

A STUDY OF VIETNAMESE DIASPORA INTELLECTUALS

FROM VICTIMIZATION TO TRANSNATIONALISM: A STUDY OF VIETNAMESE
DIASPORA INTELLECTUALS IN NORTH AMERICA

BY

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Abstract

The objective of this thesis is to examine the issue of identity construction among Vietnamese intellectuals in North America. How is the way in which they construct their identity connected to their position(s) on the Vietnam War, anti-communist community discourse, and memory/commemoration, especially with respect to the contentious debate about which flag represents Vietnam today? Vietnamese Diaspora Intellectuals (VDI) are an understudied group, and I hope my research will help to fill this gap, at least in part, and also serve as a catalyst for further investigation.

In my attempt to address this neglected area of study, I am bringing together two bodies of literature: diaspora studies and literature on identity formation among intellectuals. The intersection between these two areas of scholarship has received relatively little attention in the past, and it deserves further consideration, because intellectuals are so often in a position to serve as carriers and disseminators of new ideas, as well as facilitators in conflict resolution. Using a qualitative approach to my data collection, I conducted life history narrative interviews with 32 respondents in Canada and the U.S, as well as some participant observation research of community events. The majority of my interviewees were academics, but some were also journalists/writers, as well as community activists/representatives.

A key element of diaspora research, as Cohen and Watts have argued, involves an examination of the “victim narrative”. My project considers the victim narrative in the context of the Vietnamese experience and evaluates the usefulness of such a narrative in terms of community politics and identity formation. My interviewees were often

skeptical about the utility of such a narrative, and in some cases, viewed it as a thinly veiled mechanism of control, which serves the interests of community leaders, but may in fact, hinder the progress of the Vietnamese diaspora population. They contemplated some possibilities for transcending such a narrative, which could involve the creation of “free spaces”, permitting the expression of other points of view. As we will see, my interviewees reflected on the irony inherent in this situation. Many Vietnamese risked their lives in pursuit of the democratic ideal of freedom, but some of my participants discovered that the attempt to impose an overarching narrative – the rejection of communism – in fact led to the very antithesis of that ideal.

In this connection, my research complicates Cohen’s work on diaspora, which assumes that all diasporic communities speak with one voice with regard to defining moments in their history. Cohen argues that members of such groups, by definition, shared a common past, an agreed-upon way of commemorating that past, and a common destiny. I argue that Cohen has oversimplified the situation. My research demonstrates that there is no such thing as unanimity. Vietnamese diaspora intellectuals do not simply navigate *academic* “interaction ritual chains” as Randall Collins has asserted, they must navigate several - often *competing* interaction rituals - which extend to their roles as members of their ethnic community as well. How do my interviewees deal with the inevitable conflicts and tensions engendered by such competing interaction rituals?

Finally, what are the possibilities of moving forward, of generating a new narrative, which will transcend the rigid and restrictive anticommunist discourse dominant in community politics thus far? And what role can Vietnamese diaspora intellectuals play in

this regard? My research indicates that they are uniquely qualified to facilitate the process of *rapprochement*, because the life of intellectuals demands a high degree of reflexivity and thus better enables them to evaluate the merits of conflicting viewpoints. My hope is to inspire future research – not only in the Vietnamese community, but on and for other diasporic groups as well. My work extends Neil Gross’ theory of the “intellectual self-concept” (ISC) (which focuses on American academics) by introducing the notion of the *diaspora* intellectual self-concept (DISC). Such concept allows us to include analysis of intellectuals with significant transnational connections who are dealing with racial and ethnic tensions in their new homeland while establishing themselves as professionals and citizens in a new cultural and political context.

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There's an old English adage that I learned when I came over to North America: "behind every successful man there's a woman". I wish to extend this saying with my own variation: "behind every successful Ph.D candidate, there is an exhausted supervisory committee".

Thus, first and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Neil McLaughlin, who once told me that a good supervisor offers "unrelenting criticism and unlimited support" – and it has been my privilege to have received both from him. I am thankful for his constant prodding. He pushed me to go beyond the limits of what I thought I could do, but at the same time he always had my back, and he made sure that I had fun and laughed along the way. His dedication and commitment to his craft, especially to mentorship and to doing public sociology, has been inspiring - and I can only hope to follow in his footsteps.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ISC—Intellectual Self-Concept

DISC—Diaspora Intellectual Self-Concept

VDI—Vietnamese Diaspora Intellectuals

IRC—Interaction Ritual Chain

ARVN—Army of the Republic of Vietnam (also known as South Vietnamese Army)

VCP—Vietnamese Communist Party

VN—Vietnam

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

A Community 's Coming of Age

To understand the present, it is necessary to revisit the past. The following stories are emblematic of the Vietnamese community's maturation and their contributions to their adopted homelands - in both the U.S and Canada. Let's look at where they are now and then examine the journey that made these accomplishments possible, and the underlying connections between them. We will see that all of these stories arose from a shared experience of trauma and loss, which was then transformed into a new beginning – one that is nevertheless deeply connected to the past.

Elderly Care Facility

On August 12, 2014, Nicolas Keung, immigration reporter for *The Toronto Star*, published a report on a hoped-for old age home to serve the needs of the older members of the 100,000 strong Vietnamese community in the GTA. Ordinarily, a report on a proposed old age home would elicit little attention, but for the Vietnamese community, this is indeed a milestone. Keung explains that a particular kind of facility is needed in order to properly serve Vietnamese seniors. The community thus recently purchased a 5.6-acre, \$2.8-million on Pine Valley Drive. It is hoped that the 200-bed Golden Age Village for the Elderly will be completed in five years and will be then ready to care for the older members of the late 1970's to late 1980's boat people migration who arrived after the fall of Saigon. Kien Le, vice chair of the board, explains the situation in this way:

Most of these seniors in their 60's and 70's do not speak English. Their second language is French. They don't have much option. The food at other nursing homes is not to their taste palette. They feel cut off and depressed. It's not good for their mental wellbeing. That affects their physical health. That's the main reason for us to start this project.

This project was launched in 2012 by a group of volunteers who had been running recreational programs in a nearby office building. They soon realized that such makeshift facilities were not adequate to the needs of the growing senior population. They were also aware of the difficulties involved in attempting to integrate older Vietnamese into homes or programs, which were designed to serve members of other groups. As Thanh Nha Nguyen, a member of the board working on the \$40-million project expressed it: "I have volunteered to visit Vietnamese seniors in other (mainstream) nursing homes. They feel so isolated and depressed. It feels so sad. Now is our turn to take care of them". She continues: "Our elderly sacrificed their lives to give their children, grandchildren, freedom and a better life in Canada. They worked in factories to send us to school and had no time to learn English".

In Vietnam, it is customary for older family members to be looked after at home by children and grandchildren. Therefore, the idea of sending one's parents to live elsewhere is a radical departure from accepted traditions. Yet, this change is necessary, given the absence of an extended family in North America, as well as the fact that even if one lives in the same household with a son, daughter, or grandchildren, they cannot be available constantly. Thus, Thi Chau Vo, age 91, who was sponsored by her son and came to Canada in the early 1990's, is aware that her family cannot be completely responsible for her. "My son and daughter both work in factories, making airplane parts.

My son-in-law works on computers, and my daughter-in-law works in a nail salon. Everyone works, and I'm always home alone". She is on a waiting list of 600 people, hoping to find a place in the facility that has yet to be built. She continues: "My friends can't drive, and we don't get to see each other often. I like the idea of a place where old people sharing the same language and culture can spend time together".

It may seem ironic that the need for an old age home should be a cause for celebration. Many of us associate this with a decline in mental and physical abilities and other end-of-life issues, but for the Vietnamese community, it is mark of accomplishment because it demonstrates the resilience and tenacity of their people. The Vietnamese have made their presence felt in Canada for almost 40 years, and to have the resources necessary to take care of their elderly is almost a joyous occasion. The simple fact of needing an old age home in the first place, signifies that your community has survived, that you are visible, and that the younger members have the means to help their elders. It is a sign of what Raymond Breton refers to as "institutional completeness"¹. In other words, it is especially important for recent arrivals as well as older people who may be unable to assimilate fully, to be part of an existing structure, which not only offers them services, but also provides them with a place to "be". Breton emphasizes the importance of language retention and ethnic community participation in this respect, and as we can see, for older Vietnamese it is vital that they maintain interpersonal ties. As Dr. Kien Le points out:

¹ From: Breton, R. (1964). Institutional Completeness of Ethnic Communities and Personal Relations of Immigrants. *American Journal of Sociology*, 70,

[O]ther ethnic communities have built their own specialized nursing homes, but we weren't strong and rich enough. Boat people left everything behind and came to Canada with nothing. It took a long time for us to get on our feet. We got here. We took care of our family, children, aunts, and uncles before we had the spare money to help the community. This is the time for us to give back.

First Vietnamese-born General

The notion of giving back to one's community and one's adopted country is evident in the personal history and achievements of Col. Viet Luong, who is the first Vietnamese general in the U.S military. On August 6, 2014, at Fort Hood, Texas, Col. Viet Luong was promoted to the rank of general officer. Luong is the first Cavalry Division's deputy-commanding general for maneuver. Luong and his family escaped Vietnam in 1975. He was an infantry officer and a 1987 graduate of the University of Southern California. He has commanded a battalion of 82nd Airborne Division paratroopers in Iraq and led the 101st Airborne Division's 3rd Brigade Combat Team, the legendary Rakkasans, into combat into Afghanistan. Luong observes:

It's a personal honor for me to be promoted to the rank of general officer, but I don't want the promotion to be too much about me. It's a tribute to my soldiers and (noncommissioned officers), the folks who worked to get me where I am.

Luong is grateful for the opportunity granted to him as a U.S citizen. As he said: "It's a testament to what this nation stands for, and her ideals, and the opportunities my family has gotten". Luong is the only son in a family of 8 children, and was born right outside Saigon. His father was in the military as well and served in the Vietnamese Marine Corps. When the Luong family came to America, they settled in Los Angeles and started their lives from nothing. They were determined to succeed and eventually all eight children went to college. Luong feels that his experiences as a transplanted

American have profoundly changed his life. He speaks of the need to give back to his country. He says “there’s no sense of entitlement...there’s a sense of service, for me, to be able to give back to our nation for all the opportunities it’s given us, saving us from harm’s way, but also the opportunity to assimilate and move up through education”.

Luong has indeed received a high honor from his country, which reflect both his abilities and the influence of the Vietnamese community.

Regardless of how one feels about the ethical questions involved in participation in the military (and the politics of these particular wars), it is fair to say that Luong has served with honor and his community has every right to be proud of him and by extension, proud of itself and what they have given to North American life. But these two stories, one which involves the building an old age home and the other which speaks to military and professional accomplishments, are part of the “now” - August 2014 – what of the past, what of the beginnings of the Vietnamese community in North America? In order to grasp the significance of the “now”, we must go back. In order to further this project, and in so doing, to better understand myself and my own positionality, it was necessary for me to reflect on my own story, which is also one of loss and rebirth.

A Refugee’s Story

The Fall of Saigon

I remember vividly that fateful day, April 30th, 1975 – just like yesterday. I was a child at the time with a barely developed memory, but with all the chaos and commotion that went on in my family, I knew that it was anything but an ordinary day. I remember

my parents and older siblings were debating about which area of the house would be the safest for us to hide. Finally it was decided that we should all be together under the cement platform where we did all our cooking – sort of like a little ‘cave’. I did not fully understand why we needed to hide, but as a child, I thought it was exciting because it seemed like we were playing a game of hide and seek with the whole family. Then my mother went to lie down to rest in another area of the house that was just meters away, then I heard a loud boom sound, like a big explosion of some sort, and that’s when I heard the shrill wail from our next door neighbors. A few moments later we learned that their son was blown-up when he ventured to open the door of his house to look outside and a grenade went off right in front of both of our houses.

After the Fall of Saigon, it was an incredibly tense period. Our life was consumed by fear. We were always fearful that someone was constantly monitoring us. At any given moment, day or night, there was the possibility that government officials could burst in to search our home and take away anything they wanted, including family members. Our family background was considered “undesirable” because we were Catholics who fled south in 1954 as part of the “Operation Passage to Freedom”. This fact alone indicated that we were against the communist regime. My father and my oldest brother both fought in the South Vietnamese Army, and we also had a house, which placed us in the ‘ownership class’. All of this made our family a target for the new regime.

We were afraid of sitting down together as a family, because that would be considered an act of ‘assembly’ and could have been taken negatively by the local authorities. As Catholics, it was a practice to sit down and say prayers together, and I

remember we couldn't do that but had to walk around while saying our prayers, which looked ridiculous. My father used to love listening to this one particular Vietnamese singer, Thanh Thuy, but he was so afraid to listen to her music, and when he did, it had to be turned down really low, almost to the point where we all had to be quiet and huddle around the stereo. This was because this type of music was pre-1975 and it was considered to be a kind of “depraved culture” (or “văn hóa đồi trụy” in Vietnamese). There were always policemen sitting at a little family-owned restaurant right across from our house for hours on end to keep their eyes on us. And because of their constant presence, we felt that we always had to keep the door to our house open as a way to let them know that we had nothing to hide. We made it a habit to go to bed really early because only then we could really talk, because all the lights were then turned off and the door was also closed.

When the new government started to experiment with socialism and introduced collectivization, life became even more unbearable. We had to ration everything, from the food we eat to the things we used at home. Our main staple of rice was drastically reduced and so we had to regularly mix in with croix seeds (“bo bo” in Vietnamese) and manioc root (“khoai mi” in Vietnamese) in order to have enough food to sustain ourselves. We were only allowed to buy a certain amount of the bare basics based on the number of people in the family. I remember this one particular time – it must have been an occasion of some sort – there was a whole pig that was just butchered, and every family in the neighborhood had to draw a little folded piece of paper out of a hat. On that

piece of paper was written which part of the pig and the amount of meat your family could buy.

I remember as children we had to wear the triangular red scarves when we went to school. It was a symbol of communism and by requiring kids to wear the scarves, it served as a stepping-stone to join the party later on. We were punished if we didn't show up in school with the scarves around our necks. But the problem with wearing this scarf was that my family was against this. I would get in trouble if I left the house with the scarf on. So what I did was to roll it up neatly and put it in my school bag, and only when I walked far enough from the house and could not see anyone would I then take it out and wear it.

The Journey

Six years after the war ended, it was decided – after we had saved enough money to pay for our spots on the boat - that I would flee, along with an older brother and sister. I had “volunteered” for the trip, but of course, I was too young to realize what that meant. There were 124 of us crowded into this tiny fishing boat where there was only enough room to sit with our knees tucked neatly below our chins – we were packed like sardines. A lot of us, myself included, became very sick. We ran out of water quickly. In fact, I don't think the people who organized this voyage brought enough water on board because they wanted to maximize the number of people they could fit on the boat and perhaps there was also the thinking that we would not be at sea that long. There was no food of course, and water now was also rationed. Some started to boil sea water to try to get the

salt out and drank it, and a few others even began to try their own urine. Fright started to grip us, as all we could see was nothingness and all we could feel was our smallness in an immense merciless sea. A few managed to gather enough strength to pray out loud and others slowly joined in as well – anything that gave us hope and took our minds away from what was happening at that time was good. A woman gave birth to baby girl and people frantically cried for help. Fortunately a nurse came forward and helped to deliver the baby, using some rusted tools available on the boat to cut the umbilical cord. We were met with good fortune when, on our third day, a big ship spotted us and brought us to Indonesia.

After the initial feeling of joy of having escaped death, the worries began to set in - as many of us did not know what was going to happen next. Life, it seemed, was in limbo for us all, particularly for those with no family members to sponsor them who had to wait for a long time to be accepted for resettlement under the “humanitarian” category. Ironically for me, time spent in the refugee camp was perhaps some of the best years of my life, and most likely being a kid helped in this regard because like any other children, I played whenever I could and had no concept of time or urgency. Even though we were lacking many things and were basically given the bare minimum to survive, there was a great feeling of being given a second chance at life and the realization that we were no longer living under communism. As we met with other escapees in the camp and heard stories of people being robbed, raped, and murdered, of deaths due to sickness and starvation, and the horrifying accounts of those who had to resort to cannibalism to

survive - we were very grateful about our “fortunate” misfortunes, for this is a story of life rather than one of death.

People bonded quickly with each other, regardless of their background or other differences. We were in this together. We made it. We came through. The only thing that seemed to matter most for all of us was the sacred word *freedom* and the fact that life for us was no longer enshrouded with fear.

Coming To America

We made several applications in the refugee camp to countries in which we wanted to settle, but indicated America as our top choice. At the time, unless you already had family members from countries other than the U.S to sponsor you, you usually ended up going to America. All you needed to do to be accepted by U.S immigration was to prove that you were genuine refugees, which meant that your reasons for seeking asylum were political and not economic in nature. This was not difficult since that was the reason why we risked our lives and made that journey. The one problem, however, was that most of us left under very chaotic conditions and in secrecy (or by bribing officials), and we did not have the proper documentation to show as proof for our case, and so many people ended up staying in the camp much longer.

I remember after having waited for a long time we finally heard the announcement that we were up for an interview with U.S immigration officers. My brother began to draft out what he was going to say at the interview - rehearsing over and over our reasons for fleeing Vietnam, and he also made sure that my sister and I would learn the script by

heart as well. He was so afraid that we would get rejected and not be allowed to come to America - which of course, was the country where almost everyone wanted to go because we heard wonderful stories about America. The Vietnamese had been inundated with stories about American culture and the American way of life. After several interviews and after having spent three years languishing in different refugee camps in Indonesia, our dream of *coming to America* came true.

We ended up settling in a small town in Virginia, which at the time had only two other Vietnamese women. In general I integrated very well, except for the language issue. But as a kid, learning a new language did not prove to be too difficult and so I was able to pick up English quite fast once school started. I remember though that I was keenly aware of my refugee stigma, of being labeled a “stateless” person, of having no home to which I could go back. I was also very concerned about saying the “wrong” things for fear that it would upset people and would lead to comments such as “why don’t you go back to your own country”.

In that sense I was in a dual situation. Being a so-called “stateless” person made it possible for me to come to America, but at the same time, it created within me this sense of “difference” or “separateness” – which was terribly painful psychologically. I needed to belong, as all children do – but the question became “where do I belong?” It is this sense of inner fragmentation that has been so much a part of my own personal experience and the diaspora experience in general. Although I should say that at times, my “difference” made me a sort of “star” – it earned me “notoriety”. I became the focus of the class. I was asked to tell my story. I wrote essays and they were read to the whole 5th

grade class, and this was repeated for several years until slowly, my story lost that “magic” for me. I realized that I no longer wanted to be “special”. I did not want to be labeled as a “refugee” or “boat person” anymore. I wanted to be like any one else – except I was not.

Going Home²

As the plane touched down in Tan Son Nhat airport in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, my heart skipped a beat. It was the first time that I returned to the land of my birth after 28 years in exile. I had thought about this trip for a very long time. I had dreamt about it countless times. I had organized the whole trip in my head for years now, even though I did not know when or if I could make this trip at all. As a kid, I had no idea that I was leaving home for good when I said goodbye to my mother and slowly saw her frail frame disappearing in the distance. I had lost my father a year earlier, and was about to lose a “home” when my sister’s bicycle - with me in the back seat - was making its last turn around the street corner. But there I was, standing on Vietnamese soil, and most crucially, I was heading home to see my mother and other family members.

² After “Đổi Mới” in 1986 (or “Renovation”, which is very similar to the former Soviet Union’s “Glasnost”) there was a shift to what has been called a “socialist oriented market economy”. This change was felt to be necessary in order to salvage the failing Vietnamese economy, which was crippled by an inflation rate of 700%, and a lack of exportable goods to balance its growing dependence on imports. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 furthered the trend towards greater openness. Vietnamese in the diaspora gradually came to feel that it was safe to return, although at first they were under heavy surveillance. For example, all visitors were required to register with the local government office, surrender their passports, and inform authorities about all activities. These restrictions have been lessened somewhat, although visitors staying in hotels are still required to surrender their passports. Over the years, visits to Vietnam have become more common, although it is understood that political activity of any sort is highly problematic and could result in serious repercussions.

I hardly recognized anything, at least from what little I had retained in my memory. The first thing that shocked me immediately was that everything was in Vietnamese and everyone I saw was Vietnamese. A taxi took us to my home address. We got out and made our way through the alleyway, and then I stood frozen in front of my home. It was the correct address I was sure, but for some strange reason I did not feel a connection anymore. I felt mixed emotions and for those brief moments I did not know how to react. I asked a street vendor to confirm the address and its occupants, and finally decided to barge in through an open iron-sliding gate. I spent the next two weeks traveling up and down the country, using various means. Part of this was because I wanted to experience life in Vietnam, but more importantly, I wanted to be in touch with my own roots, to feel that sense of “home” again, and to find my place in a country that until that point had only existed in my dreams and nostalgic memories. In the end I came away with the realization that this was no longer my home – that, despite my connection to the past and how much it helped to define me, I had changed too much.

I realized that my story did not end when I came to North America. It did not even end when I went back to Vietnam and saw that I could not “go home again”. I saw that, like other Vietnamese in the diaspora, my story goes on, just as is the case with every other attempt at rebuilding. We see it in the story of Col. Viet Luong - the first Vietnamese born U.S Army General - and in the effort to build an old age home, which will allow the Vietnamese to care for their elders now and in the future. We are all part of the unfinished project that is America.

When I recounted my experiences, I was speaking in the voice of the little girl I was then. Now that little girl is still alive within me, but as I have pointed out, I have changed as a result of my experiences in North America. I have become reflexive, but that reflexivity comes with a cost attached. It has created a duality within me. There is a part of me that will always remain a child overtaken by events beyond my control, and there is the other part of me that has been irrevocably altered. My exposure to new ideas, particularly in the social sciences, means that I now speak in a different voice, and as a different self, one that has formed a layer over the old dormant self, which will nevertheless always be a part of me.

The reflexive self separates us from some members of the community, even as it brings us closer to others. The Vietnamese in the diaspora must continually navigate these tensions – as do many other immigrants – and this is central to the problem of identity construction. We cannot be who we once were, and we cannot go back, yet our past selves haunt us. How then do we move forward?

Reflections On The Flag

In February of 2013 I attended a Tet celebration in Montreal, which included a flag ceremony, as is the usual custom. The flag in question was of course that of South Vietnam, which is yellow with three red stripes. I later included a photograph of myself with this flag on my Facebook page as part of the commemoration of the Fall of Saigon on April 30th, 1975. I would have been reluctant to make such a politically charged statement in the past (as this would indicate my political stance), but my research into

identity construction has made me realize that these collective representations become part of us. I felt ready, in a way, which would not have been possible for me earlier, to defend my choice and accept any negative repercussions or comments. This is a small step, to be sure, but it is emblematic of the way in which the micro and the macro are intertwined, and the degree to which (as C. Wright Mills expressed it in his seminal work “The Sociological Imagination”, 1959), the personal is also the political – that is our personal experiences and the social/political world in which we live are intertwined.

I chose to share my story here as a way to experience how difficult it is for my interviewees to talk about their pasts and the traumas that they experienced. Even though the space in this thesis is reserved for objective work, I believe that through reflection and writing about my own experiences, I am able to understand and connect with my interviewees’ stories better. I cannot pretend to be completely neutral on the subject that is so close and personal to me, to be sure. I can, however, say that sufficient time has since passed and the fact that I was not old enough to have been affected by these events the way the elders might have – thus, I am more “removed” from these events emotionally and more “measured” in my understanding and analysis of the narratives about the war that exist “out there”, as well as those of my interviewees. Nevertheless, I do feel that a certain amount of emotion on my part is helpful in presenting my interviewees’ narratives more fairly and accurately. In this sense, recounting my personal history has been cathartic for me – articulating my feelings about my own past and the duality of my experience, has in a way, helped me to transcend it and thus, reconcile the two “halves” of myself. Like Andrew Lam (2005), I feel that by “speaking up”, I am able

to create “a self away from my family” and thus am putting “a frame around my history”(p. 37).

My experience could be included under the “pro-South” narrative, but one could say that it does not matter which narrative is invoked here. What is most important for many of the survivors of the tragedy is not the politics, but the profound sense of dislocation they experienced, and furthermore, the recognition that they could never count on a safe place in the world, that everything could be taken from them at any time. “Everything”, in this context, refers not only to material possessions (which can be replaced) but also to relationships - which cannot be.

On an existential level, what is key here is the loss of the ability to *trust* - in stability and in a secure future, as has been mentioned – but also one’s ability to trust other human beings. When any of us see evidence of extreme brutality, degradation and cruelty inflicted by human beings *on each other*, what are we to infer from this? A line from Steven Spielberg’s stunning film *Munich*³, which deals with issues of guilt and moral responsibility, comes to mind. At the end of the film, the hero (or is he an anti-hero?) Mossad operative Avner Kaufman confronts his superior, Ephraim, with his belief that he is being hunted by his own people. Thus he fears that not only his own life is in danger, but his family’s life may be as well. Ephraim responds by asking, “Do you really believe that we would hurt your family?” Avner replies with absolute conviction and finality, “I believe that anyone is capable of anything”. Ultimately, then, the sense that “anyone is capable of anything” – the death of trust – is the first casualty here. To some degree it

³ *Munich* was a 2005 movie, directed and produced by Stephen Spielberg. More information about the film can be found at : http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Munich_%28film%29

may account for the skepticism displayed by my intellectual subjects (as we will see later on) who cannot find comfort in extreme positions of any sort.

Objectives of Thesis

With this personal and historical context as a backdrop, the goal of this dissertation is to draw on and extend Neil Gross's (2008) theory of the “intellectual self-concept” and Jerry Watts’ (1994) analysis of the “victim status” among intellectuals in an effort to move the literature on diaspora forward with a case study of understudied Vietnamese *intellectuals* in North America. “Intellectual” is the operative word here, because most diaspora studies, including those on the Vietnamese, focus on the group as a whole, rather than on the intellectual elites. My concern here is with the role such elites play in framing historical narratives, which are often thought of as monolithic, unchanging, and incapable of contradiction. Throughout this thesis I will discuss the work of Vietnamese scholars (as well as non-Vietnamese scholars) on the Vietnamese diaspora community, but here I wish to examine a few examples in greater detail.

Several studies of Vietnamese diaspora focusing on narratives and storytelling have been carried out in recent years. It is important to emphasize that narratives can take many forms, on both the micro and the macro levels. Yen Le Espiritu explores this phenomenon as it applies to the US’s coverage of the 25th anniversary of the “Fall of Saigon”. Espiritu asks how the U.S has dealt with the “difficult memory” of the Vietnam War – a war that left the U.S in the ambiguous and degrading position of being neither victim nor liberator (Espiritu, 2006, p. 29). Espiritu concludes that in order to salvage the

situation, it has been “spun” by the media into a narrative, which at least indirectly revolves around freedom. The war may have been lost, it is true, but nevertheless Vietnamese refugees can be reconfigured into a success story, which to a great extent owes its existence to the actions of Americans. Thus even a failure can be transcended and reworked into a narrative of redemption.

