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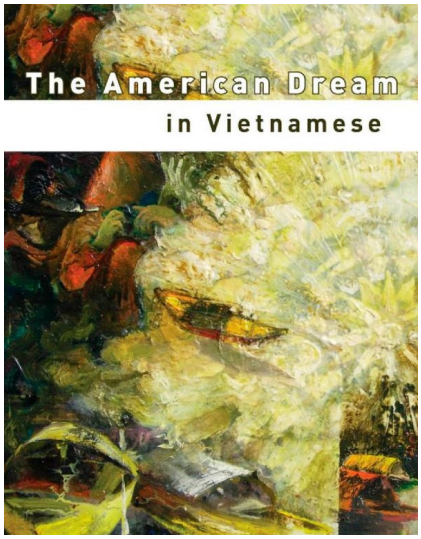
The American Dream in Vietnamese

Nhi T. Lieu

Interviewed by AnVi Hoang
https://diacritics.org/2012/05/nhi-t-lieu-authenticity-is-not-ever-reachable/
May 9, 2012



Nhi T. Lieu is assistant professor of American Studies, Asian American Studies, and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. She is author of *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011). Her other published works have appeared in *Frontiers: Journal of Women Studies* and *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*. Her new book project tentatively titled, *Beautiful Citizenship: Transnational Asian/American Embodied Practices in the Age of Neoliberal Capitalism*, explores how the strategies of consumption in private and personal choices in fashion and beauty reconstitute cultural and racial identities while transforming meanings of citizenship through embodied practices.

Nhi Lieu is such a happy and cheerful academic professor. She laughed more than any professors I've met before – great energy to be around. Her research is an important contribution to the understanding of the Vietnamese diasporic community in the U.S., for both scholars in the field and the community itself.

Anvi Hoàng: There are a lot of interesting stories in your book. In a nutshell, what is *American Dream in Vietnamese* about?
Nhi T. Lieu: [Laughed]. It is about a lot of things. It is about the formation of identity of an immigrant/diasporic group. It looks at popular culture and other forms of cultural productions as sites of study. What's new and interesting about this project is that it looks at this refugee/minority population through a different lens – it looks at everyday life and the ways in which popular culture and things in the everyday affect the social, cultural, political aspects of a community.

AH: **Did you have Vietnamese audience in mind while you were writing this book? Who were they?**
NTL: My parents [laughed]. I wrote the book for an academic audience and I hope that the new generation of students at the universities would learn about the experiences of their own community, and people who are part of this community – some of them are actively participating in these cultural forms not really understanding the context of how they emerged, not really understanding what it means to feel nostalgia toward the homeland. A

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American Dream in Vietnamese...

lot of these students have no connection to Vietnam except through forms of popular culture. They'll go to the *áo dài* pageant, they'll watch *Paris By Night*, and listen to the music, but not really understand the context of how, for example, the music from Khanh Ly emerged, or why the diaspora has nostalgic longings for the homeland.

Author and critic Nhi Lieu

AH: **What is the importance of the music variety shows to the Vietnamese community and their cultural identity formation?**

NTL: They operate in very complicated ways but for the most part, they work by connecting to what they define as "culture." Part of it is a move to preserve Vietnamese culture; part of it is an understanding of what "Vietnamese-ness" is about. In these videos you can learn a lot about history, language, and culture. Even the comedy skits are indicative of the issues that the community faces. And they are meaningful in those ways because they reflect but also capture what the community is experiencing as it assimilates and acculturates into the United States. And these forms are not only about cultural preservation, they're also about engaging with U.S. popular culture. There are a lot of performances that connect and bring in aspects of American culture, which are then folded into the acts. In the book, I discuss how Paris by Night uses West Side Story, for example, as it is reinterpreted for the Vietnamese audience – it is like multiple re-appropriations of American culture that then gets rendered as Vietnamese.

