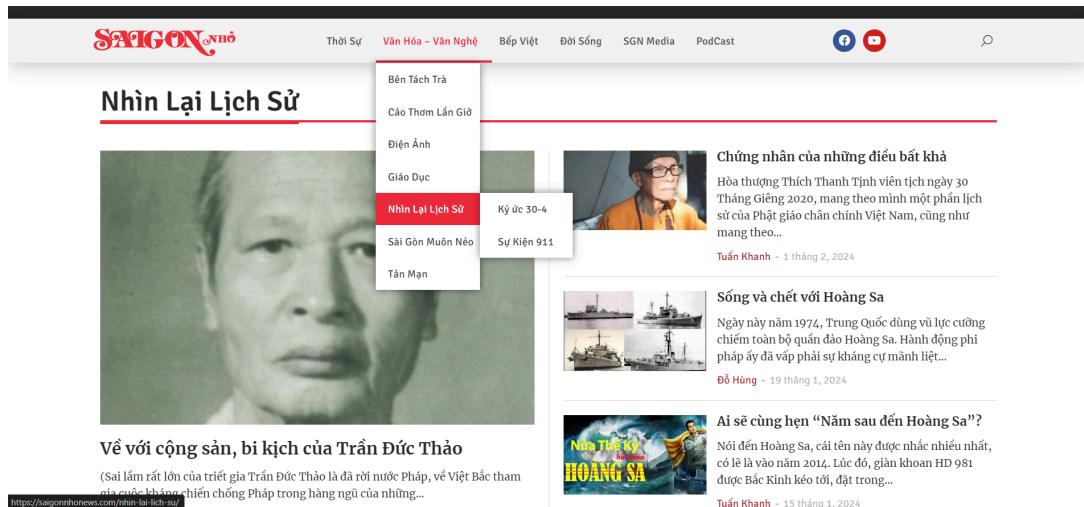


Photo of Saigon Nhỏ page titled “Looking Back on History”. The two highlighted tabs read: “04/30 Memory” and “9/11 Event”

This choice makes a statement about the histories most relevant to the Vietnamese community. While acknowledging the importance of memorializing 9/11 for American citizens, their traumatic experiences after the fall of Saigon are also historicized as equally disorienting for the Vietnamese diaspora and necessary to be reckoned with and remembered. This signals to readers of the publication that the fall of Saigon is not something that can be forgotten; rather, similar to the remembrance of 9/11, it represents a turning point for the Vietnamese community to bounce back from their losses and reestablish themselves.

Beyond reflecting on their histories, they have made many strides toward envisioning a future for the overseas collective that transcends the strict national borders of both their home and host countries. It has been nearly 50 years since Vietnamese refugees first resettled in the United States and constructed Little Saigon in California. Alongside their aforementioned historicization of 9/11 and April 30th, 1975, Saigon NhỎ is pursuing a memory project titled “Half a Century of Vietnamese People Overseas” to reflect on the current progress made by the

Vietnamese community and celebrate 50 years of refuge in the United States since the fall of Saigon. Summarily, they intend to focus on “stories that contribute to forming a picture of people, lives, and even rebuilding the roots of people who are far from their homeland but never accept the loss of roots.”

On their website, their areas of focus are delineated as follows:

“Feelings and memories of the first residents to Little Saigon and America in general since April 30, 1975; stories about the first industries established in America (first newspaper, first radio station, first nail salon, first music center...); touching stories of meeting each other again on a new land in lost days...;

Legal struggles for Vietnamese culture and customs to be established in America; Vietnamese street names and markings in many places in the US, from California to Texas; from Georgia to Virginia; from Oregon to Washington, from Massachusetts to Oklahoma, from Pennsylvania to New York...; the first Vietnamese faces to participate in politics to bring benefits to the community; even memories of the days... lacking fish sauce and longing for the spices that belong to the culinary culture of our homeland; and especially: Preserving the Vietnamese language, spreading Vietnamese culture to the young generation, and the pride ‘We are Vietnamese’...”

This memory project is a public-facing effort on the part of the Vietnamese community to assert itself in various ways. First and foremost, they feature an image of the US and Vietnamese flags on their online post requesting input from the larger community. Interestingly, the Vietnamese flag featured is the one used in South Vietnam before the fall of Saigon and the reign of the communist regime. In this way, they signal their allegiance to a Vietnam that has not been overtaken by communist control, indoctrination, and abuse. Interestingly, when I was taught about Vietnamese history growing up, my teachers simply referred to this flag as the original Vietnamese flag, not qualifying the separation between South and North Vietnam (and their

flags). This suggests that my South Vietnamese community does not consider North Vietnam as part of Vietnam and they have internalized that dissonance even in education.



The flags of the United States and South Vietnam before the reunification of Vietnam, standing side-by-side.

Photo credits: Mark Boster/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images



The current flag of communist Vietnam

Furthermore, this memory project expands into a spatial project that reconsiders the boundaries of present day “Vietnam” in two primary ways. First off, it witnesses the transformations that Vietnamese identity has undergone since the end of the Vietnam War. They base their reflections on self-ascriptions as people coming from a “country of war” and use this as a point of reference for imagining liberation. As people rising from a “country of war”, they are “resilient”, “work very hard”, and “value family and friendships very much”. These symbolisms guide their visions for liberation towards a reconstruction of “home” and the cultivation of the solidarity they lost after the war. Through their collective care and resilience,

they have built an exclusive Little Saigon in Westminster and have revitalized the previously predominantly white space (Lieu 2011). The choice to build a Little Saigon rather than a Little Vietnam again expresses their allegiances to a particular imagination of “Vietnam”. Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City, was the capital city of South Vietnam; the fact that Saigon is at the center of their memory work and reimagination sets clear boundaries for “overseas Vietnamese” identity. To North Vietnamese folk, Saigon has little to no symbolic value; even more so, Saigon has little relevance to Americans. Altogether, they establish their allegiances through processes of supplantation and replantation and the exploration of symbolisms that tie them to the homeland. In the process, they also refused the current communist regime through their exclusion of the American and North Vietnamese “traitors” who participated in their uprooting from the homeland.

In the following section, I explore how emotional attachments frame transnational citizenships between Vietnam and the United States. Moreover, I consider how space operates to resignify the boundaries of Vietnamese identity away from American models for integration. I center on iconography and its uses to expand on the transnational symbolic spaces generated through memory work and create physical spaces for identity formation in a globalized world.

Making Global Connections: Ongoing Conflict in Colonial Regimes

Past Vietnamese autobiographical works utilize many symbolisms to retain salient parts of Vietnamese identity throughout their continuous experiences of displacement. This includes making stylistic choices—e.g. incorporating “colors of exile”,⁵ employing and depicting Vietnamese bodies through their physical transformations—recalling food and drink as forms of

⁵ In his work reflecting on Vietnamese history and diaspora, Clément Baloup defines colors of exile as “...an attempt to describe the journey of migration: bright colours of the native sunny country, grey scale of the war, dark atmosphere of the refugee period, light of the new beginning in a host country” (Gusain and Jha 2022, 48).

communal storytelling, acknowledging the role of water and its fluidity, and constructing emotional geographies. Cumulatively, many Vietnamese writers engage in memory-making through space and place which similarly allow them to create a “geopolitics of memory” that transcends the assumed spatial boundaries of nationhood and national pride (Liu 2015; Duong 2020; Gusain and Jha 2022).

They contemporarily connect back to Vietnam in many ways. Alongside her “happiness duty”, Ahmed also posits a “citizenship test” based on happiness which enables refugees to conceptualize where their allegiances lie across communities, rather than being restricted to a singular model of membership and identity. She claims that one’s true national identification depends on the country whose successes you celebrate. As discussed before, media productions like Paris by Night are enjoyed by Vietnamese audiences across the world, and they reflect on various aspects of Vietnamese identity transnationally, including themes of nostalgia, memory-making, and their successes in building a new future away from the communist regime (Nguyen 2009; Lieu 2011). Lieu (2011) also investigates the role of áo dài pageants and their emphasis on beauty and aesthetics to represent the progress the Vietnamese diaspora has made since liberating themselves from impoverishment. Through the embodiment of grace and luxury, women in the community employ physical displays of transformation and growth against their past conditions. At the same time, it also supports the cultural continuity of Vietnamese refugees overseas, as they still take pride in traditional Vietnamese dress. I expand on Ahmed’s citizenship test to consider how collective mourning and anxiety also establishes connections transnationally and reveals where people’s allegiances truly lie beyond integration pressures. A large portion of this project is dedicated to covering ongoing political conflict in Vietnam, especially regarding Vietnamese, Chinese, and American relations. Much of the coverage considers the continued

conflict with the Chinese government and their transgression of international agreements to build waterways and other unauthorized projects in the region.

One of the articles featured under Saigon Nhô's memory project discusses the current politics of the Mekong River Delta, home to 65 million people, both as a place of community and contention for the entire Southeast Asian region. The piece opens by tracing the history of dam-making and the disruption of ocean and human life in the region. Contemporarily, central Vietnam is plagued by poverty due to frequent flooding of the land: the negligence of local governance brought severe environmental damage, both physical and social, on nearby inhabitants. Today, overseas Vietnamese populations are mobilizing to raise awareness of the issue and pressure global powers to hold the offending governments accountable for their actions. Tuyet is engaged in conversations about the concerns with flooding and displacement in the river delta through her engagements with Vietnamese artists in California. Tuyet specifically notes how Vanessa Vo⁶, Vietnamese immigrant and traditional Vietnamese musician, simultaneously preserves Vietnamese culture through the use of traditional Vietnamese instruments and musicality. This connects to the project's goal to envision a future that maintains the essence of Vietnamese identity and what has not been lost after 50 years of resettlement.

Beyond environmental discourse, the Mekong River Delta carries with it deeper regional cultural significance. Throughout reflections on current events, writers make metaphors to imagine the river delta as a living body, network, and life force for the communities surrounding it. The Mekong River delta is the central point of convergence of the six communities: China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Moreover, the "Spirit of the Mekong" signifies the importance of mutuality between peoples to sustain the "beating heart of the Mekong", alluding to the necessary flood rhythms that ensure that water flows evenly and

⁶ This is her stage name, her real name is Võ Văn Ánh, or Văn Ánh Võ in English name order.

replenishes itself seasonally rather than draining off. For many people living in the region, they claim that the source of present-day climate disasters in the region is the loss of the Spirit. This loss thereafter has resulted from the outright disrespect of nature by Chinese and Laotian construction projects that disrupt the natural flooding processes in the delta alongside climate change. The overarching sentiment reflects the need for sustained cooperation for mutual development and the restoration of a “Culture of Peace” between the six countries. As of now, the possibility of collaboration seems remote, but many activists have hope that the calling will be reciprocated.

Overseas, Mekong Plaza in Mesa, Arizona is an Asian cultural hub. Its choice to appropriate the name of the Mekong River has several significant implications for the local Asian community. Several large Asian communities have been built around the plaza, including a vibrant Chinese, Vietnamese, and Thai community. This parallels the shared history and ties between Southeast Asian communities around the Mekong River. Through the construction of Mekong Plaza, the larger Asian community is able to envision more harmonious relations between the Southeast Asian communities and their Chinese neighbors. Furthermore, it is an avenue for the Asian community to create space for itself in Western society. In turn, Mekong Plaza has become a space for the mobilization of Asian-American identity and the creation of bonds between the migrant and existing communities in Arizona. Mekong Plaza is now popularly frequented and enjoyed by people of all backgrounds (though the grocery store itself primarily offers exclusive goods for the Asian community). It intends to expand even further this summer, inviting more Asian businesses into the plaza for the local community to indulge in.

Finally, a large part of Vietnamese memory work also involves reflections on their own colonial histories to analyze present-day US-Mexico border politics. Through these reflections,

we find additional sentiments of connectedness with the migrant community largely, while also critiquing the racial climate of the United States. In Saigon Nhô, an article was written on April 21, 2021 about the connections between family separations during Operation Babylift and the US-Mexico border conflict.

“The April 2021 story about helpless children in the Mexico-US border area evokes images of the Vietnam Child Evacuation Program (Operation Babylift) in April 1975...series of children follow their parents, or go with relatives, or even have their parents ‘send someone they know to take them across the border’. Whether you live or die, whether you arrive or don't arrive is up to you!”

Firstly, they discuss the political violence that contextualizes their decision to give their children up to the American military, and how it reflects similar levels of fear and urgency. They rationalize their decisions through considerations of the security that the United States provides their children while acknowledging the profound trauma from indefinite periods of family separation and anxiety they experienced. Their discussions formulate into a critique of American priorities and how it informs their treatment of all migrant bodies amidst conflict. They parallel the desperation of Vietnamese mothers to protect their children at all costs with the recklessness of American military operations who took little to no notice of how the separation would impact family relationships. Later on in the Saigon Nhô article, they reflect on their own family’s history of migration after suffering through re-education camps and communist surveillance to qualify their migration decisions against American border interests.

“For many years after April 30, 1975, we lived in constant suffering. The children who remained with us never saw a trace of happiness. Their father was imprisoned in a prison doing hard labor. The ill-fated mothers and the children themselves from city life are now being chased back to the rural fields or thrown into the ‘new economic’ zone where the forests are sacred and the water is poisonous. Mothers have to work hard with their heads down on stubble, hands and feet covered

in mud, working hard for so-called ‘agricultural cooperatives’, unable to create food or clothing for their children.”

In turn, there are avenues for bridging between colonized countries when parallels are drawn between their experiences of settler colonialism, forced separation, and racial discrimination and violence. The US-Mexico border conflict becomes less rational when the motivations for the migration of separated families are based on fears for their livelihood, while American interests are based on border security against imaginations of criminals and “threats” to society.

“Until we left the country to settle in the United States, none of our remaining children were fortunate enough to receive a basic level of education. The children remaining with us in Vietnam would truly be ‘in the middle of nowhere’ if we did not set foot in the United States to reunite with our two sons who had been lost for 16 years. It is in the United States that our children have the opportunity to rebuild their lives, absorb modern education, so that they have the conditions to advance both intellectually and in social life. *We live in harmony with all other ethnic groups, although the United States is not perfect in terms of racial psychology* (emphasis added).”

Overall, Vietnamese memory work consists of generating imaginations of what could have been, as well as envisioning a new Vietnamese overseas nationalism built on pride and collective resilience to prevail over its aggressors. This includes a rejection of the Vietnamese state as it currently stands, which does serve their interests; in fact, it continues to subject them to political censorship and exile. The Việt kiều, or the refugees that would revisit Vietnam, act as representatives and icons for the greater South Vietnamese community of their successful resistance. They symbolize Vietnam’s ability to assert itself in the globalized world as participating equals and reject the dominance of the communist regime as their international representatives. Moreover, by bringing (cultural, financial, social) resources back home, they are

able to subvert the control the regime has on their loved ones still in Vietnam and grant them access to opportunities beyond its limited scope (such as the restrictive American Dream).

Cumulatively, these practices and interactions allow for the Vietnamese-American collective community to “articulate a *topos* of their pasts that illustrates a sort of locational discourse which unsettles the overdetermined meanings of ‘Vietnam,’” that transcends national borders, conceptions of membership, and the grip of the colonial gaze (Liu 2015). Rather, memory work allows for the Vietnamese community to build connections and accommodate each other across distance (locational, relational) and difference to strengthen solidarity after periods of change. Even more, it creates bridges with other communities for a more expanded identity that incorporates their diasporic experiences of colonialism, displacement, and renewal.

In this chapter, I began to explore the importance of space and occupying space for the formation of a collective identity with distinct boundaries. Particularly, I emphasize the ways that Vietnamese folk find community or belonging through kinship and the spaces they intentionally build for one another. These spaces are built from and legitimized through various forms of memory work, enabling the Vietnamese collective to imagine space differently overseas while making connections back home. In particular, they inhabit space through the projection of symbolisms and iconography that signal their investments in Vietnam and particular visions of Vietnamese nationalism in a globalized context. This identity is formed around specific characterizations of the homeland and its geographic boundaries: through the construction of Little Saigon in California and the flagging of the pre-Vietnam War South Vietnamese flag, they create spaces dedicated to the South Vietnamese community. In these ways, their collective identity is formed in a localized, temporal space created from the memories of a specific time period of Vietnamese history to inform imaginations of a continued future in a global network.

Ultimately, the Vietnamese collective's endurance in the United States is not just a story of American exceptionalism but also their own story of prevailing against colonial powers (French, Communist, and American) and paving their own roads in the modern globalized world. The Vietnamese community's recollections of their experience coming to the United States is a memorialization of their ongoing battles against colonial erasure to guide their efforts to continue resisting "forward" rather than being confined to the Oriental, backwards, and victimized past. While I acknowledge that the neoliberal capitalist present contextualizes and shapes their life pathways, I reiterate that their success is more than a model minority narrative. According to Mahmood's framework, I believe that the Vietnamese community was agentive in their efforts to situate themselves under subordinating hegemonic systems and work around its mechanisms for their own maintenance of core Vietnamese values, identity, and pride. I identify core Vietnamese values by observing what does *not* change in the processes of negotiating multiple identities.

I examine this process further in the following chapter, where I assess how the community carves out their own spaces through their everyday practice and the embodiment of Vietnamese identity, creating a visible cultural realm for Vietnamese collective identity and resilience in the United States. I begin to explore belonging as an active process, or something that is distinctly *done* to construct a collective identity, according to Julia Bennett's (2013) framework for belonging as more expansive than identity as a static, rigid marker of membership and self-representation. I move from nostalgia and memory work to active imagining of future pathways for the Vietnamese community through practice and occupation of space. Specifically, I consider the following inquiries: how is identity performed, *done*, and *embodied*? I argue that these everyday practices do not project external symbolisms but recognize Vietnamese identity as something that is cultivated through acts of care that do not need to be and cannot be narrated.

Chapter 2

Producing Knowledges: Constructing the Vietnamese Habitus

In this chapter, I expand on more static projections of collective identity to consider how Vietnamese refugees engage in everyday enactments of their relationality with one another and their shared customs and traditions to further establish their transnational ties. I develop my argument through three primary frameworks: Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) habitus, taste, and embodiment, Judith Butler's (2008) performativity, and Saba Mahmood's (2001) agency, desire, and resistance. First, I reference Bourdieu's habitus and taste frameworks to pose a Vietnamese habitus that creates an alternative lifestyle or occupation of space within mainstream American society through Vietnamese stylizations and body expressions in public and private spaces. I interrogate the everyday practices of Vietnamese folk within the community and how they materialize into a distinct Vietnamese "taste" that speaks to their values and habitus as social and cultural norms.

Second, I will show how Vietnamese identity formation gains expression through embodied practices that enable them to simultaneously affirm and occupy counterpositions and create counterpublics. Bourdieu further expands on habitus and taste by considering embodiment and how it is part of meaning-making and identity formation: the body is the locus of expressions of class, culture, and identity. Vietnamese folk engage in various expressions of their identity that both conform to and displace American values to express their unique, hybridized Vietnamese-American identities.

Third, I incorporate theories of spatial composition and organization to consider how space informs and orients social identities in hierarchical society. Through their occupation of

space and interplays of nearness-distance to American and Vietnamese societies, the Vietnamese community situates itself in American society while maintaining deep connections to their Vietnamese roots. I specifically refer to Judith Butler's (2008) concept of performativity wherein Vietnamese folk stylize their everyday practices to resignify and redefine their place in American society, destabilizing formal conceptions of borders and the nation-state for identity-formation and belonging.

Finally, I expand on Saba Mahmood's framework for agency in this chapter, as she understands practice as a culturally specific form of action in response to the broader societal structure. In particular, I draw parallels between the public silences of Southeast Asian refugees as not mere acceptance of their conditions but indicative of larger collective goals in the community. Furthermore, their activities remain illegible in the mainstream not because they are inactive or docile, but that they are not visible to the American public according to their selective vision of them. Through their everyday practice, they articulate the manifolds of their connections to the homeland while establishing themselves in the United States.

Reflections on Early Cultural Socialization

I supplement my interview analyses by referencing my own experiences within the Vietnamese community. Growing up, despite being raised in the United States, I always felt more Vietnamese than American. My Vietnamese identity was intimately intertwined with my life and informed my daily practices, including the food I ate, my ways of talking and carrying myself, and my understanding of hierarchical interpersonal relationships (e.g. teacher-student, child-parent-grandparent). I believe that this is because of the continuous effort my parents made to teach me how to live as a Vietnamese person and carry that collective identity forward even though we had committed to making the United States our home. They regularly stressed the

importance of maintaining our Vietnamese language as well as cultural and religious values so that I did not get too easily wrapped up in the “vices” of American society. To them, American society bred a complacency and a sense of blind freedom that would lead me to forgetting my roots and the relationships that nurtured my growth. Instead, I was taught to revisit my history and my ancestors and take from them seeds to plant in the future. This emphasis became part of my habitus and it informs my current practices and ways of living in the present and thinking about the future. I approach my work with humility, my family in mind, and the ultimate goal of returning the care I have received from my loved ones. I keep myself connected to my parents while studying out of state by practicing my faith in Vietnamese, even when sometimes I can express myself better in English. My first language was Vietnamese. While my peers spent their days watching Disney movies and cartoons in English on cable TV, I was singing popular Vietnamese children’s songs on the karaoke machine (most of them emphasizing respect for my elders) and watching Vietnamese-dubbed VHS tapes of Barbie movies, Marsupilami, and Scooby-Doo on repeat.

My most vivid memories growing up consisted of me slipping in and out of busy Vietnamese spaces: going to Saturday classes at church, attending yearly Tết⁷ festivals and Christmas celebrations, eating at bustling Vietnamese supercenters surrounded by the ramblings of our native tongue, and learning how to greet all my elders by their respective titles, smile, nod, and speak only when I was addressed by them. In every recollection, I felt distinctly Vietnamese.

During the times when we incorporated “American” traditions into our lives, they were mostly symbolic and overwritten by Vietnamese ways of eating, playing, and asserting ourselves in social spaces. Every Thanksgiving, Fourth of July, or Halloween, the holiday was co-opted as

⁷ Tết is the largest Vietnamese celebration. More colloquially known as “Lunar New Year”, it celebrates the arrival of spring and is a time for reunion, hope, and wishing good fortune to loved ones (especially elders).

an excuse for us to gather, eat Vietnamese food, and do karaoke or play Vietnamese gambling games (e.g. Tiến lê̄n, bâ̄u cua⁸) until midnight. I only recall having a Thanksgiving turkey once in my life. Otherwise, our plates were filled with catered dimsum, fried rice, egg rolls, fried shrimp, bánh mì, phở, bún bò Hué, bún riêu, or the occasional steak and corn.⁹ During one period of my life, we had bacon-wrapped fried shrimp and some roasted potatoes as the “new” hybridized food innovation.