The work of Natalie Cherot (2009) elaborates on this theme in a more specific context. Her research on Vietnamese adoptees who were part of “Operation Babylift” explores the so-called “rescue narrative” and the extent to which adult adoptees integrated it into their identity. Cherot found that although some do derive a sense of belonging from having become American, others feel that to identify oneself as a victim is not only one-dimensional and patronizing, but also does violence to other aspects of their history (Cherot, 2009, p. 113). Cherot delves into this issue by referring to the work of one “Babylift” volunteer LeAnn Thieman. As Cherot expresses it, “Thieman offers a simple narrative, a heroic woman in history. She details her courageous five-day sojourn where she helps to bring 600 children from Vietnam to the United States in 1975, one of whom will become her son Mitch” (Cherot, 2009, p. 134). This is all very well, and Cherot is not attempting to diminish the contribution of LeAnn Thieman and other volunteers like her. However as Cherot points out, “she honors her heroic efforts without addressing the larger consequences of the war” (ibid). For her purposes, American soldiers were not present in the country to seize territories for the U.S or to kill, but rather to rescue Vietnamese orphans. The Vietnamese government, again according to Thieman, existed to smooth their way out of Vietnam. Thus as Cherot emphasizes, the

reality of history is glossed over and stripped of its real meaning. Cherot is aware that the truth or falsity of narratives cannot be assessed in factual terms. However, what is important, as she sees it, is her subjects need to be heard.

In “For Better or For Worse”(Thai, 2008), Hung Cam Thai explores both the existential narratives of meaning which is the focus of Natalie Cherot’s work, as well as the practical attempt to transcend the past through the striving for upward mobility. Using Bourdieu’s theory of social fields, Thai shows that contrary to popular belief which asserts that transnational marriages among individuals in richer countries and those in poorer ones are often motivated by material rewards, there are also important psychological and emotional factors at work. Marriages between Vietnamese men in the diaspora and Vietnamese women living in Vietnam, apart from the more apparent economic factors, involve the process of “convertibility of social worth”(p. 10). Many Viet Kieu⁴ men feel that their level of self-worth diminishes after their immigration to the host country while the status of Viet Kieu women increases. This is because unlike in traditional Vietnam, Viet Kieu women are mostly income earners (sometimes earning an even higher salary than the men) who then play a major role in family finances, and this in turn elevates their status and position in the household. Thai notes that Viet Kieu men move across national boundaries in order to take advantage of the convertibility of their economic capital and along with it, to obtain respectability and an upgrade in social status - aspects of the self that have been lost or difficult to find in host countries. To put it more plainly, Viet Kieu men may live a “third-world” life in host countries such as the

⁴ Viet Kieu is a term used to describe Vietnamese nationals living abroad.

U.S, but in Vietnam they can afford a “first-world” life (p. 48). As one subject in Thai’s study contends: “In America, I don’t have any class because I work as a laborer, but when I go to Vietnam, I only need to spend a few hundred dollars and people see the value in me”(p. 43). As is evidenced in the subject’s narrative, Viet Kieu men look for marriage prospects in Vietnam in order to recuperate their lost status and improve their social position, both of which are based almost entirely on their purchasing power.

To be sure, Vietnamese women in Vietnam also engage in this process of convertibility. Their motivation for marrying Viet Kieu men is also an attempt to upgrade their social worth. Similar to Viet Kieu women, contemporary women in Vietnam have become “modernized” due to their increased level of education and employment opportunities. Consequently, this leads to the demand for men who are less “traditional” and who would, as one woman in Thai’s study asserts, “respect modernization and equality for women”(Thai, 2008, p. 30). Viet Kieu men, because of their exposure to “western” ideals and culture, seem to have such quality and can meet such a demand. Thus marrying “out” is also a chance to marry “up” – perhaps not so much in terms of financial security as many modern families in Vietnam have relatively high standards of living, but more importantly, they are able to obtain more value and respect for their stock of “cultural capital”. Thai’s case studies of Vietnamese international marriages provide a good example of the interplay between “economic activities and intimacies”. In other words, they show how “love and emotion are intertwined with political economy through cultural logics of desire” (Constable, 2003, p.119 as cited in Thai , 2008, p.xvi). Thai’s study of marriages across national borders is an example of a transnational practice where

members of a diasporic group “build and maintain social and economic ties” with their home country (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc, 1994; Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc Szanton, 1992, as cited in Thai, 2008, p. xiv).

Andrew Lam’s “Perfume Dreams”(2005) is perhaps one of the more celebrated works on Vietnamese diaspora in the U.S in recent years. Lam’s personal narratives provide an insightful look into the lives of a people living in exile and struggling with the issue of identity. Although Lam’s upper class family background and strong political connections⁵ sets him apart from many in the Vietnamese diaspora, what he shares with the community is the psychological and emotional tie he feels towards the homeland – a place where one’s “umbilical cord” is buried⁶ - as he takes on an American identity.

In his book, Lam talks about his personal journey – of having roots in two cultures in a more spiritual and emotional way. As he laments: “My sense of home these days seems to have less to do with geography than imagination and memories. Home is portable if one is in commune with one’s soul. I no longer see my identity as a fixed thing but something open-ended”(Lam, 2005, p. 15). For Lam, in order to transcend one’s “provincial and national limits”, it is necessary to engage in a process of self-transformation, which nevertheless allows one to - as Edward Said has expressed it - “work through” one’s attachments and memories. According to Lam, the past must not be abandoned, but rather carried with us in a way that nourishes us rather than stifling us.

⁵ Andrew Lam’s father, Thi Quang Lam, was a three star general of the South Vietnamese army (or ARVN) during the Vietnam War.

⁶ To bury the newborn’s umbilical cord is both an expression and an old traditional practice in Vietnam, the meaning of which is to show one’s sacred tie to the land and that in turn, the land would “bless and protect the newborn” (Lam, 2005, p. 3). Although it was explained this way in Lam’s book, the author might have mistaken the “umbilical cord” for the “placenta” - for it was the placenta that was literally “buried” in one’s backyard back in the days where women often gave birth at home with the help of a local midwife.

Lam's reflections on this process are especially poignant: "To truly grieve of the loss of a nation and the robbed history of a banished people, that old umbilical cord must be unearthed and, through the task of art, through the act of imagination, be woven into a new living tapestry"(ibid).

Lam's work thus focuses on the attempt to reconcile the narrative of the past, with its emphasis on "death and blood and sorrow"(Lam, 2005, p. 16) with the American narrative of infinite possibilities. Many of these possibilities converge around the dream of material success, but for Lam, that is not the whole story. It is the creation of a personal identity, which is central to his vision of the meaning and purpose of an American life, and for him this identity is impermanent, fluid, and multi-faceted, much like America itself.

Andrew Lam's exceptionally sensitive and poignant first person ethnography exemplifies the contribution that Vietnamese intellectuals can make to our understanding of life in the diaspora. They can open our eyes to the experience of transnationalism, which - as Lam reminds us - "is now a condition shared by much of humanity. It's Unique and rounded characters refute simplification"(Lam, 2005, p. 47). Lam reflects further on the nature of his particular vision as follows:

I see now with clarity my writing life. It has come to rest within me the task of marrying two otherwise dissimilar and, often, conflicting narratives. Vietnam and America are vying for my soul. But between Vietnam and America, for me, too, is an undiscovered country, and it is an epic in the making. (p. 47)

As powerful as these works are, they do not specifically focus on the role played by intellectuals in identity formation, and the articulation of the group's narrative and history to itself. It is my intention, then, to focus on this gap in the research on the Vietnamese

community. A key element of the diaspora literature is the victim narrative that builds a sense of community. This narrative keeps racial and ethnic groups united when they find themselves in a new country either through voluntary immigration, political exile or as refugees from war, natural disaster or political conflict. However, literature on diaspora says far too little about the intellectuals who create and diffuse many of the victim narratives, and there is very little existing research on Vietnamese intellectuals in North America. My work will draw on extensive interviews with Vietnamese intellectuals to answer a set of empirical questions about how they understand and remember the Vietnam War, and how they manage the tensions created by being members of a diaspora that overwhelmingly accepts a "communist take-over" victim narrative when their role as scholars, journalists and intellectuals pushes them towards a more complicated historical understanding that moves beyond the victim status.

Within the diaspora literature, *victim diaspora* is considered as the “prototypical diaspora” which serves as a basis for the expansion of the concept *diaspora* and the development of the field of diaspora studies (Cohen, 2008). According to Cohen, some key features of diaspora include having a strong sustained group consciousness based on “a sense of distinctiveness, a common history, and the belief in a common fate” (p. 47). For many in the Vietnamese diaspora, the “common history” is often spoken of with a sense of victimhood due to its long history of foreign domination that began with the Chinese, followed by the French, and finally the Americans. Indeed, when the subject of Vietnam comes up, it is often spoken of synonymously with the “Vietnam War” – a war which saw one of the largest mass migrations in the last century, made the term “boat

people” an official dictionary entry, and provided the *raison d’être* for the Vietnamese diaspora community in countries such as Canada and the U.S.

In the classical understanding of the concept diaspora (i.e., victim diaspora), “the idea of dispersal following a traumatic event in the homeland” (as in the Vietnamese case), places the Vietnamese in the category of *victim diaspora* (Cohen, 2008, p. 2). As we can see, this adjective “victim” that precedes the term diaspora is an important distinction for Vietnamese diaspora, both in terms of providing a way to identify themselves, and as a way for others to identify them. Thus, it is understandable that the Vietnamese diaspora community would want to engage in and maintain the narrative of victimhood – that is, stories about the hardships endured throughout the history of the country, their plight of escaping the place of their birth, the experience of being displaced, and the mourning for what was left behind in the homeland. Given the significance of this history of victimization, one wonders how the Vietnamese diasporic community continues to keep this victim narrative alive, especially in the face of tremendous pressure to rebuild their lives in a completely new environment and growing challenges of intergenerational differences in the age of transnational engagements.

In recent decades, scholarship on diaspora has commanded significant attention from academics across disciplinary backgrounds as well as those outside of academia, such as politicians and lawmakers. As Brubaker (2005) notes, the term diaspora rarely made it into discussions of ethnicity and immigration in the past, but since the late 1980s “there has been a veritable explosion of interest in Diasporas” (p. 1). To illustrate how usage of the term has proliferated, Brubaker further adds: “*Diaspora* and its cognates appear as

keywords only once or twice a year in dissertations from the 1970s, about thirteen times a year in the late 1980s, and nearly 130 times in 2001 alone” (Ibid.). This “diaspora explosion is not confined to academic writing”, according to Brubaker, as the term “*diaspora* yields a million Google hits” (Ibid.) – a number large enough to suggest that “the large majority are not academic” (Ibid.). As recently as January of 2010 a Google search of the term “diaspora” yielded a staggering ten million results. (Knott & McLoughlin, 2010) These statistics provide evidence that interest in field continues to grow.

The same cannot be said, however, for studies on intellectuals or ethnic elites operating within different diasporic communities. In fact, studies on diaspora intellectuals have lagged behind. For the Vietnamese case, to my knowledge, there has yet to be a sociological study of its intellectual members. This, in my view, indicates an important missing link because intellectuals tend to play a leading role in different spheres of social life, and are often sought after for leadership and guidance. In addition, it is reasonable to assume that intellectuals would have both the tools and the inclination to engage in critique and reflection – on both the nature of the diasporic situation and problems which may be carried forward from their homeland. More crucially, with regards to the victim diaspora, literature tends to focus on the maintenance of a collective consciousness surrounding the narratives of victimhood – yet the same literature does not really address sociologically the important question of who creates such narratives, and how they are sustained. Therefore by focusing on the intellectuals within the diaspora, we would likely get a better glimpse into the thinking and behavior of such a community.

As I have noted, there has been a growing interest in diaspora studies in recent years. There has also been considerable interest in the role of intellectuals, but many of the studies on this subject, understandably, ignore certain aspects of their contribution to life in the diaspora. For example, Neil Gross (2008) has conducted an important case study of a famous American intellectual, Richard Rorty, in which he examined the social factors that influenced Rorty's intellectual choices. Gross departs from previous studies, in particular the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Randall Collins, which focus on the "strategic dimensions" (p. xi) of such choices, and instead develops his theory of the "intellectual self-concept" – that is, the narratives to which intellectuals subscribe to help explain their "intellectual choices and knowledge-making" (p. 265).

An important point to note here is that Gross' theory derives from a study that deals mainly with "famous" American intellectuals – such as Rorty - and more specifically, with university professors. It is here that I wish to carry Gross' important theoretical advancement further with my study of "regular" or "non-famous" Vietnamese intellectuals who occupy both the academic field as well as other professional fields (e.g., journalists, writers, and community activists and representatives). By adding the "diaspora" element to the discussion, I am bringing in some important sociological issues (e.g., race, ethnicity, and historical memory) that have not been considered in Gross' research.

As mentioned above, victim narratives play a crucial role for the diasporas, and the ways in which such narratives are framed and promoted can differ depending on who or what group is carrying out the promoting. My concern in this project then, is with the

Vietnamese diaspora intellectuals in North America and their understanding of the victim narratives – and by extension, their influence on people’s understanding of these narratives as well. In this way, my research builds on - and further extends - both diaspora studies and literature on intellectuals. In light of my focus on the narrative of victimhood, I am specifically interested in finding out how Vietnamese intellectuals in Canada and the U.S come to understand the Vietnam War – and since maintaining a collective memory about a traumatic event is key for community building and group solidarity for *victim diaspora*, I also want to investigate how Vietnamese intellectuals remember and symbolize the war and their homeland.

Finally, if their understanding and memory about the past with regards to the war is different from that of the Vietnamese diasporic community, I am also concerned with how they negotiate their roles as intellectuals and as members of the community. My rationale for emphasizing the Vietnam War is due largely to the enormous impact that this event has had on American society and particularly the intellectual culture, which by extension, also affected Canada⁷ - and the rest of the Western world. Volumes have been written about the war from a “Western” point of view, however little attention has been given to the perspective from the “other side” – that is, the Vietnamese themselves, and in particular, intellectuals within this ethnic group. Thus my research helps give a fuller understanding of this - widely considered - the 20th Century’s most transformative event.

⁷ Canada provided refuge for the war resisters, many of whom were college-educated individuals.

Research Problem

The broad concern for me in this present project is the role that the “victim narrative” plays in the Vietnamese diaspora. The victim narrative, as I have discussed, generally serves to bring members of a particular diaspora community together. This narrative of victimhood is essentially about a shared consciousness and understanding of “the traumatic dispersal from an original homeland and the salience of the homeland in the collective memory of a forcibly dispersed group” (Cohen, 2008, p. 4). In the case of the Vietnamese diaspora, this sense of victimhood is both complex and contested in terms of how it is perceived and promoted. Focusing on the intellectuals within the Vietnamese diaspora in North America, the three key questions that I am interested in are:

1. How do Vietnamese intellectuals understand the war in relation to the various ways in which it has been discussed and debated in North America, and what meanings do they contribute to the traditional victim narrative that dominated the Vietnamese diaspora community?
2. How do Vietnamese intellectuals remember and symbolize the war and the homeland, and what are the contestations around such memories and symbolic representations as the Vietnamese community becomes part of an American society that is developing a new kind of relationship to Vietnam itself.
3. Given the complexities surrounding the victim narratives within the Vietnamese diaspora, how do Vietnamese intellectuals negotiate their sometimes contradictory roles as both intellectuals committed to general

principles of political debate in North America and as members of a community that has historically been unified by a particular victim narrative?

It is necessary to be aware of the complexity of this situation. As Cohen (2008) has pointed out, the victim narrative serves to bind members of a community by reinforcing the sense of a shared history and a common destiny. However, such an analysis may be reductionist because it assumes the existence of one overarching narrative. There may in fact be many such narratives or multiple ways of viewing the same narrative, depending on one's perspective. My research will examine several aspects of the diaspora experience, which are often overlooked – in particular, the multifaceted and therefore contested nature of the victim narrative and the ways in which Vietnamese intellectuals navigate their ambiguous and sometimes conflicting positions as individuals *and* exponents of group identity. What strategies do they employ in this regard, and how does this dilemma define the parameters of their identity? Jerry Gafio Watt's (1994) important work on Ralph Ellison, as well as other black intellectuals/artists, and their attempt to create "intellectual/artist spaces" for themselves will be particularly helpful here. In the end, the larger goal of my thesis is to help the Vietnamese diaspora community move beyond the victim narrative, which often can be both paralyzing and disempowering.

Outline of Chapters

This thesis will be organized with the following sections: Chapter 1 - as we have just seen – introduced the topic, discussed the main objectives of this thesis, and proposed key research questions.

Chapter 2 will outline the theoretical perspectives that I am attempting to combine in this study. First I will give an overview of the literature on victim narratives and diaspora, and outline the core scholarship on intellectuals relevant to my research questions. I will then discuss Neil Gross' notion of the "intellectual self concept", a perspective that emerged out of his critique of Bourdieu and Collins. The discussion will continue with Jerry Watts' analysis of *victim narratives* among African-American intellectuals. These theoretical perspectives will allow me to move beyond Gross's theory and consider the case of Vietnamese diaspora intellectuals.

Chapter 3 will outline my methods. This is a qualitative research project in which I rely mainly on the use of *narrative inquiry* in order to examine the *life history* of my subjects. Specifically I will investigate first-person accounts of Vietnamese intellectuals in North America, focusing in particular in the ways they articulate and reshape the victim narrative and the challenges and tensions they face and must work through in order to fulfill both their role as intellectuals and also as members of a diaspora community. I conducted a total of 32 interviews, including written and oral formats. This methodology is supplemented by participant observation of community events and cultural celebrations – all of this is intended to enhance the collection and analysis of my data. I will also discuss some of the challenges and limitations involved and strategies used to help

mitigate their effects throughout the research process.

Chapter 4 will elaborate the three competing *victim narratives* vis-à-vis the Vietnam War. They include: (1) Foreign Domination Narrative, a view supported mainly by the North Vietnamese and also many radical and some liberal North American intellectuals; (2) Communist-Takeover Narrative, a position favored by the majority of South Vietnamese and North American conservatives during the conflict, and is also most prevalent in the diaspora community; and (3) the Civil War Narrative, a view that is accepted by an increasing number of mainstream Americans and Canadians but tends to receive less public/official attention, especially among Vietnamese both inside the country and those in the diaspora.

Chapter 5 will examine my interviewees' narratives on the Vietnam conflict. The aim here is to see how Vietnamese intellectuals' views of the war intersect or diverge with other narratives that have been discussed out in chapter 3, and the dilemmas they face in developing an understanding of the conflict.

Chapter 6 will be about the different ways that the Vietnamese diaspora community remembers and commemorates its history and the difficulties involved in carrying out such practices. I will then explore the victim narrative in the context of the flag controversy. The yellow field with three red stripes flag is considered the most important collective representation for the Vietnamese diaspora community, yet it is also highly divisive and contested. Here I will discuss the complexities surrounding the flag debate, specifically how it is seen by different groups of Vietnamese, its political significance, and how – unlike other symbolic representations, the flag unites and also divides the

community at the same time. The study will then examine Vietnamese intellectuals' perspective on the issue and how their views differ from those in the community.

Chapter 7 will focus on the inner, sociological struggles experienced by my interviewees. Here the discussion will largely be on the tensions that arise out of the need for my subjects to be both intellectuals in networks and organizations committed to universalistic values and open debate and members of the diaspora community, which overwhelmingly subscribes to anti-communist sentiments and tends to enforce this orthodoxy passionately. An examination into the strategies they employ or the ways in which they navigate these social/political forces in order to engage in their intellectual/artistic activities and the effects that this has on their sense of self will also be discussed.

In the conclusion, I will consider my findings, discuss some of the limitations of my research design, and discuss the next steps in developing my own theoretical perspective, which extends the work of Neil Gross, to include my focus on the *diaspora* intellectual self-concept. In this regard, I will examine the role of diaspora intellectuals and the implications of my analysis for contemporary debates within the Vietnamese diaspora community. What role can the intellectuals play in terms of helping their community move beyond the victim narrative, and to what extent might they facilitate a *rapprochement* which would allow tensions within the community to be, if not resolved, at least acknowledged and addressed in the form of a more open and inclusive discourse?

CHAPTER 2

Theoretical Perspectives and Review of Literature

At the outset, it should be noted that theories of intellectuals and ideas and literature on diaspora have enjoyed a relatively rich and deep tradition, however less effort has been expended to combine both areas. Scholarly works have been carried out on diaspora/exile intellectuals in the past, to be sure, but most of them tend to focus on Western intellectuals (e.g., Coser, 1984 and Bendix, 1986). For example, the Frankfurt School has had a profound influence on the development of the critical sociological tradition in North America, but its origins are Eastern European. In addition, the beginning of the Frankfurt school dates back to the 1920's – only a few years after the Russian Revolution, and although an examination of their history contributes immensely to our understanding of the formation of ideas, it is clear that this work should be continued in the current socio-cultural context.

It is evident that the intellectual climate in North America has become increasingly diverse since the time of the Frankfurt School. It should also be noted that members of the Frankfurt School were left wing intellectuals escaping fascism. In my case, as we will see, people were escaping communism (an “extreme left” regime) and thus the context within which these intellectuals operated was different. One could argue that these “labels” are important to those in power, but regardless of how we label such regimes, the consequences are still the same - death, dislocation, and suffering for so many. The fact is that today's newcomers are more likely to be of a visible minority/non-white background than those who came prior to the “de-industrialization” period (Portes,

Fernandez-Kelly, & Haller, 2005), and along with that, their experiences are also different. This, in my view, warrants an examination into the lived history and contribution of non-Western intellectuals and how this might play a role in the broader cultural and social dynamics of their homelands, their ethnic communities, as well as their adopted countries.

My research is therefore concerned mainly with narrative discourse and the process of identity formation among intellectuals in the Vietnamese diaspora. I believe my subjects are familiar with this not only on an intellectual level, but have in addition experienced the process of identity shifts and transformations from within. It is part of their personal life experience, and this makes their contribution to my research all the more powerful. More specifically my study centers on the narratives of victimhood, as viewed and articulated by Vietnamese intellectuals, and the consequences of such narratives on how they see themselves as intellectuals and also as members of the Vietnamese diaspora community. With this focus, I draw on three main theoretical frameworks: First, the work of Cohen (2008) which provides a comprehensive approach to analyzing the different types of diaspora – specifically victim diaspora; Second, Gross' (2008) theory of the “intellectual self-concept” – a social-psychological perspective to identity formation found within the “symbolic interactionist” tradition; and (3) Watts' study of black intellectuals in 20th century America - in particular his case analysis of Ralph Ellison - and the challenges they faced in getting out of the “victim status” syndrome. My use of Watt's work in this study is essentially an attempt to bring both sets of scholarship - diaspora and intellectual literature - into dialogue with each other. This

would thus assist me in carrying out my “action agenda” – that is, to grapple with the ways in which Vietnamese intellectuals get out of the “victim mode” in order to engage in intellectual activities, which are creative and forward looking, without getting trapped in the past.

Diaspora Studies

The study of diaspora is divided into four phases, according to Cohen (2008). In the classical phase, the term is capitalized as “Diaspora” and is used in singular form to mainly describe the Jewish experience. From the 1960s to the 1970s, the usage of the term was extended to include other groups such as the Africans, the Armenians, the Irish, and also the Palestinians as well⁸. In the second phase – the period from the 1980s to mid-1990s, William Safran noted that the term diaspora was used as “‘a metaphoric designation’ to describe different categories of people – ‘expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities’” [as cited in Cohen, (2008)]. In the third phase (from mid-1990’s to the turn of the century), diaspora is conceived through the social constructionist perspective. The notion diaspora is viewed more broadly to include not only the shared idea of homeland and ethnic/religious community, which is often seen as more simple and static, but also the “deterritorialization of identities” that is complex and dynamic depending on the varying social and situational contexts (Cohen, 2008, pp. 2-3). Lastly, the fourth phase –

⁸ Although not mentioned in Cohen’s discussion, but here I would suggest to include the Tibetan diaspora as well. It is a well documented phenomenon that the 14th Dalai Lama and his followers fled to India (as well as neighbouring countries such as Bhutan and Nepal) in 1959 and continued in the early years of 1960’s.

dominated by the contemporary notion of diaspora – is about the “consolidation” of the concept diaspora, which is “marked by a modified reaffirmation of the diasporic idea, including its core elements, common features, and ideal types”(p. 2).

According to Cohen (2008), the one key feature that distinguishes the *victim diaspora* is “the idea of dispersal following a traumatic event in the homeland, to two or more foreign destinations”(p. 2). In fact, the word diaspora itself derives from the Greek language and translates roughly as “dispersal”. Early usage of the term was found in biblical text to describe the dreadful situation of Jewish people after being punished by God for their disobedience. In Deuteronomy 28:5, it was ordered: “Thou shall be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth” (Akenson, 1995, p. 378). As can be seen, the “victim diaspora” narrative refers to the negative experiences of the Jews, particularly to “their catastrophic origins, their mass nature, and their disturbing effects” (Cohen, 2008, p. 1). “Victim diaspora” thus entails a forced migration of a population from its homeland that was driven by a traumatic event or a set of events. Because of the forced conditions of their exit and their ongoing hardships, these victims cherish a collective myth and memory about the homeland on which they depend to begin the process of rebuilding their sense of identity (Ibid.). In contemporary diaspora discourse, this speaks to a “state of enduring consciousness of living away from home, adapted to the new social and cultural context”(Bauman, 2010, p. 23).

The victim narrative therefore, by definition, implies a negative approach to identity construction. Edward Said expresses this poignantly “as the unhealable rift forced between human beings and a native place, between the self and its true home: Its essential

sadness can never be surmounted”(Said, 2001). On the other hand, the diasporic experience also allows for positive forms of identity construction, which deserve further exploration. Said himself acknowledges this fact, and furthermore, emphasizes:

Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, and refugees. In the United States, academic, intellectual and aesthetic thought is what it is today because of refugee from fascism, communism, and other regimes given to the oppression and expulsion of dissidents. The critic George Steiner has even proposed the perceptive thesis that a whole genre of twentieth-century Western literature is “extraterritorial,” a literature by and about exiles, symbolizing the age of the refugee. (p. 173)

Said’s reminder of the need to emphasize the achievements and contributions made by victim diasporas echoes Cohen’s (2008) earlier discussion on the “paradigmatic case of the diasporic Jews” where he points out “Jews in Babylon, the Islamic world and in early Spain were responsible for many advances – in medicine, theology, art, music, philosophy, literature...”(p. 7). One can argue that it is precisely due to their diasporic condition that the Jews are motivated to achieve such great successes. Apart from the traumas and dangers then, it is also important to recognize the “positive virtues of retaining a diasporic identity” (Ibid.), and that the diaspora can be a site of intellectual and cultural creativity.

Thus, the diasporic experience is dichotomous in nature. On one level, the victim approach to identity formation is negative, but embedded in this negativity is also the possibility of something positive and transformative. It is a dialectic in the Hegelian sense. The victim, in order to make sense of his history and to find meaning in it, must also overcome and forge a new identity. In this way, victimhood is a necessary precursor to the ultimate goal of overcoming and reconnecting with one’s estranged self. The story

of the Vietnamese diaspora is, in many ways, also the study of many Diasporas and as Said has pointed out, America itself is a land of both estrangement and redemption.