AH: **You mentioned in the book the overlapping diasporas between the Vietnamese and the Chinese when Little Sai Gon was built. Did you see it played out in the music variety shows?**

NTL: Yes and no. I think they were not able to really compete with the sheer abundance of the films that were produced in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and now Korea. So what happens in the shows themselves is that there was an effort to engage with and connect to – because there is no way they can compete with these forms of culture. So they align themselves with Korean productions, for example, instead of challenging them. What they did was team up with the people producing Korean popular culture and they went to perform in Korea. Incorporating these other forms were a way to add to the Vietnamese experience – but not the Vietnamese from Vietnam experience, the Vietnamese *American* experience – that is also a statement of modernity. In this sense, "We're modernized and we want to be modern the way Korea is modernizing." There is also a Vietnamese Americanness in these cultural productions that places a stake in diasporic Vietnamese-ness. It is not just about Vietnamese in Vietnam – it's actually against the Vietnamese in Vietnam. It is about the diaspora and its strength in forging a diasporic identity with Vietnamese communities in the other nations that are modernizing as well.

AH: **Is there a strong Chinese influence in those videos?**

NTL: There is a distinction and I think the war is what distinguishes the Vietnamese experience from the Chinese experience. The war in itself really takes precedence when Vietnamese Americans are articulating their identity. The Chinese see the war as having an impact on their identity but I think I might have argued that, and I am citing Chuong Hoang Chung's study where he says that immigrants who are of Chinese descent have travelled so much, that the Chinese have picked up and left, picked up and left, picked up and left wherever they've gone. This is part of their migration – you can make that argument for Vietnamese Americans, too, now given Katrina and all other recent events where they picked up and left. They're part of this narrative of migration in recent developments. But the fact that the war is so much more meaningful for Vietnamese immigrants has a lot to do with their own identity.

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It is funny with the way my mom is always separating Chinese and Vietnamese through food [laughed]. She would say that, "Vietnamese food is based more on fish sauce and Chinese food is more soy sauce based." It is the most barebones and symbolic way of thinking about identity through this food connection. Even in something as simple as *áo dài* – but *áo dài* is totally influenced by the Chinese and the French – it is always articulated as authentically Vietnamese. It is interesting that Vietnamese have claims over these *things*. So the war and the meaning of the war then separate Vietnamese immigrants from Chinese immigrants because Chinese immigrants see the war as part of another process that induces their migration, whereas the Vietnamese have a real stake in their national identity that relates to the war.

AH: **Could you talk about the symbolic meaning of the beauty pageants in Vietnamese communities?**
NTL: [Laughed]. Beauty pageants are one of the ways in which the community engages with gender, with ideas about self and women's place in the community. They're also symbolic of other dynamics that occur such as the symbolic display of culture. A lot of it is symbolic for women. This is the only avenue for women to showcase their abilities to retain and navigate culture in the diaspora. This is one instant where women can be perceived as having power as cultural bearers of the lost nation, and as newly assimilated subjects in American society and throughout the diaspora. Beauty pageants are very meaningful because it allows the community to showcase what they perceive to be authentic cultural forms. It is a display of pride in the community.

AH: Could you talk about the Vietnamese cultural identity struggle involved in the building and naming of the area now called Little Sai Gon (over a Pan-Asian American village)?
NTL: My argument is that it is part of this recognition of the Vietnamese community and their struggles to forge an identity in the United States as subjects who experienced the war. The mobilization occurred because they didn't want to disappear – they want to assert this distinctive identity as refugee subjects of a war that Americans failed to help them with. The nit-picky ways of articulating Vietnamese-ness demonstrate that there are larger issues involved here, because Vietnamese culture is something that is constructed, as is Chinese culture. These are subtle constructions but both ethnic communities are invested in their own political stakes. So it is about a political articulation of Vietnamese-ness.

AH: **What is authentic about Vietnamese culture?**
NTL: I don't believe there is such a thing [laughed]. It is totally constructed and that's why I am arguing that there is a concerted effort to make it authentically Vietnamese. I think it is important to contextualize it within history, especially of the war. This experience is unique because of the war and there are historical connections to be made. We can claim something as Vietnamese but the historical origin can never really be traced.