Altogether, my personal experiences have shown me how Vietnamese identity is cultivated through embodied practice and the occupation of specific symbolic (cultural, social, and political) spaces. I explored similar threads in my interviews: I assess how social practices foster a sense of belonging and connectedness to others, create community and designated spaces to coexist, and establish exclusivity through practice as insider knowledge. This knowledge, both cultural and social, both symbolic and “mundane”, is performed through the embodiment of access, identity, and membership in everyday life.

More abstractly, I highlight the importance of cultivating a particular Vietnamese “present” to mediate between their past (memory work) and imaginations of the future (creating lifeworlds), where the realization of both visions ultimately cultivate a strong Vietnamese identity in the globalized world. I explore this concept of bridging symbolic imaginaries of the Vietnamese collective memory by exploring how language and religion provide bases for knowledge production and memory-making to create a Vietnamese identity grounded in specific contexts or spaces to inhabit in the United States.

⁸ Tiến lê̄n and bâ̄u cua are popular Vietnamese gambling games that are often played during Vietnamese holidays like Tết or other social gatherings.

⁹ Though steak and corn are not traditional Vietnamese foods, they are more common during social gatherings in the United States, where these “luxury” meals are more accessible and easy to serve to large groups of people.

My interviews cover the following themes for Vietnamese identity formation: language, religion, food, and the overarching role of space as a stage for performance or obfuscation. I consider the above themes to argue how their culmination redefines Vietnamese and American identities as not fixed by national geographic borders but as transcendent in symbolic relational orientation between the old and the new. In this chapter, I focus on language and religion as tools for producing and retaining cultural knowledge as well as marking boundaries to Vietnamese identity. I assess how spatial and temporal expansions are made throughout the latter sections and their implications for collective identity formation, situated in space (as time and place).

Language

Language is a common tool that bridges specific people together according to shared knowledge to create exclusive spaces. Language is commonly referenced as essential to belonging in national memberships worldwide. This is reflected in my discussions in Chapter 1 of English language acquisition as a primary integration demand for Vietnamese refugees to the United States. The logic behind these demands often pertain to language as fostering understanding, relationality, and supporting cultural exchange through effective communication. More specifically, it creates a sense of “simultaneity” between bearers of shared knowledge such that their everyday practices, lives, and values are implicitly assumed as shared, though not directly evaluated (Anderson 1991). Altogether, it becomes part of the basis for network building and cultivating trust that creates exclusive collective identities, or “imagined communities”.

Before I begin my discussion, I want to preface that throughout this chapter, my interviewees refer to the Vietnamese language as if it is uniform across regions; however, there are actually three dialects within the language, separated between the Northern, Southern, and Central parts of Vietnam. Today, there is some cross-cutting between Northern and Southern

Vietnamese dialects such that people from either region are able to communicate, but Central Vietnamese is much more distinct and difficult to understand outside of the region. Even more so, there are some complications marking the distinctions between Northern and Southern dialects in the United States today. Many Vietnamese refugees, due to multiple periods of migration before and after the war, have integrated both dialects in their everyday speech such that the distinction is now more obscure. Ultimately, however, there are many common terms from which these regional dialects diverge, such that people can draw divides between Northern and Southern Vietnamese people and establish their ties. I discuss the tensions between the Northern and Southern Vietnamese communities in the conclusion of this thesis to reflect on the importance of bridging people across their differences to create a common future tied to Vietnam as the place of shared origin. For now, I want to establish this background knowledge to then consider the role of space and temporality for developments in language that draw boundaries between people within a community, as well as across cultures. Language creates a space of knowledge that simultaneously marks differences and opens possibilities for convergence around these exclusive knowledge(s) and strengthening bonds across time and geographic space.

In many ways, language is a fundamental part of preserving cultures and identities against erasure. In my interview with her, Kim discussed Vietnamese experiences with book burning and the colonial erasure of their written language and history. In her discussion, she considers not only how her ancestors were able to maintain an oral language but also how their adoption of French colonial resources allowed them to establish themselves in the global community.

“When the Chinese were able to control our territory for 1000 years, in those years they burnt all our books, we only kept our verbal speech/language. We did not have writing. Afterwards, our ancestors came up with our language, similar to Chinese writing (called chũ Hán). It was really

hard to learn. Only the wealthy were able to, the poor were not able to afford it. It was difficult to learn. Then when missionaries came to Vietnam to spread religion, they only heard us speak and then he [Alexandre de Rhodes] came up with words for our speech. And from that...he wrote the third version of the language, collecting from previous linguists and brought it to Rome, Italy, bringing back our language and from there created our alphabet (Chữ Quốc ngữ). Out of all of Southeast Asia, only Vietnam has an alphabet. It is because of that that we are able to learn English and French well...And after that, I heard that they asked him to become a saint because it is because of him that we were able to have a written language and open our minds up to view the world and learn other languages. It is only through this that we could experience the rest of the world; with chữ Hán, it would be over. Learning English from Chinese is hard, but they still speak it well because they still curl their tongue, so it is easy to speak the language, but writing and learning it is harder than for us. So in misfortune, there are fortunate things."

Though she celebrates the French for giving them access to English and French and consequently the Western world, she also acknowledges how it is a tool used to empower the Vietnamese people, rather than merely as an extension of the feats of the West. She specifically evaluates the various colonial tools given to them and their efficacy to allow the Vietnamese people to "experience the rest of the world". This highlights the intentionality behind their decisions between different forms of knowledge: (re)acquiring written language became a tool for the Vietnamese community to gain access to global knowledge-production and resources thereafter.

This negotiation is similar to my later discussion about the desire of Vietnamese refugees to adopt neoliberal capitalist models for collective social mobility, compared to the desires of the American state itself to impose a singular model of integration onto Southeast Asian refugees. Vietnamese refugees utilize capitalist (and now language) models to advance their own

community's gains, while the United States expects neoliberalism to ground refugee allegiances and investments into its infrastructure. If the Vietnamese people simply accepted what was imposed on them, they may have adopted chữ Hán and held onto it for a coherent form of language. However, by critically observing the differences in widespread usefulness between the classed chữ Hán and chữ Quốc ngữ and choosing chữ Quốc ngữ, a more widely accepted and transferable language, they participate in active exchanges with their colonial powers to empower themselves and prevail over their oppressors (at least in windows of opportunity relative to their Chinese counterparts).

I additionally argue that Vietnamese Catholics adopt colonial religious models to expand on their existing Vietnamese habitus, rather than entirely reorienting their ways of living. In later sections on religion, I explore how Catholicism is integrated into the Vietnamese habitus in ways that characterize Vietnamese Catholics as distinct from American Catholics, which is informed by Vietnamese colonial histories and classed experiences of integration to American society.

Kim teaches catechism and the Vietnamese language at Holy Spirit Church in Mesa, Arizona. Throughout our conversation about language (both English and Vietnamese), she also discussed the importance of retaining language to pass traditions down and instill values to future generations. In particular, she discusses how language is part of the cultural preservation and resilience of historically displaced communities like the Jewish diasporic communities across the world.

"I learned that the Jewish community is very strong. They lost their country for so long and yet their community still stands strong. It has just redeveloped for the last hundred years, but they were able to keep their language and teach their children all their traditions (e.g. Passover). They always have children who are engaged in their faith and traditions."

Kim centers the role of language for the Jewish community to pass down their traditions and preserve continuous engagement in their faith and traditions, thereby preserving their culture and identity through extended periods of displacement. On the flipside, however, language can be a gatekeeping mechanism that simultaneously excludes American and non-Vietnamese speaking Vietnamese folk instead of fostering connection and exchange. This has been especially problematic for the Vietnamese refugee community as they tried to balance pressures to Americanize with their desires to preserve their culture and Vietnamese heritage. The present-day outcome is that many second- and third-generation Vietnamese feel displaced from the larger collective because of their low Vietnamese language fluency or lack thereof.

Struggles with generational language loss

The following excerpt illustrates the common reality of second- and third- generation Vietnamese-Americans: while they retain many of their cultural traditions, language remains a persistent barrier to full access to their Vietnamese identity.

“My reading and writing is very, yeah, nonexistent. So the language part is very disconnected that I feel like that, but in terms of like being aware of like the food, a lot of the traditions, the celebrations, the other aspect of culture and family I feel pretty connected with.” (Brian, 22)

There are other forms of knowledge primarily accessible through language that second- and third-generation Vietnamese have little to no access to, which limits their access to Vietnamese goods and belonging to the community. For example, language is central to passing down knowledge of Vietnamese goods, especially for food preparation. Moreover, language is essential for historical memory to inform their present-day activity (and possibly mobilization) as well as more in depth cultural education that interweaves history with desire and aspirations for the collective future. This issue is especially difficult for the second and third generation to

grapple with when they also have to balance other interests and commitments in their lives.

When I interviewed Noah, he explained that even though he did and would still want to learn Vietnamese, it does not easily fit into his life and long-term goals.

“I wish I spoke better Vietnamese...I think I did want to learn the language at one point. That kind of fell by the wayside. I would still love to learn Vietnamese at some point, it’s just uh, you know, like, I just have too many interests so it’s hard to find space to jam it in a way that makes sense for the life I want to live.”

Noah added that though he was given some resources by his mom to learn Vietnamese, the lack of its institutionalization or embeddedness in his everyday life limited his ability to properly learn the language. In our interview, he shared that it would have helped if there was a “cultural infrastructure”. This laments Bourdieu’s notion of habitus and (hegemonic) taste for acquiring and maintaining languages considered secondary in the United States. Similar to the habitus, it must emerge through continuous exposure, use, and daily practice. Otherwise, it was entirely contingent on whether he would want to learn the language on his own or not.

“I kind of know how to pick out a few words, I just never focused on learning it. There was like one period when I was growing up where I tried to learn it for a month...there was a period where my mom tried to send me to Vietnamese school and I just did not want to do it. And then there was a period a few years later like middle to high school where I tried to learn it, and she just gave me a book and that wasn’t... that didn’t really help. As supposed to, in my area, there was a dedicated Chinese school that I would go to so having that infrastructure was huge in actually helping me learn the language, so long story short unfortunately I don’t speak... I don’t actually speak Vietnamese very well. I do kind of know how to pronounce it because of my mom though.”

Comparatively, learning Chinese was much easier because he had a dedicated Chinese school to attend that supported him throughout his journey. The extent of his Vietnamese

knowledge is limited by what he learns by ear, rather than everyday practice and use.

Additionally, he has a figure in his life that he had to exclusively speak Cantonese to.

“My grandma, who, on his [father's] side of the family who speaks Cantonese, she was with us growing up, so my command of Cantonese is actually... it works, I think. I can speak a lot of common phrases like if you dumped me in Hong Kong for a couple of months, I would probably be able to speak the language pretty well. Yeah, so honestly sometimes I feel connected even more strongly to that because my grandma was always there as part of the family and she could not speak English so I had to speak to her in Cantonese. And so because of that, I feel like I got some pretty strong Chinese values from at least that side of the family growing up.”

Because Noah’s grandma lived with him for a significant part of his upbringing, he had a regular need to practice and utilize Cantonese in his everyday life. He feels much more confident in his command of the language in practical situations, including living in Hong Kong. Even more so, he comments on how this exposure also gave him strong Chinese values to carry forward. Ultimately, Noah’s experience shows the importance of incorporating language learning into regular routines so that it is embedded in and part of the lives of second and third generation Vietnamese people rather than a secondary or supplementary skill to develop. Moreover, Noah’s experience reinforces Kim’s importance of language as a medium through which values can be passed down and can promote related cultural education.

In our interview, Tuyet also reflects on experiences teaching Vietnamese to her children and the difficulty of balancing Vietnamese and American education. She acknowledged the same need to learn Vietnamese to communicate with elders, but her life experience demonstrates how as soon as her children entered school, they lost touch with Vietnamese. The few times when they were obligated to maintain the language is when they are put in situations where they

needed to use it, which was only when talking to the babysitter, their grandparents, or her (when she was home):

"When they was little, I usually would hire Vietnamese babysitter so they can learn and talk to them in Vietnamese and I also talk to them in Vietnamese when I'm home. Because the grandparents are older and I want them to maintain that. But then as soon as they go to school, they forgot. They don't maintain, so my boys they can still understand somewhat because I still talk to them in Vietnamese (laughs). I say you figure it out (laughs)...So I get that. I get that, because they— you know, when you're not in— when you don't practice you feel awkward, right? And I'm working all the time, there's no one else at home that's keeping them in check. Because they're talking to each other in English, right? So that's ruined. So the boys still maintain some understanding of what I'm saying. They can say a word here and there. My daughter, she, they used to be fluent. Like they would go, like I sent them to the church after school and all the nuns because they're Vietnamese nuns that run the school. And they was surprised like because my kids could understand everything they said. And she said 'I'm just shocked because they never say anything but they understood everything I said' because they're at home with the babysitter and with the grandma, right, so they were fluent. So they understood and they've just forgotten over time."

Tuyet expressed empathy for the situation, understanding that the lack of regularity makes the practice become more awkward and displaced in their lives. In this case, they initially showed promise and commanded the language better than expected compared to most of their peers. However, even though Tuyet introduced some incentives to learn the language, the lack of regularization or institutionalization left the language learning primarily secondary to their other interests. In their personal lives, they spoke English with one another. The only child she has that still retains enough of the language to understand her fully is her daughter, who has an interest in languages and therefore a personal motivation for maintaining the Vietnamese language.

My life experiences reflect a different outcome— Vietnamese was actually my first language because my mother does not speak much English. Furthermore, even as I started school in American institutions, I was (forcibly) signed up for weekly Vietnamese classes at my church. Though I did not initially like the compulsion, the continued practice and exposure to the language and cultural knowledge within the educational system allowed me to maintain a relatively strong grasp on the language and customs relative to my peers who were not placed into Vietnamese education alongside their primary American education. More practically, my regular conversations with my mother have taught me more “niche” knowledge about Vietnamese, including knowledge of the specialty noodles in Mekong Supermarket, whose histories are not often legible even to second and third generation Vietnamese. Therefore, a significant consequence of “losing” the Vietnamese language is the loss or limited historical memory and understanding of its implications for their lives today.

First-generation reconciliations with fractures

My first-generation interviewees grapple with language loss in various ways. Firstly, they both recall the contemporary movement to revalue Vietnamese language education over the emphasis on English language learning and integration. Kim prefaces this movement by explaining how language learning was differently valued throughout periods of migration and across generations. Initially, learning English was prioritized in order to properly integrate and establish families in the United States.

“People before 1975 were living very comfortably, and then those coming after 1975 were more worried about their children and made them study English a lot more. They had them watch English films so they aren’t looked down upon. Then they lose their Vietnamese language and their parents. Then a lot of people have to learn English to speak with their children because they

don't understand Vietnamese anymore. So that is also a mistake on their part. When I came during the 1990s, then it started becoming a concern. In the past, everyone would say, "Wow their English is so good!" and afterwards, after 10 years or so things calmed down and they wondered, 'Why is their Vietnamese so good?' up until now, thinking 'Wow, their Vietnamese is good.' They start to praise Vietnamese fluency more than English."

Kim's reflections reveal a common issue that arises from changing priorities throughout the integration process: while it was initially beneficial to learn English to acclimate to new contexts, once they were settled, it was more important to establish a well-defined Vietnamese identity. Language has been shown to be central to the passage and retention of cultural knowledge, but Americanization efforts led to the gradual loss of language between the first generation to the next. This then created intergenerational rifts to reconcile: in our interview, Kim added that this loss of language has forced even some first-generation Vietnamese to improve their English to maintain connections with their children. This was implicitly an issue in Noah and Tuyet's case, but the accommodation was often being done to accommodate the elders. The above accommodations create a reversal in obligations and hierarchies between children and their parents— rather than children putting in effort to maintain connections with their parents, some parents are pushed to make efforts to understand their own kids. This is a phenomenon more deeply explored in a Saigon Nhỏ magazine article titled "Mày-tao" on the usage of "mày-tao" in the second and third generation Vietnamese which have seemingly uprooted typical hierarchical relationships of respect and humility before elders.

The article opens with an anecdote on the increased concern with students informally referring to their teachers with the relational terms, "mày" (informal second-person pronoun) and "tao" (informal first-person pronoun), which would often come off as strong disrespect for their teachers. This created strong divisions in the Vietnamese community, where educators felt that

students did not take them or their education seriously. At the same time, the article discusses the overall sense of pride that Vietnamese people have in their language because of the numerous ways to establish intimacy between one another simply through our language usage. By contrast to the English language, Vietnamese has an honorific system of pronouns that establishes relationality between people depending on their relative age, levels of authority, levels of closeness, and levels of trust. The informal form “mày-tao” can be either offensive when used incorrectly or can signal intimacy depending on the context and tone taken when addressing one another. Therefore, despite the initial backlash and division between younger Vietnamese generations and the elderly, some efforts have been made to revitalize the language while acknowledging the specific contexts where levels of intimacy are actually strengthened.

There still exists concern in debates about the modernization of the Vietnamese language where the hierarchies fundamental to preserving Vietnamese values of piety and respect for one another may be deconstructed. The value, however, lies in preserving solidarity across generational shifts through historical and cultural education to establish mutual understanding, especially regarding how these continued practices and historical frameworks affect collective identity formation after displacement. At the outset, the established hierarchies between people via proper use of honorifics seems like an overemphasis on maintaining hierarchy and authority. In reality, this practice encourages Vietnamese people to pay closer attention to how they relate to those around them.

In my upbringing, one of the most essential skills I learned from my parents was how to greet those around me properly by paying attention to their closeness not only to me but my family members as well. This was especially important as a part of paying my due respects to my elders. At every family gathering, I had to greet all my relatives according to their relative

connectedness to myself, and this was most important in expressing respect for my grandparents. This attentiveness was needed in public social events within the Vietnamese community as well. In some situations, it felt awkward to try to guess if someone outside of my family network was older than my parents or not and if assuming they were older would be offensive, but ultimately, the effort in practice was met with a lot of humor and encouragement for trying to preserve the proper language use in the first place. The effort to consider these hierarchies ensured that we regularly reflected on our relationships with every member of our community and regularly tended to them through greetings whenever we met them. Ironically, it felt less daunting than trying to face authoritative figures, like teachers, in American society where there was a general tendency to avoid establishing any connections unless prompted, and therefore a perpetual distance remained with neither person reading and orienting each other (and trying to establish relationality thereafter can actually come off as offensive).

Generational shifts in ideology and perceptions of Vietnamese practice are part of Kim's motivation to teach language to maintain a level of established order to the Vietnamese language and how it can be used to bridge members of the community, rather than create additional rifts of misunderstanding and mistrust. As she put it,

“That’s why I chose to teach Vietnamese and build a Vietnamese department according to my understanding/preference and according to my way of teaching. All other countries teach the way I do. And I think teaching it is valuable because... over time there have been many different groups of people developing. Some people marrying and having partners have specific beliefs. Every generation has a different philosophy/way of living. My generation came and was focused on finding a job and getting an education.”

When teaching Vietnamese, Kim uses the international version to teach the alphabet and standardize students' understanding of tones and spelling in the language. Furthermore, she

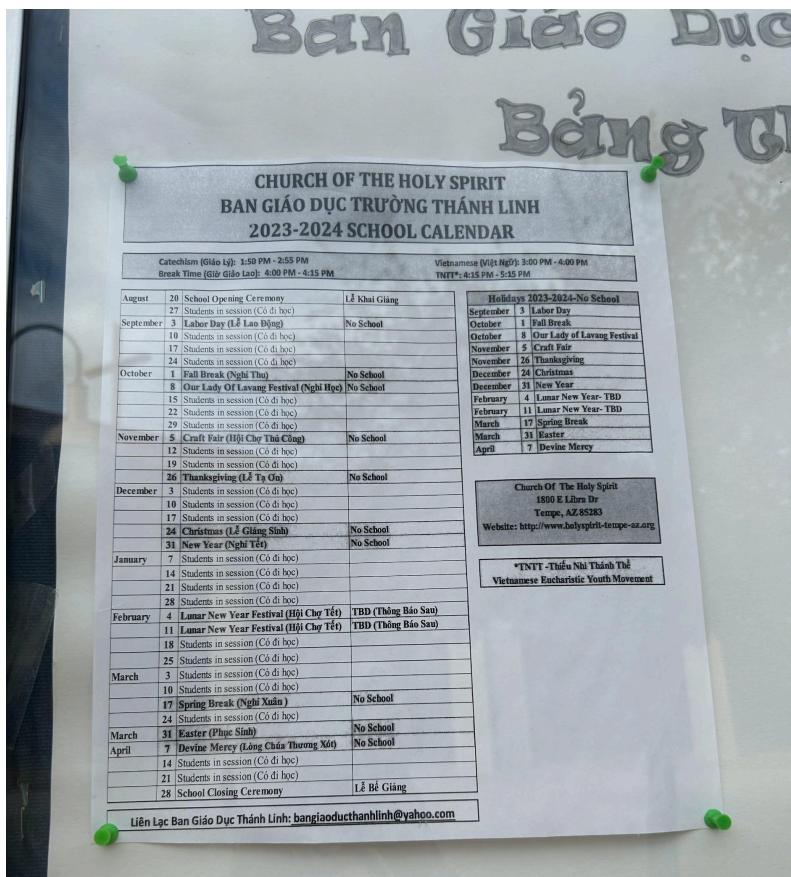
establishes the importance of standardizing language education and usage as, between generations, people adopt new values and perspectives on life that affect their ways of engaging with the world and their place in it. By standardizing the command of the Vietnamese language in the next generation, there is a step taken toward improving communication across generations and establishing more common values within the community, no longer deeply aggregated by generation and their historical memory (and valuation of their histories thereafter). Simultaneously, this education reinforces boundaries to the Vietnamese collective, delineating cultural grounds for inclusion and exclusion for those unfamiliar with the language and knowledges it grants access to. A large part of Vietnamese language education involves reading texts or learning songs that recall core values or themes, such that students can regain access to histories or folktales from Vietnamese culture. This then allows students to better understand the philosophies of and develop levels of empathy for the first generation of migrants, regardless of whether or not they subscribe to the beliefs themselves.