In the diaspora, how is identity construction made possible? One way of keeping a collective memory of the homeland alive and making the fragmented self whole again, is by engaging in the act of remembering and story-telling or personal narratives – and intellectuals in particular, are the individuals most likely to engage in such a reflective activity. As a form of “case-centered research”, personal narrative builds on the work of C. Wright Mills (2000), which seeks to illuminate the “intersection of biography, history, and society” (Riessman, 2001). The “personal troubles” that the Vietnamese diaspora intellectuals speak about in their narratives of victimhood, for instance, can help further our understanding about particular social and historical processes that encapsulated a human tragedy and gave rise to a phenomenon known as “boat people”. “Personal troubles”, Mills reminds us, “cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues – and in terms of the problems of history-making” (Mills, 2000, p. 226). Personal narratives, therefore, can shed light on “individual and collective action and meanings, as well as the social processes by which social life and human relationships are made and changed”(Laslett, 1999, p. 392, as cited in Riessman, 2002).

What victims choose to remember about the past is key to how they construct their narratives, and thus their identities. Riessman (2008) states:

[I]n a dynamic way, narrative constitutes past experience at the same time as it provides ways for individuals to make sense of the past. And stories must always be considered in context, for storytelling occurs at a historical moment with its circulating discourses and power relations. (p. 8).

Additionally, narratives also interact with present circumstances and evolve over time (Nguyen N. H., 2009). David Gross (2000) reiterates this point in saying that “in most acts of remembering, there is as much material from the present that is projected backward as there is material that comes authentically and indisputably from the past itself (as cited in Nguyen, 2009, p. 6). Consequently, the researcher is confronted with an ever-present dilemma. As Max Weber has reminded us, reality is infinite and protean. We can never hope to grasp more than a minute particle of it at any given moment. Human memory is inevitably selective, and therefore the *facts* included in any ethnography are open to question, as least to some extent. Thus it becomes necessary to ask not only “is this account true or false” but also “what purpose is served by this account or narrative” - from an existential, political, or practical perspective. In acknowledging these difficulties, the researcher is not calling into question the basic honesty and goodwill of his subjects, but is simply recognizing the methodological limitations of research in the human sciences. Intellectuals are uniquely qualified to reflect on these difficulties as well as the unique characteristics of the diasporic experience, because they are in many ways in both a privileged and marginalized position. They are both part of and outside of, life in their homeland and life in North America.

The issue of memory can take a ‘collective’ form as well, and this is particularly the case for victim diasporas, where this “collective memory” (as shown through the spoken narratives or other collective symbols) serves as a way to promote group solidarity. The idea of “collective memory”, to which I will return in chapter 5, is rooted in Durkheim’s

notion of “collective consciousness”(Eyerman, 2004). In his work, Durkheim⁹ argues that the maintenance of group solidarity or cohesion of a social group is essential to the order and continuation of society. In his view, it is necessary for individuals to be socialized to accept their roles in various spheres of life (members of a diaspora community, for example), rather than attempting to bring about radical change which may threaten the group’s very existence. He speaks of what he calls *collective representations*, which are symbols that represent and consolidate a given group’s identity. Members of the group can rally around them, and according to Durkheim, it is especially important to do this publicly and with appropriate ceremony. As Durkheim expresses it:

...[T]here is something eternal in religion which is destined to survive all the particular symbols in which religious thought has successively enveloped itself. There can be no society, which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming, at regular intervals, the collective sentiments and ideas which give it its unity and individuality. Now this moral reconstruction cannot be achieved except by means of reunions, assemblies and congregations, in which individuals, being brought together, reaffirm in common their common sentiments. From this source arise ceremonies which do not differ from properly religious ceremonies, either in their object, the results which they produce, or the processes employed to attain these results. What essential difference is there between an assembly of Christians celebrating the principal dates of the life of Christ, or Jews remembering the exodus from Egypt or the proclamation of the Decalogue, and a gathering of citizens commemorating the institution of a new moral or legal system or some great event in national life? (“The Persistence of Religion” in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p. 610; cited in Giddens’ *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings*, 1972)

Thus, for members in the Vietnamese diaspora, April 30th (or Black April) commemoration and the old (yellow) flag have become, in a sense, religious symbols.

⁹ Some of Durkheim’s core ideas, including “social solidarity”, “collective consciousness”, and “collective representations” can be found in the corpus of his work, such as *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), *Suicide* (1897), and *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912).

The same can be said for certain art displays, museum artifacts, or the insistence on naming ethnic enclaves as “Little Saigon” in metropolitan areas throughout North America as a way to honor the shared history and to help maintain the ethnic identity of Vietnamese diaspora. These collective representations are central to the identity of Vietnamese diaspora community. They are symbols that often lead to group unification and paradoxically, disunification as well. This observation thus departs significantly from Durkheim’s main concern, which emphasizes the creation and maintenance of social cohesion. It is worth reiterating here that Collins’ (1975) work on interaction ritual chains follows Durkheim to some extent, but because Collins is aware that it is possible to be *excluded* from these rituals, his work allows for a reality that includes both cohesion and disunity. This issue will be explored further in the later chapter about the flag controversy.

As I have discussed earlier, because of their “traumatic” circumstances, victim diasporas hold a collective memory or consciousness about their situation and maintain a certain idealized “vision or myth about their original homeland” to which they feel that either they themselves, or their descendants should return when conditions are favorable (Cohen, 2008, p. 6). As such, there is a strong desire to keep this memory alive. Yet at the same time, it is recognized that memory about events in the past is often contested due to its subjective nature. In their study of the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the revolutions of 1848 in Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania, Brubaker and Feischmidt (2002) indicate their awareness of the issue of subjectivity:

That the past is constructed and reconstructed to suit the needs and purposes of each succeeding generation; that even personal memory is a thoroughly social and cultural

construct; that collective or social memory is not only constructed but chronically contested; that the “search for usable past” (Commager, 1967, as cited in Brubaker and Feischmidt, 2002) involves not only highly selective memory and a good deal of forgetting (Renan, 1996[1882], as cited in Brubaker and Feischmidt, 2002) but even outright “invention” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983, as cited in Brubaker and Feischmidt, 2002); that the politics of the present therefore not only shapes the representation, but often entails the misrepresentation, of the past...(Brubaker & Feischmidt, 2002, p. 701)

Thus, memory is produced and reproduced under different contexts and often involves those in positions of power, vying to gain a political advantage and influence among themselves and over others (i.e., the general masses). In the process of these “memory struggles”, little attention (if any at all) is paid to the reception of ordinary people (Brubaker & Feischmidt, 2002). In Brubaker and Feischmidt’s view, these “memory wars” are much like the “culture wars” in the American context. Cultural wars, they explain, “are largely an elite construct, involving the polarization of ‘institutionalized and articulated moral visions’ (Hunter, 1994, p.vii, as quoted in DiMaggio et al., 1996, p.740) rather than a deep attitudinal schism among the public at large” (DiMaggio et al., 1996, as cited in Brubaker & Feischmidt, 2002, p.702).

It is necessary to elaborate on the theoretical framework(s) underpinning the study of commemoration and remembrance. This relatively new area of sociological research is founded on the assumption that memory is not merely a question of individual experience and consciousness. It is collectively mediated. Contemporary scholarship on the study of memory builds on the work of Maurice Halbwachs, a French sociologist and student of Emile Durkheim. Halbwachs’ thesis revolves around the idea that individual memory can only be understood in the context of the group (Halbwachs, 1992). This is because “the individual is derivative of some collectivity, family, and community, and also because a

group is solidified and becomes aware of itself through continuous reflection upon and re-creation of a distinctive, shared memory”(Eyerman, 2004, p. 65). This concept of group memory, or *mémoire collective* as Halbwachs calls it, is socially constructed, and he asserts that, “the idea of an individual memory absolutely separate from social memory, is an abstraction almost devoid of meaning”(as cited in Verovsek, 2008, p.8)¹⁰. That is to say, our perception of history, our so-called “memory” of it, cannot be evaluated as “true” or “false”, but rather must be understood in the context of one’s ethnicity, religious background, linguistic group, and other social phenomena.

The politics of memory (or rather, collective memory) and its concomitant narratives thus create and consolidate boundaries, which separate oneself and one’s group from others. In so doing, we also strive to construct a sense of moral rightness and efficacy. Collective memory, according to Eyerman (2004), “provides the individual with cognitive map within which to orient present behavior... Collective memory is a social necessity; neither an individual nor a society can do without it” (p. 65). Yet memory itself is elusive– it must be concretized through stories and commemorations in order for it to be available to us. It should be mentioned that while collective memory refers to recorded events in the past, “the meaning of such events is interpreted from the perspective of the group’s needs and interests” (within a certain limit) (Ibid. p.67). As I have indicated, collective memory is not about the truth or falsity of events, but rather how events of the past are understood and made sense of (Verovsek, 2008, pp. 10-11). Memory may be

¹⁰ Verovsek, Peter J. “The Politics of Memory: A Conceptual Approach to the Study of Memory in Politics”. Paper presented at the 3rd Annual Graduate Student Conference on Order, Conflict, and Violence. Yale University, New Haven, April 18, 2008.

manipulated by political elites in order to consolidate their power, and then unconsciously absorbed by other members of society, who are sometimes unaware of the machinations going on above their heads or behind their backs. This is not to say, however, that one's narrative regarding the past will remain in place indefinitely without being contested.

However, contesting about one's past is a difficult task to carry out. As Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (2003) note in their work:

To contest the past is also, of course, to pose questions about the present, and what the past means in the present. Our understanding of the past has strategic, political, and ethical consequences. Contests over the meaning of the past are also contests over the meaning of the present and over ways of taking the past forward. (p.1, also cited in Verovsek, 2008, p.4)

Rogers Brubaker and Margit Feischmidt (2002) have also pointed out “collective or social memory is not only constructed but chronically contested” to the point that this may involve “even outright invention” (pp. 700-701). At the same time, Brubaker and Feischmidt are aware of certain problems involved in the field of social memory studies. For one thing, the literature on memory and particularly on “the memory-nation connection” has often consisted of over-generalization (Olick, 1998, as cited in Brubaker & Feischmidt, 2002), which may be reductionist in nature. Thus, if one attempts to subsume all interpretations of history under the category of “the politics of commemoration”, one may miss certain important differences that distinguish one group from another.

Secondly, to assume that the past is almost infinitely malleable, and thus can be shaped at will to meet the need of the present may in fact, give elites more power than they actually wield in reality. Brubaker and Feischmidt quote Schudson on this point:

“the past is in some respects, and under some circumstances, highly resistant to efforts to make it over” (Brubaker & Feischmidt, 2002, p. 701).

Finally, writings on the politics of memory may risk overstating the case. These issues are, understandably, very important to all those involved in producing and understanding its significance. Many of my subjects clearly fall into this category. We must recognize, however, that this is not necessarily important to ordinary people who are inevitably concerned with the details of day-to-day living. Brubaker and Feischmidt(2002) offer an excellent example of the disconnect between the concerns of academics, and the indifference with which these concerns are received by members of the general public. The Enola Gay affair stirred up enormous controversy documented in a book entitled *The History Wars*.

The Enola Gay was the aircraft that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6th, 1945. It was to have been the centerpiece of an exhibit planned by the Smithsonian’s Air and Space museum to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of WWII. Their intention was not to glorify the use of nuclear warfare, but rather, to critically evaluate the decision to drop the bomb. Opposition on the part of the military and veteran groups was so intense, however, that the museum was forced to abandon its plans for the exhibit. Understandably, this issue would be of great importance to veterans, but also understandably, as Brubaker and Feischmidt observe, “the wider public scarcely took notice” (Ibid., p. 702). For many Americans then, especially those born after 1945, the Second World War clearly no longer represented a “usable past”.

There is also the issue of “generational memory” that should be mentioned here. According to Karl Mannheim, “events experienced during adolescence are the ones most likely to ‘stick’ in later life and to influence behavior” (Eyerman, 2004, p. 70). Thus, for those from the younger generation, these past events do not have the same resonance as they would for people from the older generation. In Mannheim’s view, the difference in how past events is remembered, or what he calls “generational memory”, serves a positive function in that it offers “‘fresh-contact’ with ‘the social and cultural heritage’ of a social order, which ‘facilitates re-evaluation of our inventory and teaches us both to forget that which is no longer useful and to covet that which has yet to be won’” (Mannheim, 1952, p360, cited in Eyerman, 2004, p.71). Eyerman further points out that “collective forgetting is as important as collective remembering for a society’s self-reflection” and that it is “the role of youth or the new generation to provide society with a fresh look at itself” (Ibid.).

It is important for all of us who are concerned with remembrance studies to recognize the limitations inherent in this genre. Nevertheless, I believe that such work provides an important theoretical foundation for my own research, and in fact is especially relevant where my interviewees are concerned, because so many of them are academics/intellectuals who have a keen awareness of the uses of memory. This, to a great extent, accounts for the skepticism and ambivalence with which they approach most narratives. Before I proceed further, it is useful to return to the discussion of what constitutes an “intellectual”.

Theories of Intellectuals

At the outset, it should be emphasized that the term “intellectual” itself is highly contentious because there is no real agreement on how to define intellectuals. In quoting Zygmunt Bauman’s work, Jerome Karabel notes that for Bauman, “any attempt to define intellectuals is an attempt at self-definition”(Karabel, 1996, p. 207). Here I am not concerned with providing definitions of the term or an analysis of the concept “intellectual”, rather my aim is to conduct a study into the process of identity formation of one particular group of intellectuals. Nevertheless, some exemplary sociological studies of intellectuals are worth mentioning here.

According to Robert Brym (1980), intellectuals are “well-defined, self-conscious” individuals who are “involved chiefly in the production of ideas” (pp. 11-12). Brym’s main concern is with the relationship between intellectuals’ social locations and the development of their political orientations. For example, Brym points out that intellectual radicalism is a result of an incomplete integration of intellectuals in the economic, political, and cultural spheres. Brym goes on to assert:

Intellectual’s role, by its very nature, predisposes its incumbent to adopt a critical stance vis-à-vis society. The production of ideas requires a certain preparedness to suspend judgment on, or even to challenge, conventional wisdoms; and the application of this facility to one’s understanding of social and political phenomena involves a refusal necessarily to accept prevailing ideologies at face value.(p. 14)

Well before Brym’s writing, Karl Mannheim (1936) has pointed out the importance of the “intellectual stratum” in society by saying that any analysis of a social phenomenon, no matter how objective, still carries with it “an irreducible residue of evaluation inherent in the structure of all thoughts” (p. 100). In Mannheim’s view,

intellectuals are seen as one stratum of society that has a certain degree of self-consciousness. Intellectuals can do this, Mannheim noted in his later work, because their training allows them “to face the problems of the day in several perspectives and not only one, as most participants in the controversies of their time do”(Mannheim, 1953).

Mannheim recognizes that in order to have a wide range of perspectives, intellectuals must be “relatively unattached” to their “local habitat, institution, class, and party”(Zeitlin, 2001, p. 389), however this also has its negative consequences because it does not provide the intellectual with the necessary “restraints of real life” to test his newly generated ideas – “that is, in the actions and consequences of everyday life”(Ibid., p. 390). With the increasing bureaucratization in modernity that leads to the inevitable small minority of a few men having control and power over the masses, this “relatively unattached” position allows intellectual to “impart scientific--sociological knowledge to the various elites so that they might govern wisely and benevolently”(Ibid., p. 392). A more concrete working definition of intellectuals is offered in David Schalk’s work, *War and the Ivory Tower* (2005), which examines intellectual engagement during France’s war in Algeria and America’s war in Vietnam. According to Schalk:

Intellectuals are defined by their more abstract and distantiated social role which sharply contrasts with almost all others in a modern society. Their function involves a certain kind of creativity, usually through written word and dealing with ideas in some fashion, often applying ideas in an ethical way that may question the legitimacy of the established authorities.(pp. 38-39)

Thus for Schalk, a “significant percentage of the professoriate and some journalists...as well as a substantial portion of the artistic community...who theorize in print about their creativity” (pp. 39-40) can be classified as intellectuals.

Charles Kadushin (Kadushin, 1974) conducted a study of American intellectuals in the social sciences towards the end of the Vietnam War (1970) and found that their opposition to America's involvement in Vietnam was overwhelming. Of the 110 intellectuals interviewed, 90% said "it had been a mistake to send troops to Vietnam" (p. 124). In comparison, only 56% of the general public answering an identical Gallup Poll question thought so. Furthermore, only 16% of Kadushin's respondents approved of the way that Nixon was "handling the situation in Vietnam", in comparison with 54% of participants in a Gallup Poll who approved of Nixon's handling of the war. Kadushin's findings demonstrate an astonishing level of agreement within American intellectual circles on the need to end the war. Similarly, as my data will demonstrate, there is a high level of agreement among Vietnamese intellectuals on America's role in Vietnam – most, although not all tended to be against it. This position is at variance with that of most other Vietnamese in the diaspora. This echoes Kadushin's findings.

It is important to note that although Kadushin's (1974) results may seem to indicate that American intellectuals *circa* 1970 were alienated from the mainstream, and thus more inclined to adopt both a radical perspective on the war, and act as "originators of new moral ideas"(p. 353), Kadushin concluded that this was not really the case.

Kadushin's findings indicated that his subjects acted more as "analysts, critics, and disseminators" (Ibid.) rather than originators – and while these tasks are undoubtedly important, they cannot be categorized as wholly original or radical. Kadushin in fact argued that his subjects tended to be followers rather than leaders, and pointed to the constraints of academic life as a factor in a tendency of an intellectual to engage in

critique, but without the nihilism and extremism of youth in the 1960's. For Kadushin then, the role of intellectuals in the 60's "was to oppose and to propose – but generally nothing too far from liberal sensibilities. And as for the creation of new values, this simply did not occur" (Ibid).

Thus for Kadushin (1974), the problem seems to have been that his subjects, rather than being alienated from mainstream American life, were in fact not alienated enough. He concluded that they were "simply too well off and too enmeshed in the daily routine of bureaucratic life to qualify as highly alienated and this embeddedness may have affected their style of thought" (p. 356). To put it another way, Kadushin has argued that although his subjects' extreme opposition to the war may have seemed to be radical because it was at variance with the prevailing attitude of the American public, it may in fact have been a product of pressure to conform within academia itself. It is worth noting that Kadushin's research was carried out 45 years ago, and the social/intellectual climate in North America has changed a great deal since then. In 1970 the war in Vietnam dominated the national conversation, as did other movements such as women's rights, civil rights, and equality for other minority groups.

These issues may not be central to the national debate on values to the extent that they were in the 70's, but in her book *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment* (2009), Michele Lamont argues that institutional pressures for conformity continue to constrain academics. The current focus now, however, revolves around the constant striving for "excellence", which admittedly may be defined in various ways depending on one's discipline. Peer review of one's work is essential to this goal,

and many of Lamont's subjects assert that it can be done objectively. Lamont does not contradict this assumption but she recognizes that that the attempt to achieve fairness is often elusive, and once again, may be a function of conformity and reciprocity, rather than adherence to any objectively defined criteria. As Lamont expresses it:

What is presented as expertise may sometimes be merely preference (“taste”), describe in depersonalized language. The reciprocal recognition of authority is central to the process, but it may lead to explicit horse-trading, which produces suboptimal results. Despite these potential hazards, however, panelists think the process works, in part because they adopt a pragmatic conception of “truth” (or at least what constitutes a “fair evaluation”) as something inevitably provisional and defined by the best standards of the community at the time. (p. 240)

The work of Kadushin (1974) and Lamont (2009) demonstrates the importance of successfully participating in what Randall Collins terms “interaction ritual chains”, which will be discussed shortly. All of these theorists and most of the ones I will be discussing later as well, have focused on academics as academics without giving too much attention to their extra-academic roles. The work of Jerry Gafio Watts is an exception, however, and I will be elaborating on it later. My research on Vietnamese intellectuals examines tensions that affect them in their role as academics/intellectuals but also delves into the ways the requirements associated with these roles conflict with their ethnic identity and what is expected of them as members of their diaspora community. We will see that they are constantly forced to navigate the difficult terrain of competing “interaction ritual chains”. Thus, their identity as academics/intellectuals often clashes with the community's conception of what it means to be “Vietnamese”. Conformity to one set of expectations almost inevitably means doing violence to the other.

Neil Gross (2008) has carried out an influential case study of Richard Rorty's academic and personal history, which offers great insight into the process of identity formation among American intellectuals occupying the academic field. Gross draws on the work of two preeminent theorists of ideas, Pierre Bourdieu and Randall Collins, in order to understand Rorty's intellectual development. As Gross points out, to some extent such approaches offer us a sociology of knowledge, which links ideas with dominant power structures. He does not entirely reject this approach but points out that it might be reductionist and argues forcefully that intellectuals, "like all social actors – must also be seen as bearers of identities, and the identities that are important to them and form the core of their self-reflection cannot always be reduced to concerns over where they are located in status structures"(pp. 238-239). Gross thus asserts that his goal in formulating a new sociology of ideas is to allow for a broader conception of identity.

Many of Gross' insights regarding the production of ideas are drawn from the work of Bourdieu (1988) and Collins(1975; 1998). Broadly speaking, Bourdieu and Collins argue that intellectuals gravitate toward a particular position within their distinctive social "field" out of an interest in securing "professional status and prestige" (Gross N. , 2008, p. 238). Bourdieu's work deserves further elaboration, especially as it relates to the issue of knowledge/power. Thus his approach is structural in nature but at the same time his recognition of the importance of cultural capital speaks to the relevance of the role played by academia and intellectuals. Bourdieu initially analyzes the trajectory of academia in France and points out that French intellectuals had almost no autonomy until the latter half of the 19th century:

The professor in higher education evolved from being the dignitary appointed by the political authorities and committed to politics, which he was in the first half of the century, to becoming a select and specialized teacher, cut off from the world of social dignitaries by a professional activity incompatible with public life. (p. 37).

Therefore, according to Bourdieu, academic intellectuals occupy a specific but peculiar position in the power structure. On the one hand, they do not have high levels of economic capital, but on the other hand, they do possess great cultural capital. Thus one may ask whether they have much power at all relative to economic or political elites. Bourdieu asserts that they do, if only indirectly, in terms of the reproduction of social inequality. As Randall Collins (1979) has pointed out, in modernity the U.S and Western Europe have become so-called “credential societies”. Achieved status means that one’s claim to privilege cannot be validated through ancestry or ascription, but rather must be tied to where one stands in the “meritocracy”. When racial or historical claims to privilege are tenuous at best, it is necessary to somehow demonstrate that one’s rank has been “earned”. Academics are in a position to confer such legitimacy through the granting of degrees and credentials. Bourdieu admits that academic excellence may sometimes offer the possibility of upward mobility. However he feels that for the most part, academics have served as gatekeepers, reproducing social inequality, and it in fact has been their willingness to do this, which has enabled them to carve out a small niche of autonomy. In Bourdieu’s opinion, then, they have a certain freedom to work on research projects because they have, at the same time, been willing to take on the role of sifters and sorters on behalf of those who hold real economic and political power (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 99). Thus the role of the academic, according to Bourdieu, centers on gathering intellectual prestige – that is “the academic habitus”. Bourdieu defines habitus as a set of

socially learned habits or dispositions associated with our social positions (as cited in Gross, 2008, p. 243). We may not even be conscious of the extent to which our habitus constraints us, yet Bourdieu stresses that we are not totally determined by these patterns. Human beings are capable of creativity and agency to some degree. As a result, we have a certain amount of freedom to move about within these structures and yet, as Bourdieu notes, we usually end up replicating patterns of behaviors which are considered appropriate for those in our field, including academia. Thus social inequality tends to be reproduced and the norms of the habitus are as well. Bourdieu's argument is compelling, to be sure, but its focus on the macro level leaves out the issue of individual identity formation. My research on the position of Vietnamese intellectuals will, I believe, help to close this gap by moving away (at least to some extent) from the structural and towards the social-psychological.

Randall Collins' (1975; 1998) work on "interaction ritual chains" (IRC) and the "emotional energy" generated through membership in desirable groups deserves further attention. There are some similarities between his approach and that of Pierre Bourdieu, but Collins' work departs from Bourdieu in several important ways. Bourdieu, as we have seen, focused on the notion of the "habitus" and the degree to which the possession of cultural, economic, or social capital could generate upward mobility. He thought of intellectuals as having relatively little autonomy in this process. Rather, according to Bourdieu, their position is dependent on their ability or willingness to dispense credentials, which will replicate the economic status quo.

Randall Collins does not completely disagree with Bourdieu's argument, but he places much more emphasis on the subjectively felt degree of satisfaction or "emotional energy", which we derive from membership in socially desirable groups, apart from the tangible benefits that such membership may offer. Again it must be emphasized that Collins does not ignore issues of stratification and upward mobility completely, but his work complements Bourdieu's through his focus on the psychological.

Let us look at Collins' emphasis on "emotional energy" and "interaction ritual chains" in more detail. Collins asserts that patterns of social interaction are shaped by our inclination to maximize our levels of "emotional energy". Some types of interaction are more likely to achieve this goal – in particular, the satisfaction we derive from inclusion in high status groups. Again it is true, following Bourdieu, that membership in such groups contributes to upward mobility, but for Collins, what is equally important (or perhaps even more important) is the *positive* "emotional energy" which we experience when we are allowed into a group made up of people whom we admire. At the same time, if we are continually excluded from such groups, we experience a negative result – a *depletion* of "emotional energy".

How does this continuous attempt to maximize this "emotional energy" through "interaction rituals" apply in the case of intellectuals? Collins (1975) recognizes that intellectuals, like other social actors, seek out *rituals* that will maximize their sense of importance. This means that they must carve out a niche for themselves, which will secure the attention of other intellectuals. Collins (Ibid.) frames the situation in the following way:

A realistic image of science, in fact, would be an open plain with men scattered throughout it, shouting: “Listen to me! Listen to me!”... What we [sociologists of ideas] are looking for, then, are explanatory principles stating the conditions under which men can get others’ attention. There are a variety of strategies and advantages: being on the field earliest and longest; saying the most original things or those that interest the greatest number of listeners; talking to a selective audience; picking arguments with others who are better known; mentioning other people’s names and ideas (since everyone likes to hear himself talked about); opening up new topics for others to follow. The political aspect of this is obvious. (p. 480; also cited in Gross, 2008, p. 249)

As Collins points out in the above quotation, the intellectual landscape is filled with lost lambs who continually bleat loudly and aggressively in an effort to secure a niche for themselves. Not all of them will be successful in this attempt however. Collins recognizes that every intellectual will not necessarily become part of a high status network or “interaction ritual chain” (IRC), and even those who do may not become established as major thinkers. He admits that “the successful intellectual may welcome followers”(1998, p. 39) - however the role of mentor may be a debilitating one, and the intellectual may experience a decrease in emotional energy if his or her followers do not become successful, or take up too much of the mentor’s limited time. Thus, the intellectual playing field is competitive on many levels. It is difficult to achieve a position of importance in intellectual networks, to sustain that position, and to decide which of one’s followers are most worthy of one’s attention. One does not wish to be associated with failure, after all.

Following from this, Collins (1998) asserts that there is an almost immutable law at work in intellectual life, which he terms “the law of small numbers”(p. 81). Collins explains that for intellectual debate to flourish, there should be at least three schools of thought in play at any given moment, and ideally, no more than six. If the number drops

below three, there will not be sufficient controversy to generate new ideas, and if it exceeds six, the number of followers attached to any one perspective will be too small. Thus, intellectual growth is furthered by the generation of a certain amount of competition, or even antagonism, but it must not exceed the optimal level. Obviously, then, opportunities are limited. There are only a certain number of slots to be filled, and beyond that it may be impossible to enter the top ranks in any given discipline.