AH: **Your study shows that Vietnamese identity in the U.S. is formed by the social political circumstances many of which are out of the control of the Vietnamese?**
NTL: Yes. The Vietnamese have tried as much as they can to control it but a lot of it is out of their control. The fact that they are considered as a refugee group in need of assistance is not something they can do a lot about. They can control it in ways that are productive to their own interests. For example they mobilize against communism under those kinds of arguments.

AH: **What is the future like for the Vietnamese community?**
NTL: In the conclusion, I try to engage with the future and what it means for the community. I think one of the interesting aspects of what's going on currently is there's a lot of back and forth, the transnational exchange, that is in the realm of the *private*. [Laughed]. People are doing these things but they don't want to admit to it. Because in the end, this community is still against communism to its core. Until this nation that they once

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called *home* becomes a liberal democracy, people are not going to *publically* recognize it as something legitimate.

AH: **What is the relation of the homeland and the diaspora in terms of efforts to look for happiness?**
NTL: In my new project, I am examining images of bridal photography to see how they engage with ideas about assimilation and modernity. I study how it is part of this larger process in which immigrants are looking to the homeland for authenticity. The gaze is multi-directional in that the people in the homeland are looking to the West to see how they would construct their images of happiness in marriage. At the same time, immigrants in the United States are looking back to Asia to see how they can authenticate their experiences because having been here a decade or two they are no longer in touch with their authenticity. So on their wedding day they decide, " I think I want to go ethnic" [laughed].
This is part of how I conceive culture too – culture is always a beautiful set of ideas, that it is not something authentic. Authenticity is not ever reachable, in a sense.

The 1.5 Vietnamese-American Generation

Vietnamese novelist **Lan Cao** artfully illuminates the destructive power of the Vietnam War through the eyes of a young girl and her father in her latest book,*The Lotus and the Storm*. In a beautifully crafted novel filled with love, pain, and betrayal, Cao transports the reader back to the troubling times of the twentieth century and the impact it had on the South Vietnamese. Author of critically acclaimed *Monkey Bridge*, Cao spoke at an ASNC and Mechanics' Institute event on September 10 about her newest book from the perspective of the "1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans," who were born in Vietnam but moved to the U.S. at an early age. Together with award winning journalist and short story writer **Andrew Lam**, Cao described growing up in the shadow of the Vietnam War after fleeing her country with memories of love and terror.
For Cao, *The Lotus and the Storm* is not just about the loss of a country, or the journey from the East to the West, but also why Vietnam was lost at the end of the War. To her, there is a greater purpose in understanding the reasoning behind why the United States retreated and the impact it had on the Vietnamese population. Cao describes her novel as an attempt to "introduce the perspective of a country that served the geopolitical purposes of US foreign policy" and what happened to Vietnam when it no longer served the interest of the superpower.
Cao was surrounded by the War for her entire childhood and feels "her past never left her." Despite leaving Vietnam in 1975 at the age of 13 she was obsessed with the war because unlike other Vietnamese American fighters, most of her family fought in the War. However after coming to the United States, a feeling of discomfort kept her story and her perspective on the War in the shadows. It was as if "I had left Vietnam but Vietnam had lever left me" she says. Childhood memories, both good and bad, continued to appear as if they happened yesterday, and helped her find inspiration to write her novel. For example, Cao immediately thinks of firecrackers during Tet when she sees red while walking down the street. Or if she sees smoke, she "literally think[s] of the Tet offensive." Cao's ability to illustrate relationships that humanize the war distinguishes her from her peers. Cao fought to write against mainstream academia on the Vietnam War, wanting to break away from the conventional in-depth research and analysis and add an experience-driven point of view on the War. Combining stories from family members and close friends with personal experiences, she helps readers understand the intimate, traumatic, and personal quest to survive.