Similarly, Tuyet's expectations for her children are no longer high-level fluency of the language to be able to engage in conversation and read and write. Rather, her emphasis is on listening and speaking so that they can communicate with others in their community and retain some cultural knowledge. She explained her expectations in the following way:

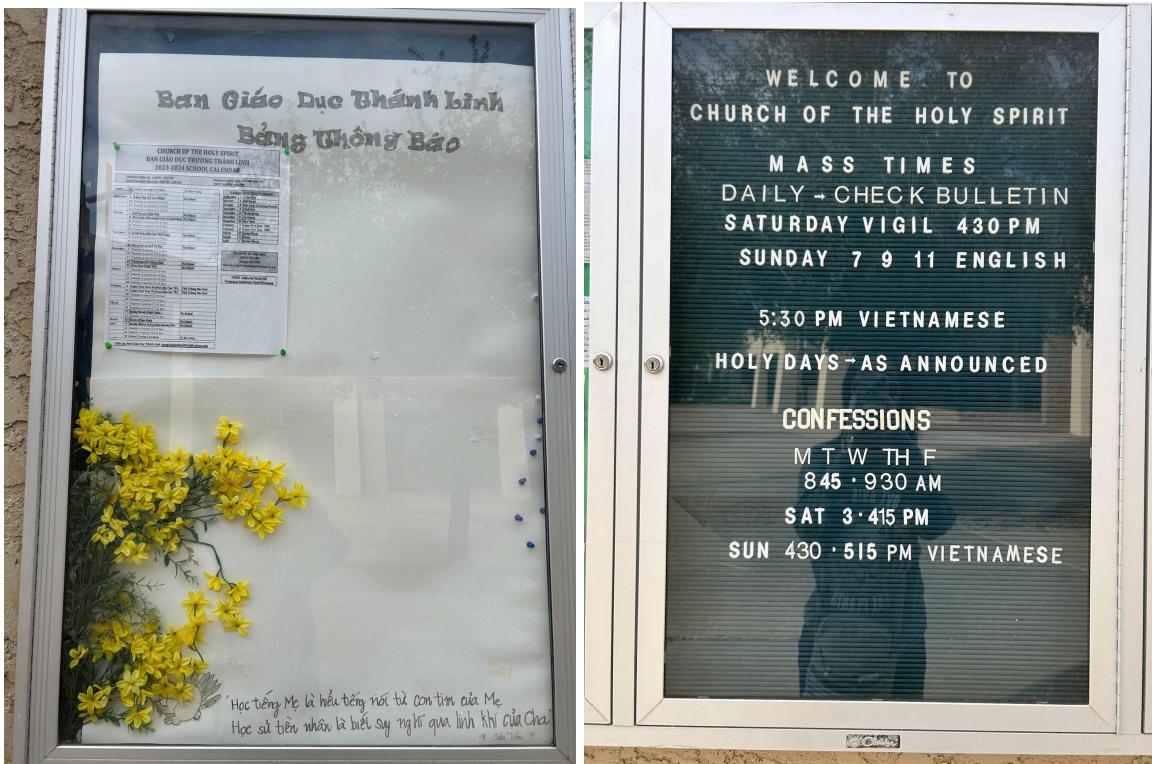
“Yeah I told them, I say, I don't expect them to— it's, ideally I want them to be able to listen and speaking, right. But if not, you should at least understand what I said. The more you know, regardless of what it is. And your mother tongue you should know it too, so. Yeah. So I still say things to them and then I say, ‘Did you understand anything I said?’ (laughs). So that way I want to make sure that they understood...they have the basics. Basic understanding, maybe not exact.“

This shift in priorities for Vietnamese language fluency reflects a pointed compromise that highlights the Vietnamese value of accommodating one another to foster a strong, inclusive

community rather than assimilation to the point of flattening all its members to a normative model of fluent Vietnamese users. This is especially a trend for migrant populations whose collective identities are displaced after extended periods with war and conflict that differently frame the lives of the constituents depending on their closeness with their history, or lived experience of history (Belonging to the community is created by fostering inclusion of second and third generation Vietnamese who, being born in the United States, are inherently removed from domain cultural knowledge. In some cases, when no Vietnamese literacy can be expected, there are explicit efforts to translate all important news and information to English so that it is accessible to all members of the community. At my local church, the Holy Spirit Church where I met Kim, the Vietnamese bulletin boards include scheduling in both English and Vietnamese.



Schedule for 2023-2024 Sunday School Year, where translations made in both English and Vietnamese.



Two bulletin boards hung on the church grounds, one catered to the Vietnamese community and the other to the general church community about mass times. The Vietnamese bulletin board has the words “Ban Giáo Dục Thánh Linh Bảng Thông Báo” written on top, roughly translated to “Holy Spirit Board of Education Bulletin Board”.

These bulletin boards often provide information on programming at the church (e.g. cultural events, fundraising events, food service for the community) and important news focused on the mobilization of the community toward common interests. Additionally, the church (like many Vietnamese Catholic churches nationwide) has a youth group called Thiếu Nhi Thánh Thể (Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Society) that exposes children to cultural education in both English and Vietnamese. I consider the above church activities in greater depth in the following section on religion, religiosity, and how these philosophies also contribute significantly to collective Vietnamese identity formation.

Vietnamese to English translations are an effort being pursued by the magazine publications I review as well—all of them are bilingual to some degree. I claim that the articles they choose to translate reflect the Vietnamese community’s investments in re-establishing

cultural solidarity. Not only are more articles becoming accessible to both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese speaking audiences, but the articles being translated are focused on covering stories most relevant to the community and its history. Research done by Kaus (2016), Gusain and Jha (2022), and Liu (2015) have shown how Vietnamese literature and autobiography recalls the ways their post-war traumas have fundamentally shaped and altered the remainder of their lives. They recall their often untold experiences with torture in re-education camps, with political persecution and poverty, as well as resilience and community that has contributed to their survival (Kaus 2016). Similarly, these articles allow for next generation Vietnamese people to contend with their parents' and grandparents' histories and better conceptualize their ties to and relationship with their community (Duong 2020).

One of the articles translated entirely in English in the VietLifestyles magazine was titled “The Origin of the Vietnamese People and Land” and reserved for the KidZone in the publication. In the article, though they use the original Vietnamese terms and names for primary actors in the story, they have a key to translate and describe all of them in English. Overall, the article reviews a Vietnamese myth that discusses the creation of Vietnam, its original name, and how it was borne from the strength and resilience of a descendant of dragons and his wife, descendant of fairies (which are central symbols in Vietnamese culture today). Embedded within the article are several battles and interactions with spiritual beings that represent historical struggles, as well as allude to the cultural tools that the Vietnamese people possess and hold onto today (musical instruments, rice farming, how to build housing, etc). Ultimately, the conclusion of the article calls to unity between the land, mountains, and sea (or the community at large) in the symbolic marriage of ancient Vietnamese leader Lạc Long Quân (who returned to the sea)

and his wife Âu Cơ (who stayed in the mountains) who, through their 100 descendants, will band together to protect and preserve Vietnam against future invaders.

This article reiterates similar themes of cultural education, historical preservation, and the cultivation of unity through active practice and storytelling. The legend retells the history of the development of tools important to Vietnamese life to establish simultaneity between members of the community through their shared history and cultural knowledge. Furthermore, the ending of the legend reflects Vietnamese valuations of solidarity against encroachment, which relate to historic Vietnamese battles against colonial powers. The translation of this piece and all its references to English make the legend accessible to more readers, rather than exclusively Vietnamese-speaking readers. This reflects past emphasis on language as a gatekeeper and bearer of knowledge for cultural preservation and the cultivation of mutuality through shared history, culture, and values. Especially considering that this piece is featured in the KidZone of the article, this article introduces many children and next generation Vietnamese to stories of Vietnam's origins and its cultural values that strengthen their ties to their heritage and identity.

English translations of Vietnamese community news also bridge members across generational and geographic distance through the expression of shared aspirations, which cultivate solidarity with a clear set of values, namely collective social mobility. In the VietLifestyles magazine, the article, “Giáng sinh tại Nhà Trắng Atlanta – Giác mơ Mỹ thành sự thật” (Christmas at the Atlanta White House – An American Dream Realized), was published a few days before Christmas in 2023. This article reflects on Thuy Ai Kathy Lam's accomplishments as a Vietnamese businesswoman and her construction of a home that mirrors the White House in the United States.

Throughout this article, references to the “grandeur of the White House” and the achievement of the “American Dream” are made to highlight the social mobility of South Vietnamese refugees in the United States. When supplemented by recollections of Thuy Ai’s difficult migration journey, her parents’ history with re-education camps, and her responsibility to “rebuild her family life from scratch”, Thuy Ai’s experiences seem like a classic “rags to riches” story that exemplifies the “model minority myth” and glosses over the profound trauma refugees faced due to American colonialism. The article even goes on to say that the “magnificent piece of architecture, a *perfect replica* of the iconic White House in Washington, D.C., represents much more than just mere luxury; it encapsulates the profound story of the American Dream—a testament to the unyielding dedication, perseverance, and *gratitude of a Vietnamese American immigrant family*” (emphasis added). In this way, Thuy Ai’s successes are somewhat owed to her access to the “American Dream” and the equal opportunities that enable her to achieve it; she and other South Vietnamese folk who aspire to similar achievements are passive consumers of a larger hegemonic structure that do not destabilize the norm.

At the same time, I heed Saba Mahmood’s warning about relying on Western, secular models of liberalism to assess the agency of marginalized “Others” in their processes of identity formation (Mahmood 2001). Instead, I suggest a different interpretation of Thuy Ai’s desire to replicate the White House that rests on ownership of the means of production in Marxist terms and access to resources, better known as capital. Within this desire, I suggest that she completes two subversions of hegemonic power: firstly, the perfect imitation of the White House allows her to gain ownership over a product of white America and make it her own. Through this, she is able to exercise various forms of power. This iconography imbues symbolic meaning to her achievements and grants access to networks (social capital) she would be otherwise restricted

from— it is stated that the Atlanta White House has been used for Governor Brian Kempt’s campaigning and wedding ceremonies, “creating an atmosphere of celebration and unity”. Furthemore, the article explicitly states that she possesses the “resilient spirit of a successful businesswoman”. In other words, this display also symbolizes her entrance into the American world as an equal, rather than a mere extension of the American narrative. She has carved out a space for herself in the Western hegemonic structure and unquestionably belongs. This is subversive in nature because by perfectly imitating the White House, she gains ownership of one of the most esteemed symbols of American identity and unquestioned executive authority and is able to exercise levels of power as if it is the real thing. In turn, this imitation destabilizes the exclusiveness of living in the White House and its associated sociocultural meanings altogether.

She further destabilizes hegemonic structures through the ways she is able to uproot the Western cultural hegemony, or “taste”, by associating her achievements with the accomplishment and prioritization of uniquely Vietnamese values. Her contributions are cited as a “living testimony”, a “historic chapter”, a “beacon of hope” that serves as a guide for the possibilities within the dream for the Vietnamese community.

I also suggest that it is important to consider the audience of this article—to whom is the article sending messages, and how may they interpret this kind of signaling of wealth and mobility? This magazine is primarily catered to Vietnamese audiences on the West Coast. Though the articles are translated in both English and Vietnamese, it is likely to make the articles more accessible to generations of Vietnamese-Americans who are not fluent in Vietnamese and international readers. In their mission statement, VietLifestyles Magazine outlines the following philosophy:

“Our mission is to *reserve and promote the beauty of our traditional Vietnamese culture while embracing the modern Western culture of a place where the Vietnamese culture, identity and*

traditional heritage is preserved and shared with Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese readers from around the globe.

Our goal is to serve as a bridge to merge the Vietnamese and American cultures, connect different generations within our Vietnamese community to become closer and strengthen our community (emphasis added)."

The above excerpt establishes the magazine's goal to bridge American and Vietnamese cultures and create a place for the vitalization of Vietnamese "culture, identity, and traditional heritage" for all members of the community, across generational and language barriers. I argue that the verbiage in the article accomplishes this goal by signaling themes of hope and community solidarity as a shared dream for the larger audience. Thuy Ai's achievements are often prefaced by her personal qualities: her "*unwavering determination and tireless efforts have created an extraordinary legacy*" (emphasis added). These words highlight the importance of her persistence and commitment to her goals. The outcome is the creation of a legacy—her goal was to establish an example for her Vietnamese community, not for Western society. This is made more explicit in the assertion that "her success not only resonates within her own achievements but also echoes proudly in the global Vietnamese community...making a historic chapter in the tale of the American Dream". Specifically, her example is prefaced by a parallelism between her experiences in Vietnam and the United States, as well as her qualities as a businesswoman and her more humble background, which has an emphasis on a renewed family life:

"Thuy Ai Kathy Lam's recollection shows the resilient spirit of a successful businesswoman. A political refugee who came to the United States at a young age, Lam came from a family steeped in the ordeals of postwar Vietnam. After the fall of Saigon, before fleeing to the United States in 1995, Mr. Tau Lam, her father endured many years in a Communist re-education camp. In this new land, Thuy Ai shouldered the burden of rebuilding family life from scratch."

Through this lens centered on fostering solidarity, her efforts are guided by her intention to relieve the burden of starting anew, which is a sentiment that all Vietnamese refugees share. This example also recognizes the shared experiences of moving from Vietnamese to American society and the changing norms and lifestyles. In turn, Thuy Ai's successes are a frame for hope within the Vietnamese community— it signals that they themselves can access this renewed life of greater financial stability and freedom. This hopefulness is further emphasized in the following statement: “Her journey is wildly[sic] considered an inspiring testimony to the triumph of a person of South Vietnam origin within the fabrics that created America’s success.” Moreover, the article centers her successes on “resilience” such that she becomes a motivating figure for continued allegiance and investments in community vitalization.

The above discussion shows that Vietnamese celebrations of opulence and social mobility in the United States are not only acts of celebrating America and the opportunities it presents, but also the resilience and resourcefulness of the Vietnamese community to create a life for themselves and those around them. When understanding the deeper valuation of resilience and building a new life as a core value and desire for the future of the Vietnamese community, her desire to recreate the White House resignifies what it means to achieve the “American Dream” beyond uplifting neoliberal capitalism. On its face, the fact that the Atlanta White House is now a state landmark seems like a way for the state to co-opt her success. At the same time, I suggest that the desire to establish oneself within white American society is a way for Vietnamese refugees to establish their own identity as equal— equally capable, equally entitled, and equally present in the larger fabrics of the country. It is not simply an expression of the “reality” of the American Dream, but that it is a dream for Vietnamese refugees to take hold of and broaden the axes for, or even reinvent, the “successful American”. Ultimately, though these success

narratives are open to appropriation by hegemonic discourse, it alone should not be deemed a “failure to resist”; rather, it opens up new ways of valuing different desires and conceptions of “human flourishings” across different cultures (Mahmood 2001, 225).

I acknowledge that my analyses are limited in scope and not wholly conclusive because I did not speak to Thuy Ai personally. There exist class-based limitations to personal agency that divide Vietnamese community members among themselves: many class stratifications within the Vietnamese community complicate the feelings of attachment and hope that can be derived from Thuy Ai’s successes. Rather, many lower-income Vietnamese refugees face continued racial discrimination when socioeconomic struggles are made to be “natural” and individualized (e.g. lack of English fluency and employment). Thereafter, the celebration of Thuy Ai’s achievements do not come without harm or the exclusion of other members of the community to whom these dreams are much less tangible and realistic. Some Vietnamese folk have greater access to opportunities to take advantage of, thereby creating a class of privileged Vietnamese refugees that reaffirm American models for well-adjusted, successful migrants based on neoliberal capitalism. Still, I find value in Mahmood’s recommendations for a more critical analysis of desire in marginalized communities, for they may illuminate larger themes about employments of the body and self and identity formation within their sociocultural contexts that extend beyond secular discourse. When reading these stories through different lenses, human desire and its fruition thereafter manifest in unique ways. Many other stories are translated in Vietnamese magazines on the West Coast. They all share common visions to reflect on histories in Vietnamese terms, rather than entirely understood by and for Americans, and create solidarity within the community to resist forward, rather than being reserved to the historical past.

Lastly, many Vietnamese restaurants accommodate non-Vietnamese speaking people such that Vietnamese cuisine can be enjoyed and legible to those who cannot read Vietnamese. Below every Vietnamese dish are simple statements about the ingredients. Some Vietnamese restaurants may create stories in more detailed descriptions (though this is often more catered to American audiences) that make reference to their histories.



Images of different items on the Mekong Sandwiches menu are posted against the wall, with names of the item in both English and Vietnamese while more detailed descriptions are provided in English. There is a sign underneath the posters that read “Có bán chà cá”, which translates to “We do sell fish cakes”/“There are fish cakes for sale”.



Two pages of the Phở Number One menu, which provides both English and Vietnamese translations for every dish and the categories the dishes fit under.

Though this may primarily be an effect of needing to accommodate their American customers to stay afloat, it remains a useful introduction for next generation Vietnamese people who are trying to learn more about their culture through food and what it consists of. Moreover, these descriptions still have more benefit for the Vietnamese audience, given that they possess some levels of exclusive knowledge that are supplemented and expanded by their engagement with Vietnamese cuisine (and their Vietnamese servers).

These descriptions are useful for me even though I am fluent in Vietnamese because there are many ingredients and dishes I only know in Vietnamese and am unable to explain what they are in English. In many conversations with friends or professors, I have spoken with pride about my mom's garden of fruits and vegetables that are difficult to find in the United States that she uses to make some of my favorite soups and snacks. My excitement is always followed up with questions about the vegetables I refer to, and I can only respond by saying "I don't know the names in English, I'm sorry". And I am often genuinely sorry because it is part of my culture that I want to share but do not have any terms for except rau đay, táo tàu, đậu bắp, and trái muróp đắng. Only after searching for them in Vietnamese spaces did I finally find the English terms for some of the foods I enjoyed (to this day I do not know what rau đay is in English) without thinking to name them, e.g. táo tàu are jujubes, đậu bắp are okra, trái muróp đắng are bittermelon. That way, seeing these descriptions have given me more terms to explain my culture to others who are interested.



Canh rau day, photo credits:

<https://cookpad.com/vn/cong-thuc/2378608-canh-rau-day-tr%E1%BA%AFng-n%E1%BA%A5u-tom>



Bittermelon soup, or Canh muop đắng, photo credits: <https://vnexpress.net/canh-muop-dang-ham-4645190.html>

Furthermore, some Vietnamese eating locations primarily serve the Vietnamese community and seek to retain specialty dishes or goods that are catered to the community. Having these labels have helped me learn more about the regional goods in Vietnam and how they are interconnected (and disparate). This was especially helpful for me in Grand Century Mall, where most stores are mom-and-pop shops run by first-generation Vietnamese folk who have weak English but a strong passion for retaining a vibrant cultural space for their people. This leads me to consider as well how language barriers may be intentionally reconciled for non-Vietnamese speaking next generation Vietnamese but still remain illegible to the general American public.

One of the ways this is observed is by reviewing the external aesthetics of some of these restaurants and the cultural references they make. Some Vietnamese restaurants are more or less accessible than others depending on their signage and advertising. Many Vietnamese restaurants today incorporate witty word play or reference popular dishes (e.g. Phở Number One) or both (e.g. Unphôgettable) that are more accessible (and sometimes catered) to the American audience.



The front of a Vietnamese restaurant called Phở Number One Restaurant in Mesa, Arizona.



The front of a Vietnamese restaurant called “Unphogettable” at Mekong Plaza.
(Photo courtesy of Unphogettable website)

Others have more cultural significance to the Vietnamese community through references to history, signature dishes, and their cultural valuations. For example, there is a restaurant called “Com Tâm Thuận Kiều” at Mekong Plaza, which translates to “Broken Rice [at] Thuận Kiều”, where Thuận Kiều¹⁰ was a well-known street in Vietnam and broken rice is a popular South Vietnamese dish. Below the main title states “Đệ nhất tàu hũ ky”, advertising one of the dishes they are best at: tàu hũ ky, or a tofu dish with rice. Either way, the signage in Vietnamese restaurant names welcome different populations to the table by referring to specific culturally significant indicators.

In the above ways, the visibility of the Vietnamese language in these spaces marks the public presence of the Vietnamese community. The inclusion of the Vietnamese language alongside English translations fashions specific spaces as “Vietnamese” and welcomes engagement with Vietnamese cuisine. Ultimately, language is again used to delineate the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion by redefining some public spaces as Vietnamese and limiting engagement when mastery of Vietnamese is necessary to capture cultural details.

¹⁰ Additionally, Thuận Kiều also speaks to the valuation of having boats in Vietnamese culture to preserve security and stability in one’s life, especially when navigating treacherous waters and reaching new destinations. Boats are a significant part of the daily lives of Vietnamese people, guiding how they carry themselves now and into the future.

Overcoming Language Barriers Through (Affective) Collaboration

My second and third generation interviewees have realized the importance of intergenerational communication to reckon with their trauma as well as to mobilize toward a better collective future. They have then engaged in many efforts to learn the language both as a social but also a cultural enrichment endeavor. Brian (22) described a Stanford Vietnamese Student Association (VSA) event he attended:

“...we would get into different groups in different language levels and just talk to each other so they would teach us some words, so like for people who didn’t know, they would sometimes teach us like, ‘Okay, here are some terms about school. Let’s ask each other like what are you doing at school’ yada yada, that kind of thing. And that was a lot of fun, like I said, I don’t know very well, so I picked up some words here and there and I think it was fun for some of the newer folks to like, we tried to make it as comfortable as possible, right, because like, sometimes our families like for me, our family kind of like, rags on us if we can’t speak Vietnamese very well. So we tried to create a safe space to teach people and be able to talk about it, but like on the day-to-day, there are a lot of people who would use like Vietnamese slang, like what I was using earlier, like Vietlish, where they would just use the Vietnamese term.”