The theoretical frameworks offered by both Bourdieu and Collins have been invaluable in allowing sociologists of ideas to frame their positions with insight and specificity. However, neither Bourdieu nor Collins have adequately explored the ways in which factors outside of one's "habitus" or "interaction ritual chain" influence identity construction. One may be an intellectual, to be sure, but one is also a carrier of other identities such as a member of an ethnic or racial group, a community, and a nation. As Neil Gross succinctly puts it: "the fact is that intellectuals are bearers of identities whose contents have little to do with their field positions but which may nevertheless influence the views they come to hold" (Gross N. , 2008, p. 255). Another issue with the theories developed by Collins and Bourdieu, in light of my case, is that they assume interaction rituals are *internal* to the intellectual networks (for Collins), and intellectuals are primarily oriented to their field position (for Bourdieu). The intellectuals in my study do not really have to negotiate their "interaction rituals" or "field positions", rather, their struggles have more to do with how they negotiate between conflicting demands in carrying out their role as intellectuals and being part of the community at the same time.

In the case of my interviewees, tensions occurred when the interaction rituals, which are a necessary part of their role as academics, came into conflict with the interaction rituals of their community. The interaction ritual chain of academia usually requires that one distance oneself from traditional, overarching narratives. Yet the dominant interaction rituals within the Vietnamese community usually demand the exact opposite – the uncritical acceptance of received knowledge about the past. As we will see, this uncritical acceptance of the dominant narrative is also a function of the Confucian attitude towards the maintenance of the social/familial order. My research thus investigates how my interviewees navigate these tensions between conflicting interaction ritual chains.

It should also be noted that Bourdieu and Collins were primarily concerned with studying intellectuals *as* intellectuals – they were focused on their lives within the self-contained bubble of academia. That is a worthy goal, to be sure, but it is also necessary to ask: How do other people maximize positive energy through interaction ritual chains or field positions? Thus, Bourdieu and Collins’ theories are limited because they do not allow for more expansive conception of the self and a “broader set of self-understandings”(Gross N. , 2008, p. 264).

Gross’ work (2008) focuses on the theory of the self/identity or what he refers to as “the theory of intellectual self-concept” to complement the theories of Bourdieu and Collins in order to help explain “the intellectual choices and knowledge-making practices of American academic intellectuals specifically. The idea behind this theory, according to Gross, involves intellectuals telling themselves and others “about who they are qua intellectuals: about their distinctive interests, dispositions, value, capacities, and tastes”(p.

263). The stories in which intellectuals engage, Gross further elaborates, “are typological – they involve a thinker describing herself or himself as an intellectual of a particular type – and once they become established they may exert a powerful effect on his or her future thought, inclining the thinker to embrace certain ideas over against others”(pp. 263-264).

I believe that Gross’ approach offers a unique framework, which will immensely enrich our understanding of intellectual identity formation. He emphasizes the importance of the narrative in this context, with particular attention to the argument that, as he phrases it:

Intellectuals, like all social actors, are reflexive and have idiosyncratic and strongly defined conceptions of themselves. As anyone who has attended a faculty party knows too well, intellectuals talk frequently about themselves, telling themselves and others stories about their experiences, interests, values, dispositions, and orientations in conversation, correspondence, diaries, statement of research progress, grant applications, lectures, and so on. (pp. 13-14)

These “self commentaries”, Gross argues, are on one level a reflection of the actors’ experiences, but on another level they may act to influence interactions and future experiences. Because my work is mainly concerned with narratives, Gross’ insight is helpful in providing a theoretical foundation as well as a solid scaffolding on which I can base my analysis, and also carry my work forward.

Gross builds on the theory of the intellectual self-concept (ISC) to develop his two other works¹¹, which deal with the issue of professorial politics. But Gross’ work focuses exclusively on analyzing the development of political views among American professors and does not account for the cross-national contexts as well as the changes in professors’

¹¹ See Neil Gross and Catherine Cheng’s article: “Explaining Professors’ Politics: Is it a Matter of Self-Selection?” in Stulberg, Lisa and Weinberg, Sharon (eds.) *Diversity in American Higher Education: Toward a More Comprehensive Approach*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

See also: Gross, Neil. *Why Are Professors Liberals and Why Do Conservatives Care*. Harvard University Press, CA., 2013.

political views over time, especially as they crossed national boundaries and found themselves in different social and political milieus. His study of Richard Rorty in particular, limits to a single case of a famous intellectual. As Neil McLaughlin (2009) points out: “There are limits to how one can generalize from one case”(p. 1159). Thus, “we need more paired or network comparisons (perhaps looking at more of the New York intellectuals than the most famous ones, for example) (Ibid.). Nevertheless, Gross’ theory of the intellectual self-concept is particularly relevant for my work, as I just mentioned, because it stresses the importance of narratives in the process of identity construction among intellectuals. Gross’ work is valuable in broadening our understanding of how intellectuals “talk”, and how they organize their reality. However, one limitation of Gross’ theory is that it does not deal with the narrative of victimhood, which is central to the process of self-understanding and identity formation among intellectuals who have been in marginalized position. Here Jerry Gafio Watts’ (1994) work on black intellectuals is especially useful as it illuminates our understanding of the victim narrative and possible strategies for transcending it.

The Heroic Intellectual

In his book on the life of Ralph Ellison, *Heroism and the Black Intellectual* (1994), Watts examines the role played not only by Ellison but other black intellectuals in articulating the narrative of victimhood and their methods of either embracing it, distancing themselves from it, or possibly, overcoming it. Watts argues that all black intellectuals do not necessarily adopt the same stance with respect to their roles as

intellectuals and as members of the black community. As we will see - some, like Ellison, reject the imperatives that such a role imposes on them. At the same time, others (such as Langston Hughes) embrace it. Still others attempt to negotiate an “alternative path” which reconciles the demands of their art with their cultural/racial identity. Watts’ work focuses on the black experience, using Ralph Ellison’s life as a kind of “case study”, but his findings have relevance for the experience of Vietnamese intellectuals as well. Vietnamese intellectuals, like their black counterparts, are marginalized in a double sense. The reality of life in the diaspora impinges on them, but their position as intellectuals may at times both bind them closer to their group, as they articulate its concerns, and serve to separate them from it as well.

Watts (1994) is especially concerned with the victim status, which is often a central aspect of black identity. What are the characteristics of such a status, according to Watts? He explains that the “victim status” is a metaphorical paradigm – a kind of symbiotic relationship in which both the victim and the victimizer navigate moral guidelines in an attempt to achieve mutual recognition and validation. Watts thus recognizes that the victim and the victimizer need each other – and this symbiosis informs their relationship on a political, economic, and psychological level. As Watts expresses it:

The victim status hinges on the desire of the victimized to obtain from the victimizer recognition of their victimizer both to accept the victimized the desired recognition. In the process, the humanity of the victimized is supposedly affirmed, but the superiority of the victimizer is not challenged.(p. 17)

How can the victimizer salvage some sense of moral superiority in this situation?

Watts explains that the attempt to seek recognition from the victimizer is by definition predicated on the assumption that the victimizer possesses at least a kernel of humanity

and/or insight. This does not imply, however, that the victimizer will relinquish control. This would be impossible, in Watts' view, because without this relationship, his identity would collapse. For Watts, the more likely scenario revolves around paternalism, which conceals the exercise of power while at the same time consolidating it.

Paternalism is an insidious mechanism of control which offers the victim material inducements to remain in this symbiotic relationship of dependence. At the same time, these inducements stymie any attempts at authentic self-determination. Both the victims and the victimizers assume that this structure is natural and inevitable. The victim, in fact, may identify so strongly with his oppressor that he may not want to give up his subordinate status. But the dialectical relationship between victim and victimizer can only be sustained at great cost to both parties. As Watts sees it:

The victim status sacrifices moral autonomy for social acceptance and material gain. In appealing to the justice and morality of the oppressor, the oppressed often participate in the legitimation of their own oppression. Guilt might result in increases in benefits given to blacks, but it cannot generate equality. By its very definition it presupposes dependency.(p. 18)

Watts' work is especially compelling, particularly with respect to the position of intellectuals and their plight throughout the early part of the 20th century in America. In the case of Ellison, Watts explored "the strategies that Ellison employed in order to learn to become an excellent writer and the ways that these strategies intersected with certain political choices he made" (Watts, 1994, p. 12). These issues will be examined further throughout my thesis.

My research builds on the aforementioned theorists (Cohen, Gross, and Watts), but departs from them in several important respects, which I believe represents a new

contribution to diaspora studies and literature on intellectuals. As I have already indicated, there seems to be a gap in diaspora literature when it comes to discussing intellectuals belonging to a specific ethnic group or community. I am attempting to help fill this gap. My case studies of Vietnamese diaspora intellectuals extend Gross' theory of the (American) intellectual self-concept (ISC) by bringing the components of race and ethnicity to the discussion. Diaspora intellectuals, because of their "un-rootedness" as they cross national boundaries, would tend to view things from the perspective of exile – the position which carries the pain as well as the freedom of displacement. Focusing on the Vietnam-American conflict, I want to examine how they construct the narratives of victimization as a way of showing their connection or tie to the past, which as Cohen (2008) indicates, is a key aspect of a "diasporic consciousness" (p. 24). I also want to investigate whether there are different versions of this victim narrative within the Vietnamese diaspora community - and if so, how do Vietnamese intellectuals deal with the inevitable tensions that arise out of such differences. Finally, I'd like to find out what kind of intellectual self-concept (building on Gross and Watts) emerges out of their experiences and the ways in which they negotiate this concept of the self and situate their place in varying social, political, and national contexts.

It is important to point out that Watts is of course primarily focusing on the black/white issue and the varying strategies in dealing with their marginal position exemplified by Ellison et al. The Vietnamese experience, however, is relatively unique and so far has not been studied from a sociological viewpoint. As far as the victim status is concerned, we might say that the Vietnamese also suffered similar condition vis-à-vis

the war and its aftermath. The difference with the Vietnamese situation is that they still have a homeland to which they long to return, even though not everyone agrees with the idea. In the case of African Americans, one can argue that they are no longer Africans - they might be divided in how they see America, but they are Americans and America is their home. My research examines the multi-layered and nuanced nature of the victim narrative through the perspective of intellectuals, including both academics and “extra” academics.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This research project is a qualitative study of the life history of Vietnamese diaspora intellectuals in Canada and the U.S. The main objective of this study is to offer an analytical understanding of the dynamics and tensions surrounding the role played by Vietnamese diaspora intellectuals in the debate about victimization. To help achieve this goal I rely mostly on the use of narrative inquiry or story telling to investigate the ways in which Vietnamese intellectuals articulate and reshape the victim narrative, in particular, their perspectives on the war, their views about the ways in which the community remembers and commemorates the past, and how this is connected to the flag controversy. Following from this, I am also interested in asking how such narratives/commemorative practices might be transformed in order to help forge a new kind of relationship with the homeland as well as with the host society. How do these practices either facilitate or hinder the process of identity construction, as my interviewees continue to navigate their roles as both academics and professionals, as well as members of their community.

Within the field of refugee/diaspora studies, there has been much focus on Vietnamese refugee stories or narratives, especially among Vietnamese American scholars (e.g., Nguyen-Vo-Thu-Huong, Yen Le Espiritu, and Thuy Vo Dang). What seems to be missing, are the stories from those scholars themselves, who - like any other scholars, tend to engage in critical thinking and reflection on issues that often have a

wider impact on society. For this reason and the fact that it has been almost 40 years since the first big wave of Vietnamese refugees came onto the “international”¹² scene, which speaks to the maturity of the community in relation to cycles of immigration and integration, I believe this study is timely in providing us with fresh insights about what happened in the past as well as identifying some visions for the future.

The Narrative Turn

According to Riessman (2008), narrative inquiry has gained increasing popularity among social scientists and researchers in the past several decades. Falling under the broad tradition of oral history, this “narrative turn” is used across disciplinary fields (e.g., psychology, anthropology, sociology, literature, and medicine)(Riessman, 2008) in an effort to understand the way people experience the world. People rely on narratives in order to tell others about events or life experiences that reflect “human interest” and support our “sense-making”(Bold, 2012). Narrative can also be a transformative experience in that it helps us to change lives and the contexts in which we live (Bold, 2012). In this way, engaging in narratives allows us to derive meaning for ourselves.

Kristin Esterberg (2002) emphasizes that qualitative research is uniquely suited for smaller scale inquiries that address themselves to complex issues of interpretation. Such research is grounded in theory, because it is a knowledge of theoretical perspectives, which enables us to move from the individual and specific to the structural. This of course is what C.Wright Mills (2000) meant by the development of the Sociological

¹² The mass exodus of Vietnamese refugees following the Vietnam War came to be known as an international humanitarian crisis.

Imagination – that is, the ability to see individual issues within the larger social context.

As Esterberg expresses it:

Learning to think sociologically in qualitative research involves not only developing a set of discrete methodological skills (such as interviewing or doing participant observation) but also learning how to move back and forth between theory and evidence. It involves learning the art of interpretation. (p. 3)

Esterberg (2002) recognizes of course, that this narrative turn comes into conflict with the assumptions which are central to carrying out quantitative research. Qualitative and quantitative researchers are in agreement regarding the importance of studying the social world, but they differ on what constitutes the most effective way of doing it.

Quantitative methods involve using numbers to explain a social phenomenon at work in a large group of people. Results are based on mathematical formulas and the significance of these results is demonstrated through the use of statistics. As I have noted, qualitative research, on the other hand, (although it sometimes also involves the use of numbers and calculations) primarily focuses on entering into the social world of one's participants. In citing the work of Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein¹³, Esterberg states that “qualitative research involves the scrutiny of social phenomena” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 2). It

encourages us to look at supposedly “ordinary” aspects of everyday life in novel ways.

As Max Weber famously expressed it, the goal of sociology (and presumably of broader research activities as well) is to come to attempt to grasp the subjective meanings that human beings attach to their actions as they interact with others. Thus he defines sociology as “a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in

¹³ From “The New Language of Qualitative Method” (New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 11-14)

order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects”¹⁴. Whether sociological inquiry can truly be termed “scientific” according to the standards of the natural sciences is a debatable point, and perhaps one that is not relevant for our discussion here. In any case, it is the issue of interpretation and the interplay between theory and data that is the central concern here.

Unlike the traditional approach to research interviews that usually takes the form of “question-and-answer” where the researchers tend to take charge of the process, narrative inquiry gives the interviewees the space to tell their stories in their own way and at their own pace, so as to allow for the stories to flow rather than be fractured by a set of standardized questions (Riessman, 2008). Riessman’s discussion of narrative analysis is organized under four typologies: thematic analysis, structural analysis, dialogic analysis, and visual analysis.

Thematic analysis deals with how the content of narrative, both in written and oral forms, is analyzed. Researchers using this approach identify the common themes in their data - which can be drawn from a variety of sources such as interview, archival documents, and field notes - and focus mainly on “what” is said rather than “how”, “to whom”, or “for what purposes” (Riessman, 2008, pp. 53-54). These developed themes, Riessman points out, are “influenced by prior and emergent theory, the concrete purpose of an investigation, the data themselves, political commitments, and other factors” (Ibid.).

Structural analysis places emphasis on the “telling” - or the way a story is told - and is often used to address social injustices (Riessman, 2008). Drawing on the works of

¹⁴ From “The Theory of Social and Economic Organization” (1947, p.88).

William Labov and James Gee¹⁵, Riessman uses the analysis of the sequence of speech act to explain people's behavior. Labov's approach focuses on the structural elements of the narrative and the sequence of the speech act. Gee's approach looks at narrative in terms of idea units, lines or stanzas. This is helpful in reducing the large amount of data, as well as in identifying important issues that the researcher might miss when using thematic analysis alone.

In dialogic/performance analysis, Riessman emphasizes the idea that narratives are co-constructed and multi-voiced. This analytical approach is influenced by symbolic interaction and literary theories and can be combined with thematic and structural analyses for the interpretation of narratives. Finally visual analysis draws on thematic and dialogic/performance analysis and focuses not only on how and why images are produced but how they are produced with participants.

My project adopts more of the "thematic" approach, which is most commonly used, especially among novice researchers. Thematic analysis focuses mainly on the "content" of the story – or the "what" is said, rather than on the "how" it is said (Riessman, 2005, p. 2; Riessman, 2008). Although thematic analysis is very similar to "grounded theory and interpretive phenomenological analysis" in that the "investigators collect many stories and inductively create conceptual groupings (or generate theory in the case of 'grounded

¹⁵ Labov, W. (Ed.). (1972). The transformation of experience in narrative syntax. In W. Labov (Ed.), *Language in the inner city: Studies in the Black English vernacular* (pp. 354-396). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Labov, W. (1982). Speech actions and reactions in personal narrative. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Analyzing discourse: Text and talk* (pp. 219-247). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Gee, J. P. (1985). The narrativization of experience in the oral style. *Journal of Education*, 167(1), 9-35.

Gee, J. P. (1986). Units in the production of narrative discourse. *Discourse Processes*, 9, 391-422.

Gee, J. P. (1991). A linguistic approach to narrative. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1(1), 15-39.

theory' method) from the data”(Ibid.), there are some key differences. Firstly, thematic analysis relies on prior theoretical concepts to guide the research inquiry. Secondly, thematic analysis keeps “the ‘story’ intact” by preserving the “sequence and wealth of detail contained in long sequences” rather than “fracturing” the data (Riessman, 2008, p. 74).

In this way, narrative inquiry aims to capture the “whole story” rather than “communicate understandings of studied subjects or phenomenon at certain points, but frequently omits the important ‘intervening’ stages”(Webster & Mertova, 2007, pp. 3-4). It is important to note also that in an interview process there is often a kind of “power dynamic” between the researcher and the participants. The interviewer, by the very act of asking the questions that demand answers, is in effect taking charge of the situation. This is something I wish to avoid doing because the aim of this project is to focus on personal stories of the past – stories that require a certain degree of reflection, time to articulate, and the language to present them in a way that makes sense to both the listener and the narrator. Riessman argues in her earlier writing that “the [narrative] approach gives prominence to human agency and imagination” and as such, “it is well suited for the studies of subjectivity and identity”(1993, p. 5); it respects the ways the research participants tell stories and organize meanings about their lives. Narrative research thus gives power back to the participants. As Riessman sees it, it is precisely the idea that narrative approach privileges subjectivity and positionality that makes this type of inquiry valuable.

It should be noted that Riessman's four approaches to narrative analysis are intended as "typologies", or general guidelines for researchers. Thus the approaches are not meant to be "mutually exclusive", and in fact, Riessman notes that the boundaries that serve to distinguish them are often "fuzzy" (Riessman, 2005, p. 2). To be sure, each approach suggests a different mindset towards, and a particular set of expectations about, interviewing techniques, transcription of interviews, and the researcher's bias and positionality - in practice, it is often necessary to combine different approaches (Ibid.). Thus, I also was keenly aware of context and nuance as I interacted with my interviewees. There were moments during the interviewing process when I realized that I needed to combine several approaches in order to not only better understand my participants, but also to enhance their trust in me. When it became difficult for them to relate their stories, I would express my understanding of their situation, and concretize this by including an account of some of my own experiences. It should be emphasized that all of these decisions are taken on an almost moment-by-moment basis during the course of the interview itself. Thus the experience is incredibly fluid and generative for both the researcher and the participants. I found then, that nothing could be "boxed in" to rigid, pre-ordained format.

Riessman's fluid conception of the meaning of the narrative thus dovetails nicely with the approaches to this issue offered by Gross (2008), Watts (1994), and Andrew Lam (2005). As previously mentioned, for both Gross and Watts, narrative is an integral part of self-understanding and identity construction. The work of Andrew Lam is also informed by the realization that identity construction is a complex process. For Lam as

well as Watts and Gross, narratives may serve a number of functions. Lam argues in fact, that various narratives may be intertwined in a single individual's life history. He points out for example, that although the narrative of victimhood is often central to the identity construction of the Vietnamese in the diaspora, ultimately as he sees it, it is necessary to transcend this perspective, without rejecting it utterly. One's past is part of one's present, as Lam points out, and the individual must take this past history with him as he embarks on a new journey, which is always a process of becoming.

This study focuses primarily on first-person accounts by Vietnamese intellectuals of their life stories. My objective is to examine the life history narratives of my respondents, especially their views regarding the Vietnam War, the experiences of boatpeople and displaced individuals – whether directly or indirectly¹⁶, and how they create possibilities for their self-identity and position in society. Although the stories themselves provide for powerful, rich data, I am also interested in how they are constructed or put together, the kind of language used, and the cultural resources (e.g., educational level, habitus, and social position) respondents draw on to help authenticate their stories and make them more persuasive for the listener (Riessman, 1993).

Despite the fact that the construction of narratives or storytelling is considered a universal human activity, some experiences – especially those that involve pain and suffering (e.g., war and persecution) are extremely difficult to speak about. Moreover, certain political conditions also place constraints on what can and cannot be narrated.

¹⁶ My study includes first generation, 1.5 generation, and some second generation Vietnamese diaspora. Therefore some had direct/personal “boatpeople” experiences while others only have family members who went through them; nevertheless, they have - to a large extent - inherited that past and are part of it.

Therefore I chose to collect these life history narratives both in oral and written formats. It is generally agreed that conducting the interviews face to face and in person is a much-preferred method as it allows for a more in-depth conversation to develop between the researcher and the interviewee, which in turn would facilitate the process of telling about one's past and life experiences – I offered my respondents the choice of responding to a list of semi-structured interview questions in writing for the reasons I have just mentioned. Moreover, during this phase of my research, which was in the spring and summertime, a number of my participants were also traveling for their own research (as is often the case with academics) in places where communication was more limited and not as readily available as in North America. Therefore, responding to the interview questions in writing was a more practical option.

As indicated, I adopted the semi-structured and open-ended approach in these interviews in order to encourage my respondents “to attend to and tell about important moments in their lives”(Riessman, 1993, p. 54). I listened with minimal interruptions and asked questions, which would help generate “extended accounts” rather than those that are closed-ended (e.g., “tell me what happened” instead of “when did it happen”) (Ibid.). It was my goal to examine Vietnamese intellectuals' narration of significant events about their past, how they find meaning and purpose in spite of their sense of loss and displacement, and how they deal with the tensions that arise as they attempt to negotiate conflicting role demands. Of particular interest to me was the focus on some salient themes that have been dominant in community discourse over the years. These themes serve as identity markers for the Vietnamese - not only to distinguish themselves from

other communities but also to highlight social and political differences between community members.

A total of 32 interviews were conducted, 9 of which were in written form. The remaining 23 were carried out one-on-one in an interview format. Of those 23 interviews, seven of them were conducted “in person” where I met and sat down with the interviewees, and the other 15 interviews were carried out via the Internet or over the telephone. The majority of the interviews lasted between one and a half to two hours. In some cases, the interviews were interrupted and had to be rescheduled. As academics they sometimes had to attend to unexpected visits from students or telephone calls. I also conducted a few follow up questions via emails for clarification on issues that were discussed earlier or to ask questions that were missed.

In the course of analyzing the data, several questions emerged which required me to contact my interviewees again. The first question asked for my respondents’ views on commemorative practices, and the second one invited them to discuss tensions they might have experienced as they attempted to reconcile the demands of what Randall Collins(1998) has termed conflicting “interaction ritual chains”. As my participants’ responses demonstrate, the flag issue is enormously important for the Vietnamese community, however, I realized that it was important to situate the issue in a larger theoretical framework, which revolves around the meaning of commemoration, myth, and memory. I felt that it was crucial to revisit these concerns, and to delve more deeply in my respondents’ views - although I had touched on the importance of symbolism and commemoration earlier, at least to some extent. A total of 21 participants responded to

my email, and I was grateful for their continued involvement. I assume that time constraints prevented my other interviewees from replying. In addition, quite a bit of time had passed between the first and the second stage of the interview process, which took place almost at the end of this project. The time lag between my initial interviews and the follow up questions would inevitably affect the level of participation. It is difficult to assess the effect of this loss of participation on the outcome of my study. Nevertheless, I had to respect my interviewees' wishes as to their continued participation, as well as my own deadline for completing this research.

Initially, my plan was to meet many more of my participants to carry out the interviews in person, but this was not possible due to the limited resources available to me. Understandably it is often preferable to conduct interviews face-to-face, however in this particular project there were certain advantages to collecting the data through other means (e.g., on-line and via the telephone). Aside from its practicality, one major advantage of carrying out these interviews over the Internet was that it created a sort of “safe distance” so that the participants felt comfortable enough to share their life stories. There was also the option of whether or not to have live video feeds during these interviews, which added another layer of comfort for my respondents. A few of my interviewees preferred to have the live video so as to make them feel more like they were really talking to a real person. Several others requested no video, as it made them feel more self-conscious about their appearance and the way in which they presented themselves – and finally a few others did not mind either way.

Another aspect of my methodology involved participant observation or field research. Participant observation demands that the researcher “takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people” in an attempt to learn the “explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002). In a broader sense, it is an approach to doing research that aims to achieve “an understanding of the nature of phenomena” in their “natural settings” rather than assessing their “magnitude and distribution” (i.e., quantifying it) (ibid, p. 2). As pointed out by Kathleen and Billie Dewalt (2002), even though we all are “participants and observers” in our everyday interactions, what makes this a method of inquiry unique is that the researcher engages in the “systematic use of the information for social scientific purposes” (p. 3).

I conducted ethnographic observations of several community events, (e.g., political rallies, meetings, conferences, celebrations, and fundraising events) where I observed and took notes on the gatherings and those in attendance, focusing especially on the “elites” members of the community. I participated in a total of 5 of such events, 4 of which took place in Montreal and 1 in Ottawa. These two cities were chosen primarily for purposes of convenience. Since I live in Montreal, which is also close to the city of Ottawa, it was not difficult for me to attend these events. I also watched videos and/or read news reports of some of the same events that took place in other cities since it was not feasible for me to be there in person. Field notes were taken, either on site or subsequently, or both. These notes were about my direct observations as well as my reflections on the events and how they might relate to my research questions and hypotheses.

Although this was not a major part of my methodology, I believe taking part in these events enhanced the quality of my work as it allowed me to observe the intellectuals “at work” and also to gain more insights about the activities and group dynamics within the community. Additionally this helped me to be more reflexive about my work, in that it encouraged me to continually re-examine and reassess what it is that I am doing, to question my own assumptions and pre-conceptions, and to be aware of how my “personal baggage” plays a role in this entire research process. I learned to develop conversational sensitivity towards the interviews, which is crucial for narrative inquiry because stories are jointly and interactively constructed. As Riessman(2008) observes: “The specific wording of a question is less important than the interviewer’s emotional attentiveness and engagement and the degree of reciprocity in the conversation”(p. 24). Thus, the relationship that developed out of my interaction with the respondents helped me to obtain extended accounts rather than brief answers.