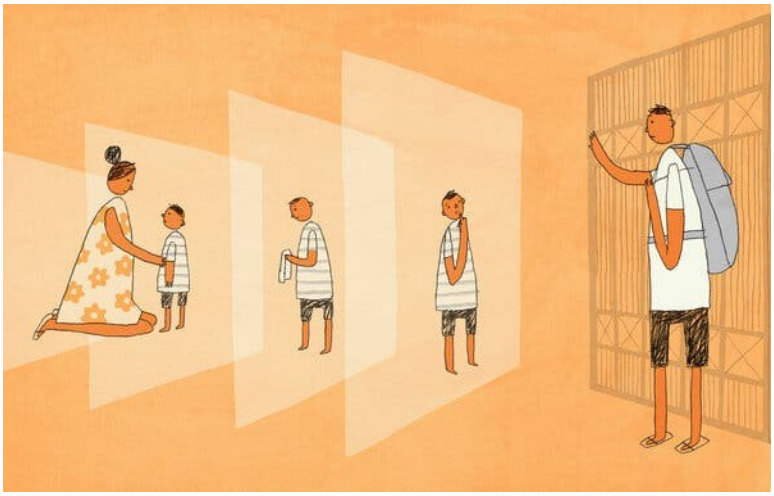
Why Did She Leave Me There?

KACEY VU SHAP
July 24, 2020
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/style/modern-love-adoption-vietnam-why-did-she-leave-me-there.html

The gate to the orphanage was smaller than I remembered. Nearly 25 years had passed since I lived there. I wondered if coming back was a good idea.

My best friends Phu, Francis and Will had planned this trip to Vietnam and invited me to come. I met them 15 years earlier when I was in high school. They were in college and had started a support group for young, gay Asian men.

At the time, I was rocking blonde highlights, blue contacts and Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirts with baggy ripped jeans. Phu and Francis thought I was trying too hard, but they let me tag along. Now they had become my overprotective brothers, nagging me about everything.



My friends knew I had lived in an orphanage near Ho Chi Minh City and suggested, as part of our trip, that we try to visit. More than that, they wanted to do a Kickstarter campaign to raise money for the orphans who now lived there.

I thought that was crazy. We were set to leave in a week. And I had no desire to return to a place I had spent most of my life trying to forget.

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” Francis said. “You won’t be alone. We’ll be with you.”

They were able to talk me into it, and within days we had raised more than $5,000 to buy clothes, toys and other essentials.

The next week, as we unloaded the donations from a rented truck and made our way inside the orphanage, we were greeted by tiny faces and bony, outstretched hands. How strange that I once had been among those scared, excited faces vying for attention from a stranger like me.

Back then, the big building was dilapidated, the white paint covered in dirt, the walls battered. It had since been fixed up and expanded, but one thing remained: the distinct odor of baby powder, sweat, urine, decay, hopelessness and despair.

Even though I was 5 when I arrived, I was too small to quarter with the older children but too big to be with the babies, so they put me with those with deformities, missing limbs or mental illnesses. The memories came rushing back as my friends and I walked inside. My eyes began to swell, my heart pounded and my anxiety kicked in. Before long, I was fleeing to the gated entrance, my friends calling after me.

As a child, whenever I told people I was adopted, I used to say I came premade: I simply appeared on one summer

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Why Did She Leave Me There?...

night at the Baltimore airport to be greeted by my mom, dad and sister, who were bearing candies, flowers and kisses. It was easier to sanitize my story by speaking only of my life as Kacey, who was loved and wanted, than to tell people of my life as Vu, who was abandoned and undesired.

I never knew my birth mother, who died when I was 2 in the delivery room along with my brother. I hardly knew my birth father, a migrant worker who was never around. When I was 5, my older sister drowned in a river near my grandmother's home. I watched from 10 feet away as she thrashed and then disappeared in the murky water. I had pleaded with her to play in the river with the other children, despite my grandmother forbidding us from going when she wasn't around. I wished it had been me who drowned that day.