The event Brian described allowed for second generation students to engage with their mother tongue as well as create a safe space to learn more, where other private spaces could be more subject to judgment. Brian also explained how the Vietlish is used to merge their various cultures and create more expansive spaces for their performances of Vietnamese identity through everyday use of language.

Additionally, Brian and other VSA members have adopted new ways of communicating that transcend the language barrier. One way that these bonds have been rekindled is through the consumption of music and media, specifically karaoke. In previous studies, karaoke and the

Vietnamese music industry in the United States have been investigated as an avenue for first-generation Vietnamese immigrants to reflect on their histories and properly grieve their loss. This is a particularly accepted social space and activity where their latent feelings of love and resentment emerge, while the Vietnamese are typically motivated to demonstrate their resilience through silent perseverance in their everyday lives (Lam 2006).

During my attendance of the “Soundtracks of Home” workshop led by two Vietnamese activists for the 2024 East Coast Asian American Student Union (ECAASU) conference, the leaders and participants reflected on how music has been an avenue for reconciliation when communication was lacking or completely lost otherwise. In particular, they expressed how music was one of the ways that their parents often broke their silences with them, even after extended periods of dissociation from one another. After years of not speaking, the workshop leader’s father sent her a song he listened to while living in Vietnam. This song opened her up to her father in many ways. Practically, he had reached out to her of his own accord after disavowing her for her life choices. Moreover, the song welcomed her into his feelings about his lived experiences by giving her access to her father’s desires back then and what he may or may not still yearn for today. Cumulatively, this allowed her to empathize with her father more and build stronger emotional ties with him: a few months down the line, she found herself listening to a TikTok cover of the very song he sent her, and she sent them back to him. This reciprocity re-established connections between her and her father when it seemed like all prospects of finding common ground were lost. By the end of the workshop, all participants reflected on how music was an alternative form of communication between refugees that enabled them to empathize with one another and learn how to communicate differently when their own words failed to capture the nuances of their sentiments.

Similarly, Brian described how karaoke is a popular social practice within the next generations as well. Part of this enjoyment is through the commemoration of “OG Vietnamese music” that his parents shared with him and his siblings throughout their youth.

“So a lot of the social gatherings, in true Vietnamese spirit, of course we have karaoke. Almost every party we would bring, either with the dance group or the VSA, we wouldn’t only sing traditional Vietnamese songs. Some people would sing the OG Vietnamese music that our parents... and that was fun, right, like, a couple of my older upperclassmen would sing and that was really fun. But yeah, we would also just sing pop music or whatever we wanted to queue up and that honestly was ironically the classic staple of our parties...we just almost always had it, like it became a go to and people just loved it like, ‘When are we going to do karaoke?’ Of course we would enjoy the beverages and the dancing and the partying and stuff, but you know it is a Vietnamese party when we bring out the karaoke. Even when I was throwing my birthday party, I had to make sure there was a karaoke machine.”

As Brian’s experiences reveal, banding around common memories with (social) karaoke reaffirms exclusive memberships through lived experiences of connectedness and commonality. Brian specifically states that even though VSA members enjoy the extra activities that come with socializing, what makes a Vietnamese party is when they bring out the karaoke. Particularly, this emulation of the joy and relief their parents find from karaoke and the Vietnamese classics establishes particular ties to their parents and predecessors. Carrying their personal experiences and observations into these social spaces demonstrates the strong ties that these generations have to their parents and how they have influenced their social life and identity.

Finally, the Stanford Vietnamese Student Association (VSA) also hosts many public events and performances that enable Vietnamese students to reflect on their Vietnamese-American identity and explore alternative ways to express themselves and their

belonging to the collective. The largest niche event is Culture Night, which Brian planned for during his junior year of college.

“...a lot of the themes are about [Vietnamese-American identity], so I think that’s really awesome not only for the people participating to be involved in such a large-scale endeavor and celebration and it’s also a lot of people learn too, about themselves, certain cultural aspects whether it’s dancing or singing or whatever, and it allows people to express that too, especially through the play. A lot of people are like, people who write the play get to take the opportunity to share stories and, yeah, like the storytelling aspect of our community and then share that with the broader Stanford community, um, and so that’s really big.”

This event, alongside other similar events, enable Vietnamese students to engage in storytelling in their own terms and understandings of the Vietnamese collective and their place in it. They carry on the oral traditions, reflect on their multiple identities, and engage in conversations with the local community to act for the present and future.

Brian also described how intimate conversations within the Stanford VSA about experiences at home bring them comfort and reassurance as well as motivation to learn how to communicate differently with their parents when oral or written language alone does not suffice.

“It felt very reassuring, while I didn’t wish that upon them, it felt very reassuring to hear people experience similar things. Similar experiences of expectations of perfection, similar emotional neglect, similar experiences around that stuff that made me feel less alone and also gave me some perspective. They would have their own insights about their own parental trauma, right? Like that they would share and I tried to learn from that. A lesson that I try to carry is, although I can’t speak with my dad at the same level if I could speak Vietnamese...he still communicates a certain way through his actions...so I tried to be more understanding of that and like tried to...reciprocate that with my parents...because I realized, oh, sometimes it’s like they... I’m trying to communicate with them and it’s not coming across the way I want to versus you’re not

listening...Maybe they just have a different way of receiving that kind of information or receiving that kind of emotion. They've also done some learning too, especially my mom, she's grown a lot in our conversations and stuff."

Brian explained that these conversations made him feel less alone in his struggles to meet his parents' various, sometimes contradictory, expectations of him. At the same time, while all VSA members struggled with forms of parental trauma, they also learned different approaches to the trauma from one another. Brian was enabled to realize the power of communicating through the ways he and his family know best, rather than standardizing communication to spoken and written words. By changing his perspective, he was able to better understand what he initially perceived as silence or neglect to his father's own expressions of emotionality and reception. Higher levels of patience for one another enabled his mother to put in additional effort to match him and communicate better with him as well, without being restricted by the language barriers (both literally and emotionally).

Ultimately, these anecdotes expand on the mediating force of language (and communication through music and performance) both in preserving cultural knowledge as well as social relationships between generations, which have been disrupted following multiple forms of displacement (geographic, spatial, cultural, etc). They also consider the private engagements within the next generations to resolve generational gaps rather than unilaterally portraying them as ungrateful or ready to abandon their Vietnamese roots altogether.

I have established how language is a powerful tool for communicating and preserving cultural knowledge and carrying it forward to create a collective Vietnamese identity through exclusive knowledges that sometimes bar next generation Vietnamese from membership. Embedded within my discussion of language are illustrations of how space informs and is informed by language employment to enable the Vietnamese community to situate themselves in

American society as cultural and economic participants. By incorporating Vietnamese classics in common social spaces, e.g. through cuisine and music, Vietnamese culture and tradition is brought to the public sphere and made visible. Furthermore, alterations (specifically accommodations made in bilingual newsletters, menus, and musical performance and social activities) of space allow for the generations to cultivate belonging by making exceptions and prioritizing inclusion. In these two ways, language penetrates the public sphere to include Vietnamese people alongside/within mainstream American culture and constructs multiracial spaces that foster more fluid (rather than fixed and “contradicting”) identities.

At the same time, despite efforts to reconcile the language loss and barriers that emerge, language still destabilizes efforts to cultivate a unified, collective identity. Language loss is difficult to restore in entirely new contexts when balancing integration pressures and when the Vietnamese language is much less frequently used or needed in everyday life. Thereafter, I consider language one of the elements of Vietnamese identity that are less portable and have been given up in some ways. I consider the power of body language for transcending language barriers and these subtle forms of and efforts toward maintaining reciprocity between generations in the following chapter on food, space, and embodiment.

In the following section, I consider how religion expands on the cultural education provided by language and provides the “cultural infrastructure” that Noah and other second generation Vietnamese people seek, considering how the church is key to teaching the language. Specifically, I examine how religion introduces different fractions, more related to intergenerational rifts that introduce new relationships between humanity and the world (heaven and earth than regional differences that limit cultural education.

Religion

Language is also deeply tied to religion as a form of acquired knowledge through communication and the constant resignification of particular symbols, values, and philosophies. I expand on the role of religion as a form of knowledge but also an avenue for broadening Vietnamese knowledge systems beyond its historic boundaries in this section. I start by first discussing Kim's experience as a religious educator, then supplementing her sentiments with the general engagement of my other interviewees with religion to conceptualize the role of religion and religious philosophies in Vietnamese life. I claim that religion gives meaning to food and linguistic practices to solidify Vietnamese values and collective identity. Second, I argue that it establishes a space for action and mobilization within the community— it is an established space for sharing information based on particular goals, obligations, and philosophies grounding their relationship with the world. Third, I assert that religion is a form of universalizable knowledge that also allows the Vietnamese community to enter the global world and expand their horizons for possible visions of the future and how they fit in it. Finally, I maintain that there persist limitations to incorporating religious embodied practices in daily life, such that some elements of religiosity have been given up in the process of integration and renewed identity formation.

Religion as knowledge structures

Before I begin my analyses of the various religious practices in Vietnam and their significance for the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States, I want to provide background information regarding the diversity of religious practice in the community. In Vietnam, the majority of people do not follow any of the mainstream organized religions such as Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, or Islam. Rather, the majority practice some form of folk religion based in venerating ancestors and elders and maintaining close ties between the human and spirit worlds.

Of the globalized religions, the two most commonly practiced in the Vietnamese community are Buddhism and Roman Catholicism. Buddhist principles (alongside Confucianism and some folk practices) were adopted from Chinese and other Asian influences. Roman Catholicism was brought to Vietnam through French missionaries before and during the time of French settler colonial occupation in Vietnam.

Today, folk religions are most practiced in Vietnam (~80% of the population), followed by Roman Catholicism (~8%) and Buddhism (~3%). On an international level, the religious demographics of the Vietnamese diaspora are similar, especially in the United States where the presence of the Vietnamese Catholic community is strong. Of my interviewees, Kim practices Roman Catholicism, Tuyet practices Buddhism, and Brian and Noah informally practice a mix of Buddhism and folk practices passed down from the older generations. All my interviewees integrate some folk practices in their lives, regardless of their religious background, allowing them to bridge religious differences and preserve levels of connectedness for solidarity. I explain later how Catholicism as a colonial religion expands on existing Vietnamese values rather than replacing them, allowing Vietnamese Catholics to strengthen their Vietnamese habitus through religion and religious embodied practices.

Kim teaches Vietnamese and catechism at the Holy Spirit Church. Throughout our interview, she regularly refers to faith and religion as the basis for Vietnamese ways of living that allow for them to live independently of societal pressures and confusion.

“People who think they have independence and can do whatever/entitlement but in return they just become slaves to ordinary life, to money, to drugs, they don’t have freedom. It is only by following God do you find true freedom. He knows everything that is good for us, so truthfully, if you know catechism...it is for that reason that I want to teach catechism to children so they

understand that and maintain their faith. They have freedom and independence, but not their own will. Their will belongs to God. Nobody can abuse or own their will because it belongs to God.”

In the above excerpt, Kim explains how their faith in God allows them to find “true freedom,” orienting themselves toward desires beyond the existing social structure that subjects them to materialistic interests. Again, this is tied to Saba Mahmood’s redefinition of agency, which centers around subjected populations’ ability to act on their own desires under a hegemonic social structure that preserves particular dominant interests. In this case, serving God liberates Vietnamese folk from the chains of (excessive) capitalist consumption and materialism.

In the previous section on language, I introduced Kim’s sentiments regarding the passage of religious knowledge through language and family education. On top of retaining Jewish traditions through oral storytelling and passage, she explained that the Jewish community stands strong through the ways they ground the significance of religious practices and philosophies in their lives as well.

“Why Passover and why do their parents always talk about it? It is because it is always being passed down generation by generation until now, it has been so many years. I find that the family is really important. The faith/religion, whatever it is, but our Vietnamese culture really fears God and the supernatural/divine (heaven and earth). They are afraid of... doing bad deeds/punishment. They are afraid of retribution/justice. Vietnamese people have that.”

In her discussion of Jewish religiosity, Kim illustrated how religion gives people a basis for how to inhabit and respond to the world according to a set of values that projects their memberships. She expanded that Vietnamese people have similar grounding in their religion or faith, as folk religion is practiced regardless of other religious backgrounds, which informs their relationships with God, the supernatural, and holistic systems of karma and justice on earth. Kim

also emphasized the importance of that family education to preserve core Vietnamese values and pass them on, from both the Jewish example and from her experience with the church.

"It is because outside of their parents, nobody teaches them to love God. The parental love they're given is... their parent's sacrifice is how they can experience God's love... Otherwise, if God is invisible, how can they grow to know Him? It is only through their parents. Who teaches them to pray for the first time? Their parents... I tell them that they have to help their children at home... You are their first teachers for everything."

In Kim's reflections, she asserted that parents provide the next generations with their most influential example for living through embodied practices of prayer and sacrifice to realize the extent of the intimacies cultivated through religious faith. While family education also focuses on preserving language and food practices, religious education gives meaning and intentionality to Vietnamese people's relationships to their food and language by informing their relationship with the world at large. Religion is a basis for connectedness between community members who may otherwise live different lives. Kim specifically explained how religion gives her a basis for establishing norms within her family (and later on in the larger community through church organizations) and counteracting the tides of change that have otherwise displaced generational unity and understanding. She compared her experience with faith and parental care with her American peers in the following ways:

"So that's how Vietnamese people are. Americans aren't. The coworkers I've had, once their children turn 18, they kick them out of the house because they don't want responsibility and secondly because... like this American woman I knew, she has a 12 year old who tried to commit suicide and she had to take a class to learn how to support her child who tried to commit suicide. When her child was 18, she kicked them out immediately. But Vietnamese people and their

culture are different. I am 62 years old and before my mother, I am always a child. When she sees me, she will ask ‘Have you eaten? Have you showered? Are you working?’ [laughs]”

In the above excerpt, Kim illustrated the different frameworks for care: Vietnamese parent-child relationships persist past adulthood and center on social obligation, compared to American emphases on the transition to adulthood through independence. Buddhist and Confucian philosophies are so central to contemporary Vietnamese culture that it is practiced by all its members, regardless of religious background. Multigenerational households are the norm in Vietnamese culture, and the concept of filial piety founds their long-term obligations to one another to ensure their collective survival (in material life and in the passage of knowledge). In turn, religion provides a basis of care and interconnectedness between parents and children in Vietnamese culture that spans a lifetime whereas in American culture, their mutuality is more strictly bound to time and a moment where reciprocal relationships “end”. Moreover, Kim’s example illustrates how Vietnamese Catholicism emphasizes their distinct values from American frameworks (not practiced by American Catholics). Kim points out how this demonstrates the advantage that Vietnamese culture provides for its members while living in the United States. She elaborates on this sentiment by referring to anecdotes about her friends and how they found success through family networks.

“I have a friend who moved to the States and lived together [with their family] and share money together and slowly built up so they all have a house of their own. And they help each other and were able to pay off all their homes because they work together. I also have a friend, he is very skilled. When all his siblings found careers, they gave up \$5000, so with 7 siblings for example, they put up \$35000 in a bank and add a little to make \$50000. Whoever needs to borrow it, then they can take it to make profit then pay it back and then the next can borrow it and then everyone can help each other build upwards.”

In both cases, their strong sense of kinship and social obligation supports collective survival and mobility. She explains how this enables them to be more socially mobile than their American peers as family members develop and grow from each other, whereas within American society the expectation of reciprocity is not as strong within family institutions, needless to say larger societal structures. Therefore, Kim focuses her energies first in intimate family spaces to ensure that social obligations are retained within family networks.

Tuyet and Noah's engagement with Buddhism and other influential religions explains how much of their present-day ideological bases, including the consumption of food, are rooted in religion and their religious education at home. Tuyet's mother is Buddhist and is part of the temple. Throughout her life, her mother taught her many Buddhist traditions that tied religion with food and other cultural practices. New Year was celebrated by making offerings and cooking food that "they always make for the holidays", like different kinds of soup and salads, also used for giỗ, or the anniversary of someone's passing. One particular practice that she described was lê ông táo lên trời.

"...when I was little... when I was single and lived with my mom, my mom used to do lê ông táo lên trời...lê ông táo lên trời is praying to the kitchen saint or I'm not sure what they call it because they believe that there is a spirit that always sees your wellbeing at home...and then he's supposed to go up and report how well you have lived for the year, whatever (laughs). So my mom used to do that. And then they also do believe in...what do you call it? I know that they used to, when I was little, they would go buy fish or birds or pigeons and they set them free like around New Year."

In her recollections, Tuyet explained how this tradition respects relationships with spirits and how they watch over them every year. Similar to the celebration of giỗ, there are rituals and processions that foster mutual connections between life on earth and the spirit world or afterlife:

while memorialization of ancestors ensure them good health in the afterlife, spirits watch over life on earth to ensure their wellness.

She also learned more from her friend, who chose to become a Buddhist nun after her husband and son passed away from cancer. Through her friend's experience, she witnessed the significance of devotion to Buddhism for the human experience and learned alongside her. Religion was already a part of everyday life and practice, but it became especially relevant when dealing with changes that support deeper engagements with the world. Her friend decided to fully commit to Buddhism by becoming a nun because it was the only strong devotion she had left in the world aside from her now departed family.

Religion as fractioning

At the same time, balancing religion in one's life against other interests is not always straightforward. Similar to limitations with language learning, Tuyet admits to having limited knowledge of the philosophical bases of Buddhism; primarily, she understands the cultural importance in relation to maintaining social relationships (particularly with ancestors).

"...in general I know that we have lẽ vu lang. Lẽ vu lang is the day that you remember your parents and also that's the day that you go visit the graves to commemorate your ancestry, right, and then they have the wearing the rose on lẽ vu lang. I think that tradition is coming from Japan, but today we practice on that lẽ in memory of our parents. So you wear the rose, you give the rose to your mom. So basically, all the moms wear the rose and if your mom is still alive then you wear a red rose. But if your mom has passed away, then you wear a white rose."

Despite knowing the details of the practices she learned from her mother, Tuyet explained they are traditions she observes but does not always practice herself. This shows that receiving family education alone does not always substantiate personal long-term practice and

incorporation of religion in one's life. Rather, it takes a more intentional coupling of religious practice with everyday life and obligations. For instance, even though Tuyet has interest in understanding Buddhism better later on in her life, it is not something she can easily expect of her children whose father practices a different faith.

"I don't make my kids go because they, so their father is Catholic, so I'm not sure what they wanted to be and I let them decide... So far just family gatherings, I do ask them like occasionally I still ask them to go because my sister lives in Saratoga, so occasionally when my... whatever occasion comes up like my mom always, she still does the New Year's Eve dinner where she does all the offering to the ancestry and then she'll make us all gather and eat so yes, they still have to do that. That's not an option."

In order to respect everyone's individual beliefs, Tuyet has to make compromises with her ex-husband and children. She expects them to engage in the practices out of respect for their grandmother and maintaining those intergenerational relationships above anything else. Again, this reflects the balance between pushing religious and cultural traditions on the next generation and accommodating her family's needs to cultivate a strong and united Vietnamese community. Personally, Tuyet intends to pursue future Buddhist education at her own pace.

"I just find that I like to go the temple sometimes. I know that my friends do, they do traditional— oh, yeah. Like I would, you know when someone passes away, you have the 49 days lễ. Lễ 49 ngày, so you do it every week, you do it once a week for 7 weeks. So those I participate. I go usually with close friends. I know that my mom she part of the temple so she in a group... whenever the temple go to wherever who do it for other people, then she would come and do their prayer at the temple, but for me, I do it for my close friends if their parents passed away then if they happen to be in San Jose at the mass, then I would go. I would do that for them, so I still do that... But I want to learn more about being a Buddhist because growing up I didn't really.

I kind of like follow certain traditions and certain practice at home, but I don't really know it all and I don't really fully understand."

There are elements of Buddhist practice that Tuyet understands and participates in alongside her friends and community. This enables her to support her community's spiritual well-being while developing her own: she builds off of her mother's teachings in order to supplement her future practice with friends and community members. In these engagements, she is able to cultivate her own practice away from her mother, as well as stronger relationships with her community members through religious involvement with each other and experiences of loss. At the same time, she realizes that there are practical considerations she must make to grow her Buddhist faith moving forward.

"I would like to when I retire (laughs). Then I have more time for myself. But for the little practice that I do, I still keep them. I do think that's important and I go to the temple whenever I feel like I need to. I know that they have weekly prayers but it's just too much socializing and drama that I don't want to do it. I usually go see the head monk when let's say I need to ask for... what do you call it? Like the prayer peace for the passing person? If I need request, firstly I go see the head monk. And I go to the temple when I feel like I need to go. I don't go on a regular basis because I just avoid people altogether (laughs). But I still believe in that, I still have my own faith, so I do it on my own time."

Firstly, Tuyet acknowledges the difficulty of balancing religious practice in her life alongside her work obligations. For the average worker in the United States, religious obligations are not accounted for in the work day; rather, religious considerations are made on an individual basis. For that reason, finding time in her everyday life to commit to learning more about Buddhism feels much more possible after she has retired and no longer has to care intensely about work or for her children anymore. This also involves boundary setting when she finds that

going to the temple forces her to interact with too many people rather than bring her comfort. Ultimately, she has to balance many interests to ensure that her practice of Buddhism aligns with her understanding of the faith in her life—there is no one-size-fits-all incorporation, but there is universal interest to cultivate faith and knowledge within the community. In the conclusion of my discussion of religion, I explore how Noah (24) integrates Buddhist philosophies to guide his life trajectory and engagements with other forms of thought.

Even Kim realizes that there are limitations to uniform religious practice and instead calls for negotiation between the churchgoers and priests to best align people's faith with their personal situations. Though the Church is based in hierarchy with the Pope as the supreme leader and producer of knowledge followed by bishops, priests, and the like who translate teachings of God to the people, the practical application of lessons vary based on the lived experiences of the church community and involve intentional processes of respect and reciprocity between members of the church. As Kim put it, "...our religion is strong because there is authority that is clear and uncontested. Even when we have our disputes and disagreements, *the right thing is prescribed from above*" (emphasis added).