Sampling

My sample of participants includes Vietnamese intellectuals, consisting primarily of university professors, in the U.S and Canada. My main method of finding participants for this project was nonrandom purposive sampling using websites of different social and professional organizations and universities across Canada and the U.S. Specifically, I relied on the “Vietnamese-North American University Professors” network – an organization of Vietnamese educators from North American universities that meets

annually¹⁷ to share and exchange ideas as well as to foster academic collaboration. A list of Vietnamese professors and other professionals (journalists and writers) was compiled and contacts were made through emails, letters, or telephone calls. The non-academic participants were contacted through “snowballing” as well as through Internet searches. It is important to note that the scope of my search was relatively narrow because there are comparatively few Vietnamese in these fields, and thus they are well known in the community.

For the most part I received positive feedback from those who replied, both in terms of showing commitment to participation as well as expressing their enthusiasm about the subject matter itself. Three individuals refused to participate. Two of the respondents declined after having seen the sample questionnaire¹⁸. There were also a few candidates who never replied back after initially agreeing to take part in the study. While it was made clear that this study is for educational purposes and that it follows certain research protocols, in the case of the Vietnamese diaspora - especially the intellectuals - the fear of

¹⁷ This is what is written on the website of the organization. However since its first meeting in 1999, there have been only two meetings after that, in 2000 and 2001. There have not been any updates about the activities of this network of professors. I am uncertain whether this “inactivity” might be attributed to the on-going threats posed by the Vietnamese government in Vietnam, which aimed to crackdown on dissidents, intellectuals, bloggers, and religious groups. Perhaps this is just another professional organization that struggles to get volunteer labour and resources from busy professionals.

¹⁸ I chose to send the sample questionnaire upon request only so as to avoid “scaring away” any potential participants. Due to the political climate of the Vietnamese diaspora and the nature of my inquiry, which deals with personal life history and covers issues that might deem “sensitive”, I felt this was a good precaution to take). One person who refused is from an Ivy League institution. This person flatly refused through my initial email and asked not to be included in my email list, something which I originally requested in order to keep all my participants informed about my project. The second refusal was from an older person from the U.S who, after having read the summary of what my project is about and after having seen the questionnaire, explained that he did not feel comfortable reliving these events. The third individual who lives and works closely with the Vietnamese community in the U.S, cited sexual orientation as the reason for not participating. This person was concerned about the possibility of being identified. This is understandable because one of the challenges of narrative inquiry is that one can occasionally be identified through one’s story even while remaining anonymous.

reprisals from the government in Vietnam as well as backlash from the community where they live may be factors influencing their decision to decline to participate.

I also relied on the “snowball” sampling technique to recruit respondents. This occurs when some of the respondents, after having confirmed their participation, either informed me about someone they know, or made direct contact with their friends and colleagues and introduced me to them. This means that, as is sometimes the case with snowball sampling, those who already agreed to be part of my study would seek out colleagues similar to themselves. However, I tried to guard against this by making use of multiple starting points – that is, rather than waiting for one particular person to respond to my request, I asked *all* of my participants to introduce me to other possible individuals. Many of them were willing to do this, and the participation of new candidates enhanced my research.

The participants in my study are mostly from first (i.e., immigrants who came over as adults) and “one-and-a-half” generations (i.e., children of first generation immigrants or those who arrived before they reached adulthood) (Rumbaut R. , 2004). I also included 2 participants who were born in North America to both Vietnamese parents but whose growing up experience mirrored those of first and 1.5 generations. Finally I also had 3 participants who are of mixed race marriages. Although these three individuals might not “fit” under the definition of diaspora in the strictest sense, their biographical accounts and scholarly work are in some ways, a reflection of the Vietnamese diaspora experience. I believe that their contribution adds a certain degree of diversity to this study.

It should also be noted that the concept of diaspora itself is still changing and scholars in the field continue to debate its features and characteristics; thus it was not possible for this study to have a strict set of selection criteria as to what characterizes someone as “diaspora”, rather I was more interested in locating Vietnamese intellectuals in general. Because this project is considered one of the first, if not the first, of its kind (i.e., a study of Vietnamese diasporic elites), I felt it was more important to get the project started rather than being bogged down with selection criteria.

As mentioned above, a total of 32 participants were recruited for this study. In narrative research it is often advantageous to work with a smaller sample size because the approach privileges subjectivity and positionality, which allows for the uncovering of identity and meaning making. As Riessman has pointed out, “narrative analysis is not useful for studies of large numbers of nameless, faceless subjects”(Riessman, 1993, p. 69; 2001, p. 706). The methods of collecting narratives (e.g., interviewing and analysis of written texts) are “slow and painstaking” – requiring much “attention to subtlety: nuances of speech, organization of a response, local contexts of production, social discourses that shape what is said, and what cannot be spoken” (ibid). Although one can argue that each narrative is unique in itself - and of course all studies could continue to go on - I decided to stop conducting more interviews when common narratives seemed to have emerged and. In other words, I did not need more interviews because the themes I was interested in examining (e.g., views about the war and the flag controversy and tensions between personal and community politics) recurred repeatedly. In qualitative research, this

generally indicates that collecting new data would not be likely to yield new insights on the issue under investigation (Mason, 2010). One has thus reached the “saturation point”.

Limitations and Challenges

As with any research methods, narrative inquiry has its own set of methodological challenges. In the following sections, I discuss several “common” difficulties involved in doing narrative research as well as some of the more specific issues unique to this project that I encountered in the research process. I end the discussion by talking about the different strategies I employed to help mitigate these challenges.

Reliability and validity.

Reliability is one of the main concerns for research inquiry. Simply put, reliability refers to the quality of the data and how likely it is that those same findings can be repeated by other researchers when they follow the same research procedures. Complete reliability is almost impossible to achieve in narrative studies because of the subjective element on the part of both the researcher and the participants. Interviews differ from person to person and from one context to another. The researcher thus needs to be able to think on his or her feet and be creative in making quick changes or adjustments when necessary. As Charles T. Morrissey (1998) noted: “interviewing techniques vary with the person you’re interviewing”(p. 107), thus it is very difficult to be able to repeat the same data at another time.

Narrative accounts are also jointly produced through a process of interaction and exchange between the researcher and the interviewee, and involves different levels of interpretation for both the respondent and the researcher (Riessman, 1993; 2001; 2008) - as such one cannot expect that the same stories will be repeated consistently each time. Even though the content of the story may stay the same, the manner in which the participant narrates his or her story can differ depending on a host of other factors (e.g., relationship with the interviewer, the environment where the interview takes place, the level of comfort between the interviewer and the subject, and how the questions are asked).

These same issues that I just discussed can also affect the validity of the data – yet another challenge of doing research. Traditionally, validity is rooted in the positivist tradition and is commonly applied in quantitative research. Validity usually refers to the strength or accuracy of the analysis, which often times depends on the measuring instruments (e.g., survey questionnaire and statistically testing devices) used and the extent to which such instruments measure what they set out to measure. In other words, validity is mainly concerned with how “truthful” the research findings are.

Qualitative research, and in particular narrative inquiry, involves a high degree of subjectivity, both on the part of the researcher and research participants. Thus the issue of “validity” is approached differently by qualitative researchers, based on the argument that reality is always subjectively experienced or perceived, and therefore, it is impossible to speak of the existence of absolute truth. As Riessman (1993) asserts:

Prevailing concepts of verification and procedures for establishing validity (from the experimental model) rely on realist assumptions and consequently are largely

irrelevant to narrative studies. A personal narrative is not meant to be read as an exact record of what happened nor is it a mirror of a world “out there.” Our readings or data are themselves located in discourses (e.g., scientific, feminist, and therapeutic.(p. 64)

What is more important to consider is the “telling” of the story. In other words, it is about paying attention to the contexts that shape how the story is told and the cultural resources the individual draws on to present it as such. Thus, narrative researchers aim to be more “persuasive” and “plausible” in their interpretations of the data - that is, asking the question “is the interpretation reasonable and convincing?”(Riessman, 1993, p. 65; 2008). How can one achieve all this? Riessman points out that “persuasiveness is greatest when theoretical claims are supported with evidence from informants accounts and when alternative interpretations of the data are considered” (Ibid.).

Validity in narrative research is more about making claims for the “trustworthiness” of the interpretations and less about assessing the “truth”(Riessman, 1993; 2008). The notion of truth points to an objective reality whereas trustworthiness involves placing things in a particular social context. Every story is, in essence, socially constructed and reality is unique to the individual’s experience, and can change depending on the different contexts and settings. It is very difficult to make generalization across cases, but the researcher can look for common patterns or repeated themes that are important to her research focus. In short, the concept of validity is not accorded the same weight as in other quantitative research methods.

Janice M. Morse *et. al.* (2002) argue in *Verification Strategies for Establishing Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research* that “qualitative researchers should reclaim responsibility for reliability and validity by implementing verification strategies

[which are] integral and self-correcting during the conduct of inquiry itself” (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002, p. 13). Methodological rigor requires that the researchers subject himself or herself to challenges which must be met if the value of his or her work is to be upheld, rather than relying on the judgments of readers or reviewers after the fact. Morse *et. al.* elaborate on strategies which will enhance the reliability and validity of qualitative work. These include “investigator responsiveness, methodological coherence, theoretical sampling and sampling adequacy, an active analytic stance, and saturation” (Ibid. p. 17).

I have already discussed some of these issues, and I hope that I have been able to meet the challenges that they present. Having said that, and with a deep appreciation of the points raised in Morse’s article, I would also like to argue that Riessman’s approach may be more realistic. Morse calls for a level of verification which may (and I say this guardedly) only be possible if qualitative research could be carried out with endless time and funding at one’s disposal. Riessman (2008), on the other hand, identifies two levels of concern when assessing the validity of narrative inquiry and advises researchers to ask themselves two basic but profound questions: (a) was a true story told by the participants and (b) was the researcher’s analysis accurate? (Victor, 2009, p. 175). Riessman thus demonstrates her understanding of the nature of social reality – which is to say, that there is no one overarching reality. My perception of what constitutes “truth” in a given situation is not necessarily the same as my neighbor’s perception of it or my interviewees’ understanding of it. Of course, this does not mean that qualitative research should be reduced to mere fiction. Riessman suggests that researchers should search for

consistency in narratives, and in order to do this, they must be placed in a larger socio-political context. I have been engaged in this effort throughout the process of data collection and analysis for this thesis, and I believe that my research is coherent and consistent.

It should also be emphasized that my research was confined to a small group of intellectuals in an already relatively small diaspora community. I was not attempting to compare Canadian and U.S experiences, or the differences between disciplines in the academic community, nor was I attempting to study the Vietnamese population in North America as a whole. I set out to answer a specific set of questions, which I was able to answer with the data collected. Would a larger sample have made a difference? I am not sure if the basic story would change that much. Of course a larger sample would have allowed me to make casual claims such as what determines viewpoints or differences between academics and journalists, but this was not my intention for this project.

Sampling bias and representativeness.

With regard to the study population for my study, it is important to point out that there is a certain degree of political bias, which would affect the reliability and validity of the data. The fact that the intellectuals I interviewed, or members of their families, fled Vietnam as a direct consequence of the war indicates that they would probably hold a pro-south Vietnamese perspective. This is more likely to be the case for the older/first generation Vietnamese in the diaspora, however, which is understandable since they have experienced the conflict and its effects in a more direct manner than younger generation

Vietnamese. In the 1.5 and second generations, this view might be less pronounced and perhaps even more balanced in terms of seeing the war from multiple angles rather than from the one dominant perspective found in the diaspora. My research revealed, however, that there was little difference in perspectives between the older (1st generation) participants and younger (1.5 and 2nd generations) participants. In general, the intellectuals I interviewed were critical of the dominant anticommunist politics in the community. Perhaps younger participants were more forthright or outspoken about their views, particularly those in the area of ethnic studies and other social science disciplines.

In order to help with the problems of reliability and validity, I include more respondents from the younger generation. This also serves a practical purpose, as there are fewer intellectuals from the first generation in academia – a place where many intellectuals work. This is expected because the first wave of refugees not only came when they were older but also had to deal with resettlement issues, thus leaving them with little opportunity to pursue higher learning that would lead to a career in academia where many of the intellectuals are usually found.

It is also advantageous for me to have respondents from the younger generation because they offer a greater diversity of viewpoints due to their time spent in North America and they are also more removed from their past compared to the older generation. More importantly, even though I am focusing on the narratives of victimhood, what I also want to look for are the changes in these narratives and how they might be related to other social conditions that Vietnamese intellectuals experience in the host societies.

My use of the snowball sampling technique (i.e., asking for referrals from participants after I have made contact with them) to find candidates for this study also poses a challenge to the representativeness of the data. Although snowball sampling is considered a kind of selection bias, it is helpful for my study for several reasons. Firstly because this study of intellectuals in the Vietnamese diaspora is, so far, considered to be the first of its kind - snowball sampling serves as a good “exploratory” purpose. More specifically, it provides me with an opportunity to “feel out” the topic as well as to make further contact with the community and with those who may wish to participate in a future in-depth study. Moreover, throughout Vietnamese history (and even now) Vietnamese intellectuals have often been targeted and marginalized by those in power¹⁹, which in turn has prevented many of them from wanting to be associated with the label “intellectual”. The indirect “snowballing” method of recruitment allowed my respondent to feel more comfortable with me, because they were introduced to me by people they already knew. I tried to minimize this sampling bias by having multiple starting points. Thus besides using the “Vietnamese-North American University Professors” network to recruit participants, I also searched websites of different universities. Multiple contacts were made each time during this phase of recruitment as opposed to waiting for referrals.

¹⁹ It is well documented that in political systems such as those of dictatorship and totalitarian regime, intellectuals have been subjected to abuse, oppression, and persecution. Vietnamese intellectuals have suffered the same fate under French colonial power and their current Communist government. The most recent writing that documents how Vietnamese intellectuals have been victimized can be found in “Bên Thắng Cuộc” (Huy Đức, 2012).

Positionality.

My positionality is perhaps another concern in this study. The fact that I am a boatperson who went through many of the same experiences as the participants in this study might also add to this problem of bias. However I believe that one can never be totally detached or unconnected from a research project. In my case, it was due to this very connection that I became interested in this topic and made the decision to undertake this important and timely research endeavor. As any researcher would agree, it is extremely difficult to be completely objective and value-neutral, particularly in qualitative research. In my case, I believe that my “insider status” provided me with the “cultural” sensitivity necessary to cultivate relationships and to deepen my understanding of the narratives of my participants.

As I have mentioned, narratives are jointly constructed through a process of interaction and relationship forming, and as such they are laden with subjectivities. I was aware of the fact that what I might say or do during the course of the interview could have an influence on the kind of narratives being produced. In citing Louis Starr’s proclamation, Morrisey (1998) stated: “a good interviewer is a good listener”; that it is important to “let the interviewee talk”, as “it is his show” and we should “let him run with the ball”(p. 108). Thus I listened as much as possible and I only “interfered” to help fill in a long pause or an uncomfortable silence, such as when the subject struggled to find words or needed validation from me, the listener (e.g., a simple “yes, I understand what you mean, or I also share with you on that view”). I was also aware of the fact that because of my shared background and experiences, I needed to be prepared “to give” as

much as I was prepared “to take”. This meant that I also talked about my own story when necessary. This strategy worked especially well in situations where I needed to show my understanding and sensitivity towards my interviewees’ stories.

Emotional issues.

I was aware that recounting past experiences not only affects the narrators themselves but also the listeners, especially in my case since I shared many of the same experiences as my participants. The one challenge that I had not anticipated was on one occasion when I conducted an in-person interview session, my subject was too overwhelmed with emotions and started to sob as he talked about events in the past. There were cases where my interviewees seemed to have a “lump in their throats” when repressed memories began flashing back at them, but none actually broke down in tears in front of me. For a brief moment I was unsure of what to do as I was directly facing my subject – not on the phone and not over the computer but face to face. This was a good illustration of the difficulty in doing interviews that Morrissey (1998) had pointed out. This was the time when I urgently needed to “think on my feet” and to rely on my “intuition” in trying to figure out what to do. In this case I offered to stop the interviews and tried to express my understanding and sensitivity towards what my interview subject was experiencing. After a short tea break, my interviewee decided that it was fine for us to carry on.

A couple of other interviewees informed me that they had not revealed any of what they were telling me to anyone, even to their spouses and children. While I was cognizant of the challenges in doing narrative research, I had not anticipated the heavy

burden of carrying these stories – stories that were wrapped in pain, sorrow, loss, and haunting memories. I felt that they were secrets that had been deposited with me and I had been entrusted to protect and care for them. I felt honored but at the same time my heart ached as I listened to these “secrets” and realized how painful it must have been for my interview subjects to live with these memories and not have the opportunity or the courage to speak about them. I struggled with the question of objectivity and how I could represent my respondents’ stories without injecting some of my own personal thoughts and feelings. Indeed the demarcation line separating the personal and the academic agenda can become blurry at times, especially when carrying out research on one’s own ethnic group.

To help deal with this challenge I kept a small journal to write down my own personal feelings and reflections throughout the whole process. Additionally I took “time out” as needed as a way to work through these emotional difficulties. I also shared some of the “raw data” with close, non-participating individuals as a way to help me debrief. This same strategy was used during the transcription and analysis phase of my interviews.

It is common for a boatperson to hold an antagonistic and oppositional view about the current government, and I am no exception; however I should emphasize that over the years my view has leveled off and has become less one-sided. This is due in large part to my exposure to higher learning in western institutions in general and sociological understanding in particular, all of which has helped me to be more critical in my thinking and more open-minded in my understanding and analysis of history. I am also of a younger generation who mainly grew up here in North America, which as I have

previously mentioned, allowed me to develop greater awareness of the complexities embedded in this type of analysis, and it enabled me to adopt a more balanced view of the country's history.

Language issue.

Despite the fact that I am fluent in Vietnamese, I relied almost entirely on English in all my communication with the participants. The Vietnamese language imposes a hierarchical order in the way interlocutors address each other, which I wanted to avoid. For example, in Vietnamese the pronoun “you” is used differently depending on the age as well as the social position of the individual. The same also applies to using “me” or “I” to address oneself. Thus both “you” and “me” take various forms depending on one's position in relation to the other person. In other words, Vietnamese language is spoken with “familial pronouns” so that each person is given a title (e.g., older sister, older brother, aunt, and uncle) before his or her name is being called. All of this has to be evaluated at the beginning of an encounter. How each party addresses one another would indicate a certain power relation, which in turn would set the tone for, and have an effect on, the entire course of the interview.

This is not the case in English where “you” and “me” are all inclusive pronouns regardless of one's age or social position. Therefore using English was deemed as the best strategy for several reasons. Firstly it allowed both parties to establish a sort of “equal playing field” and to reduce the distance between the interviewer and the subject. This was important because it ensured greater objectivity throughout the whole research

process. Another advantage was that it helped me to establish myself as a “serious scholar”²⁰, which would deter the tendency of participants from the older generation to impose their views as a way to teach young people about the country’s history and culture, as is often a common practice in Vietnamese culture.

In my next section, I include a breakdown of the Vietnamese diaspora in North America, with particular emphasis on their conditions of exit and how the experience of resettlement differed in the U.S and Canada. My participants were drawn from this large group of Vietnamese diaspora members, and I felt that it was important to be attentive to the differences within this population, which will be elaborated in the following chapters of this study.

Unpacking and analyzing the narratives

The process of unpacking and analyzing data was a particularly challenging one. It is, of course, necessary to respect the accounts of one’s interviewees, particularly in this type of ethnographic inquiry. This leads to the question: How does one reconcile the need to respect the data with the equally important need to distinguish between essential and non-essential details? Very long verbatim quotations are understandably frustrating for one’s readers, who may question the salience of such information, and how it might be connected to the theoretical foundations, which inform such research.

It was thus necessary for me to be judicious in sifting and sorting the data in a way that would allow me to make theoretical linkages and demonstrate its relevance for the

²⁰ I use this term with reservations, acknowledging the fact that I am merely a “scholar in training”.

questions I have posed in this thesis, while at the same time respecting my respondents' narratives. I hope I have been able to do this successfully, but I am aware that it is sometimes difficult to "sift and sort" without doing violence to the data. Thus in some cases I opted to include accounts with only minimal editing. Keeping the narratives "whole" is in fact a strategy advocated by Riessman (2008), particularly when one is engaging in thematic analysis. Riessman argues that such analysis should be "case-centered" – in other words, in narrative inquiry, cases should not be selected in order to be "statistically" representative, but rather should be placed in the framework of a theoretical argument. Riessman cites the work of Gareth Williams who used thematic methods to analyze his participants' answers to the question, "why do you think you got arthritis?"(Riessman, 2008, p. 55). This apparently simple and straightforward question yielded a multiplicity of responses, which Williams felt could be linked thematically in terms of the individual's need to deal with an often disruptive, even catastrophic illness. The attempt to integrate this into one's life course, while striving, at the same time, to sustain oneself as "whole" and functional necessitated a profound degree of cognitive reorganization.

Williams found that in telling their stories, his interviewees needed to contextualize, to explain, and to bring in many apparently circumstantial factors, which nevertheless were important to them. Yet he did not attempt to edit or categorize their narratives. As Riessman observes, "Williams does not fracture the biographical account into thematic categories as grounded theory coding would do, but interprets it as a whole"(Riessman, 2008, p. 57).

My respondents were not forced to deal with the effects of serious physical illness, but often the psychological stresses they had experienced required them to engage in their own form of cognitive reorganization. Many of them confronted the abrupt and permanent loss of their country, their homes, and their families as the result of a situation which was political in nature, and therefore beyond their control. Yet as my data reveal, my interviewees confronted the experience of loss and rupture in their own individual ways. Thus it was necessary for me to preserve the integrity of their accounts, while at the same time, situating their experiences within a larger socio-historical context. I believe that to attempt to do otherwise would be reductionist and unfair.

Having said that, it should be noted once again that I began this project with several salient themes in mind (namely my interviewees' perspectives on the war, on the issues of memory and commemoration, and their views regarding the flag controversy) – thus, after the initial transcription of the interviews (which I described in more detail in the latter part of this chapter), I went back to examine these themes more closely. To help ensure an accurate representation of my respondents' accounts, I revisited each interview transcription after having analyzed my data. I made note of how each interviewee responded to the question about these themes and found, once again, that many of them had conflicted views about these issues. There were only a few who expressed the “pro South” view with regard to their position on the war. However, this was not always clear either. For instance, to say that one supports the American effort to prevent the spread of communism in the region does not necessarily mean that s/he also supports the South Vietnamese regime. Similarly, regarding the flag issue, only one interviewee strongly

opposed the current flag of the country. Overwhelmingly my interviewees showed their understanding of the community's emotional attachment to the past, but pointed out that a constant fixation on it can be destructive as well. I am aware of the fact that there is no one "truth" to any narrative, or any analysis of a narrative for that matter. Therefore my aim in analyzing the data is to try to interpret the possible meanings, which I hope would enhance the plausibility of my analysis.

Profile of the Vietnamese diaspora

The Vietnamese diaspora today can be divided into three distinct groups based on the conditions of their exit from the homeland. In Canada, the latest available statistics indicate the population of Vietnamese to be over 180,000²¹. For the U.S, the total number of Vietnamese is reported to be over 1.5 million²². The first group (often known as first wave) arrived as asylum seekers following the war. Members of this group generally came from a privileged background in terms of their economic position and/or social standing (Bloemraad, 2006). Many of those who came to the U.S (or their family members) often held government posts for the South Vietnamese government or worked for the U.S government or American companies. They were forced to flee for fear of retribution when the communist regime took control of the entire country in 1975. Therefore, this first refugee wave generally was opposed to the communist regime (and most continue to be). Upon their arrival in the U.S, refugees were systematically dispersed throughout the country – an effort on the part of the government to prevent the potential formation of ethnic enclaves. Without such a dispersal of the population, certain cities or towns in the U.S would have had to bear a heavy financial burden to settle the refugees. Because of this early pattern of settlement, many of them ended up in small regions or rural areas where there were little opportunities to contact other Vietnamese or Asian Americans, and in general this made resettlement more difficult for them²³.

Southern California has proven to be the most successful refugee settlement, however,

²¹ From Statistics Canada 2006 Census. This number includes both ‘single and multiple ethnic origin’ responses

²² U.S 2010 Census.

²³ See pages 463-68 in Encyclopaedia of Multicultural Psychology for more discussion of Vietnamese refugee experiences in America.

due in large part to the already established Asian cultural base, including Southeast Asians as well²⁴. Consequently, Vietnamese started to migrate toward the west coast, forming large enclaves in Orange Country and Los Angeles, California. Today of the over 1.5 million Vietnamese in the U.S, California has the largest concentration with close to 600,000. The tables below provide a visual breakdown of the Vietnamese population in the U.S.

Table 1

Asian Population in the U.S, 2010 Census

Asian Alone Population in the United States: 2010	
Asian	14,674,252
Chinese	3,347,229
Asian Indian	2,843,391
Filipino	2,555,923
Vietnamese	1,548,449
Korean	1,423,784
Japanese	763,325
Other Asian	2,192,151

Source: U.S Census Bureau, 2010 Census

It should be noted that since the 2010 Census, “respondents were asked to report “one or more” races they considered themselves and other members of their household to

²⁴Encyclopaedia of North American Immigration.

be. Data on race can be divided into two broad categories: the race ‘alone’ and the race ‘in combination’ population”²⁵.

Table 2

Top 10 States with Largest Vietnamese Population: 2010

	<u>States</u>	<u>Vietnamese Population</u>
1	California	581,946
2	Texas	210,913
3	Washington	66,575
4	Florida	58,470
5	Virginia	53,529
6	Georgia	45,263
7	Massachusetts	42,915
8	Pennsylvania	39,008
9	New York	28,764
10	Louisiana	28,352

Source: U.S. 2010 Census

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http://www.bpsos.org/mainsite/images/DelawareValley/community_profile/us.census.2010.the%20vietnamese%20population_july%202.2011.pdf

Table 3

Top 10 U.S Cities with Largest Vietnamese Population: 2010

	<u>U.S Cities</u>	<u>Vietnamese Population</u>
1	San Jose, CA	100,486
2	Garden Grove, CA	47,331
3	Westminster, CA	36,068
4	Houston, Texas	34,838
5	San Diego, CA	33,149
6	Santa Ana, CA	23167
7	Los Angeles, CA	19,969
8	Anaheim, CA	14,431
9	Philadelphia, PA	14,431
10	New York City, NY	13,387

Source: U.S. 2010 Census

Prior to the fall of Saigon in 1975, a number of Vietnamese were already living abroad as students, military personnel, or war brides. Those who left the country as students were usually from a more privileged and educated background, as they had to apply and compete for scholarships, which were being offered by different foreign

countries under the ‘Colombo Plan’²⁶ – an organization originally set up to help economic development and to fight the spread of Communism in Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam.

Vietnamese who entered Canada to study during this pre-1975 period were mainly males and most came to the province of Quebec (Dorais, 2005). These visa students left with the understanding that they would return home once they completed their studies; however they were unable to do so due to the unfolding events of the war, which eventually led to a complete communist take over of the country. As the result, they were “forced” to settle here, and a good number ended up marrying “local, non-Vietnamese women” (Dorais, 1999, as cited in Dorais, 2005, p. 170). As has been mentioned above, the population of Vietnamese in Canada is a little over 180,000 and mainly is concentrated in 4 provinces as well as large metropolitan cities (tables 4 & 5).