Then it was just my grandmother and I living together in a poor farming village in southern Vietnam. If my grandmother were a cat, I was her tail, because wherever she went, I followed. I loved being near her in the kitchen. Exotic spices mingling with seasoned meat and fresh herbs would cocoon us in their delicious embrace as I peppered my grandmother with questions about our favorite subject: my mother.

"Grandma, you have my eyes, my nose and my cheeks," I said. "Do you think my mother also looked like me?" "Of course, silly! Who do you think gave you and your mother such handsome features?" She beamed her toothless grin. Then she stopped chopping vegetables and said, "Can I tell you a big secret? Your mother was my favorite of all my children. She always tried to make everyone laugh. I want you to be good, like your mother. Yes?" "OK," I said.

After my sister died, I learned that my father had died too, and it wasn't long before my grandmother told me to pack my things for a trip. I was delighted, having never been on a trip before.

Eventually we arrived at a big white building full of children. After touring the place, my grandmother seemed reluctant to leave. Finally, she bent down and said, "I am going home, but you are staying here."

I stood there, frozen.

My grandmother cupped my cheeks with her leathery hands and directed my face toward hers, her normally fierce eyes filled with sadness. She took a floral-patterned handkerchief from her neck and wrapped it around mine. It was her favorite, infused with her familiar scent. Then she stood up and walked away without looking back.

I tried to follow, but strong hands gripped me. I screamed for my grandmother, begging her to take me home. After she left, I waited for days at the gated entrance, hoping for her return.

Some months later, a Jewish couple in Northern Virginia was in the final stages of an adoption that fell through. Devastated, on the verge of giving up, they received my photo from the adoption agency and decided they wanted me as their child, a difficult process that took two years. I was entirely unaware of my adoption until the day I was taken to the airport. I would later learn that of the hundreds of children at the orphanage, only a handful made it to America. Most were babies. I was 7.

A quarter-century has passed since my grandmother left me that day. I still carry her handkerchief safely tucked away with me wherever I go, but her scent has since faded. There are so many things I have wanted to share with her of my American life: my loving parents, friends, dog, Los Angeles apartment and freshly minted Ph.D. in social

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psychology. There are also so many questions I have wanted to ask her.
Whenever I told people I was adopted, I didn't tell them about the day I was abandoned, or of my fear that my friends and family would discover that I had been worthless enough to deserve that.

Now, my friends had seen it. They knew. When they came out and found me by the gate, they asked why I had left so abruptly.

"I knew that once you saw my orphanage," I said, talking fast, "you'd think less of me and wouldn't want to be my friends anymore."

"Seriously?" Phu said. "We traveled across the globe, covered in mosquito bites, soaked in sweat, and you're worried we might think less of you? We've been subjected to worse. There is Kacey who is always late, Kacey with a big head and Kacey who chases after emotionally unavailable men. If all that didn't scare us off, nothing will."

My friends surrounded me, wrapping me in their warm embrace.

"You're family," Francis said. "We love you. Besides, being friends with you is like catching herpes. It's very contagious, easily treatable, but impossible to get rid of. And we've been treating it for over 15 years now."

Then Will said, "And maybe your grandmother did love you. Maybe letting you go was her final act of love, so you could have a chance at a better life."

It's something I had long wondered. Had she left me because I was a burden, or to spare me from a brutal life of poverty?

My friends then told me that while I was outside, they had been able to find my grandmother's last known address in the orphanage's records. There was a chance she still might be there, only 30 minutes away.

If my grandmother were still living there, I could have my answer. I thought about that, and also about the love and support of my friends, family and others who had made this possible.

"No," I said. "I don't need to know her address. We can go now." For once, I could choose not to be defined by my abandonment.

With that, we left the orphanage and spilled out into Ho Chi Minh City, where the sweet scent of sizzling pork mingled with the laughter of children chasing each other, as if the streets were one giant playground.