Through conversation, the "right thing" can practically vary to accommodate the various contexts that churchgoers come from, but it works toward the same objective: cultivating the strongest relationship with God and living a saintly life according to His principles. Therefore, hierarchy in the Church does not enforce compliance but is a space for collaboration and meaningful negotiation toward a collective project of incorporating religion in their everyday lives and learning how to receive spiritual guidance from God throughout the human experience. Kim supplemented her discussion by acknowledging that religious leaders themselves are not

infallible or the sole reference point for understanding the world and human purpose; rather, a large part of their job is to be a guidepost for recovering from human limitations.

“You need to give them tools to get back up, if you just tell them... for priests they have many strengths that allow them to get back up but even many priests will falter. But it is because... it is because they are high up that they believe they’re invulnerable but even Saint Paul taught us that once you feel high and mighty you are about to falter. It is important to hold onto God like a child.”

Kim suggests that the way to do this is by considering the various non-human-centric tools that the Church provides for spiritual healing and guidance against the struggles of everyday life. She recalls a time when she and her community members had to negotiate with a priest who was neglecting the everyday concerns of the community and failing to provide contextualized care for people in need. She explains the vulnerability of priests to emotional struggles, some related to universal irritability in warmer, less comfortable climates and others related to aligning with the interests of the community. In response to community concerns, Kim suggested many sources of spiritual guidance from Mother Mary and other dominant figures of the Catholic Church that can provide healing that she wanted the priest to minister to in the future for those in need. Altogether, Kim explained how the emphasis on negotiation within the Church’s hierarchical structure actually supports greater faith in its legitimacy. Through negotiation, both churchgoers and religious leaders grow in their understanding of God’s will, their true purpose, and how to enact it in their everyday practice.

Kim also commented on the resemblance between hierarchy in the church and within the family: “You respect your parents’ authority, you don’t simply disagree and disrespect them and cause chaos. There is hierarchy, so the Vietnamese community has that. And that requires having a good leader. If we have a good leader, then our community is really strong”. As previously

discussed, family structures create social obligation in ways that cultivate connectedness and reciprocity between family members. Particularly, having a respected head of the household ensures that the core principles of the family and larger community are maintained and incorporated in family life even while conflicts arise and compromises must be made. Similarly, religion centers solidarity and love as strength for the Vietnamese community to hold onto while rebuilding their lives in new contexts. In these ways, religious organizations are an expansion of household contexts through which reciprocity is utilized to support community connectedness against the vices of the material(istic) world.

This shared social obligation further explains how religion establishes simultaneity between people within the community; previously, I suggested that language facilitates the construction of “imagined communities” through simultaneity. Religion engages with this more deeply by centering philosophies that substantiate “Vietnamese” ways of living and connectedness. As described by Kim, Vietnamese people are God-fearing and pay close attention to concepts of karma, retribution, and justice as effects of the balance between heaven and earth. As a result, they possess high levels of social responsibility for others and support members of their household as well as the larger collective. Moreover, Kim asserts that Vietnamese people, regardless of religious background, describe themselves as superstitious to qualify their meticulousness and careful attention to the way they engage with the world and other people relative to other social groups.

Ultimately, religion provides a common foundation for negotiation to create belonging and solidarity, rather than an assimilating imposition of values and characteristics that all members must uphold and embody in their lives. It even presents useful frameworks for everyday decision making. Later when discussing food, Tuyet explained the practices of eating

warm foods like phở when it is cold out, while eating cool foods like bánh cuốn when it is warm out. The logical basis of these practices are related both to labor practices as well as Vietnamese philosophical beliefs about the need to preserve equilibrium in nature. In particular, Vietnamese food consumption and balances within the diet is highly informed by hot-cold theories, yin and yang theories, and the Five Elements theory. These theories generally hold that there is an internal balance to be maintained within the body. For example, after birth, the woman's body is considered cold; therefore, women are often given warm soups after childbirth to balance out the "cold" internal processes of birth and cleanse the body. These logics are extrapolated in the larger world in Vietnamese conceptions of relationships between heaven and earth and the need to respect the natural balance of the world. Decisions made otherwise contribute to disorder and chaos where there are tangible consequences for the individual and community at large. Extending the example of childbirth, it is understood that eating cold foods can result in adverse health outcomes that can extend the sickness of childbirth or even endanger the lives of women during the postpartum period.

When making housing decisions, the orientation of the house is taken into account in Vietnamese philosophies as well. It is believed that when the door and pathways to the door are positioned in particular ways, evil spirits may be invited into the household that bring misfortune to the family. Thereafter, measures have to be taken to either cleanse the home (e.g. through Catholic housewarming rituals) or consider alternative constructions of homes. Altogether, these practicalities continue to explain the Vietnamese community's larger humility based on respect for the order of the world and their minuteness in the midst of everything. Moreover, it explains the strong emphasis on religiosity/piety to bring purpose and intentionality to relationships with the world (on earth, in heaven, and connected spirit worlds).

Religion as creating lifeworlds

While granting the constituency a basis for understanding their relationships with the world, religion is also a source of hope and a guiding framework that differentiates Vietnamese folk from their secular American, or Americanized, counterparts. Within Noah's mixed-race family, there are different philosophies that guide his relatives' aspirations for themselves and their children. His family members strike a balance between Westernized principles and more "Asian" philosophies grounding expectations to excel in formal institutions. As Noah explained:

"...a lot of Asian cultures they have Confucianism as a sort of big sort of like, philosophical bedrock. So that was true for both, like oh, respect your parents, value family, food. I think there might have been a couple differences that... with Vietnamese culture, at least with my aunts and uncles on that side, they have a more... I've noticed that they have a more Western attitude towards things. I don't know where that [came from]. I don't know if that... yeah, like basically in terms of parenting styles, they're a lot more Western and being like 'Oh, yeah you can kinda do whatever you want'...so it's kind of interesting having this kind of intersection. Sometimes I behaved more like a traditional Asian American, sometimes I behaved more like... it's just part of being an Asian American in general. Sometimes I'm very Asian, sometimes I'm very Western. I feel like a lot of Asian Americans are similar."

Noah explained how differences in parenting in his family portray the polarization between "Western" and Vietnamese cultures, where Western cultures center freedom and liberalism and Vietnamese cultures focus more on family hierarchies and humility. Noah expanded his discussion to reflect the different priorities between people depending on their personal contexts and how that informs their incorporation of religious philosophies thereafter.

Interestingly, Noah's Vietnamese side seems to possess more "Western" values. This shows that there is not a neat separation between "Western" and traditional "Asian" values;

rather, these nuances reveal the greater aggregation of individual desires that inform parenting philosophies. I argue that different forms of survival are imagined depending on the individual's personal conceptions of "freedom" or liberation. The notion of passing relies more on Western conceptions of membership that rest on the politics of invitation—it is a one-sided reciprocity where bridging is done between American and non-American populations by the discretion of the American population (Rytter 2019; Nannestad, Svendsen, and Svendsen 2008). It is a membership based solely on the American gaze. Alternatively, Noah previously expressed his mother's philosophy of "being bold" and making sacrifices to survive in a new world. With reference to previous discussions of large-scale Vietnamese prioritizations of survival as cultural preservation, kinship, and strong Vietnamese solidarity, Noah may be encouraged to have more freedom as an individual to embrace his identities and inhabit space as he wishes. In turn, there is a greater social connection (rather than social compulsion) to his Vietnamese identity, as well as encouragement to occupy more "Western" spaces of privilege to make his Vietnameseeness visible.

Finally, Noah's ability to access these various philosophies as an Asian-American suggests how, even through efforts to pass, Asian-Americans will always occupy a unique liminal space that, on the outset, can be confusingly disadvantageous. At the same time, it gives Vietnamese-Americans (and many other marginalized groups) a heightened awareness of the societal structure and how they can utilize their diverse (religious) knowledges to traverse and challenge broken (moral, political, socioeconomic) systems.

Kim reflects on the vices that plague both American and Vietnamese society that faith and religion help her overcome. She then elaborates that religiosity allows her to transcend the material temptations of present-day capitalist society. First, she asserts that a large problem the

Vietnamese community currently faces is their competitiveness and how divisive it has become for members who pursue personal gain over supporting one another. This results from the desire in Vietnamese communities to cultivate self-esteem as a way to establish themselves as respectable equals in new American contexts that classified them as “out of place”, disorderly, and a threat to national cohesion.

In many cases, esteem is deeply tied to the success of their networks (for many Vietnamese people, these are their own relatives and loved ones), in ways that can be pressuring and stressful. For example, Kim recalls some Vietnamese women who have pressured their husbands to seek promotions or better positions to compete against other men in their respective jobs. They would threaten their husbands with divorce if they failed to prevail above their counterparts and bring pride to the family. In turn, this would often bring stress to their marriage while not improving their relationships with each other (between husband and wife and her friends whose husbands hold similar positions). Moreover, Kim considers the many temptations that people fall prey to that leave them in cycles of debt and impoverishment.

“But people, we have many temptations like alcohol, drugs, gambling, sexual relationships... in the nail industry it’s easy to get caught up in those things with money. It is easy to make money.”

Second, Kim reflects on the ties between materialism and greed and how it has blurred many Vietnamese people’s visions for their future and how they wish to establish themselves anew. She told me how at her workplace, her boss often confides in her to understand the dissatisfaction that the other nail technicians feel with their work. She told her boss that it was less a reflection of her accommodations but the “timelines” (what I consider their social backgrounds) of her coworkers that contextualize their frustration—with the decline of the economy and nail businesses broadly, they become more preoccupied with competing for wages

such that injustice is more strongly felt. Kim shared the following example to portray her coworkers' disillusionment with their wages:

"If I get 5 clients and the other also has 5 clients but the other 5 people chose an expensive set like \$50-60 and I only do the average \$30 always, the money will be unequal, but the clients are even. And greedy people will see this and think it is unfair, like 'Why is it that the other person gets more money than me?' thinking that the boss has favorites, but that is not the case."

In this example, Kim shares her view on how greed disorients people's priorities; rather than focusing on how to use money to supplement their lives, money becomes the locus by which people compare themselves to each other. In turn, they disrupt their relationships with others in pursuit of money and other resources (social, cultural, political). In the above case, the coworkers lose their passion for the work itself and their trust in their boss due to their focus on monetary gain, which does not well-represent or substantiate the value of either their work or their interpersonal relationships. Moreover, she claims that the prominence of gambling represents a dissatisfaction of the Vietnamese community with avenues for joy and their perceived loss of agency in the United States.

"Mostly they go in there [casinos] because when they win they feel happy and then they keep going. A lot of Vietnamese people go to casinos. Here, there are not many places for entertainment. In Vietnam, they had a lot of things, even going to concerts, they go to Vietnamese concerts so they can understand. English concerts, they cannot understand. They don't understand so they don't go. And most of the time, there are a lot of people, like my younger brother, nobody gambles. He just goes home and spends time with his wife and kids. But then he does stocks, which is also gambling. He works at his office and then invests in stocks, which is just a kind of gambling, because there's nothing else to do to entertain themselves."

Kim grounds her analyses by demonstrating how historically, greed has been the basis of destruction and long-term loss. She recalls how greed destroyed both solidarity within the Vietnamese community (and therefore the loss of the Vietnam War and persistent antagonisms between South Vietnamese and North, communist Vietnamese folk) and in biblical relationships between Jesus and his disciples.

“...historically, people thought that the union of the North and South in Vietnam would strengthen the country. My dad felt the same...And for that reason, our sense of solidarity is very important. However if our feelings of greed are included, then everything falls apart. Like the people who wanted money and killed our president. Or the people today who would judge our country in the past. It is much worse today...What keeps a country together is solidarity, and what destroys it is division. Greed divides people like...even in Jesus’s story. If he [Judas] wasn’t bribed with money, he would not have betrayed Jesus. It is only because of greed that people fall apart.”

For Kim, religion liberated her from these societal plagues through her faith in God as something that transcends material obsessions and relationships with the world. She is much more steadfast when it comes to earning wages and focuses on being grateful for the stability it grants her: money provides her with essentials to live, but does not define how she lives. Thereafter, religion provides her with a different habitus, or stylization of life, that centers her self-esteem on the nourishment of her faith and her relationships with (rather than above) others. She specifically orients her Vietnamese identity around the Catholic habitus as opposed to the secular habitus when discussing how religiosity granted her with strength to deal with the everyday temptations of a money-driven society.

“I am thankful that with God I didn’t fall into any of those temptations. Due to God, I spend the most time in church and nowhere else. I am grateful to God for that reason. I did not fall. After my divorce, I struggled a lot, but I did not fail. I held onto my faith. Every day, I prayed a lot (the

rosary 4 times). I kept holding onto my faith and for that reason, my spiritual life has only blossomed. And due to my spiritual life, I did not fail and I am grateful to God for that reason.”

In particular, it taught her how to approach difficult and emotionally exhausting situations with patience and grace. When she first arrived in the United States and was hospitalized, she prayed to God to help her. Similarly, she prayed to God when she was dealing with homelessness and considered her salvation from the debt a work of God: He led her to the Vietnamese insurance staff who gave her guidance on lowering her mortgage. Even more so, her faith in God and His mercy has helped her reorient her own priorities when dealing with violence in her community. Initially, when she found out about sexual abuse cases occurring at the Holy Spirit Catholic Church, she was ready to abandon her post as leader of the Vietnamese Education Board out of anger and disappointment with her community. However, her faith instilled her with greater patience for her community and their shortcomings, and she re-established commitment to fostering more safe spaces within the church for the community. This is another form of making accommodations for solidarity—through her faith, she is committed to conflict resolution and adaptation instead of separating herself from her community entirely.

Religious practice also grants Kim with values and ways to communicate her values beyond linguistic boundaries: instead of verbal expression, she practices her faith to embody her Vietnamese identity, its core values, and train the next generation to adopt similar lifestyles. Kim explains how she presents the Vietnamese people as resourceful, adaptable, diligent, and respectable individuals through the ways she carries herself in the workplace between both her Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese coworkers. Whenever people hand her things, she receives and returns them with both her hands raised to show respect for them. She extends these efforts by always looking out for her coworkers and preparing their stations for them when they are preoccupied. In response to her acts of service, many of her coworkers express gratitude for her

care. Interestingly, these actions have served as an example for her coworkers to follow suit in supporting one another and creating a more collaborative work environment. She provided the following example of her resourcefulness and adaptability in the workplace:

“In the salon, there was a lady who didn’t want to keep the trash at her desk while cleaning up and kept moving it, and the eating area is very small and we need space. And the others would say, ‘we’re using this space to eat!’ and push it back to her. And I would see them arguing with one another and I took the trash near the sink where we clean our hands and said leaving it here is convenient, that way we can clean our equipment and everything...the others found relief and so we are very resourceful because we come from a place of poverty, so we are very adaptable.”

Throughout her recollection of this experience, Kim added that her acts reflect the general resourcefulness of Vietnamese people due to their history and need to be adaptable to survive long periods of poverty. She reiterates that Vietnamese people are trained to be flexible so that “everything can be okay”. Otherwise, as her manager initially assumed, mistakes can mean the loss thereafter of all progress with little to no prospect of recovery.

“We know how to be flexible so everything is okay for us. It is just like when my boss was drawing a flower and accidentally touched it and lost a large piece of it and was now worried like ‘What do we do? Do we wash the whole thing off?’ And I was like it is okay, a writing utensil has a sharp point, drawing flowers with it turns out very nice...I told her to draw it with a writing utensil and it turned out beautiful and she commented, ‘Wow, why are you so smart?’ and I replied, ‘This isn’t intelligence, this is quick-wittedness/resourcefulness.’”

Kim contrasted her resourcefulness with her manager’s initial dismay and rejected qualifying her practices as “intelligence”: she developed her skills from past experiences with impoverishment and relied on religious faith and optimism to overcome adversity. Kim later explained that her boss also relies on her to determine the atmosphere of the workplace as her

most reliable Vietnamese-speaking nail technician. I claim, however, that this reliance is not only because she speaks Vietnamese, but that a sense of trust was cultivated through the ways she has communicated her respectability and piety through proactive acts of care for others.

The two aforementioned anecdotes show how her embodied practices, informed by her religiosity *and* life experiences, differentiate her from her boss and coworkers to strengthen her Vietnamese identity. In fact, it demonstrates the naturalization and embeddedness of Vietnamese values within their bodies and their comportment that construct the materialization of Vietnamese identity in social spaces. This subtlety allows for Vietnamese refugees to teach their descendants values and traditions that are not easily replicated by those outside of the community. The cultural and social training primarily is done by and for those who possess some level of domain knowledge of Vietnamese culture, values, and practice to continue it.

Noah echoes this sentiment regarding Buddhism and how it has been incorporated in his life: repeated engagement to Buddhist rituals and beliefs built an interest in Buddhism that he gradually adapted into his life and utilized to expand his thinking about the world at large.

“...my mom is Buddhist, so we would do these Buddhist worship rituals every week and I would engage in that and doing that every week kind of gave me interest in Buddhism growing up...I feel like my interest in Buddhism has since blossomed into an interest in various kinds of religions, so it’s like, again, a lot of the interests I used to have, they have now broadened and now I am just interested in a variety of things now. But I feel like Buddhism still does play an essential role in my identity.”

Noah noted how Buddhism played an essential role in his identity by introducing him to religion, its philosophies and practices, and avenues to broaden his engagement with various forms of thought. In these ways, religion unites the generations and encourages them to think more deeply about the world and how they situate themselves beyond secular, national visions of

social order and obligation to one another. In fact, coming from other backgrounds (and knowledge systems) allows the Vietnamese community (as well as many other migrant groups) to consider alternative conceptions of membership and social collaboration beyond nation-state boundaries. Noah's experience with various global religions give him a more expansive moral philosophy to work with. He recalls how some allegiances to religion are rigid in ways that people can only imagine aligning themselves with one philosophy or none at all.

"I went to a Christian school growing up, but my mom was Buddhist, and then also my... I got really into science and stuff so I have all these different views of religion and so that's honestly been a major factor of my personality that I have not seen that much in other people. Usually it's like I have one religion and I will stick to it. Or they're like I don't really believe in religion, I'm atheist. For me... I'm kind of glad to have that backing of a bunch of religions because I think that a lot of them have a shared moral understanding and that has been really influential into me becoming the person I am in ways that are different from the people I went to highschool with."

For Noah, the engagement with multiple philosophies allows him to view religion and faith as a whole for its impetus to provide a moral framework for humanity, which is often very similar across faiths and cultures given some baseline human struggles and obligations to one another. He even considers science as an orientation around religion, which often rejects the utility of religion as a reliable basis for action. Whereas Western secular accounts flatten reality for the convenience of scientific objectivity according to Enlightenment logics, Noah is not tied to rigid religious identities or categories but expands on them by contesting taken-for-granted assumptions about religiosity, faith, and practices and their limitations for conceiving more holistic and nuanced accounts of human existence and morality.

By extension, the Vietnamese community's access to and incorporation of various knowledges speaks to the broader perspective they have on the world that guide their

engagement in more transnational relationships and exchanges. While exploring and re-employing Western, Vietnamese, religious, and secular values, they are able to conceive projections of identity and belonging through spatial (as relational) conceptions rather than the spectrum of geographic, national memberships. The expansion and appreciation of diverse knowledges (and therefore memberships) reflects Butler's rejection of taken-for-granted concepts that reveal the illusion of their rigid essentiality and redefine them in new contexts. I argue that Vietnamese social activities through religious organizations also expand on and ultimately contest rigid Western national logics.

Religion as spaces for action

Religious organizations are also spaces for the community to realize their hopes and aspirations through collective organization and action. As I mentioned previously, the Holy Spirit Catholic Church has a lot of programming that is communicated to the community for everyone to engage in when they can. Cultural events include the Tết festivals and religious holidays whereas fundraising events include collecting donations to improve the church or send money back to church organizations back in Vietnam to support those in need (one being donations to disabled children and elderly in Vietnam). Food service programs are provided by the volunteer work of women involved with the church who want to collect money to serve the church. Altogether, these activities establish community through mutuality and reciprocity between churchgoers, regardless of their personal engagement with the church.

Religious organizations are also sites for strengthening ties back to Vietnam through the investment of resources through church fundraising, mobilization, and international connections. A large portion of Vietnamese religious activity outside of attending mass and religious education is sending remittances in the form of financial and medical service back to Vietnam.

Kim explains how she often hosts fundraising events to raise money for those in need in Vietnam. She goes out of her way regularly to ensure that she makes her rounds of collections and properly advertises the fundraisers during and outside of weekly mass. Tuyet, despite being Buddhist, also supports some Catholic organizations that provide medical aid for the community there, allowing her to connect to Vietnam.

Through these transnational practices and establishments of connectedness, they envision more expansive and inclusive citizenships, compared to Anderson's proposal of shared religion as grounds for exclusive national memberships. Through remittances, Vietnamese community members formally invest in Vietnam's infrastructure after war and maintain responsibility for the country's future even as they rebuild their lives anew in the United States. Overall, rather than being historically geographically bound, religion provides a more universal(ized) basis for connection that grants the Vietnamese community more opportunities to consolidate a complex collective identity beyond localized concepts like "nationhood". Counteracting localizing forces to flatten Vietnamese identity, actually flatten American identity by turning it into their "Other" counterpart.

In turn, religiosity highlights many divergences in philosophies for human existence. At the same time, religious spaces can be unifying spaces (physically, philosophically, spiritually) that bind people together according to shared interests and imaginations of what structures of community care and belonging should be between people. These imaginations are universally inclusive (rather than regionally) given efforts to capture the core human experience and learn how to navigate humanity (or human identity) as flexible and diverse. Despite the differences in origin and philosophy between Buddhism and Catholicism, they share a common interest in theorizing relationships between mankind, the earth, and the supernatural.

Ultimately, as I have shown, both language and religion contribute to the formulation of a Vietnamese habitus visibilized through occupation and refashioning of public and private spaces. While Vietnamese language marks the tangible presence of the Vietnamese community in American society and translates Vietnamese culture and tradition through food and music, religiosity grants ideological bases and communal spaces and practices that facilitate embodying the value systems of the Vietnamese community. Specifically, despite the different ways that Vietnamese generations will encounter and engage with religiosity, they share a common interest to imbue their everyday practices with meaning and intentionality. Throughout her various acts of service, Kim embodies and bridges Vietnamese values with religious stylizations of life: her humility and steadfastness is guided by religious emphasis on service and care for others, rather than more individualistic perspectives of space and occupying space.