Table 4

Vietnamese Population in Canada (1991-2006)

<u>Province</u>	<u>1991</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>2006</u>
Ontario	38,550	61,055	67,450	83,330
Quebec	21,805	27,820	28,310	33,815
British Columbia	12,805	21,095	27,190	30,835

²⁶ Information on this organization is available through various on-line sources such as the <http://www.colombo-plan.org/> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colombo_Plan

Alberta	15,135	19,170	21,490	25,170
Manitoba	3,545	2,930	755	3,875
Saskatchewan	1,530	2,090	870	1,640
Nova Scotia	645	670	790	600
New Brunswick	250	435	235	315
N.W.T	120	190	75	345
N.L	65	110	0	55
P.E.I	0	35	25	15
Yukon-Nunavut	30	210	15	120
Canada	94,260	136,810	151,400	180,130

Sources: Les Vietnamiens de Montréal, p.43 (Statistics 1991, 1996, 2001) Recensement 2006 – Origine ethnique/Ethnic origins. Catalogue 97-562-XCB2006006.

Table 5

Top 5 Canadian Cities with Largest Vietnamese Population

<u>City</u>	<u>1991</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>2006</u>
Toronto	24,550	41,735	45,105	56,095
Montreal	19,265	25,340	25,605	30,510

Vancouver	10,095	16,870	22,865	26,110
Calgary	7,255	10,110	11,595	14,285
Edmonton	6,780	7,775	8,990	9,740
Total	67,945	101,830	114,160	136,740

Source: Statistics Canada (1991, 1996, 2001, 2006)

It should be noted that Quebec has the highest percentage of Vietnamese seniors (65 and over) because the community was first established in Quebec (as the result of the early arrival of visa students) many years prior to when the war ended in 1975, which brought an influx of Vietnamese refugees. Another important characteristic also worth mentioning is that Vietnamese in Quebec have the highest level of education compared to other provinces (e.g., 29% of Vietnamese in Quebec are university graduates vs. 14% for Ontario). This difference in levels of education, in turn, would have a significant impact on the community and society as a whole. The unique position of the Vietnamese in Quebec is reflected in an article written by Gerard Leblanc for *La Presse* (Quebec's largest newspaper) in 1992: "Covered with university degrees, tireless workers, the Vietnamese could repeat the prowess of the Montreal Jews in the mid 50's. The Vietnamese Quebecers could very well be the first to occupy high offices in both private and public sectors"²⁷. These characteristics – that is, the high number of university graduates (yet another instance of their being regarded as a "model minority) and the larger population of Vietnamese seniors in Quebec may mitigate against the visible

²⁷ From *Vietnamese: From Sea to Sea*, an on-line resource that provides information on the Vietnamese in Canada. This website can be accessed at: <http://www.vsscanada.org/en/index.php>

political activism which is so much a part of other Vietnamese communities in the U.S, such as those in California, Texas, and Washington D.C, for example.

The second distinctive group is made up of those popularly known as “boat people” (or the second wave) who left Vietnam by sea between the late 1970’s until the mid 1980’s. This group is a diverse mixture of those who have left Vietnam to reunite with family members and those who left in search of what they regarded as freedom. It should be mentioned that although the term “boat people” generally refers to Vietnamese from the South who fled the country after communist take-over in 1975, the boat people exodus originated with the Sino-Vietnamese. Ethnic Chinese had been living in Vietnam for generations. In the southern part of the country, they were mainly merchants and controlled a large percentage of the retail trade in South Vietnam. When the country fell under communist control, these ethnic Chinese were targeted by the regime. Heavy taxes were levied against them and the new government also imposed trade restrictions. Much of their wealth was confiscated and they were forced to relocate in the New Economic Zone. This left them little choice but to flee the country, first in an “orderly” fashion with help of the new communist government²⁸, and more disorganized later on when China and Vietnam engaged in a short border war in 1979 (Bloemraad, 2006). It is also important to note that a number of people from the North (including Vietnamese and Vietnamese with Chinese background) also fled and most ended up in Hong Kong²⁹.

²⁸ In exchange for their expedited departure, ethnic Chinese had to “pay” the government with their lands and wealth, especially in gold. On the part of the government, ethnic Chinese were given proper exit papers and provided with boats fit to go to sea.

²⁹ The 1954 partition of Vietnam resulted in an exodus of refugees to the South. The majority were Catholics and fled due to fear of persecution, and therefore were considered anti-communists. Among those who stayed behind – whether or not by choice, many did so because they were landowners or had

Since many of the second wave previously had ties with the old regime and by virtue of the suffering they endured when communist North Vietnamese took control of the country³⁰, they often took on the leadership roles in refugee camps³¹. Quite often such leadership positions continued to be recognized by the Vietnamese community in the adopted countries (mainly the U.S, Canada, and Australia – these three countries took in the vast majority of the refugees from the refugee camps such as the one in which I was living in Indonesia). These leadership elements of the second wave, together with prominent members of the first wave (e.g., government officials and high ranking members of the military) dominate the political landscape of the diaspora, which often centers on anticommunist sentiment.

The third group (third wave) is composed of the remainder of those in the diaspora – those who left Vietnam with proper exit visas. It includes mainly the family reunification class; the specially created Humanitarian Operation (HO) class and its Orderly Departure Program (ODP), which extends exit visas to the officers of the former South Vietnamese armed forces and soldiers who have spent time in re-education camps. These former soldiers were given a chance to resettle in the US. All together, over 200,000 Vietnamese were admitted to the U.S under the ODP provisions and over 70,000 more under the HO agreement (Zhou & Bankston, 1998, cited in Bloemraad, 2006, p. 73). In addition to

properties. They were seen as communist supporters, even though they suffered heavily under the regime and its land reform program. As boat people in the refugee camps, these northerners were targeted and often faced discrimination. Their choices for resettlement were also limited due to the difficulty in “proving” that they were political refugees. Consequently, many went to Canada on humanitarian grounds.

³⁰ In many cases members of this second wave were punished because of their expertise in administrative matters and their experiences in dealing with Westerners

³¹ This is based on my observation and the conversations I had with many members of the community with whom I share the experience of refugee camp.

these, when the cold war came to an end, there were close to 200,000 Vietnamese living and working in the USSR and Eastern Bloc countries, many of whom chose to remain in those countries after the transition period (Balaz & William, 2007). Another significant number of the third wavers includes those who married foreign nationals and left Vietnam for that reason. Taiwan and South Korea have been popular destinations for members of this group. Finally, there are students and business émigrés though their numbers are not significant compared to other groups. Similar to the first wavers, those who entered the U.S under the ODP and HO programs tend to hold deep resentment towards the current government and “militate for the overthrow of the communist regime”(Bloemraad, 2006, p. 73). Their ideological opposition is due to the “painful experiences in jails and reeducation camps, including torture and psychological abuse” (Ibid.).

As can be seen, the Vietnamese diaspora community is made up of diverse groups of individuals with different exit conditions, which would impact their political attitudes that in turn, would lead to tensions and conflicts - if their position is incongruent with that taken by the community. Such tensions, I would contend, are due in large part to the refugees’ varying perceptions of their situation. For many of the first wavers, it was believed that this was only a temporary escape until it was safe for them to return home. This is understandable since being a refugee - by definition- means to take refuge in another country³², and thus it is not necessarily a permanent condition. An interviewee shared with me that he always thought his stay was temporary and that he “always wanted

³² For the dictionary definition, please see: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/refugee>

to go back and contribute”³³. One can imagine the heartbreak experienced by these refugees when faced with the realization that they could never return to the land of their birth. Thus the tensions and conflicts (that is the differing views as to the extent of the French, U.S., or communist responsibility for conditions in Vietnam), may seem negative and counterproductive, but serve as a way to maintain a connection to the homeland. The account from a retired male interviewee reflects this deep sadness and disappointment:

As soon as the communist took over South Vietnam, I knew that I would not be able to go back and would not want to go back, let alone work there. There is no way that I would want to work under the communist system. I was very sad but we had to accommodate and adjust to the fact that we would not be able to go back to Vietnam to work and live as long as the communists are there. So in a sense it is sad because it is a reality. (Camden L.)

Over the years, there have been efforts from the first and second wavers to distinguish themselves as “refugees”, while at the same time considered the “latecomers” as “immigrants”. This is done mainly to claim a sort of “legitimacy” to be here in the host society since people who left earlier did so for political reasons as opposed to those who left for economic reasons. Furthermore, the experience of living in the refugee camps - which people from the third wave did not have to go through - is also used as a way to establish this distinction. This sense of being the more “deserving” refugees or the fight over “who has suffered more” is deemed an important identity marker for members in the Vietnamese diaspora. This in turn would allow some members to have greater “moral authority” over others (Watts, 1994, p. 19). Understandably, people’s political attitudes with regards to the current regime in the homeland would also be affected by the context and circumstances of their exit. As an example of how significant this can be, in

³³ Truong, V.V interview, conducted 03/2012.

the course of my interviews I was asked a few times by several interviewees (particularly the elders) the time when I came over and under which conditions I left Vietnam. Only after having established my so-called “legitimate” background would we begin our interviews and would my subjects open up to me about their stories.

The above discussion on the different “waves” of migration of the Vietnamese lends itself well to the literature on diaspora, especially Cohen’s (2008) argument about how conditions of exit often shape the nature of diasporic life. Vietnamese diaspora can thus be broadly grouped into two distinct waves: refugee and economic – or in Cohen’s “ideal types” of diaspora, they can be characterized as belonging to two types: victim diaspora and labor diaspora. As I have already discussed in the earlier chapter, victim diaspora refers to “the idea of dispersal following a traumatic event in the homeland, to two or more foreign destinations” (Ibid. p.2). For “labor diaspora”, William Safran(1991) notes that this category includes people who label themselves, or are labeled by others, as “expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities tout court...” (p.83; also cited in Cohen, 1997, p.1). Individuals in this category tend to be more diverse in terms of their “historical experiences, collective narratives, and differing relationships to homelands and hostlands”(Cohen, 2008, p. 1). Thus for the Vietnamese diaspora, their differing contexts and circumstances of exiting the homeland as well as entering the hostlands would logically lead to tensions and conflicts even though they come from the same “imagined community”.

Contexts of Host Countries

At this point it would be a good opportunity to elaborate on the schism within the Vietnamese community, in particular on the attitudes taken by those who came to Canada and were therefore not as strongly anti-communist vs. the unwavering anti-communist stance taken by many of those who came to the U.S. As we will see, their conditions of exit were different, and this can be traced back to different policies toward the Vietnam War on the part of Canada and the U.S. Yet at the outset it must be asked: were Canada/U.S policies on the war really so very different? Of course, an overview of all the relevant literature would be impossible to include here, but two divergent viewpoints on the situation are especially worthy of attention.

I will first discuss John Hagan's work (2001), which argues that the vibrant and well-organized movement to shelter draft resisters in Canada, in particular in the Toronto area, points to our independent position vis-à-vis the war. Hagen calls this "a remarkable migration" (p. 3) and goes on to say that, "this was the largest politically motivated migration from the U.S since the United Empire Loyalists moved north to oppose the American Revolution". Hagan continues:

Altogether, more than an estimated 50,000 young Americans migrated to Canada in opposition to U.S draft and military laws. If Americans of all ages are counted, the number is closer to 100,000. It will never be known exactly how many came or eventually stayed – neither government kept count. (p. 3)

This movement may be seen as at least partially "grassroots" in origin, but Hagan points out that in order for it to succeed, there would have to be support on the governmental/legal levels. And indeed there was. Hagan elaborates:

On May 22, 1969, the Canadian Minister of Immigration, Allan MacEachen, rose in the House of Commons to announce the cabinet's decision: that henceforth American Vietnam draft and military resisters.... would be admitted to Canada without regard to their military status. (p. 34)

As Hagan emphasizes, “MacEachen’s statement opened the legal gates to Canada, providing the opportunity for immigration that many American resisters had been looking for”(Hagan, 2001, pp. 34-35). Yet is this position really indicative of a strongly independent Canadian stance on the war? In his work “Snow Job” Charles Taylor (1974) argues that Canada was never anything more or less than “an undeclared but effective ally of the United States in Vietnam (p. 131). Furthermore, according to Taylor, Canada freely offered such support, and had no quarrel with the *ends* sought in the conflict, only occasionally with the *means* used to implement them. Taylor continues:

Ottawa never doubted that the Americans had been right to view the insurgency in the South as a form of communist aggression which threatened the security of the whole Western alliance. Blinkered by Cold War dogmas and insensitive to Asian political trends, the Canadian government never saw any need to challenge the Americans on their basic perception of the conflict and so became fatally entangled in the American escalation. (p. 131)

Thus it is important to keep in mind that Canada’s policy regarding the Vietnam War may not have been free of American influence. Hagan’s work makes a good case for the possibility that to some extent, Canada and the Canadian government may have acted independently. Of course, there is often a disconnect between the circumstances which help to create a powerful grassroots movements and the foreign policy of one’s government. Whether Canada was really capable of acting independently vis-à-vis the war is a question that is difficult to answer, but nevertheless Vietnamese refugees who came to Canada and those who fled to the U.S found themselves in quite different

situations. In the U.S for example, various policies and programs were set up to accommodate incoming refugees, although this could not have happened overnight. Irene Bloemraad offers an insightful account of this process in her book *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada*. As Bloemraad (2006) points out, the fall of Saigon in 1975 precipitated the arrival of 130,000 new refugees and a new array of settlement policies and practices. These refugees would of course have to be fed, housed, and later, “socialized”. As Bloemraad explained:

In April 1975 President Ford used \$98 million in U.S. Agency for International Development money, initially targeted for postwar reconstruction in Indochina, to pay the Defense Department, to transport and house the first wave of Vietnamese refugees. Ford then created the Interagency Task Force for Indochina Refugees (IATF) to operate four camps in the continental United States to house and resettle the new arrivals. (p. 127)

In addition, it became necessary to supply domestic social services. Therefore direction of the IATF was soon transferred to Social and Rehabilitation Services, a branch of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. In 1980 the new Office of Refugee Resettlement was established in the Department of Health and Human Services (Bloemraad, 2006, p. 128). Bloemraad notes that in many ways Canada’s approach to resettlement mirrors that of the U.S., and she asserts that Americans are much like Canadians in their acceptance of multiculturalism. Bloemraad recognizes that this may be a debatable point, but she observes that most of the immigrants with whom she spoke feel that they can continue cultural and religious practices from their homelands and still can be accepted as Americans.

We can see that in general, government programs in Canada put in place to facilitate refugee resettlements parallel efforts to those in the U.S., but the Canadian government

has not offered as many programs to meet their needs (Bloemraad, 2006). Of course Canada did not receive as many Vietnamese refugees as the U.S., and the resources available were not as great. In addition, Bloemraad argues that the American approach to refugees often views these individuals as needing temporary asylum and then repatriation. Canada has largely viewed refugees as permanent immigrants with particular needs. Thus once they have been accepted as refugees, they can usually gain permanent residence and access programs that are available to the rest of the population. Finally and most crucially, although Canada has been aware of foreign policy concerns in dealing with refugees, it has been much less focused on them than is the case with the U.S. This is especially so as far as communism is concerned. In its new Immigration Act, which was rewritten in 1976 and came into effect in 1978, one of the stated objectives was “to fulfill Canada’s international legal obligation with respect to refugees and to uphold its humanitarian tradition with respect to the displaced and persecuted”. Thus, with regards to the Vietnamese situation, Canada was more concern with admitting newcomers “on humanitarian grounds” as well as “enabled the private sponsorship of refugees”³⁴. To put it more simply, the new *Immigration Act of 1976* focused on “who should be allowed into Canada rather than who should be kept out” (Marcus, 2014)³⁵. An important point to note here is that because of its humanitarian tradition, Canada often ended up taking in refugees who were not accepted to go to other countries (mainly the U.S and Australia).

³⁴ Canadian Council for Refugees: <http://ccrweb.ca/sites/ccrweb.ca/files/static-files/canadarefugeeshistory5.htm>

³⁵ Article can be found in ‘Bout de papier’, Canada’s Magazine of Diplomacy and Foreign Service, Vol. 28, No.1 - published May, 2014 by the Professional Association of Foreign Service Officers (<http://www.pafso-apase.com/magazine.php>).

Besides the fact that the U.S received the bulk of the first wavers (i.e., refugees fleeing in 1975) - when dealing with those who came as boat people, the U.S “favored those who suffered severe reprisals from the communist government – usually those who had held positions of authority in the South Vietnamese government or military – or their families” (Bloemraad, 2006, p. 215). In Canada, government policy during the boat people crisis “did not require proof of significant political persecution” (Ibid.). Thus, compared to the U.S., Canada probably has a greater proportion of Vietnamese refugees who fled for economic reasons than political ones (Ibid.). Even without such connection to South Vietnam or its ally, the U.S, America was selected as the number one destination for a vast majority of boat people³⁶. The influence of U.S culture during the war years was perhaps a key factor for this choice. Moreover, Vietnamese were considered as *allied aliens* - “foreigners who are the responsibility of an interventionist state as a result of foreign policy defeats” (as cited in Bloemraad, 2006, p. 70) - and as such, the U.S felt a certain sense of obligation towards the Vietnamese refugees, which in turn, led them to turn to the U.S for assistance.

In light of the above discussion, it is no surprise that Vietnamese in the U.S would hold more ardent anticommunist attitudes than those who settled in Canada. Nevertheless, given their shared experience of the war and its aftermath (whether directly or indirectly), it is reasonable to expect that Vietnamese diaspora in both countries hold similar views regarding the Vietnam conflict - that is their nonacceptance of the current regime and that they would see the war from a pro-South perspective, which is the

³⁶ Based on my own observation and experiences as a boat person who had spent several years in the refugee camp.

narrative that is most prevalent in the community. But it is necessary to ask if my subjects, many of whom are academics, see the situation in the same way as the rest of their compatriots in the diaspora. The answer appears to be: not necessarily, and in fact, there is no definitive answer.

Data Collection

I began conducting the interviews in early spring of 2012 and finished in the fall of that same year. All interviews were then transcribed in two steps. I began first with a rough transcription of each interview with hand-written notes. This step was done rather quickly to get all the spoken words and other subtleties (e.g., long pauses, laughing, and showing of emotion) of speech down on paper. I chose to record this in handwriting because I felt it was less of a distraction to have to worry about the neatness and correcting grammatical and other writing errors, as is often the case when typing on the computer. This also afforded me the opportunity to flip back and forth between the pages of notes and make any remarks that I may have had. It was here also that I began to take note of the common themes that emerged as I saw what different respondents had said. I then typed up these handwritten notes and organized segments of the narratives under the different themes (e.g., views on the war and issues surrounding the commemoration of past events) that I identified previously on the computer. I did not rely on any software to analyze qualitative data. Transcribing the interviews required a certain level of emotional investment and so using software would not have been a good choice for me.

Of the 32 interviews conducted, 16 are male and 16 are female. Twenty-three (23) participants are from the U.S and nine (9) from Canada. My participants include twenty-five (25) university professors, four (4) journalists, two (2) writers, and one (1) community leader/representative. As mentioned previously, I was more concerned with recruiting participants as this study is considered the first of its kind for the Vietnamese diaspora, and less so on having “representative” sample. This means that I was not very concern with having an equal number of participants for each country as well as and having participants from a wide array of academic disciplines. At the same time, I also did not concentrate on any particular field of specialization in my search for participants.

The biggest age group was between 31-40 years old, which has fourteen (14) respondents; eight (9) were between 41-50; one (1) was between 51-60; and finally eight (8) participants were in the 60 and up age range. All interviewees were given the “letter of information and consent form” which they had to sign. Upon request, a list of “interview guide questions” was sent to the interviewees before the interview. Due to the complexities of the narratives, I chose to quote the stories from my data verbatim. This was done in order to keep intact the full context of the stories and to preserve their sequence as told by the interviewees.

I began each interview with a brief self-introduction followed by an explanation about the study and its aims. I found that this step was crucial in “setting the stage” for the interview. Sharing some of my personal background and life experiences really helped to create a level of comfort for both the interviewees and me. On several occasions I was “tested” first with a series of questions from my interviewees, especially

those from the older generation, before the interview began. I understood this was a way to establish who I was and to assess my political position. This was not unexpected as there is a tendency for members in the Vietnamese diaspora community to hold a skeptical attitude towards other Vietnamese who did not share the same diasporic experiences, such as the condition of exiting the country, where one is from (North or South Vietnam), and whether one's family is part of the exodus in 1954³⁷ - or "Operation Passage to Freedom" as it is referred to by the U.S. Adding to this skepticism are the recent crackdowns and arrests of dissidents and bloggers, thus it is understandable that intellectuals would act cautiously when sharing their political viewpoints with others.

The majority of my interviews shaped into narrative form fairly easily. This means that the interviewees normally began by talking about their journey of coming over to North America, and the story progressed until their present situation. This was more difficult to do with interviews that were done in writing. In these cases, I made contact for follow-up questions or to ask for additional comments or clarifications. Even after having carried out this extra step, many of these written responses came back as a kind of "answer to the question" rather than in narrative form. In the later stages of my writing, particularly on the chapter about memory and commemoration, there were questions that arise which I had not anticipated. I made email contact with the interviewees and asked for their response to my questions in writing. Many did in fact responded, but there were also those who did not answer my email.

³⁷ In 1954 Vietnam was divided into north & south under the Geneva Accords and people were given a grace period of 300 days to migrate freely, as a result about one million northerners (mostly Catholics) moved south in order to escape living under Communist control. This historic event has become a sort of political marker for the Vietnamese and is frequently asked (or volunteered) in order to establish each other's position. Information about this mass migration is widely available both on-line & in printed media.

Below I present a list of my interviewees. As I have already mentioned, the current population of Vietnamese in Canada and in the U.S is around 180,000 and 1.5 million respectively. It is difficult to have an exact number of Vietnamese professors, but statistics on educational attainment indicate that 3% of Vietnamese Canadians have “post-graduate” degrees³⁸, while 3.1% of Vietnamese Americans have “professional or doctoral” degrees³⁹. This indicates that there are roughly 5,400 Vietnamese Canadians with post-graduate degrees, and 49,500 Vietnamese Americans with professional or doctoral degrees. It should be noted that for ethical reasons, I only provided some general characteristics of the participants. It was particularly important that the interviewees are not identifiable due to the sensitive nature of some of the topics discussed in this thesis. Thus, I opted to only provide, for example, the credentials of my interviewees rather than giving details about where they are teaching. Almost all of my participants are ‘active’ professors in universities. One older male is a retired professor, another male is a community representative, and there are also a few writers and journalists.

³⁸ Statistics Canada, 2001 Census of Canada

³⁹ U.S Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2008-2010 period.

Table 6

Biographical sketches of interviewees (Names have been changed to protect the identities of my subjects)

<u>List of Participants</u>	<u>Age Groups</u>	<u>Male/female</u>	<u>Time of Arrival</u>	<u>Country of Residence</u>	<u>Academic/Professional Positions/Degrees</u>
Bill D.	B	M	1980	U.S	MFA (Fine Arts) (Professor)
Charles L.	C	M	1975	U.S	Ph.D. Sociology (Professor)
Duncan N.	B	M	U.S born	U.S	Ph.D. Social Work (Professor)
Hal N.	C	M	1975	U.S	Ph.D. Cell and Molecular Biology (Professor)
Irene P.	C	F	1984 (from France)	U.S	Ph.D. Asian American Studies (Professor)
Ishmael S.	B	M	U.S born	U.S	Ph.D. Anthropology (Professor)
Jacqueline L.	B	F	U.S born	Canada	Journalist
Kira H.	B	F	U.S born	U.S	Ph.D. Sociology (Professor)

Laurence C.	D	F	1974	U.S	JD (Professor of Law)
Laurie D.	B	F	1975	U.S	Ph.D. Media & Cultural Studies (Professor)
Lavon G.	E	F	1966	Canada	Ph.D. Nursing (Professor)
Camden L.	E	M	1963	Canada	Ph.D. Engineering (Community Rep.)
Thayer L.	E	M	1980	U.S	Ph.D. Engineering (Professor)
Lenise N.	C	F	1975	U.S	Journalist
Beatrice T.	C	F	U.S born	Canada	Writer
Hannah N.	B	F	1974	U.S	Ph.D. Military History (Professor)
Lanya G.	C	F	U.S born	U.S	Ph.D. Anthropology (Professor)
Mallory P.	B	F	1980	Canada	Ph.D. Sociology (Professor)
Moreen T.	C	F	1975	U.S	Writer/Lawyer

Nehole T.	B	F	U.S born	U.S	Ph.D. Psychology (Professor)
Harris N.	E	M	1965	Canada	Computer Science (Professor)
Xander N.	E	M	1959	U.S	Prof Emeritus, Physics, Biol, Chem & BioChem
Hope N.	C	F	1975	U.S	Ph.D. Humanities (Professor)
Niah L	C	F	1980	U.S	Ph.D. American Culture (Professor)
Patrick N.	B	M	Canadian born	Canada	Journalist/Filmmaker
Hubert T.	B	M	1982	U.S	Ph.D. Sociology (Professor)
Theodore H.	B	M	1979	Canada	Journalist
Therese D.	B	F	1983	U.S	Ph.D. Asian American Studies (Professor)
Dustin T.	E	M	1963	U.S	Professor of Economics
Val T.	E	M	1960's	Canada	Ph.D. Physics (Professor)

Victor N.	C	M	1975	U.S	Ph.D. English (Professor)
Tom V.	E	M	1983	U.S	Ph.D. Biomedical Engineering (Professor)

A= 30 and under; B= 31-40; C= 41-50; D= 51-60; E= 60 and up

CHAPTER 4

HISTOICAL CONTEXT AND NARRATIVES ON THE WAR

The main focus of this study is to contribute to the understanding on debates concerning the “victim narrative”. I am interested in investigating how such narratives are constructed by my interview subjects as a way to concretize their identities and situate themselves historically as members of the Vietnamese diaspora, and as intellectuals who have both lived their experiences and are able to reflect upon them. More specifically, my aim is to examine the ‘professorial politics’ of my subjects, that is their political views and attitudes - following the work of Gross (2007)⁴⁰ and those before him (e.g., Lazarsfeld and Thielens, 1958, Lipset, 1960, and Garfinkel, 1987), with regard to the Vietnam conflict and its aftermath. I chose to focus on the Vietnam War because the event not only gave birth to the formation of the Vietnamese diaspora community but also set off a series of deep changes in America, and to a large extent, also changed the contours of the political landscape of the world.

Vietnam Matters

In observing the opening of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C, historian and journalist Stanley Karnow (1983) - best known for his work on the Vietnam War - noted that the names engraved on the Memorial Wall “symbolize a faded hope.... They bear witness to the end of America’s absolute confidence in its moral exclusivity, its military invincibility, its manifest destiny”(Ibid. p.9). The Tet Offensive in particular, is

⁴⁰ This was a working paper that Gross co-authored with Simmons, which was later published as a book in 2013.

seen as an event that triggered what Wallerstein (2006) called the “world revolution of 1968” (p.16), referring specifically to the various social and political movements that came about as the result of this battle, which forced the American people to question their own government and the ability of its military might to win over communist aggression in the region. In *Apocalypse Then* Robert Tomes (1998) pointed out that the events in Southeast Asia profoundly affected the essence of what America stands for, namely its “idealism, moral exceptionalism, and a sense of mission” (p. 3), and such principles are deeply rooted in American history. This historic event also consumed the American intellectual culture and transformed the ways intellectuals see the world (ibid). In short, the Vietnam conflict was, in George Herring’s words, “America’s longest war” in which the U.S was directly involved for about a quarter of a century - spanning from 1950 to 1975(Herring, 2007, pp. 336-337). Perhaps Herring (Ibid) best sums it up when he notes: “The influence of the Vietnam War has, thus, been persistent, pervasive, and powerful. Such is its staying power, its hold on the national psyche, that it has become a war that never seems to go away”(Herring, 2007, p. 336)

The views above clearly showed how important the Vietnam War was - that it still matters, and how much effort scholars in the West have devoted to discussing, debating, and writing about it. This preoccupation with the Vietnam War can also be found quite frequently in current mainstream media reports, particularly in the U.S and especially around the events of April 30th - or Black April as it is referred to in the community – the day when Saigon fell under the control of North Vietnamese government. These reports oftentimes focus on anti-communist discourse – a kind of community politics that is

highly contentious and has been a major source of division for both: between Vietnamese outside of Vietnam and the home country, and among members within the diaspora community. At the same time, the media also portray Vietnamese refugees as a “model minority group”. This notion of the “model minority group” has also been discussed recently in the work of Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld(2014). According to Chua and Rubenfeld, a history of marginalization/persecution can be an important catalyst for success. The authors see this dynamic at work among Asian immigrants and their children, as well as among Mormons, Jews, and East Asians. Chua and Rubenfeld emphasize that the qualities, which they feel are essential for success, need not necessarily be confined to these groups, and in fact can be found in individuals in many other groups as well. However they note that members of these groups tend to place a high value on academic success, the creation of a strong work ethic, and most importantly, delayed gratification.

This depiction of Vietnamese refugees as a “model minority” by the media helps to reinforce the idea that they owe much to their host countries, especially to America⁴¹. This sense of indebtedness can be attributed to the fact that not only did the Americans fight and die for them in their struggle against communism, but the country also opened its doors to take in the vast majority of Vietnamese refugees at the conclusion of the war. This way of thinking in turn, feeds back to the notion of so-called “refugee guilt”- that is, the burden one feels for being given a better chance at life in comparison to those left

⁴¹ One can observe the Vietnamese community showing their gratitude through their expressed patriotism to America at various events and gatherings in the singing of the U.S national anthem and having the American flag (or Canadian in the case of Canada) flying side-by-side with the Vietnamese flag. Positive views of America can also be found in media reports, books, and individuals’ accounts praising America.

behind in Vietnam, and that one should be indebted to America for having rescued and liberated Vietnamese refugees (Espiritu, 2006). This seems reasonable and logical since it is generally expected that we should always show gratitude to our benefactors – of course this is a debatable point, since to continually be forced into the position of being “grateful” is an assault to one’s ego. Many members of the Vietnamese diaspora do display such gratitude but what do Vietnamese intellectuals think about this, I wonder? I hypothesize that they would approach the matter with considerable skepticism, both because that is what intellectuals tend to do (i.e., being skeptical and questioning the commonly held views), and also because of their exposure to “western” learning and culture which encourages questioning and looking at matters through multiple lens. In this sense their position is quite different from that of intellectuals in Vietnam, who often feel that they cannot express their views freely and must adhere to a rigidly constructed paradigm on the war and its aftermath. In addition, the Confucianist model has profoundly influenced the way in which learning takes place. Confucianism stresses obedience to authority, the received version of the “truth” and often rote memorization of facts as opposed to critical thinking. As the following narratives will show, the majority of my Vietnamese American subjects are very critical of the war and express strong opinion about how it had deeply affected their lives. An investigation into the narratives of Vietnamese intellectuals would yield important insights not only for our understanding of this particular ethnic group but also for the overall field of diaspora and transnational studies.

It should be noted that in analyzing these narratives, it was necessary for me to not only look at the text (the explicit meaning of what was said) but also the subtext (the underlying or implicit meaning). Admittedly uncovering the meanings embedded in the sub-textual can be challenging and can lead to problems of projection or misinterpretation. However, I feel that my familiarity with and understanding of Vietnamese and American cultures will help me to overcome many, if not all, of the difficulties associated with interpreting that which is nuanced and implicit.

Generally speaking, for a lot of Vietnamese, the war is seen from two competing narratives. One is the “pro-North” standpoint, which can be more properly understood as the *French Colonialism/American Imperialism Narrative*, and the other is the “pro-South” point of view, or the *Communist Takeover Narrative*. These two narratives will be discussed in more details in the following sections, but first, it is helpful to introduce briefly about what they are.

For those who subscribe to the first view (mostly communist North Vietnamese and left-leaning North American intellectuals), the war against the U.S and South Vietnam is understood as a “fight” against forces of colonialism and imperialism (or in general, foreign domination) in order to liberate, take-over, and place South Vietnam under the control of North Vietnamese communist government⁴². Vietnamese who hold the second view (mostly those from South Vietnam and North American conservatives), it is believed that the war happened because South Vietnam needed to “defend” itself from

⁴² This view was not commonly known, particularly in the West, rather the war was seen as an effort to get rid of foreign domination and to reunite Vietnam. Such a view was popular at the time due to the strong worldwide support of self-determination and anti-colonialism.

communist invasion and the takeover of the country. Both of these views see Vietnam as being victimized: first by the West (France and the U.S), and second by the communist North Vietnamese. There is a clear difference, however, in how the war is conceived: one intended to “fight” and to take control while the other aimed to “defend” and to prevent the takeover.

There is also another perspective to the conflict: the *Civil War Narrative*, which tends to receive less public/official attention than the first two versions, especially among the Vietnamese. This narrative views the war as an internal conflict between North and South Vietnam, which should be left for Vietnamese people to resolve. According to this narrative, both North and South Vietnam had legitimate reasons to engage in this war – however, with the backing and military intervention of more powerful nations (The former Soviet Union and China for the North, and the U.S and its allies for the South), the war dragged on longer than necessary and became much bloodier as well. To be sure, all the actors involved were essentially out for their own interests - whether they were the NLF (National Liberation Front) insurgents, North Vietnamese forces, local militias, or South Vietnamese and American troops. Within the Vietnamese diaspora community, the narrative that is most prevalent is that of anti-communism, which is reasonable since that was the underlying rationale for people risking their lives and everything they’ve known to flee the country. However I would contend that there are those who do not see the war in this light, but their view is being silenced – whether voluntarily or involuntarily, due to the heavy constraint imposed on them by the community. In my view, an event that is as complex as the Vietnam War needs to be considered much more critically rather as a

simple black/ white issue. Focusing on my population of Vietnamese diaspora intellectuals, I seek to investigate their perspectives of the war and how they come to make sense of it. I wish to find out how their narratives differ - if any - from what exists in the community. The differences in way the war is viewed and conceived would then be explore in the context of the flag debate in the next chapter. For the moment, the rest of this chapter will focus on presenting and discussing the three competing narratives of the war.

A History of Foreign Domination

A Thousand Years of Chinese Rule

Vietnamese history is largely imbued with a struggle for nationhood and the inherent right to self-determination. It all began with the early period of Chinese domination (a period of 1,000 years, from 111 BC to 938 AD) which was marked by the emergence of a few great Chinese governors (Tich Quang, Nham Dien) (Tran T.-K. , 1971 [1929]) who taught the Vietnamese the Chinese techniques of rice cultivation, which involved the use of the plough and irrigation. They also opened schools to teach the Vietnamese Chinese language, writing, ideas, and the so-called “civilized customs”⁴³(Buttinger, 1968, p. 28). The Chinese governors acted on the orders of the Chinese Court, and to do so they had modeled the Vietnamese political structure after the Chinese. The effect of this political arrangement was to establish the paramount position of China as a colonizing state and

⁴³ This type of language use is prevalent in historical writings of earlier period, I use it in quotation to illustrate the distinction between the ‘raised’ and ‘unraised’ consciousness. I suppose we now have our consciousness ‘raised’ thanks to the works of sociologists, particularly those belonging to feminist movement.

Vietnam as a tributary state. Even when China no longer ruled Vietnam directly, Vietnam rulers still felt compelled to offer tributes, and to ask for blessings from the Chinese emperor in cases of succession or any major changes in the Vietnamese court. This was done in order to keep the Chinese emperor “happy” and thus to prevent further invasion. Needless to say, it was an enduring task, for it lasted well in to the late 19th century.

From an economic point of view, Chinese domination helped to increase productivity with the introduction of new and more effective rice cultivation techniques. Further, a closer connection with China also facilitated the building of infrastructure, such as roads and other means of communication, which helped to further trade between the two countries. The Vietnamese peasants, however, might not have reaped the benefits, for they were the ones who would be most taxed and exploited. There were those who benefited, to be sure, as this period afforded them the opportunity to absorb, what considered at the time, more advanced cultures and learning (Schulzinger, 1997). As for the remaining few, the persistence of a separate cultural identity gave rise to a distinctive political identity, in particular the sense of nationhood and political aspirations (Ibid.). These few who Buttinger (1968) called “hereditary local chiefs”, were fearful that their social status was being threatened by the Chinese reform efforts. Hence it was in their interests to oppose Chinese rule, which developed into open rebellion especially when provoked by the brutality and oppressive practices of certain Chinese governors, though most would prove to be unsuccessful.

Socially, the emergence of a new social class: the privileged Chinese-trained autocrats and aristocrats altered the social fabric of Vietnamese society. In the interests of territorial expansion and to permanently absorb Vietnam as a Chinese province, it was necessary for the Chinese to impose their culture on Vietnam beginning with the institutionalization of Confucian teachings as the standard of learning, and as the requirement for educational attainment (Tran T.-K. , 1971 [1929]). This meant that those who had absorbed Chinese ways of life through learning were also those who found themselves acting as educators and standard bearers of the new social structure that now had begun to rise to prominence. Through gaining economic advantages over the rest of the population, this newly formed elite class gradually replaced the once powerful local hereditary chiefs, although they managed to survive assimilation by maintaining a delicate balance between keeping their ancient customs and antagonizing the Chinese rulers. Karnow (1983) and Tran (1971 [1929]) point out that these Vietnamese mingled with the Chinese ruling elite so as to avoid the fate of those who retreated to the mountainous or remote regions and often ended their lives in obscurity, while preserving their identity. There were also the descendants of the Chinese bureaucrats who had earlier emigrated to work in the Chinese administrative apparatus, some of whom later integrated themselves through intermarriage and adoption of local customs with the larger Vietnamese population to become the local lords. As the result of the proximity between the Chinese rulers and the masses, the line separating the two cultures became blurred. With the passage of time some of the localized Chinese became more and more Vietnamese – completely in most cases (known as Sino-Vietnamese), while some

selected to retain the essential Chinese customs and traditions whose descendants are still living in pockets scattered around the country. For the well-to-do Chinese-trained ethnic Vietnamese, while the economic gap between them and the peasants remained wide, they ultimately returned to their own roots and became more conscious of their identity. This group of Vietnamese played key roles in historical events culminated in the overthrow of the Chinese domination in the 10th century⁴⁴. The historian Buttinger (1968) sums it best:

... despite all these factors, and a thousand years of military, administrative, and propagandistic efforts notwithstanding, the Chinese failed completely in their attempt to assimilate the Vietnamese. One probable reason for the failure was the long history of the Vietnamese. The roots of their culture probably reached deeply into their pre-Chinese past... It is the story of Chinese rule which contains the final explanation for the ethnic durability of the Vietnamese: When the Vietnamese, after many unsuccessful attempts, finally broke away from China, they had forever passed the stage, when a people can become anything other than its own riper self.(p. 29)

Nevertheless, any system under an excessively long period of domination is bound to change or be deeply affected by it. In addition, since social and cultural practices are established over a “longue durée”⁴⁵, they have the appearance of being timeless, and ubiquitous. These practices are intricately linked with the modes of production and relations between social classes are often founded on such basis, which in this instance refers to agriculture (wet-rice farming) and cooperative labour. As mentioned above, the process of social stratification had begun early in Vietnamese history in terms of land ownership (i.e., some had more agricultural land than others). However, the spirit of

⁴⁴ Curiously the man who would be successful in ending the Chinese rule came from a localized Sino-Vietnamese elite class. Ngo Quyen was not identified as Chinese by Tran Trong Kim, but he was implied as such by both Buttinger and Karnow.

⁴⁵ Concept favoured by Fernand Braudel which refers to a “structure time that was long-lasting and reflected continuing (but not eternal) structural realities” (Wallerstein 2004:97). In other words, it refers to the long term view of history, instead of focusing on single events or shifting patterns from one year to the next.

cooperation among autonomous communities had always been higher in such rural settings as people relied on each other for support and economic survival due to the practices of wet rice farming (Buttinger, 1958). Such unity, when infused with Confucian ideas of social harmony became a potent force because of its quick mobilization against foreign invaders (Ibid.). According to Buttinger (Ibid.), “...no culture ever developed stronger family bonds or greater degree of solidarity among the people of the same village” than the Vietnamese, and “the unity of Vietnam is like the ‘unity of a chain’” (p. 42).

This persistence of a distinct identity – and its resemblance to what one might call a collective inferiority complex – has been both a blessing and a curse: it produces a very complex set of conflicting values which became a source of strength and unity in times of war, as well as the very reason for the appearance of meekness and internal discord in times of peace (Karnow, 1983). This unique cultural feature of the Vietnamese is an important consideration if we want to gain a better understanding of Vietnamese historical processes. Thus in the 1950s, the French sociologist Paul Mus once warned “against the convenient notion that the Vietnamese peasants were a ‘passive mass’, only interested in their daily bowl of rice, and terrorized into subversion by agents” (Karnow, 1983, p. 99). Unbeknownst to the French political class, the Vietnamese, peasants and elites alike, had had their aspirations for nationhood forged a long time ago.

A millennium is a long time indeed, but the Vietnamese did survive Chinese domination and emerged as an independent nation. They have been able to resist attempts at Chinese assimilation whilst learning and absorbing the valuable Confucian

teachings. Their openness to different religious and moral systems – so long as these systems do not contradict the practices of ancestor worship, further complements and enhances Vietnamese society as a whole.

French Colonialism/American Imperialism

The Vietnamese enjoyed a period of “relative” independence following the end of Chinese domination, however they were never truly independent because they always functioned as a kind of tributary to the Chinese. This period of relative autonomy did not last long because French merchants began arriving in Vietnam in search of trade opportunities in the 16th century and were met with a warm and welcoming attitude from the Vietnamese imperial court. In looking back, the ruler of Vietnam at the time might have committed an error of judgment when he underestimated the potential dangers posed by the French, even though all seemed well at first. Indeed, in a letter addressed to the Prince of Tonkin, Louis XIV - or the “Sun King” as he was known, expressed his great pleasure in having developed a good relationship with the prince, and that he wished to obtain protection for the subjects of the King of Tonkin who had embraced Christianity. The “Sun King” further said: “We are quite convinced that, if you knew the truths and the maxims which it teaches, you would give first of all to your subjects the glorious example of embracing it”. But there were limits to this good relationship. In response, the King of Tonkin replied: “As regards your wish that we should cooperate in propagating your religion, we do not dare to permit it, for there is an ancient custom, introduced by edicts which formally forbids it”(Brenda & Larkin, 1967, pp. 86-87).

In 1802, French assisted in the founding of the Nguyen Dynasty by Prince Nguyen Phuc Anh. On behalf of the Prince (a young survivor of the Nguyen Dynasty whose clan had been defeated by the Tay Son uprising), a great French Bishop⁴⁶ secured with the French court an agreement to send an expeditionary force to assist Prince Nguyen Anh in his power struggle (Karnow, 1983, p. 106). The agreement failed, however, when the Count de Conway⁴⁷ refused to execute its terms (Ho, 2008; Buttinger, 1958). France might have been able to gain control and turn Vietnam into its colony much earlier, without having to use military force, had the agreement been carried out.

Nonetheless, Ba-Da-Loc, as Pierre Pigneau de Béhane was known in Vietnamese, did secure a sufficient amount of support for the Prince, which enabled him to conquer the whole country from the Tay Son brothers and proclaimed himself as Emperor Gia Long. But when religious persecution intensified under the reign of Minh Mang⁴⁸, who succeeded Gia Long, and continued into the Thieu Tri and Tu Duc's rule, France decided to intervene. It should be mentioned that the persecution of Christians had begun earlier in the 17th century by various Vietnamese rulers who felt that Christianity was a subversive religion, which sought to undermine the traditional belief system that they inherited from their ancestors. The decision to colonize Vietnam therefore had more to do with overseas expansion and the quest for empire, which was a common practice of European powers of the epoch, than with the persecution of Christians. As it turned out, using the pretext of religious persecution and imprisonment of French missionaries and

⁴⁶ Pierre Pigneau de Béhane, Bishop of Adran

⁴⁷ Commander of French forces based in India.

⁴⁸ Prosecutions against the new religion has in fact started during the “Trinh-Nguyen phan tranh” period (in this period, Vietnam was divided into two parts, North and South reminiscent of the provision of the Geneva Accord in 1954, ruled by the Trinh Lord in the North and the Nguyen Lord in the South).

local Catholic converts, France invaded Vietnam with naval assault from 1858-62 and slowly gained control over parts of Vietnam and eventually succeeded in establishing direct rule over the country (Tran T.-K. , 1971 [1929], pp. 202-235; Sardesai, 1992, pp. 33-44). France faced a tough choice of choosing to apply the policy of “association”, as had been the case with British rule over India - or to opt for an “assimilation” model, which entailed a direct and total control over all aspects of Vietnamese society. In the end, French specialists favored the second approach and were convinced that “no greater honor could befall a people than to absorb the ideas and culture of France”(Karnow, 1983, p. 113).

In Buttinger’s view, France’s conquest of Vietnam had more to do with economic reasons than missionary propaganda. Thus, a systematic exploitation of the country, including its natural resources (e.g., rubber, coal, and other rare minerals) and Vietnamese people became the guiding principle for French rule(Buttinger, 1972). Heavy taxation policies were implemented, which prevented and often excluded the Vietnamese from owning property. Vietnamese who collaborated with the colonial administration also took advantage of their position of power to “embezzle funds and oppress peasants”(Karnow, 1983, p. 114). Natural resources were depleted and agricultural land was used to grow crops for direct exports(Buttinger, 1958). Reinvestment was rare, if any took place at all, and evidence suggested that for the majority of Vietnamese, life under French rule was reduced to peasantry and was worse than the living conditions one hundred years earlier (Ibid.). As Karnow pointed out, French colonial rule in Vietnam was not so much about the romantic notion of *mission civilisatrice*, but had more to do

with the financial bottom line. Paul Doumer's⁴⁹ writing in his memoirs provides a good reflection of this: "When France arrived in Indochina, the Annamites were ripe for servitude"(Karnow, 1983, p. 116).

The Nguyen emperor was allowed to continue occupying the palace in Hue, but France limited his power by controlling all taxation and had the final say in all matters. Election of local councils was permitted, but the actual power of these councils was limited. However, this allowed for the development of local elites who were intimately tied to the French rulers. This situation has some similarities with the distant past under Chinese domination where such an elite class emerged as a result of the close collaboration with the occupying power. These elites also took advantage of their position to benefit themselves (Schulzinger, 1997). This led to a drift between local Vietnamese and the country's elites, or those who cooperated with the French and those who remained opposed to such collaboration. The French deftly manipulated such divisions to consolidate their grip on power.

A few examples will serve to illustrate the nature of this symbiotic relationship between a small section of Vietnamese elites and the French colonizers. As is often the case in colonized territories, it was necessary to utilize cheap, local labour in mining, rubber, construction, and other industries. These companies were linked to the Bank of Indochina which was not an independent entity, in fact it was owned jointly by a consortium of Paris banks and the French government. For this arrangement to continue it was necessary for a small group of Vietnamese elites to, in effect, cooperate with their

⁴⁹ A French politician who is credited to turning French Indochina "from a financial loss to a profitable enterprise for France" (Karnow, 1983, p. 115).

exploiters. This meant that there was little opportunity for Vietnamese people to protest against the situation or do anything to improve it. This does not mean that the Vietnamese were entirely passive however. In the 1920's, Vietnamese nationalists murdered a Frenchman Rene Bazin who "recruited" workers - often through abduction. In that sense, the situation in Vietnam could be compared to slavery, although the analogy is not an exact one(Karnow, 1983). These workers were considered to be a necessary but expendable resource, and therefore no attention was paid to their welfare. In the rubber industry for example, the workforce was decimated by malaria, dysentery, and malnutrition to such a degree that one Michelin plantation, 12,000 out of 45,00 Vietnamese workers died between 1917 and 1944 (Ibid.).

Thus, the common feature of colonialism was to subjugate the colonized people to a life of slavery⁵⁰, in order to fulfill the primary objective which was to maximize the exploitation of natural resources and labour and to transfer the wealth of the colony back to France. Slavery and indentured life induced suffering and discontent. The source of this discontent extended even deeper than the apparent suffering borne by the disenfranchised Vietnamese, and that was the automatic disdain and resistance to any foreign domination; and for the first few decades of French rule this source of discontent was kept in check by the sheer brutality of the French colonialists. At the end of the 19th century, French Governor General Doumer arrived in Vietnam and generated a flurry of activities aimed at transforming the colony into a more prosperous place, financed by a

⁵⁰ The notoriously harsh and even deadly working conditions on rubber plantations, or the monopolistic practices of controlling the production of salt backed by threats of severe punishment are examples of life of "slavery". In effects, the material production of the country is geared for the enrichment of the colonial masters.

loan of 200 million Francs from the French State (Tran T.-K. , 1971 [1929]). Doumer and his successor, M. Beau, were credited with having improved the country's infrastructures, and its health-care and educational systems. The Doumer period saw a disruption of the traditional lifestyle as more and more peasants became landless labourers. Many ended up working in rubber plantations or coal mines where as previously indicated the working conditions were extremely harsh (Karnow, 1983) or employed to build the railroad system, and various public projects initiated by Doumer at the time. Nevertheless, the actions of these Governors were intended to make the colony more productive in the service of France rather than the improvement of the life of ordinary Vietnamese, and as such they did little to quell the tide of discontent that would rise to become waves of nationalism and anti-colonial movements.

Socially the century of French rule catapulted Vietnamese social structures into modernity by abruptly altering traditional arrangements (i.e., introducing a new system of learning and the social division between the Christians and non-Christians), and by infusing them with a hybrid social system organized according to Christian values rather than Confucian teachings (e.g., giving reverence to God rather than to the father of the family or ancestors). The contrast between the traditional lifestyles and the newly developed social structure was instrumental in the fragmentation of society whereby the once cohesive structure of rural society had now been transformed into multiple segments based on creed, class and political affiliation. The Vietnamese had finally arrived at a crossroads in reference to their ability for cultural absorption. What resulted was a deeply divided society with a pro-modern, pro-French culture and ultimately pro-western ideas

and values pitched against those who would fight to preserve the traditions of the past. Although Vietnam's experience with *capitalism* under French *colonialism* was painful, however, it was crucial in germinating anti-colonial sentiments as well as in cultivating a strong sense of nationalism, which contributed to various national liberation movements that began in the early 20th century (Buttinger, 1972).

Under the *mission civilisatrice*, French colonialists considered the Vietnamese as a backward people to be “civilized”(Laffey, 2000). As such, the notion of having the obligation to bring civilization to the colonies was shared by people in France, and other colonizing countries. At the forefront of this mission was the support given by the various organizations, namely the Chamber of Commerce from the city of Lyon, hence the phenomenon of Lyonnais Imperialism discussed by John Laffey (Ibid.).

Compared with French society of the time there was little doubt as to what the Vietnamese had to learn in order to keep up with the many political, social, cultural and technological developments that had propelled many European powers to attain a more advanced position. For many Vietnamese, especially the intellectual elites, the ability to quickly adapt and absorb French knowledge and culture would provide the way to disentangle themselves from the colonial yoke. In turn, this helped the Vietnamese to diminish the “differences” (between the colonizer and the colonized) that provided legitimacy for colonial rule, the very “yoke” of colonial discourse, as well as furnished them with greater realization of their “advancing” position. This was the view pioneered by notable intellectuals such as Phan Chau Trinh, Pham Quynh, who advocated changes in social practices (i.e., polygamy and divorces) and lent support to the French effort in

overturning Vietnamese laws, which they considered as obsolete (e.g., polygamy was outlawed and divorce limited). In general there was some support for the modernization of society in terms of propagating modern ideas and values; however this was rather an exception, being one of the very few legacies of colonialism which may be regarded positively.

Unfortunately, the overriding concern for economic gains outweighed other social considerations, because the real objective of colonialism was the transfer of wealth from the colonies to the colonizing countries. The Vietnamese also had ample opportunity to witness the brutality of the so-called “civilized” people, thus there also existed an element of doubt as to the veracity and values of Western learning. This sentiment slowed down the process of transformation and provided common ground for unity among resistant forces. French colonial power also contributed to the deepening of the social and cultural differences between the three regions of Vietnam as a result of their administrative policy. Under French colonial administration, the three regions were named Tonkin (North), Annam (Central), and Cochin-China (South). The difference in the regions could be recognized in dialects and cultural characteristics. However, they were subtle and often were not apparent to a “non-Vietnamese”⁵¹. Using these regional differences to its advantage, French colonialists imposed different governing administrative bodies and treated each of the three regions as separate entities. The development of the young Vietnamese language was greatly affected by this polarization. Regional differences especially shown in the way Vietnamese language is spoken and culinary dishes became

⁵¹ As a Vietnamese I can attest to this fact in terms of the differences in attitude, ways of thinking, and patterns of interaction.

more pronounced and led to the permanent fragmentation of Vietnam. This problem persists until present day, and has become a sort of “marker” that Vietnamese often use to distinguish themselves from one another. For example, a person from the North would be expected to possess a set of characteristics and patterns of behaviour quite distinct from someone from the central region or in the South. Although such distinction in some way could be taken as a positive process, for it serves to enrich and diversify an otherwise homogenous population and static culture.

Under this colonial era (1858-1954), Vietnam was forcibly introduced to a new system and method of learning, one that was taught in *French* and was more technical and scientific in order to help fuel the country's economy, and thus to benefit France (Furnivall, 1943; Zink, 2009). Qualified Vietnamese students were selected to go abroad to study in France, and some even went privately at the expense of their families. Upon returning, these individuals would play an important role in modernizing the system of learning which appeared to many at the time, to be backward and outdated. Some of these returnees found work within the colonial system, but there also were those who did not condone the harsh treatment of the French towards the population. They actively sought ways to change the existing structure, through various methods, thus becoming revolutionary leaders of the anti-colonial movements. One of the most famous of them all (though not a student)⁵², was Ho Chi Minh - who would later become a leader of the world's most successful anti-colonialist movement and is considered by many Vietnamese, as the father of a nation (Duiker W. , 2000; Quinn-Judge, 2002). And so long

⁵² Ho Chi Minh lived in Paris for a period from 1910-1923, during which time he befriended other Vietnamese nationalists who were already living there at the time.

as they provided leadership, the masses followed - for it was deeply inscribed in the traditional social order of “SI, NONG, CONG, THUONG”; Si (gentry scholars or intellectuals) were the most respected in Vietnamese social pyramid (Goodman, 1973), followed by Nong (peasant farmers), then Cong (artisans and craftsmen), and finally Thuong (merchants and traders).