Finally, I reiterate the significance of space: religious spaces are a primary space of socialization, through which much of the social and cultural training is done between members of the community. Bulletin boards and signage in religious spaces repeatedly highlight core Vietnamese religious values while also serving as a guide for action within the community. Moreover, they are transnational spaces for action through the exchange of goods and information across borders that build on and strengthen feelings of collective responsibility and solidarity. Altogether, these imaginations orient the Vietnamese habitus as something distinct from the Western, English-speaking, secular habitus that grant them different forms of cultural capital (or knowledge) that influence Vietnamese collective identity formation. In specific, the Vietnamese habitus becomes closely guided by religiosity, or superstition, and a greater respect for the world and our collective responsibility for each other within the world.

Still, while accommodations are made to bridge various forms of thought (secular and religious) and emphasize important Vietnamese values, there remain limitations to incorporating religious practices in daily life due to the demands of the workplace, home, and various other contexts. Rather, after entering new American contexts, some practices have become more or less portable, requiring changes in the way that religious practices are done and integrated in everyday life (sometimes giving them up entirely).

In the following chapter, I explore how many next generation Vietnamese-Americans are able to reconcile with these practical gaps through embodied practices of cooking and sharing Vietnamese dishes with their families. I center on commensality to argue that food and its traditions offer alternative forms of communication that produce knowledge about Vietnamese culture and identity that are otherwise exclusive through religious and linguistic models of teaching. Ultimately, I demonstrate that food, compared to language and religion, offers pathways for cultivating organic solidarities in the Vietnamese diasporic community, through which people are joined by their differences rather than divided and distanced.

Chapter 3

Clearing the Table, Sharing a Piece of the Vietnamese Taste

Vietnamese autobiographical literature and memoirs often incorporate food as a form of storytelling and cultural preservation (Gusain and Jha 2022). Furthermore, food is a translation of history and mobile identities, especially for displaced, border-crossing persons. When I studied abroad in Europe, I learned about Greek-Turkish relations; a large part of their everyday enactments of identity and culture stemmed from the celebration of their food and the preservation of recipes throughout periods of migration. Food was a basis for contention over cultural ownership and hegemony between the two countries but was also a way to signify their knowledge of the “familiar”, or what is distinct to their identity from others in diverse societies (Abbots 2016). Similarly, for Vietnamese refugees, food is a connection to “home” and a community activity between members of the collective that establishes in/outgroup memberships.

Maurice Bloch assesses the role of commensality, or the act of eating together, as “one of the most powerful operators of social processes,” which I consider the levels of intimacy between people preparing and eating food together (Bloch 1999, 133). I similarly assess the symbolisms of food, its preparation, and sharing at the table across various contexts and organize this chapter around similar themes regarding commensality and hierarchies of relationality for the Vietnamese community. Bloch also establishes various forms of solidarity, organic and mechanical (as egalitarian), that I also review in my establishment of hierarchies of closeness, or relationality, between participating members in the act of sharing food. Embedded within my

analyses are continuing considerations of space and temporality as contexts that delineate avenues for Vietnamese identity performance and redefinition in relationship with others.

In the previous chapter, I described how there are persistent fractions within the Vietnamese migrant community due to language barriers and religious differences, primarily based on intergenerational divisions that require negotiation and compromise. Both Bloch and Abbots consider how commensality across time and space allow distanced next generation members to re-establish themselves as members of the “commensal household” (Bloch 1999, 140) *and* creatively negotiate relationships with their own communities and the host society. In the latter half of this chapter, I explore how food is employed by next generation Vietnamese-Americans alongside other Vietnamese cultural traditions or goods to create exclusive spaces for cultivating and refashioning collective Vietnamese identity across different temporal and spatial contexts. I specifically investigate how the Vietnamese collective navigates distance between generations and the broader American society at large through the lens of “households” and creating households as celebratory and safe spaces for the community (Bloch 1999, 141-142). Abbots particularly notes the significant role of food as grounding migrant identities, or projecting their habitus and taste, where migration places their “sense of being and belonging into a state of flux” otherwise, attempting to bridge multiple identities and callings in their everyday lives (Abbots 2016, 116-117). I also see the persistent divisions and their implications for Vietnamese identity formation toward the idealized “cohesive” collective that remains an unrealized (im)possibility.

Food as a cultural object, as cultural knowledge

Vietnamese food is characterized in various ways by my interviewees. Some consider Vietnamese food to be healthier than their other options. Noah (24), for instance, explains how

Vietnamese food compares to other cuisines he has explored in the United States. Being half-Chinese and half-Vietnamese, he is able to compare the multiple benefits to eating Vietnamese food: he eats it knowing it will be good for his health, and it is equally culturally relevant for him.

“Food is a really big part of my Vietnamese identity because you know, like other Asian cuisines, big ones like Chinese food. You get Chinese food and it’s really good but it’s unhealthy, like the bun and the chow mein and stuff. It’s like barely any vegetables and you compare that with like the Vietnamese spring roll, pho, bánh mì, like so many veggies there and like, honestly I love to eat Vietnamese [food] because I know it’ll be really good for me and like culturally relevant and so I would be really interested in whenever my mom would bring home Vietnamese food I would eat that.”

Noah even expands on how Vietnamese food and eating culture has influenced his taste, or way of eating on a larger scale. Not only is Vietnamese food “healthy” because the plates are prepared with a balanced mix of ingredients and nutrients, but the food is served with a broader philosophy for health in mind. Noah’s mother emphasized early on in his life the importance of eating healthy, and he finds that he has ingrained her lessons in his everyday practice. He describes, “I also just like Vietnamese food, but I’ve taken that sort of mentality to eating in general so these days I don’t... I will occasionally have fried chicken or a burger or something, but I try to generally eat lots of fruits and veggies on top of whatever food I want to eat even as an adult”. Naturally, Noah balances out his own meals with extra ingredients to ensure that he has a well-rounded diet according to Vietnamese philosophies and implicitly remains connected to his mother and her teachings. Noah’s example outlines the contours of the Vietnamese habitus through expressions of taste through relationships with food and eating practices (e.g. diets).

Vietnamese food also ties people back to “home” and memories of home while being away. Brian (22) studied out of state at Stanford University, and his parents’ cooking, especially his mom’s, and the familiar smells would take him back “home”:

“My family— my mom cooks a lot. She will cook phở, she used to make canh chua, um, we eat bún đặc biệt or chả giò, or gỏi cuốn, you know, traditional stuff. She’ll cook— like she knows when I come home from school, she always cooks stuff like that because she knows that’s what I want, that’s what reminds me of home. So like the smells of like nước mắm, and all that stuff. My dad would make chè bắp.”

For Brian, the smells of nước mắm (fish sauce) symbolized home to him, and this aligns with the common use of fish sauce in countries like Vietnam and Thailand, whereas other parts of Asia more commonly used soy sauce and the like. Throughout my interviewees’ descriptions of food, they referred to specific dishes and seasonings that they associated with Vietnamese spaces, the community, and cumulatively, their identity. More so, this demonstrates how Vietnamese foods were referred to as specific knowledge they possess that grant them access to a larger cultural space. For example, when discussing the role of food in his upbringing, Noah cites his numerous trips to Little Saigon in California with his mom that allow him to “know all the really good Vietnamese spots to go to” and indulge in the Vietnamese food scene. In his recollection, he names some well-known Vietnamese community spaces, including Grand Century Mall, which I discussed in Chapter 1. Additionally, he mentions Lee's Sandwiches, a popular bánh mì chain that has since grown beyond the Vietnamese community with the increasing popularity of bánh mì in everyday American diets.

“...because we went to Little Saigon so often, I would kind of know all the really good Vietnamese spots to go to. I don’t know how familiar you are with the Bay, but there’s this mall

called Grand Century Mall which is like a one stop shop for a lot of like South Bay Vietnamese people and food. And uh, there was also like, you know, Lee's Sandwiches is also really big."

In some cases, Vietnamese food is entirely distanced from or mistranslated in American society. The types of ingredients essential to Vietnamese cuisine, the ways of preparing and consuming Vietnamese food, and implicit hierarchies for sharing establish signifiers to Vietnamese identity and membership in the collective. For those who are unfamiliar with Vietnamese food, many ingredients sold in grocery stores and how they are differently labeled have little bearing on their selection. In my local Asian grocery store at Mekong Plaza, Vietnamese noodles are universally labeled as "fresh rice noodles" or "rice vermicelli", with few additional details. However, within the Vietnamese community, it is clear that there are stark differences between each type of noodle sold in the markets and how they should be prepared.



Multiple packages of "fresh rice noodles" appear on the shelves in Mekong Supermarket.



A variety of “rice vermicelli” on the shelves in Mekong Supermarket, packaged with different images: various dishes made with these noodles and a Vietnamese woman in the fields.

For Vietnamese folk, there is a difference between the bánh phở, bánh hủ tiếu, bánh canh, and mì quảng that are all translated as “fresh rice noodles” in English. This translation is especially egregious considering it does not provide any specific details about the noodles such as shape, size, and texture, except that they are “fresh” (rather than frozen?) and made of rice instead of egg or other alternatives. The reality is that each of these “fresh rice noodles” can be used for over ten unique dishes, depending on how long the noodles are cooked, if they are cooked cold or in warm broth, and the specific distinctions between each noodle as considered above. The Vietnamese labeling on the noodle packages are much more detailed: their names reflect precisely what kind of dishes are commonly made and as well as information about the regional origins of each noodle. For instance, bún bò Huế are noodles specifically used for a popular beef (bò) noodle dish originating from the city of Hué in Vietnam, commonly cooked in

pork and beef broth. Similarly, the “rice vermicelli” translations overgeneralize noodles like bún tươi đặc sản thủ đức which are specifically fresh, *thick* specialty noodles originating from the Thủ Đức district that previously existed in northeastern Saigon (or present-day Hồ Chí Minh City).



Photo of a bún bò Hué bowl I had in Berlin.

Unfortunately, all of this information is obscured through poor or lazy translations. Behind these labels are rich descriptions of Vietnamese history and culture that are only accessible to an exclusive group of South Vietnamese, while the importation of these specialty noodles serves dual purposes. Not only is it useful for culinary preservation and familiarity overseas, but the importation of bún tươi đặc sản thủ đức is a form of banal nationalism similar to the flagging of the South Vietnamese flag in Chapter 1; those outside of the community would not commonly know the significance of these labels nor notice the specificity. For the South Vietnamese community, the preservation of this knowledge through food labeling allows them to

sustain a particular understanding of their history and culture against present-day communist Vietnam. In this case, it is the memorialization of the Thủ Đức district in Saigon that has been erased and redistributed since the fall of Saigon that signals their continued survival overseas.

Similarly, the different labeling of plants and vegetables at Mekong Supermarket speaks to the kind of knowledge that is generally accessible and inaccessible. The kinds of common household greens like rosemary or perilla are labeled only in English, whereas more niche but still identified goods like “rice paddy herbs”, native to Southeast Asia, have a more distinct Vietnamese name. Even more so, there are some plants that do not have a colloquial English translation beyond scientific terminology and are therefore only labeled in Vietnamese. Again, this inaccessibility is a form of exclusive knowledge that draws boundaries between those who are part of the “knowing” Vietnamese and those who are not.



Common household vegetables with labels in English.



Some vegetables are labeled in English, while others are labeled in both Vietnamese and English.



Some vegetables are labeled entirely in Vietnamese with no English translation.

Overall, I claim that these discrepancies in translation create a form of “insider knowledge” that bars specific folk from accessing Vietnamese identity fully (also known as gatekeeping). At the same time, I claim that this knowledge discrepancy is a product of failed reciprocity on the part of the Western world— while expectations to integrate to American society were imposed on Vietnamese refugees, the reverse was not being pursued. In turn, there are aspects of Vietnamese identity (specifically via food culture) that have literally been lost in translation for the Western world: there are no distinct English terms for some of these goods or practices that are accessible to the general public. At most, the increasing popularity of Vietnamese cuisine has introduced those outside the Vietnamese community to some dishes.

Simultaneously, the intricacies of Vietnamese culinary and private commensal practice draw more subtle boundaries to membership— Vietnamese celebrations of their culinary tradition establish exclusive norms that subvert common narratives of refugee complacency with colonial erasure (historical and cultural). In the latter sections, I consider how food is informed by language, religion, and space and imbued with meaning as a cultural good that constructs boundaries to Vietnamese identity and membership apart from American society. For now, I explore how the preparation and consumption of Vietnamese food adds an additional layer of meaning for the Vietnamese community that culminates into a distinct collective identity.

Food as creating intimacy

Vietnamese food is consumed during particular times and spaces that have not only cultural but social significance for the community: it is both a cultural preservation and socialization project that establishes hierarchies of relationships between Vietnamese folk. Moreover, these practices can create exclusive forms of knowledge that establish barriers to membership for non-Vietnamese folk.

Often, Vietnamese food is consumed in more intimate social gatherings to accommodate the desires of family and friends for familiarity. This is especially true on the West Coast where the Vietnamese presence is stronger, and therefore access to high quality Vietnamese food is greater than other parts of the United States. Tuyet and her friends host mini-reunions at different locations each year. When they visit her in California, they visit Vietnamese restaurants to have food they otherwise could not access.

“...we enjoy having Vietnamese food, especially for example when we have friends from out of town. We always take them to Vietnamese restaurants because oftentimes these are friends who live in the States or outside of the country who don’t live in big Vietnamese communities, so usually we would take them to whatever food they want (laughs).”

Their desire for Vietnamese food whenever they have the chance to access it suggests a particular connection to or longing for Vietnamese cuisine in commensal practice, especially after resettling in new countries. I argue that this is a demonstration of their strong ties to Vietnam as the “familiar” and the “home” even while living abroad. This more inclusive and accommodating practice to preserve people’s connection to Vietnam in their lives is seen by the way Vietnamese food is included in the celebration of both American and Vietnamese holidays.

“Not only in terms of just immediate family, like with relatives and stuff like we would have so many family gatherings...we would meet for Thanksgiving, Christmas, Fourth of July, and I have quite a few uncles and aunts so there would be a lot of cousins and these were very lively affairs. These were not just one or two people just hanging out, it’s like we have big family gatherings and lots of Vietnamese food so I felt very connected to my culture.” (Noah, 24)

As Noah’s comment reveals, the focal point of my interviewees’ recollections is not only the cultural significance of food, but the social aspect of commensality, or sharing food and creating connections between people that strengthen overall connectedness to one’s culture and

identity as an extension of culture and practice. I claim that the spaces they occupy vary in significance to the larger community, and this distinction must be assessed to consider the kind of relationalities constructed between Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese folk and the consolidation of a “Vietnamese” identity. Kim and her friends host potlucks during the winter holidays where they would invite Vietnamese students at Arizona State University to attend. ASU is one of the largest universities in the United States, and they have a large international student population.

“I have some friends who go out and we get together and share potluck, everybody brings something we make to share with each other, especially in the New Year time or Christmas time. We get together and just sharing like the dishes and the gifts. Like last Christmas, my sister had a get together because her house is big. My house is small. Her house is big. We had 30 kids... not kids, but young adults. They’re from Vietnam and they study at ASU. They don’t have a family, so we invite them come to share the Vietnamese... Christmas party with us, so we share... we bring the food and share so they don’t feel lonely in the time here because they miss family, something like that. So we just eating, cooking, playing with the group.”

Kim’s work is particularly meaningful because she provides the students with a space abroad to indulge in the food and activities that remind them of and connect them to their families at home. In this way, the consumption of Vietnamese food in intimate spaces can allow for people to reconcile with the displacement experienced from being away from what is considered “family” or “home” by continuing those practices in new places. This reflects Bloch’s assertion that food and the sharing of food in intimate spaces allows people to re-establish closeness with those they consider part of their “household,” despite the geographical distance (Bloch 1999, 141). More colloquially, my interviewees consider their households their “family”.

Brian expands on this idea of cultivating a “family away from home” through the communal practice of cooking together in university spaces. To him, his mother’s cooking is a

significant part of his memories of home and longing to reconnect with his family. Throughout his years of studying at Stanford, he developed a balance between missing home and carving a space for himself abroad. Part of finding this balance is redefining what his “family” is—it is not only genealogical nor geographic but is based in the relationalities that allow him to practice everyday enactments of his imaginations of “home”.

“I am pretty close with my mom, my brother, my dad. And you know...sometimes I would cook myself, like we do spring roll making nights that I would host for my friends...or we would go out and get phở, stuff like that. Nothing beats mom’s homemade cooking, right...that’s why I would always like ‘Ah, I miss home,’ not just for the cooking, but like that’s part of it, just like being away from them when hardship would come and not being able to be there was hard, but I finally over the four years navigated that balance of having a healthy missing of home and doing my best to be there for them but still feel very much at home as well at Stanford, my ‘gia dinh’ away from home, right, is like what we kind of literally say.”

In this excerpt, we see how Brian was able to find a “gia dinh (family) away from home” through their spring roll making nights and similar communal cooking and eating activities. Spring roll making nights and getting phở have a layer of intentionality for preserving both cultural and social connections to his Vietnamese identity. Making spring rolls, like making dumplings in other Asian cultures is a popular family tradition in Vietnamese culture both because it teaches essential skills (craftsmanship, basic cooking) and is much more efficient when done by multiple people. Moreover, it is a dedicated time for conversation and establishing deeper bonds between the people working together in the space. Similarly, going out to get phở is a common practice in Vietnamese groups because of the often cozy and homey atmosphere that it creates for everyone involved (some may argue that the best phở is found in family-owned restaurants with children running about, though they may look a little janky at the outset). In

these ways, food counteracts people's feelings of displacement by maintaining and creating new social and cultural ties to one another.

"I think one event that I remember in particular in this past year... kind of, long story short, there was a hate incident against the VSA that we had to deal with... I decided to, because our leadership was really burnt out because of it... to hold like a kind of a community space where we just made spring rolls together. Like I literally just bought all the ingredients and did it like family style where you just set it up and people roll their own, right? And it was really awesome, like it really was... while the circumstances weren't great of like why we were doing that... I know for a lot of people... it genuinely was something I wanted to do... A lot of them were my friends, I wanted to do it for my friends but just for the community broadly and like people would share, like because it had to do with safety, people would share like 'Ah, this is really nice to know that we can gather safely together, despite all the bad stuff that's been happening,' and just like being together, just eating food and some of us were playing cards and stuff and just chilling out."

Again, commensality strengthens ties between Vietnamese community members when threatened with experiences of racial discrimination that disrupt their feelings of belonging in American society. The intimacy of commensal spaces create spaces of safety and familiarity against continued experiences of displacement and estrangement, thereby restoring feelings of connectedness and belonging within the Vietnamese community.

Tuyet more explicitly defined the occasions for sharing specific dishes among her Vietnamese friends. Her considerations took into account the weather, the time of day, and the accessibility of food across the regions of California that accommodate Vietnamese people.

"Well, it's very popular, common that we, let's say, go for coffee early in the morning. Sometimes for breakfast, we either have cháo or đồ ăn phở. We have phở or bánh cuón. Those are like traditionally what we would have. Actually, when we were young, we would have corn and stuff, but that's more like adult (laughs). So yeah. We have things like that. So we have specific like,

okay, for breakfast we want to have phở or— depends on the weather, like if it's cold, we will have phở. If it's hot, then we will have bánh cuôn. And then cháo is only for night time because that's the only place that opens late at night and we want something light. And then if we have a dinner, whoever can make it to a dinner, we usually have a Vietnamese restaurant as well."

Phở is typically eaten when it is cold out, while bánh cuôn is enjoyed during warmer weather. In her considerations of food they commonly had and the occasions for them, Tuyet also reflects on past traditions they had that have been switched out for more accessible options. Accessibility varies a lot depending on the cultural significance of the dishes to Vietnamese folk. Because phở is primarily a noodle broth, it is eaten during the winter or cooler weather so it keeps them warm. At the same time, the tradition of eating phở for breakfast originates from old Vietnamese labor routines where the broth was enough to get them full quickly but not be too heavy for them to work in the rice fields. In these ways, food consumption is part of taste, or the class expressions and classed stylizations of life. Bourdieu considers how food consumption is intertwined with class status and the privileges granted to people according to their capital (or resource) accumulation. These Vietnamese food traditions and their cost evaluations reflect the Vietnamese working-class taste and its ties to labor efficiency as a priority. Today, its meaning has changed since being carried to the US: whereas previously phở was consumed as a necessity, it can be argued that with greater financial stability, phở is enjoyed as an expression of luxury. Today, phở is more widely appreciated in American culture as "comfort food" because of its simple richness, reflecting similar sentiments within the Vietnamese community. Comparatively, bánh cuôn is a cold dish that is more refreshing during the warmer months while being relatively light as well. Tuyet closes by considering the consumption of cháo at night time because of its availability during late night activities. Later on in our conversation, Tuyet clarified that eating late night cháo only happens in Southern California because there is a bigger community and

therefore more choices, whereas in San Jose, there is no nightlife. These considerations reveal the priorities that Vietnamese folk balance between accessibility, comfort, and timeliness that are informed by both cultural and social knowledge they possess within the community.

On some occasions, Vietnamese food is mixed with other cuisines, especially in more mainstream activities such as road tripping¹¹ and club picnics that penetrate into the public sphere. I claim that the blending of cultures is an effect of balancing Americanization and preservation efforts after resettlement. Some practices are more portable through migration than others; in the realm of food, it is often more economical to cook and eat various cuisines in the United States. Still, the continued desire to maintain Vietnamese culture and lifestyles alongside their adjustments to American society suggest that their ties to Vietnam matter and possibly even take precedence. Tuyet regularly goes on hikes and trips with her friends to stay connected to one another. Tied with these activities, they have a routine for sharing food: getting bánh mì to eat at home before and after trips. Alongside these trips, they incorporate other Vietnamese traditions that create an intimate space for making memories and maintaining core aspects of their identity.

“We often try to do like— we always have at least áo dài photoshoots. Just a— for memory from our friends. And then we would “di ăn cháo cho đêm”, like we go out to eat at night at like midnight (laughs). It’s just to have memories and having food that especially friends out of state don’t normally have them. But even for me, I don’t really go out that much to Vietnamese... I mean at home, I cook kind of half and half, I cook half Vietnamese food and half Vietnamese cuisine and then the rest you know, whatever, American, Italian, whatever. So I don’t necessarily eat all the Vietnamese food. So when we get together, we do try to have different dishes and then we would go out at night to have cháo.”

¹¹ Road tripping is considered a more “American” practice adopted by the Asian-American community to demonstrate their Americanization efforts and efforts to pass as participating equals in American society and culture. (Source: <https://roadtrips.saada.org/>)

In her conversation about social activities with friends, Tuyet admits how she cooks a mixed variety of cuisines at home and does not solely eat Vietnamese food. In fact, when she would go out with friends, she would try a variety of different dishes. Still, there is a domain of familiarity that is maintained in her social activities and routines. Alongside more mainstream “American” activities, they regularly have áo dài photoshoots where they celebrate Vietnamese traditional dress and its centrality to their memory making. Moreover, they end the night having cháo, which is culturally and socially more accessible than other dishes at night time.

Similarly, Noah recognizes how both Vietnamese and typical American foods are incorporated during exclusively American holidays like Thanksgiving.

“Yeah, and to give you an example, at like Thanksgiving we would have turkey that we would eat and people would actually cook a turkey. We would also cook Vietnamese dishes like rice and get catering, so... You know, like the sticky rice and Vietnamese noodles?”

Turkey is served for Thanksgiving to generally respect the American tradition, but it is also paired with catered Vietnamese dishes. In this way, despite adaptations being made to “fit in” to American culture and norms, there are parts of their Vietnamese culture that they maintain alongside these compromises. This suggests a continual separation between a wholehearted commitment to living the “American way” (or “Vietnamese way”). Rather, these discussions continue to reflect Bloch’s assessment of the dialectics of food and kinship. Particularly, Bloch explains how food practices create a “substantial unity” that enable community members to join and rejoin “which was and would become separate” due to various levels of distance (Bloch 1999, 137). By continually revisiting and incorporating Vietnamese food traditions in their daily lives, they re-establish themselves as part of the Vietnamese “household” even after engaging in activities, e.g. geographic relocation, sharing food with other groups, or trying other kinds of cuisines, that create distance from the community.

Noah continues his discussion to describe how at his taekwondo studio growing up, they would have a mix of American and Vietnamese foods for their yearly picnics “because a lot of the people there were Vietnamese”. This example shows how the significant Vietnamese presence redefined (public) spaces: the event organizers catered food that accommodated Vietnamese needs as participating members of the community and shared space.

In both anecdotes, though there is a hybrid mixture of practices in the public sphere, Noah and Tuyet retain a Vietnamese identity through continued practice that signifies parts of their everyday lives that are most pertinent above all the adjustments made. Tuyet cooks a variety of foods at home, but the dishes she seeks with her friends, especially for those who do not have easy access, are Vietnamese dishes. Their regular consumption of Vietnamese food paired with their celebration of Vietnamese dress center their Vietnamese identity as part of their social practices and ideas of leisure. More so, in Noah’s case, though they celebrate American holidays, they choose to carve out space to indulge in Vietnamese food. The act of going out of their way to include Vietnamese cuisine and social practices represents their cultural preferences and identity expression while living in the United States.

In fact, by pairing Bloch’s dialectical model for food and kinship with Ahmed’s “citizenship test”, I argue that their constructions of “households” or families within the Vietnamese community (as opposed to American communities) reveal where their allegiances or intimacies are rooted. Ahmed defines the “citizenship test” as the metric for expressing allegiances to a community based on happiness for or their celebration of the community’s successes. In the above anecdotes, Vietnamese food was prepared and consumed primarily in intimate spaces between Vietnamese folk and within the Vietnamese community at large, even if they ate in public restaurant spaces.

Food as relationality, cultivating intimacies

It is not always the case that food creates households from within the Vietnamese community, especially for next generation Vietnamese-Americans who try to situate themselves alongside their American peers. Rather, sharing food traditions can be a way to cultivate new intimacies with other groups, albeit uneven and hierarchized by levels of trust and knowledge (Bloch 1999).

For the celebration of the Vietnamese community's largest holiday, Tét, Vietnamese food is exclusively consumed and incorporated in public spaces that involve the larger Vietnamese community. When Brian first came to Stanford, he celebrated Tét with his friends by getting food and indulging in the “microcommunity” in San Jose, California. In his discussion, he distinctly compared the scale of these communities and their celebrations relative to his hometown in Michigan.

“I definitely— my friends and I, my Vietnamese friends and I would go there for food. I remember going there for Lunar New Year celebrations, some family friends there, so I definitely like... I wouldn’t say I was like integrated myself in the same way as like a community, but I definitely became familiar with that community outside of Stanford and that definitely was really nice. It wasn’t something I grew up with. We had a couple Vietnamese restaurants and like I said that kind of microcommunity, but nothing to the scale of San Jose, right, like having a whole Vietnamese town or like... it’s just a different scale. So that was really awesome.”

What is particularly notable about Brian’s observations is the cultivation of community through access to food and the widespread celebration of the most important Vietnamese holiday of the year as well as the excitement he had for this discovery. These examples demonstrate two important details about the development of the Vietnamese identity in the United States. Firstly, Tét is made accessible to second-generation Vietnamese such that they are able to develop a

stronger sense of identity within the community. Brian explains how these vibrant Têt festivities were a significant change from his experiences with a “predominantly white school district since [he] was in kindergarten”, and something he found to be “really awesome, really, refreshing, something [he] was excited about”. Furthermore, it granted him access to a cultural space that encouraged him to connect more with an identity that he previously felt displaced from due to the greater prominence of the white community in his life: “it really opened my eyes to a lot of things and I actually got really involved with the Stanford Vietnamese Association”.

In my personal experience, Têt strengthened my connections with the Vietnamese community through the labor we invested into preparing food for the holiday. Every year, my parents would order banh Têt of various types (some with beans in the sticky rice, others without), which we were only allowed to have during the weeks leading up to the one-week celebration of the Lunar New Year. Furthermore, we would make generous batches of egg rolls, banh pate so and other shareable dishes like fried rice and shrimp to adequately serve the community. In some cases, we would even indulge with lobster and crab, which are more “luxury” investments to engage in the annual celebration of joy and prosperity coming into the new season and year. Altogether, these activities fostered a sense of connectedness within families and between members of the larger Vietnamese community.

I additionally argue that the large-scale celebration of Têt is a collective effort to invite the American people to better understand Vietnamese culture. In particular, food becomes an avenue for cultural exchange and communication that creates a visible realm for Vietnamese identity in the mainstream as a one not wholly defined by loss but also elements of joy and resilience. I note that while Têt is shared with the American public, the burden rests on the Vietnamese community to invite their American neighbors in rather than them choosing to

initiate reciprocal relationships organically. I expand on the significance of Têt to the construction of Vietnamese identity overseas in greater depth in the latter half of this chapter. For now, I consider the ways that the preparation, consumption, and sharing of food articulates spaces with different levels of intimacy that can be extrapolated to imagine the bounds of Vietnamese identity formation in the United States.

The above anecdotes demonstrate how Vietnamese food and the practice of sharing food can create an intermediary space between Vietnam and the United States that allow people to experience both cultures and not feel disoriented or wholly displaced from either identity. Ultimately, everyday engagements with food crystallize into a Vietnamese identity built from negotiations between the homeland and their “new” home and projections of values most central to their sense of belonging through feelings of comfort, familiarity, joy, and passion toward food and the practice of sharing food. I argue further that the different valuations of holidays and interpersonal relationships establish hierarchies of relationships between people and cultures. While American holidays were celebrated at home, they were often displaced by the incorporation of Vietnamese dishes and activities; comparatively, Têt is given exclusive attention in the Vietnamese community. This hierarchy of holiday celebrations reveals their different valuations of American and Vietnamese cultures, one being more important to preserve than the other. Furthermore, the invitation of non-Vietnamese folk (and second-generation Vietnamese) into the grand celebration of Têt symbolizes what they take most pride in and consider part of their identity as something to be seen and appreciated.

In a more private setting, levels of intimacy between people influence the ways they prepare and share food together. Tuyet explains that the general order of preparing for communal eating during social gatherings is very similar to how preparation is done at home.

“...when we first came [to the United States] when I was young, my parent does the weekend a lot more than I have. Like we would go to different people’s houses, depending on who wants to host the gathering. Sometimes they each bring a dish, sometimes whoever hosts would cook a meal and we would all come in and share, just like home. All the little kids would go set the table, make sure we have all the sitting for everyone. And the adults— one would serve, one would cook, and the other one would clean up. So you know, it’s the same thing with friends. So we do it here too. When I go to my friend’s, same thing, but we still usually...with good friends it’s different. Friends in general when you go to someone’s house, usually if you invite someone to your house, you don’t let them do anything, right? You just serve them. But... among good friends, we usually come to each other’s houses and we serve ourselves (laughs).”

However, Tuyet adds that there is a difference in hospitality between “good friends” and just “friends” in the sharing of food at social gatherings. Out of trust and respect for one another, food service is approached differently, where good friends are more free to serve themselves and consequently decide their own food portions. Everyone’s choice is not only respected but well understood and encouraged by the entire party.

I consider this attention to portioning and choice essential to understanding the roots of people’s personal desires. My interviewees’ attention to their Vietnamese customs and traditions is portioned differently in their everyday lives than their investment in upholding American values and customs. Altogether, this demonstrates where the allegiances truly lie even while they explore new ways of gathering and eating in the United States— all their practices are grounded by their desire to uphold Vietnamese traditions and sustain their connection with that respective identity in various aspects of their everyday lives.

Food as conversation and adaptation

In the above discussion, I considered how Vietnamese food (along with cooking and eating) is positioned in the broader American context. Before this chapter, my frameworks for conceptualizing “American” and “Vietnamese” cultures were generally rigid and viewed as mutually exclusive, with little overlap or opportunity for exchange and development. It is only as I begin to consider levels of autonomy beyond the homogenizing pressures of societal norms that intentionality guides people’s navigation of multiple cultures and memberships. In some ways, being in the United States has allowed the Vietnamese community to expand on their food traditions through hybridization with American societal norms rather than being limited by rigid conceptions of membership that require homogeneity.

When talking to Tuyet, I expressed the sentiment that “food is a big part of what you get to keep as part of home these days”, to which she agreed and stated that it keeps “who we are” and “the friendship...when we have time and gather, eat, and talk, we talk about a lot of things. We talk about childhood, we talk about the food we eat, and compare different regions because different regions and how one is different from each other and how things evolved to what we have today.” Tuyet's sentiments describe how food grounds people’s identities and is part of everyday conversation and socialization that leads to the expansion of cultural knowledge and social relations. Food is part of the memorialization of the past (childhood) as well as connections to the present and how differences translate and are reckoned with from within the Vietnamese community (between regions of Vietnam) and beyond (the United States).

In chapters 1 and 2, I have considered how historically bridging differences was a part of cultural exchange and making accommodations to strengthen solidarity within the Vietnamese community after periods of (social, cultural, and political) change. The Vietnamese language has

many French and Chinese influences (some words resemble French and Chinese words), and written language was acquired through encounters with French missionaries. Buddhism and Catholicism are religious models that came from separate colonial encounters with Chinese and French imperial powers in Vietnam. Similarly, many Vietnamese dishes and food traditions come from culinary exchanges with the Chinese and French. For instance, though bánh mì is popularized as a Vietnamese dish, it takes inspiration from French cuisine and is a Vietnamese adaptation that better suits the access to ingredients and culinary expertise of the community. Bánh patê sô (also known as pate chaud) also takes inspiration from puff pastries, where instead of having sweet fillings, it is filled with meat (as many Vietnamese pastries are). These food adaptations illustrate the ways that Vietnamese culinary traditions have converged with other cultures, but also reveal how the core components of the Vietnamese lifestyle, or habitus, are maintained. Both bánh mì and bánh patê sô take French goods then fill them with popular Vietnamese ingredients. For instance, every bánh mì comes with pickled carrots and daikons, which are used as sides and dipping sauces in other Vietnamese dishes. Similarly, bánh patê sô was traditionally filled with beef, but now commonly has ground pork, which is used more by the Vietnamese community.

Contemporarily, many adaptations are being made through Vietnamese migrant encounters with American society and its various demands to integrate. Tuyet considers how Vietnamese food traditions have evolved over time. In particular, she describes some of the adjustments that have been made to describe how adaptation itself is part of cultural preservation overseas through the continued consumption of distinctly Vietnamese dishes in new social and cultural contexts.

“When we first came, we didn’t have all the ingredients we needed, so we needed to improvise, right? So, like, traditionally I know when I was growing up I only had like the regular cabbage,

the white cabbage with chicken, right, but we came to the States and we learned that we can also use the purple cabbage... my mom had tried different combinations and we would use the purple cabbage and with that we also used celery as part of the ingredients, so it's very colorful. Tastes just as good."

Though they did not have access to ingredients regularly used in Vietnam, they were able to find alternatives to improvise and adapt their food traditions. This effort represents their desire to sustain Vietnamese cultural knowledge and hold onto their roots even after migration. Furthermore, these improvisations also allowed them to make new discoveries that improved the eating experience for everyone involved and reconcile with the displacement that comes with entering new and unfamiliar contexts. Tuyet elaborates, "But we still use nuóc mắm as the dressing. The peanuts...Actually, we get away from the peanuts because my son is allergic to peanuts. So a lot of things we don't serve with peanuts anymore." These changes made parts of Vietnamese food more accessible and inclusive for those that had dietary restrictions or preferences.

This especially resonated with my own personal experience of going vegetarian a year ago when Vietnamese food is traditionally meat-based. Initially, my transition was met with a lot of confusion by my family. Meat consumption was considered a luxury that was made more readily available for the Vietnamese people after migration to the United States. That way, my rejection of meat was seen as a disposal of privilege that I was born with that my parents were not guaranteed in their youth. Often, my dad told me recollections of wartime Vietnam and how he had to share one slab of meat a week between his family members. Similarly, he talked about the scarcity of salt, sugar, and other seasonings for regular use. Altogether, giving up meat was an entitled choice I made that they sometimes considered as a betrayal of their efforts to guarantee me a better life than they had. At the same time, they were willing to accommodate my

dietary preferences; we have learned to adjust many Vietnamese recipes to include other forms of protein (e.g. tofu and beans) that I find equally hearty and delicious. The exceptions made within the community suggest a greater emphasis on maintaining the relationality between people by adjusting to make Vietnamese culture more accessible to everyone involved. For me personally, these adjustments made me feel included in my community and strengthened my ties to my Vietnamese identity because of the emphasis on community and care above everything. No matter who I was, my family practices could be adjusted to fit my personal preferences while retaining the core tenets of Vietnamese culture and/as identity expression.

Tuyet's children also have particular preferences for dessert that required some adjustment after coming to the US. Ultimately, she similarly accommodated their preferences to make their engagements with Vietnamese food and culture more intentional rather than compulsive. Though some Vietnamese desserts have been substituted for "typical American" desserts after mealtimes, there remain occasions for cultural preservation through food and drink that she takes advantage of.

"Maybe some icecream, fruit, whatever we have in the house. Just typical American, you know.

My kids don't eat so much of Vietnamese desserts like may cai banh dau xanh or whatever.

They're not into that, but they like che sometimes, certain kinds. But that's more like for fun when we go out and we have drinks and stuff. But we just have the basic, like we share the cut fruit (laughs)."

Aside from food as a product, Vietnamese families continue their traditions through the routinized practice of preparing for and sharing meals together. For many families, this is part of their family education and transference of Vietnamese cultural values based in respect, piety, and kinship. There are some institutional barriers to continuing these traditions like in restaurants where family sharing options are no longer available. Tuyet expresses disappointment with

changing protocol in San Jose restaurants: “The one thing I miss is that up here, in San Jose, there used to be a lot more restaurants that served family style, like traditional kind of like a Chinese dinner. But more and more, it’s usually just you go to a restaurant and everybody orders their own dish. You don’t do a sharing anymore.” Still, given her background, Tuyet puts in additional effort to preserve these practices within her own family in the United States. Tuyet grew up in Vietnam in a multigenerational household. During lunch and dinner time, she would share meals and conversations with her grandparents and the rest of her extended family. After coming to the US, she makes additional effort to maintain this tradition with her husband and kids.

“...meals is like a feast even though it’s just basic, nothing fancy. Just like a three-course meal, like basic soup, a stew with rice, maybe some stir fry of some sort. But we always eat together as a family, and I really miss that, so when I have my own family, I told my ex and my kids, I told them, I say ‘lunch and breakfast, kids have lunch in school, work we all have different time schedules, but dinner you must come home for dinner. Whatever hour that we agree upon, we have to come home for dinner.’ He can miss dinner once in a while because sometimes board meetings, they call on the last minute and you can’t miss it, but overall the rule is you cannot miss dinner and that way you get to see everyone at least once a day and talk about what they do and you know, you’re also teaching your kids. How they behave, how they eat at a table, we teach them their manners, how do you share meals with a family, things like that. So that’s a tradition that I [keep], nothing else but that.”

Though she realizes there are some barriers to perfectly preserving this tradition, e.g. difficult matching time schedules for lunch, she maintains the strict expectation that they will have dedicated time to share meals and memories together. She contrasts her family experience with observations of her friends and their families, who often eat independently. On top of the

importance of spending time together, she explains that the dinner table is an opportunity for teaching her children manners and mealtime etiquette, which relate to larger Vietnamese cultural values. She expresses hope that her children will pass on these traditions and realize their value in their own lives. In fact, she describes her present-day experiences with her eldest son and how he has adapted her values into his own life.

"I hope my kids will continue to... I don't know. My son, my oldest son definitely still going to be doing that because every so often he has ten of his friends come over to my house to have a party. They would literally have... all would bring meat. When we first moved to this place, the first time, we hadn't gotten all the stuff together, they would come. One would bring meat to grill, one bring the grill, one bring the TV so they can watch together (laughs). So everybody would bring something and they would come and congregate at my house and all the boys would have a meal."

In this recollection, there is the continuing trend of accommodation that allows for expansion of practices while maintaining the core values of communal eating. Even in moments of unpreparedness, the focus on shared time and communal eating motivates her son's friends to bring the missing pieces and enjoy moments together.

These case studies demonstrate how some barriers can be reconciled with continued effort within the community to preserve what they consider most essential. In some cases, this involves sustaining these traditions in private spaces when public spaces are limited in nature; in other cases, it involves wholesale disposal of some values that are no longer tenable. Ultimately, it is shown that retaining solidarity (specifically organic) and in turn identity is most important: kinship, respect, care, and resilience take precedence over assimilation, compulsion, and compliance with a rigid, immutable model of Vietnamese identity. Rather, adaptations are inevitably made in response to the displacement that comes from forced migration. In the

process, I argue that the body is also shaped and materialized through everyday negotiations with different cultures and contexts.

Reflections on food and its role in everyday Vietnamese life is a point of conceptualizing my interviewee's connections to Vietnam, as well as present-day divergences from their past conceptions of Vietnam and Vietnamese ways of living. Today, Tuyet explains that with new social environments and a different set of options adjustments have been made to the practice of gathering and sharing meals with one another. Specifically, she explains how private gatherings have expanded and become more communal compared to her childhood memories of Vietnam.

“...in general, people [in Vietnam] do go around and visit because back then we didn't have telephones, so every so often, my parents would take me and go visit their friends. So usually when we're there, we probably spend about an hour or two, just catch up and visiting. And usually it's just water, you know, drinks are served. Maybe some cut fruit (laughs). But that's it. That's the extension of sharing food. It's not like here [the United States]. Here, it's a lot more common that you go to your friends and it's, you can easily, they, if it happens to fall on meals time or they happen to start their meals, whatever time that is, it could be a party or whatever, they just invite and either you stay or you don't. And people are more accepting with that. But me, growing up, you don't just go to someone else's house and expect to be, you know, and that's why you avoid... most meal times you leave.”

This has been beneficial for the Vietnamese community because it enables them to foster stronger connections after extended periods of displacement. It has allowed the community to strengthen their bonds with each other through an expansion of shared time and activities, when previously formalities in Vietnam flattened opportunities for deeper engagement with one another. Tuyet continues to reflect on how resettling in the United States has presented new

opportunities (rather than being primarily disorienting and restrictive) to imagine more ways to connect.

"I would love to have more gatherings with friends. Because here we have the means. We have bigger houses, so we can gather but it's not easy. Because you have to find someone who thinking the same— think your same way. Sharing the same common interest to do that."

Given their increased financial stability and access to material resources, they possess the means to more regularly connect with their friends. However, she acknowledges that it requires more than just material investment in gatherings but alignment of interests, which not many of her friends currently share. Though she acknowledges some present-day limitations to her desires, they provide a framework for future opportunities to take advantage of within the community to further strengthen the bonds being cultivated between people. The possibility may be more attainable given changing relationships with other life priorities like holding jobs and raising children, which Tuyet herself admits limits her availability to engage with the community.

The preparation of Vietnamese food also has many cultural meanings which have changed since coming to the United States. In our interview together, Tuyet asked me if I understood why Vietnamese people often offer fruit in peeled bite size pieces. She explained that this difference in practice symbolized both practical differences in agricultural practices as well as symbolisms of family hierarchy between the two cultures.

"...in Asia, we use a lot of pesticide. So that's why usually we cut and peel like apples even though Americans believe apples' skin is good for you, right? Fiber. But for us, because of pesticides— traditionally, it's not anymore— but it's still in our culture. So we always peel and also cut to bite size because that's how you would offer to someone. We don't eat big bites. That's why you always cut it small when you serve and you share. That's important for sharing

because...you learn to be aware of your surroundings because everybody has their portion, then okay, nobody has anything to talk about...Not just thinking about yourself but thinking about everyone else at the table and make sure you're offering your elderly or even your young ones. You offer up and you offer down and things like that."

Firstly, she considers how the logic behind peeling fruit no longer holds in the US where pesticide use is less heavy; instead, many people have actually grown to eat the skin for its health benefits. Furthermore, she considers the deeper cultural meaning of cutting fruit into bite size pieces in order to share with others. Within the practice of sharing are deeper understandings of hierarchy based on the importance of filial piety to Vietnamese philosophies: cutting fruit so it is shareable suggests a greater awareness of one's responsibility to others, especially the young and elderly that require more care and respect. Overall, this shows how food translates core Vietnamese values in everyday practice, as well as how the difference across cultures reflects a distinct identity through embodied practice.

Within the Stanford VSA, he has actually been on the Culture Night team, which coordinates celebrations of Tết and other major Vietnamese programming. enabled next generation Vietnamese-American students at Stanford to imagine what it means to be Vietnamese in America.

"...we also have a Vietnamese dance group on campus called "Múa Lạc Hồng". I think "Lạc Hồng" comes from like, I need to brush up on our history, but like we have some region of Vietnam, I forget where it's from, but MLH for short and we...it's grown exponentially since I joined freshman year but it's been a lot of fun. We try to mix traditional Vietnamese dancing with more modern, like hip hop dancing— eh, hip hop might be a stretch. We're a non-audition group, right, so it's lowkey, we're not dancing crazy. But we have like our props are more attached to traditional, like we have the hats, the nón lá, the fans, we also have the umbrellas, I think that's all

our props, yeah. And then usually we dance to V-pop so again it's more modern. It's—I showed my family, my mom and she used to teach very traditional, the lotus flower dance, very traditional dancing and she was like "Agh, that's not traditional dancing, you're like..." whatever, she was kind of salty. She was like "Agh, you're not doing the tradition justice" or whatever, but like, you know... It's like, there are some sets that we do that are more traditional for like Lunar New Year, where we wear áo dài and like it's more cutesy and like wholesome, but a lot more of our [inaudible] are more modern, hip-hoppy, but have like a lot of the choreography that is rooted in the fan movements and the formations, like the flower formations that are very typical stuff."

Brian's recollection of their performances, even as they do not "do the traditions justice", portrayed how Vietnamese dance becomes part of his identity, as he situates his Vietnamese traditions in his life and expands upon them with other dance forms. Altogether, the developments and accommodations made through food have changed and strengthened the Vietnamese community and their solidarities as they learned how to incorporate their embodied practices in new American contexts. In the following section, I consider how embodied food practices, paired with other Vietnamese traditions, allow community members to communicate their identities that create belonging across space and time.

Food as storytelling

Clément Baloup: "Food is used as a symbol, of life and good health and also it's a link between past, in the native country, and present, in the host country. Because cooking is a knowledge that abides, so it's a part of the identity. We can see in my pages that characters share food and story at the same time." (Gusain and Jha 2022, 48)

Brian explains that the Stanford Vietnamese Student Associations (VSA) prepares for three large events a year: Tết (Lunar New Year), the Mid Autumn Festival, and Culture Night.

Throughout these events, food is positioned alongside other Vietnamese cultural traditions that are shared with the broader Stanford community.

“We also have, like we celebrate Mid Autumn and the Lunar New Year. So the VSA, they’re the ones who put on the Lunar New Year celebration on our campus where we get like different Asian-American groups to come perform on campus, we get food, and then like for Mid Autumn, in addition to all that stuff, we get like lanterns for people to paint and stuff, and so like that again is another way for us to get... to celebrate our culture and then share that with the broader community.”

Across the various events, food is a staple alongside and in conversation with other key objects of Vietnamese culture and tradition, such as dance, music, and fashion. In these ways, food is part of a larger collective project that the community engages in to recall a nostalgic past (where nostalgia is differently understood between generations), tell stories about themselves, and envision their present and future as Vietnamese-Americans.

“Culture Night, the cultural show. That’s a really big, very big gathering of like the entire club and we kind of mandate everyone participate— not everyone does, but it’s supposed to be everyone where it’s kind of like Paris by Night style, like a variety show. We have skits that people write that are supposed to be funny. It’s all centered around Vietnamese-American identity. We have a fashion show where people wear áo dài, we have dances, we have a main play that’s usually a little bit more serious to like interrogate, like we’ve done themes about home or identity, stuff like that. And... I think there’s one more aspect... dancing... Oh, some people sing. Some people sing too, in Vietnamese and stuff. So kind of like, you can kind of see the Paris by Night that we try to imitate...and that’s really awesome for everyone to get together and work toward a collective project, especially around the Vietnamese-American identity.”

Ultimately, Brian explains how all these events enable Stanford Vietnamese students to reflect on Vietnamese-American identity through the forms of storytelling that their parents

showed them in their youth. In these ways, they are able to establish closeness to their Vietnamese roots not only by projecting their traditions to the larger community, but reflecting on how they are situated alongside their parents.



Food refrigerators with Vietnamese desserts in Mekong Sandwiches.

Previously, I reflected on the regional specificity of goods sold at Mekong Marketplace as well as the mom-and-pop shops at Grand Century Mall that drew boundaries for inclusion and exclusion. While the nuances of many of the produce and other culinary goods are often lost in translation, I also argue that it is through the sharing of these regional cuisines and imported goods that food transcends language and regional knowledge barriers— food is a way for people to engage with isolated historical and cultural contexts and experience them firsthand to learn more about them. Similarly, alongside food, there are other social activities, e.g. singing, dance, performance and skits, that invite creative engagements with identity and its redefinition in the American context that cut through language barriers.

In the above ways, food bridges and encourages reconsideration of the boundaries of identity and belonging through the ways that cross-cultural differences can be bypassed in

commensal practice and the sharing of food traditions that bridge other cultural elements. It invites people to engage with their personal differences when they establish and re-establish levels of distance and closeness with one another. It enables people to imagine ties with people that cut across various boundaries—generationally, culturally, locationally—to create relational spaces/structures of relationality that hold distant people together, where national identities cut across people and their “unsettled” connections to people and place(s). Food produces the materiality of the body, whereby individuals embody nationalisms through the passage and consumption of food through generations. This allows for the maintenance of hybridized and transnational identities through the embodiment of a Vietnamese and American habitus and projections of taste (as blended according to the individual’s unique subjectivities).

Ultimately, food invites dialogue to work toward cultivating organic forms of solidarity across gender, class, and racial divisions that keep feelings of belonging and collectivity at bay. The intimacies of food and commensality introduce a model for identity formation that destabilizes the rigidity of national boundaries which are mechanical in practice.



My family gathered at the dinner table last winter to share bowls of phở. On the table are an assortment of snacks, including mandarin oranges and some pancakes from yesterday's breakfast. My grandfather is seated at the head of the table, with my mother and my two uncles seated to his right, and my grandmother and my sister on his left.

Conclusion

The Deafening Sound of the Waves Crashing Ashore

“‘Don’t forget who you are because what you do reflects the skin color of who you are.’ You don’t want to lose your value and you don’t want to do something that is a bad reflection of who you are...so you can’t just say I’m American now so I don’t do this. No. The people still see you as Asian. I still think that’s important that you... not all of it, but don’t lose who you are.” (Tuyet, 58)

It will be the 50th anniversary of Little Saigon’s construction next year, marking 50 years since the Vietnamese community first set foot on American soil after the Vietnam War. Since the end of the war, the Vietnamese community has been dispersed across the globe. The majority of the Vietnamese refugee population in the United States are South Vietnamese, whereas North Vietnamese migrants settled in Europe and other countries after the war. For that reason, I chose to focus my historical analyses on the experiences of the South Vietnamese community and how they have contextualized their ties to Vietnam through their fundamental loss of rootedness after the fall of Saigon.

When I first started this thesis, I fell into the trap of searching for a defined, “cohesive” collective identity among the Vietnamese community. It turns out, I was recycling the same homogenizing, assimilating demands for national identities that were subjugating the Vietnamese experience in the United States in the first place. Rather than glamorizing the Vietnamese collective as one that is harmonious and bound by a cohesive set of values and visions for the future, I focus on the processes through which the community recenters their solidarity with one another after displacement. I start by expanding on the power of memory work to challenge

predominant narratives to also consider how the Vietnamese collective establishes connectedness to one another and “Vietnam” (as a geographic and symbolic space) across space and time.

I focus on the everyday practices of the Vietnamese community in chapters 2 and 3 to better conceptualize the personal desires embedded within their practices, grasp where the tensions are rooted, and ultimately how they are being mediated within the community. Within my discussions of everyday enactments of Vietnamese identity formation, I uncover two primary fractures within the community that complicate the materialization of a collective identity: generational and regional differences.

I discussed generational differences throughout the chapters, but not in enough depth to explain the implications of these differences for the mobilization of the collective and their future prospects overall. Similar to previous literature, I find that generational differences result in differences in values and practices, based on the levels of closeness established between multiple identities (Sealy 2021). I add, however, that generational differences also lead to emotional distance that further restrain efforts to bridge the intergenerational gaps— even when family education is prioritized by first-generation Vietnamese, emotional distance between generations expanded fractures that disoriented collective visions for banding together. Thereafter, I argue that more attention needs to be paid to the ways that next generations can be engaged in their own histories, traditions, and experiences of trauma before imagining ways to cultivate solidarity. This involves efforts to communicate between generations, even when there are language barriers and differences in value structures.

I discuss various efforts between first-generation and next generation Vietnamese folk to reconcile with these divisions through informal practice. Practices, especially the mundane, are often overlooked by identity scholars for the many ways that they communicate identity where

symbolisms and words are not legible (Bennett 2013). Within all my analyses, I emphasize the importance of space as the context for action: it is the site for orientation (embodiment) and reorientation (performance) through which identity is done and revised, ranging from physical space to interpersonal interactions between people that project levels of relationality. Ultimately, this consideration of space allows for expanded conceptions of identity and belonging that are not limited to physical contexts but span spatial and temporal boundaries of membership.

Much of what is considered “Vietnamese” has changed and evolved over time. I argue that the primary avenue for adaptation has been through accommodating differences, whether that means loosening the strictness of traditional Vietnamese practice or learning to incorporate Vietnamese tradition alongside other everyday activities. In addition to centering accommodation and bridging, I argue that identity formation involves processes of simultaneous change and continuity, whereby the continuities qualify the core values of the Vietnamese identity. I ultimately identify the core values of the community to be respect and humility, social responsibility and reciprocity, and preserving solidarity and unity.

Language, religion, and food all contribute to creating a culture to fashion a particular lifestyle and set of norms, or habitus. In this thesis, I cover the various mediations of language and religion to establish and strengthen the foundations for Vietnamese identity. I expand on Anderson’s emphasis on language and religion as hegemonic tools for constructing national citizenships and grounding them according to historical “realities”. I find that there are limitations to creating belonging across language and religious differences; particularly, I note how language loss resulted from a collective learning experience to balance competing interests. The initial impetus was to assimilate, but now there is a new focus on language maintenance and revitalization that requires active work in the US context. Specifically, I emphasize how the

cultural infrastructure in the United States affects their language and religious retention by limiting the spaces for continued practice and education. Comparatively, I find that food is easier for sharing and engagement across cultural divides. Food is the cultural object through which these stylizations are made visible and also up for contention and conversation with other cultures. As a matter of fact, food is an avenue for filling in the knowledge gaps that are left out from lack of language and religious education— food itself is a form of education, which simultaneously cultivates interpersonal intimacies.

Using Bloch and Abbots' emphasis on commensality as bridging, I argue that food fosters levels of connectedness that transcend language and religious barriers to membership. Sharing is one of the most visible acts of trust, reciprocity, and kinship, and food is a cultural good that can be shared without pre-existing common understanding. I also expand on Bloch's concept of "households" by examining how next generation Vietnamese-Americans create "families away from home". This allows them to feel less displaced by their cultural differences from their American peers and address the displacing aspects of migration that Abbots is concerned with. My analyses broaden Bloch and Abbots' narrow focus on food as the object for conversation as I consider how food is also integrated with other Vietnamese traditions like dance, performance, and celebration. Thereafter, I expand on commensality to consider how identity formation includes the sharing of various cultural objects to create exclusive Vietnamese spaces according to their own understanding of themselves and how they want to invite others. Ultimately, my thesis demonstrates the processes through which identity is created through everyday symbolic social practice. Within my analyses, I explain how these everyday enactments are neither linear nor coherent even as communities seek to construct feelings of "wholeness" to

create connectedness. In fact, they are often employed in contradictory but not unexpected ways as people navigate multiple identities.

I also witness indirect references to regional differences that have created fractures within the community. In our interview, Kim recalled her experience returning to Vietnam in 2003, and how the country has changed for the worse since the communist regime took over. She describes,

“I can see that society over there is different from the time I left...they are not faithful. They are easy liars because society make them like that when they become communist...Right now, I think the Vietnamese community [here] is better because the kids learn from school to be faithful, be honest, and respect self-esteem.”

Though she does not explicitly speak about North Vietnamese folk, it is common in the South Vietnamese community to generalize communists with the North Vietnamese due to divisions during the war. These layers of separation are more distinct when, while projecting imaginations between “here” and “there”, the Vietnamese community in the US continue to mark histories only significant to the South Vietnamese population that flatten histories of Vietnam and previous solidarities between the various regions. For many South Vietnamese people, North Vietnamese people are characterized as unfaithful traitors who are guided by greed. These assumptions are grounded by their different recollections of Vietnamese history.

Despite all these differences, there is continual investment in Vietnam as a whole. The church and Asian marketplace remain spaces of connection through which the Vietnamese overseas and homeland communities can exchange goods with one another and sustain connectedness and simultaneity across national borders. This exchange also includes the dispersion of news and knowledge within the transnational community, where mutual interest in American and Vietnamese politics are maintained to consider the present and future realities of the collective. Altogether, these transnational connections depict how transnational citizenships

play out in real life and support more active engagement among seemingly disparate groups as arbitrarily divided by rigid national memberships.

Ultimately, I find that though liberation (as freedom from the colonization of the self and identity) is complex, difficult, and sometimes contradictory, what is often revealed is not contradiction in seeking liberation but in the systems people seek to be liberated from in the first place. Today, the Vietnamese community remains “unsettled”, both literally and figuratively. However, I believe that their efforts to create a collective through continued projections between “here” and “there” actually unsettles the legitimacy or “reality” of nation-state constructions of citizenship or membership broadly.

I opt to abandon cohesion for solidarity, which my interviewees repeatedly reference as the basis for their resilience and pride even after displacement. I consider solidarity distinct from cohesion or homogeneity by the ways that it does not require simultaneity, or shared values, but shared commitment to the betterment of the entire community however that will be achieved. Specifically, as I adopt Bloch’s organic solidarity, I portray how the Vietnamese community contends with complex differences within the community to find and strengthen semblances of familiarity or belonging. These calls acknowledge that Vietnam is not a monolith but is built of subgroups with various interests that need to be leveraged toward the creation of a space for Vietnamese existence in the global community. Furthermore, these calls have allowed the Vietnamese community to create belongings that have crossed many borders and identity markers that were supposedly strict and all-encompassing.

I believe that creating belonging is and has been the way to “resist forward” within the Vietnamese community. My second-generation Vietnamese interviewees felt most situated in American society when they were able to find safe spaces for themselves. These safe spaces are

where they feel that others around them “get it” and where their identities are not made hypervisible in order to be understood. The emotional geographies of memory have also guided their coalition building moving forward. Brian has participated in political activism on Stanford’s campus that united all Asian-American groups that have been made secondary to the school. Under the 22% Campaign,¹² Asian-American groups of diverse backgrounds banded against the Stanford administration to demand institutionalized support for affinity groups and admissions protocol that diversify the student population. The Stanford VSA was especially a large player in this movement, being one of the more active Asian-American affinity groups on campus.

I argue that creating belonging also supports action and redefinition on a global level. Of my interviewees who have not returned to Vietnam since migration, all of them want to return to Vietnam to understand the geographic space to contextualize their histories and how they currently occupy space in US society as a displaced migrant population with distinct socialization processes that remake them as neither perfectly American nor Vietnamese. This self-realization extends beyond assumptions that the habitus is either Vietnamese or American and that there exist no other possibilities for more expansive allegiances, convergences, and negotiations of identity. Ultimately, I argue that in increasingly globalized contexts, it is imperative that we broaden our conceptions for citizenship that account for transnational or stateless contexts. The cultivation of organic solidarities is one avenue for the creation of expanded, nuanced identities that are humanizing, accommodating, and fit for diasporic realities (where otherwise, the racialization of Vietnamese migrants makes their assimilation impossible).

¹² The campaign called for eight initiatives from the Stanford administration (revised from an initial six demands). They continued through the COVID-19 pandemic, but activity seems to have stopped since. (Source: <https://stanforddaily.com/2020/02/24/the-22-campaign-demands-that-the-university-publicly-release-disaggregated-admissions-data/>)

To conclude, I propose several considerations for future research based on the variations I have observed, but without enough data to provide deep analyses. Firstly, I call for more research on regional subgroups: though I do not know of a dedicated North Vietnamese community in the United States, it may be useful to compare Vietnamese diasporic communities between the US and Europe, where there exists a larger North Vietnamese population. It is possible that an emphasis on other contexts may be more fruitful and create a more holistic understanding of Vietnamese subjectivities in the globalized world and how to bridge these persisting variations.

There are also gendered and classed divisions within the community that can be further explored in future research. When recalling experiences of receiving or giving cultural education, my interviewees reference women in their lives as arbiters of knowledge and primary educators. This includes women as first teachers of language, religious practice, as well as embodied practices of preparing and sharing food. I do not interview any first-generation men, however, so I pose that future research on the gendered nature of social practice and identity formation will illuminate important findings about the fractions within the Vietnamese community.

On a similar note, I found interesting intersections between gender and class in social practice, especially within the realm of domestic and service work and the overarching theme of sacrifice and emotional labor. First-generation Vietnamese social mobility stemmed from the emergent popularity of nail salons in the United States, but nail technicians are predominantly considered a “woman’s occupation”. Additionally, those preparing food for donations at church were primarily women committed to their communities. How is class mobility different between genders and generations, and how is this related to the valuation of different forms of labor within the Vietnamese community and American society at large? Finally, who is making the sacrifices and how does this give them different positions in the economies of sacrifice and/or

moral economy? In Abbots' (2016) study, she considers how these new avenues for gendered labor may also introduce avenues for role reimagination. Thereafter, with more research, questions around gender and class dispositions can be assessed for possible new conceptions of membership as well as social stratification.

Finally, I also briefly referred to the panethnic Asian-American identity and how that is tied to the racialization of my interviewees and their political organization. Given the hate incidents that re-emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, additional research needs to be pursued on the racialization (specifically pathologization) of Asian-American groups and the consequences of essentializing panethnic models for identity formation. While panethnic and national associations are useful for making the Asian-American community legible in American society, what are some emerging pitfalls and avenues to reconcile with these fractured identities? In fact, the creation of national cuisines to advertise ethnic food in American society has led to the flattening of regional nuances and other variations within entire cultures, further subjecting marginalized identities to the appropriating colonial gaze.

All in all, though the Vietnamese community seems invisible in their everyday activities, the reality is that their action is not legible to Western models for identity expression, belonging, and social change. As the waves continue crashing onto the shore, clashing against the seemingly impermeable walls, the stone will chip away little by little, until there is nothing left between the water and land. Through small deliberate actions, the stability of national conceptions of power and citizenship is shaken until its foundations can no longer hold the weight of illusion. And from there, the tides of change come crashing onto the shore carrying with it the Vietnamese desires for the transnational collectivities to rise above the shore.

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Appendix

I. Interview Guide

Introduction

Hi [participant name]! Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I am very excited to hear your thoughts on your experiences and perception of Vietnamese social gatherings and activities in the diaspora/community. Before I start, I would like to tell you a little about how the interview will be conducted and what you can expect from me.

Interview Guide

Let's get started!

Questions:

1. [introduce myself] Tell me about yourself.
2. How long have you lived in CA/AZ? Where did you live before? Why did you move to CA/AZ?
 - a. Where in CA/AZ do you live and why? How did you choose the neighborhood/area that you live in?
3. What was your community like growing up? Is it different from the community here in California/Arizona?
4. What do you do to spend time with other members of your community? What do you do to have fun?
 - a. What are common social activities in your community? How frequently do you participate in community activities?
 - b. Do you enjoy the social events in your community? Why? Why not?
 - i. What do you look forward to at community events?
 - c. Are you a part of any social or cultural groups?
 - i. How involved are you?
 - ii. What are your roles and how do they relate to your connection with the community?
 - iii. Why did you decide to join them?
5. What are parties and celebrations like? What are common occasions for celebration and partying (e.g. holidays in the US versus Vietnamese events) and what are the prominent activities that you partake in?
 - a. What are the most important things to you about these gatherings?
 - i. What do you look forward to at parties?
 - ii. How do these activities (for example: the role of food, drinking, karaoke and dance, etc) speak to you and your identity as a Vietnamese person?
 - b. [If drinking if mentioned] Do you or any of your close ones drink?

- i. If so, what is the experience like drinking? What does it mean to you?
 1. Do you and your close ones primarily drink in social situations?
 - a. If so, why?
 - b. If not, why?
 - ii. If not, why don't you drink? How do you feel about drinking and people who drink?
- c. [If food is mentioned] What food is commonly served at these gatherings (e.g. traditional Vietnamese food, American food for US holidays)?
 - i. What is your favorite food at these gatherings? Where do you get it from (how accessible is it—is it catered or home made)?
 - ii. How often do you eat this food?
 - iii. What food is served on different occasions? What do they mean to you?
- d. [If karaoke is mentioned] Where do you usually do karaoke? Do you do it as a large group?
 - i. What are your favorite karaoke songs?
 - ii. How often do you do karaoke at gatherings?
 - iii. Do you pair karaoke with other activities? Which ones and why?
6. What are other activities that you feel are common in your community?
 - a. Why do you think that it is common/popular?
 - b. Do you enjoy these activities?
 - i. If so, why do you think so? Why are they important to you and how do they speak to your identity as a Vietnamese person?
 - ii. If not, why not? What turns you away from these activities and what do you like to do instead?
 1. How do your social activities speak to your identity as a Vietnamese person?
7. Have you been to Vietnam?
 - a. If so, how often do you visit Vietnam? What are the major differences you notice about life and socialization there and here?
8. [If from Vietnam or lived extensively in Vietnam] What was the party scene like before coming to the US? What has stayed the same, and what has changed?
9. [In case they didn't share in question 1: Demographic questions] How old are you? What is your gender identity? What is your income and education level? Are you currently a student?

II. Interviewee Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation	Education	Student?	State	Vietnam?
Tuyet	58	F	Finance	College	No	CA	Yes
Brian	22	M	Unemployed	College	No	MI	No
Noah	24	M	Engineer	College	No	NY	No
Kim	62	F	Nail Technician	College	No	AZ	Yes