As the above discussion of Vietnamese history and the country’s subjugation under French colonialism indicated, there is ample reason for the Vietnamese to subscribe to the narrative of victimhood. Inevitably this narrative engenders feelings of helplessness, resentment, and ultimately the need to transcend the yolk of servitude. The question then becomes: how is this to be accomplished, and indeed is it possible to trust one’s leaders? Leaders of revolutionary movements are of course inclined to portray themselves as dedicated to the welfare of their people. This was the case with the communists, who claimed that their mission was to reunify Vietnam and in so doing, continue Vietnamese resistance to Chinese domination, French colonial rule, and American imperialism. But interestingly, they seldom ask themselves “what price glory”. The leader of the North Vietnamese forces, Ho Chi Minh, exemplified this “win at any cost” attitude claimed to the French as early as the 1940’s, he asserted that “you can kill ten of my men for every one of yours, but even at those odds, you will lose and I will win”. This cavalier attitude towards human life, and in particular, the lives of the people he was supposedly interested in liberating, did not speak well for Ho Chi Minh’s motivations. The same attitude was demonstrated by General Vo Nguyen Giap, the Communist commander, who pointed out that “every minute hundreds of thousands of people die on this earth”, and following from

this, “the life or death of a hundred, a thousand, tens of thousands of human beings, even our compatriots” is considered inconsequential (Karnow, 1983). It is necessary, therefore, to pose the question: whose interests are being served here? It is easy to claim that one wishes only to liberate one’s people, but these statements demonstrate that often the reverse is true. Intellectuals in particular tend to be sceptical about such claims, and thus may warn the rest of the population about the true motivations of those who seek self-aggrandizement rather than the good of the collectivity.

Truong Nhu Tang addresses this question in his book “A Vietcong Memoir” (Truong, 1986) which traces his own journey from idealism to disillusionment. Tang points out that he had hope that the revolution would not only be a national one but also a national and *democratic* movement – one which would have safeguarded the freedoms of all ethnic groups, religions, and regions in Vietnam. He soon discovered that this was not to be the case - as Tang expresses it:

[T]he national democratic revolution itself became a casualty, choked by the arrogance of power among those who were responsible for the nation’s fate. Instead of national reconciliation and independence, Ho Chi Minh’s successors have given us a country devouring its own and beholden once again to foreigners, though now it is the Soviets⁵³ rather than the Americans. In the process, the lives that so many gave to create a new nation are now no more than ashes cast aside. That betrayal of faith will burden the souls of Vietnam’s revolutionary leaders – even as surely as their rigid ideology and bellicose foreign policies have mortgaged the country’s future. (p. 310)

Nevertheless Tang ends his discussion on somewhat hopeful note: “but nothing of course disappears entirely” (Ibid.).

⁵³ In 1985, when this book was written, the Soviet Union was still intact. Since its dissolution in 1991, Vietnam has been more closely aligned with China.

As the French colonial power suffered its final defeat in the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the Geneva Conference was convened to decide on the future of the former French Indochina. The terms of the accord that followed effectively divided the country into two Vietnams: the North or the DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) received backing from the then Soviet Union and China, and the South or the RVN (Republic of Vietnam), received support from the U.S (Buttinger, 1972; Fitzgerald, 1972; Karnow, 1983; Schulzinger, 1997). The U.S involvement in Vietnam and its military action were carried out in order to serve its policy of “containment”, a measure to stop the spread of communism which the U.S feared was overtaking Asia. In the context of the Cold War, this was intended as a “global strategy to contain Soviet aggression” (Schulzinger, 1997, p. 24). In addition, there was a growing worldwide support of decolonization. As stated in “A Time for War”, under the Truman Doctrine, “the U.S pledged to assist ‘free peoples’ everywhere ‘in maintaining their freedoms’” (Ibid., p.39).

Foster (2006) has a different view of the American role in Vietnam. For him, the Vietnam War was engaged not so much to “contain” the spread of communism, since there was no indication of the Soviet Union and China’s “global expansionary tendencies” and “third world revolutions” were pretty much “indigenous affairs” (Ibid., p.108). Thus, U.S involvement in Vietnam shows its deep-rooted imperialistic tendencies, an inherent characteristic of capitalism, which “accepts no bounds to its expansion” and this has reflected in U.S foreign policy ever since (Ibid., p.109). Foster’s analysis seems to be in agreement with supporters of anti-American Imperialism.

The costs, casualties, and destruction caused by direct U.S military involvement in Vietnam - and in fact, the whole of Indochina is well documented. According to Buttinger (1972), in Vietnam alone there were 3.6 million tons of bombs dropped – in comparison to 2 million tons dropped in WWII, and 1 million tons dropped during the Korean War. For the whole of French Indochina (including North and South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), the total tonnage of bombs dropped was 6.2 million – an average of 300 lbs. of bombs per person in those three countries and 22 tons per square mile. It is difficult to disagree with the assertion that “the U.S has committed monumental crimes in Indochina”(Barnet, 1972, p. 5). Perhaps this direct quotation from one U.S diplomat during the war can help capture the magnitude of such crimes: “To make progress in this country, it is necessary to level everything. The inhabitants must go back to zero, lose their culture, for it blocks everything” (as cited in Barnet, 197, p. 14). Apart from the human casualties, Vietnam’s landscape also sustained tremendous ecological damage from bombs and napalm, and forests were defoliated (ibid). Approximately 72 million liters of herbicides were sprayed over 12% of forest area and 5% of agricultural land, which caused long term health effects and made subsequent economic recovery more difficult (Beresford, 1988). American forces withdrew from Vietnam in 1973 having suffered more than 58,000 deaths. Vietnamese casualties were a lot higher to be sure. Although there is no accurate account of the total number of deaths, it is estimated that between one to three million Vietnamese died during the war (Hirschman, Preston, & Vu, 1995).

When we speak of the American involvement in Vietnam, it is important to make a distinction between those who do the planning and those who do the killing. As Barnett points out in his book “Roots of War” (1972), the bureaucratic structures in the U.S, such as the CIA and the Pentagon, make it possible to plan “the saturation bombings, free fire zones, defoliation, crop destruction, and assassination programs in the Vietnam War”(p. 14). Thus, according to Barnett, “the bureaucratization of homicide is responsible for the routine character of modern war, the absence of passion, and the efficiency of mass-produced death” (Ibid). All of this, in Barnett’s view, is designed to serve one main political end for America, which is its expansionist project – or as Barnett phrases it: “the drive to expand control over an ever greater portion of the universe” (p. 17). In practice, this is carried out in a variety of ways, such as “the granting and withholding of aid, the penetration of foreign economies by American corporations working closely with government, the export of American tastes and fashions through magazines, movies, TV programs, educational curricula, and of course, the ubiquitous activities of U.S intelligence” (p. 18).

Atrocities were not only limited to the American side to be sure. Vietnamese also suffered under the South Vietnamese regime and its leader, Ngo Dinh Diem. The implementation of the Agrovillage Program, later became known as the Strategic Hamlet, where peasants were uprooted from their native dwellings and forced to relocate in enclosed farming villages set up to counter Vietcong insurgency, caused much bitterness and resentment for the people (Frankum Jr., 2007). There were also the suppression of antiwar movements and the use of military force on religious demonstrations (Ibid.).

Perhaps the image of the Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, setting himself afire was the most telling of life under Ngo Dinh Diem regime. It should be noted that although this act of self-immolation represents one of the most dramatic forms of protest, at the heart of Buddhist belief, self-sacrifice is also understood as a way of liberation and purification. Thus the act itself carries a sacred meaning for the Buddhist religion (Ibid.).

As I have indicated, the issue of leadership and any claim made by leaders that they wish to liberate their own people is often problematic, but this situation may be examined from another perspective as well. There are those (e.g., Chomsky⁵⁴) who see nationalist movements as indeed, representing a force for good, or at the very least, an option which is vastly preferable to American imperialism.

The work of Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (1979) offers a much more critical view of America's role in Vietnam. As they see it, all of the negative economic and social effects following the war was a function of American interference. Chomsky and Herman argue that the U.S attributes all of Indochina's problems to Communist domination, while at the same time failing to offer a more human and effective alternative. In fact the authors assert that the U.S created Indochina's economic problems in order to ensure that the region would continue to be in need of U.S aid, and therefore under its control. In order to buttress their argument Chomsky and Herman cite the example of American aid given to Germany and Japan following WWII. It may seem strange to offer aid to aggressor nations, but the price for this aid was reintegration into

⁵⁴ In an interview with Paul Shannon in October, 1982, Chomsky showed his support by pointing out that "the NLF was the only South Vietnamese group that ever talked about South Vietnamese independence".

the so-called “free world” and their subservience to U.S interests. The irony of this support, it seems, is that both Japan and Germany came close to challenging the economic supremacy of the U.S in the 70’s and 80’s. Chomsky and Herman also argue that the U.S media (whether knowingly or not) were complicit in this, continually presenting Indochina and in particular VN and Cambodia, as victim nations whose people were subjected to unspeakable evils, perpetrated by their demonic leaders (Chomsky & Herman, 1979, pp. XI-XIII). In spite of their compelling argument for the dominance of U.S interests and the effectiveness of the propaganda machine, Chomsky and Herman have had their share of critics. Chomsky in particular, is said to be obsessed with being anti-American⁵⁵ and has been called “dishonest” in his “handling of source material”⁵⁶. Both scholars are seen as “propagandists” who attacked America and its allies while ignoring atrocities caused by communist dictatorships⁵⁷. In short, Chomsky has been widely criticized for underplaying the violence and atrocities of both the Vietnamese and Cambodian communists. Ultimately then, observers and historians who consider these events are once again confronted with a lesson in the perspectival nature of truth.

Communist Takeover Narrative

We have seen that before the arrival of the Americans, Vietnam had been a French colony since 1859 (Karnow, 1983). During World War II, France ceded control of Vietnam to the Japanese Imperial forces, and when Japan surrendered to the Allies in

⁵⁵ See David Horowitz’ article: “Noam Chomsky’s Anti-American Obsession” in *The Anti-Chomsky Reader* (2004) by Peter Collier and David Horowitz.

⁵⁶ See Oliver Kamm’s November, 2005 article in the magazine *Prospect*.

⁵⁷ See Paul Bogdanor’s article “Chomsky’s Totalitarian Apologetics”.

August 1945 it left a power vacuum, which allowed the communist led Viet Minh⁵⁸ to take full advantage (Huynh, 1971). On September 2, 1945, having secured the abdication of the last Nguyen Emperor Bao Dai, Ho Chi Minh declared to the world a newly independent country: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), with himself as head of a coalition government comprised of various nationalist forces⁵⁹.

Although committed to revolutionary ethics, it is important to take note that Ho Chi Minh and his Party's ability to win the hearts and minds of Vietnamese peasants was due in large part to the "land-to-tiller" policies (Brigham, 2007). The Party relied on its social program, which included rent reduction and the redistribution of land, as the "prime political instrument" and the means to gain "dominance over the rural population" (Ibid., pp. 116-118). In Dinh Tuong, a province located in the Mekong Delta, a Party document stated: "The main interest of the farmer is land. Before, during, and after the elimination of our enemy's influence, the Party...always used the subject of land as a means of propagandizing the masses" (Ibid.). In his book "War Comes to Long An", Jeffrey Race confirms this same strategy when he notes: "the Party went to great lengths to make its land policies appear more attractive to peasants than those of the Saigon government" - and according to this scholar, "this was the crucial difference in the war"(as cited in Brigham, p. 118).

⁵⁸ Short form of "Viet Nam Cach Mang Dong Minh Hoi" or Association of Vietnamese Revolutionary Alliance. This is an umbrella organization uniting all nationalist forces to fight against French colonial rule. Because the Vietminh represented a wide spectrum of society it enjoyed broad popular support.

⁵⁹ Even as late as 1948, the US was not sure about the Vietminh's and Ho's political inclination. The State Department suspected Ho's ties with Moscow, but they had no evidence for it (Gravel, The Pentagon papers. Vol. 1, 1971).

The subsequent decade witnessed the return of the French and the struggle against the French occupation (known as the First Indochina war 1945 – 1954), which ended with the defeat of the French forces at the battle of Dien Bien Phu (Buttinger, 1967). This decade also witnessed the systematic elimination of all nationalist parties by members of the Lao-Dong Party (Workers' Party), which emerged as the sole surviving political party. The Vietnamese communists' brutality in the suppression of its political rivals and the bloody campaign against landowners during the land reform fiasco of 1956 (Fitzgerald, 1972; Duiker W. , 1972) made a deep imprint in the hearts and minds of nationalist leaders in the South, and those on the opposite side of the communist ideology. In fact it may have contributed to the fear that descended over the country after the communist victory.

The Vietnamese Workers' Party subsequently changed its name to the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) in 1976 during the Fourth Congress (Rees, 1977), one year after unification. The Geneva Conference of July 1954 convened by the world major powers effectively divided Vietnam into two different states, with the question of unification to be decided in a general election to be held within two years. The subsequent developments proved fateful: fearing a communist election victory, Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem, who had been appointed by the Emperor Bao Dai to form a provisional government that controlled areas south of the 17th parallel – comprised of the central and southern parts of the country, decided to hold a plebiscite to have him declared the president of the First Republic of South Vietnam (Buttinger, 1967). Realizing that the South had backed out of its Geneva obligations, the North Vietnamese government -

supported by the Chinese and Russian allies, began a military campaign to reunite the country under its rule. At the beginning American involvement was limited to an advisory and training role, and providing military aid and humanitarian assistance. The roles were changed to full combat duties in 1965 when large contingents of American marines made their landing on the beach near Da Nang (Maitland & Weiss, 1982). It should be mentioned that Ngo Dinh Diem's refusal to carry out the scheduled 1956 elections, as called for by the Geneva Accords, was supported by the Americans. Similarly, recent released records of the Nixon's papers shows that in 1968, Nixon intervened to stop the signing of the peace treaty between North and South Vietnam, a treaty that was being brokered by the then President Lyndon Johnson⁶⁰. This was done in order to help Nixon win the tight presidential race against Hubert Humphrey who was Johnson's Vice President at the time. Nixon's sabotage of the peace talks effectively helped to extend the war years and led to a tremendous increase in human casualties on all sides.

The examples above serve to illustrate the extent of U.S involvement in Vietnam and the increasing influence the U.S had on the affairs in the country. As Stanley Karnow (1983) poignantly put it: "The new reality was expressed in an old epigram: 'they may be sons-of-bitches, but they they're our sons-of-bitches'" (Ibid., p. 450). The American interference in Vietnam helped contribute to growing political turbulence in Saigon, which in turn greatly affected American public's opinion about the way the war was

⁶⁰ For more on this, see Bob Fittrakis and Harvey Wasserman's article: George Will Confirms Nixon's Vietnam Treason, <http://www.commondreams.org/views/2014/08/12/george-will-confirms-nixons-vietnam-treason>

going and the conduct of their government. Indeed, Ngo Dinh Diem's rule was often defined by the attempt to deal with the need to maintain a fine balance between Eastern traditions and Western influences. To a large extent, the South Vietnamese leader was unable to fulfill such a tall order and this eventually led to his demise (Brigham, 2007).

The aftermath of "TET" in 1968 laid bare the vulnerability of America and its Vietnamese allies to the attacks of the Viet Cong (Young N. , 1977), and it brought home the realization that this is the war that cannot be won⁶¹. The war now had become unpopular at home, sparking social unrest and protests on university campuses around the country and all over the world. The world revolution of 1968 had begun⁶². Thus, under pressure, the Americans negotiated secretly with North Vietnam during the Nixon administration to secure what had been promised since 1969 as "peace with honor" which led to the Paris Accord of 1973 that essentially ended America's direct involvement in the Vietnam War (Schulzinger, 1997). The conflict persisted for another two years and eventually with superior firepower and unwavering support from its allies, North Vietnam finally captured Saigon on April 30th, 1975.

The previous discussion has focused on the orthodox view: that American involvement in Vietnam was a colossal mistake, an error in judgment, which stemmed from the United States' failure to understand the internal conditions of Vietnam. The debacle in Vietnam thus can be seen as a consequence of misjudgment and an attempt on

⁶¹ CBS Anchorman Walter Cronkite voiced his doubts about the war publicly on February 27, 1968 during the Tet offensive. President Johnson thought that he had lost public support for the war upon listening to Cronkite that day.

⁶² For many intellectuals, the world revolution of 1968 was instrumental in forging a new way of thinking. Immanuel Wallerstein formulated the World-System perspective; Pierre Bourdieu's work *Homo Academicus* studies the French intellectual establishment within the context of change brought about by this period of social upheaval.

the part of Americans to gain global dominance, while at same time asserting that this effort is in the best interests of all concerned. However, in recent years, a conservative revisionist approach to the war has emerged. Revisionist historians reject the view that this was a useless tragedy brought about by America's constant need to consolidate its power (Anderson, 2007, p. 20). Revisionism assumes that the attempt to contain communist expansion was a worthy goal, and in fact, Americans must undertake this moral responsibility, and continue their involvement in global affairs, which has increased since the end of WW II. One such revisionist historian, Guenter Lewy (1978), asserts that America's failure in Vietnam has resulted in a loss of face. America's allies can no longer really believe that America will live up to its avowed commitments. Lewy frames the situation in this way:

In the wake of the trauma of Vietnam, America is in the grip of a 'No More Vietnams' psychology, which stands in sharp contrast to the spirit of active involvement in global affairs prevailing since WW II... There is no reason to assume that the weakening of America's will to act will make for a better and more peaceful world. (pp. 426-428).

There have been divisions *within* the revisionist approach as well. According to Anderson(2007), there are three types of revisionist arguments:(1) That the war in Vietnam could have and should have been won, but the United States did not make full use of its enormous conventional military power. (2) That in order to win the war, the United States should have recognized the limitations of conventional military tactics, and focused on guerrilla warfare. (3) The third approach assumes that military force was not the answer and the effort to overcome communist expansion should have emphasized pacification.

We should not be surprised to learn that the assertion that the war was “winnable” as well as “right” can be found in the memoirs of high ranking American officers who led U.S forces in Vietnam. U.S army colonel, Harry P. G. Summers Jr. wrote an influential book, *On Strategy* (1982, as cited in Anderson, 2007) in which he claimed that America’s failure to win the war militarily, was the result of a failed strategy. The U.S should have isolated the battlefield in the South and directed its firepower against strategic enemy’s targets, instead of dispersing its military and human resources in a wasteful manner. As has been indicated, the *win thesis* has gathered much support from military officials, including General William Westmoreland. Those who support this view argue that a more concentrated and aggressive use of military resources would have allowed the U.S to force Hanoi into a negotiated settlement (Anderson, 2007)⁶³.

Orthodox historians have challenged the so-called *win thesis* on several points. For one thing, superior military force is not enough if one fails to understand the political and social context within the country. Thus, according to this view, the corrupt nature of the South Vietnamese government must be taken into account. It could not muster any significant degree of support from within its population, and to assume that American involvement would somehow make it more “popular” was naïve (Anderson, 2007)⁶⁴. In addition, some historians argue that American military forces inflicted so much damage on the *South Vietnamese*, that they undermined their own interest, and alienated the

⁶³ Also cited by Anderson: Summers, 1982; Palmer B.J., 1984; Davidson, 1988; Stanton, 1985; Palmer D.R., 1978; Westmoreland, 1976; Sharp, 1978.

⁶⁴ Also cited by Anderson: Herring, 1987; Hess, 1986; Kimball, 1988.

population in the countryside (which suffered the most as a result of the bombing) from the Saigon regime.

Some revisionists, as has been indicated, reject the idea that the war could have been won by military means (either conventional or guerilla) and argue that the U.S should have adopted a pacification approach to consolidate its power in this area. Thus, the U.S should have been providing security and necessary services, such as health care and agricultural technology, in order to win over the population (Anderson, 2007, p. 22).

The pacification approach is undoubtedly appealing, but as Anderson points out, this aspect of the revisionist approach may be overly optimistic. Revisionists tend to assume that Americans lost a war that was winnable. They differ in their notions of the *methods* which would have made this outcome possible – as we have seen, some advocated conventional military power, others argued that guerilla warfare was necessary, and finally, some revisionists assert that pacification would have been the most effective strategy. Regardless of the methods advocated, revisionists assume that the war in Vietnam was a just cause worth winning. As Anderson points out, the revisionist assumption that there could be an “American” solution to the contest for political power in Vietnam is difficult to sustain. He argues that:

The course and outcome of the Vietnam War were matter not only of American failure, but also of Vietnamese success. Some studies of individual U.S combat units that gave serious attention to village security and local improvements have found that these programs did not translate into loyalty to the Saigon regime after the Americans left the area. Other localized studies of particular villages or provinces have shown that the resistance to external interference – Chinese, French, American – has deep historical and cultural roots in Vietnam. Similarly, real economic and social inequities and injustices provided fertile ground for revolution. They combined their discipline and ruthless political tactics which appeal to patriotism and justice to

create an effective strategy for withstanding the might the powerful Americans. (p. 22)⁶⁵

The realization, then, that the communists were credible opponents gave rise to a sub-group of revisionists, called *legitimatists*. This position was developed by historian Garry Hess who argued that in order to maintain its superior position vis-à-vis Moscow and Beijing, the United States could not give up Vietnam without a fight. Thus, the international balance of power was at stake here, and furthermore, one could point to human rights abuses on the part of the communist regime to show that American involvement in Vietnam was a moral imperative (Anderson, 2007, p. 23)⁶⁶. This legitimatist version of the Vietnam War has, of course, been supported by a large majority of the Vietnamese diaspora community in North America. At the same time, though, some legitimatists point out that the regime in Saigon, although corrupt, was no worse than its opponents. Furthermore, many legitimatists acknowledge that no matter how one feels about American involvement in Vietnam or what methods should be used, its chances for success were never very good.

With the communist victory in April of 1975, it appeared at last that a new dawn had begun; a new chapter had opened for a now-united and independent country. For the victors: Communist North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front guerrillas, it was time to celebrate their final victory in a long struggle over the American-backed regime of South Vietnam (Truong, 1986) - but for the vanquished (i.e., those who had been a part of the defeated government), this was a time of fear and uncertainty for intellectuals and

⁶⁵ Also cited by Anderson: Bergerud, 1991; Fitzgerald, 1972; Race, 1972; Trullinger Jr., 1980; Pike, 1978; Harrison, 1982; Elliott, 2002; Gilbert, 2002

⁶⁶ Also cited by Anderson: Podhoretz, 1983; Lomperis, 1996; Smith R.B., 1884-90; Hammer, 1987; Hatcher, 1990

people who held privileged positions in society, or those with a more educated background, especially if they received their education in America. Thus the event of April 30th 1975 has come to mean both a day of national liberation as well as a day of national defeat for Vietnamese people.

In his vivid and compelling ethnographic research, *Vietnam: A History*, Stanley Karnow (1983) recounts his experiences doing ethnography in Vietnam. Much - although not all of what he saw, reflected the brutality of communism and the heavy cost this regime imposed, especially on the population of Saigon. Those who were connected to the old government were especially victimized by the new regime. Karnow's accounts deserve to be included at length here:

But soon afterward (the takeover of Saigon) the Communists proceeded to shun four hundred thousand civil servants and army officers as well as doctors, lawyers, teachers, journalists, and other intellectuals into 're-education' centers – and the concentration camps still hold between fifty and a hundred thousand people. There are about forty of these camps in the south, several of them jails once used by the Saigon regime to detain its critics. The inmates are reported to suffer from malnutrition, malaria, dysentery, and other diseases as a result of inadequate food and medical care, and accounts of torture and summary executions abound. At one large center, located near the town of Tan Hiep, south of Saigon, those charged with infractions of the rules are beaten and shackled in the sun without water. Elsewhere, they are locked in the same 'tiger cages'

Apart from its inhumanity, the Vietnamese gulag betrays Vietnam's own interests by discarding the skilled people needed for national recovery. During my visit to Ho Chi Minh City, as Saigon was renamed after the war, I encountered a former professor of medicine recently released from a camp. He and his wife, a lawyer, both intense nationalists, had deliberately remained in Vietnam after the Communist takeover in hopes of contributing to their country's reconstruction. Now, their spirit broken, they dream of escape.

When the Communists drove into Saigon in 1975, they were prudently greeted by a dazed population yearning for peace and prepared to cooperate. But instead of proceeding gently, they embarked on a program of wholesale repression, creating neighborhood committees of agents and informers to report on citizens, and arresting anyone even remotely affiliated with the *ancien régime*. (p. 29-35)

For the new regime, the purge was seen as an effective way to “get rid of the bourgeois rubbish” (as cited in Karnow, p. 30). The new regime also caused tremendous hardship to the people when they applied socialist reconstruction and agricultural collectivization immediately after the war. Inevitably, this resulted in widespread poverty and repression and served as a catalyst for the massive exodus of people, which is considered “one of the largest migrations of modern times”(Karnow, 1983, p. 34).

The Civil War Narrative

We have already seen that Chomsky and Herman (1979) offer an account of the Vietnam War and its aftermath, which is highly critical of the U.S interference and its conduct in the affairs of other countries. Stanley Karnow (1983), on the other hand, contends that many of the problems in Vietnamese society following the war were the result of excesses on the part of the new communist regime. It is also necessary to examine another narrative, which depicts the war in Vietnam as a civil war. This, in fact, is the position taken by many of my interviewees, who could not fully subscribe to either the anti-American narrative or the anti-Communist narrative. It must be emphasized that any attempt to make the past comprehensible is bound to be colored by our biases, our dreams, and our need to impose meaning on our experiences. At the same time intellectuals in particular are often comfortable with the middle ground of uncertainty. This may be why so many of my subjects chose a model which to a great extent, rejects the comfort of “either or “, and instead leaves room for doubt and interpretation.

This *civil war* model sees the war largely as an internal conflict, and those who subscribe to it would argue that both North and South Vietnam had legitimate concerns and a sincere interest in the future of their country. Thus the position taken by each side could be seen as equally valid – the problem in terms of Vietnam’s future would be a question of execution. This is not to say that the leaders of each faction were completely genuine, but rather to speak of a vision for the country’s future in general terms. Ho Chi Minh and his forces - particularly the NLF⁶⁷, saw it as their goal:

To bring together a disparate collection of elements opposed to Diem: various peasant, youth, religious, cultural and other associations founded by the Vietminh during the war against the French; and remnants of the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen, which had retreated into their sanctuaries in the Mekong delta after their defeat by Diem five years earlier. As a southern movement, it was intended to serve to underpin Hanoi’s claim that North Vietnam was not violating the Geneva agreement by sending forces into the south. (Karnow, 1983, pp. 238-239).

North Vietnam, therefore, viewed the conflict as a continuous struggle for independence from French colonialism and American imperialism, and the ultimate objective (as it was known officially) was to reunite the country under communist rule. For Ngo Dinh Diem and his supporters in the South (primarily the population of Saigon), their goal was to defend against communist invasion and to prevent communist take-over of the entire country. In other words, theirs was a struggle against communism.

Thus, under the civil war perspective, the conflict was between North and South Vietnam - and one in which the U.S could not have hoped to intervene successfully. This is mainly because North Vietnam had legitimately “identified itself with the struggle for

⁶⁷ The National Liberation Front was created in the late 1960’s by communist North Vietnamese. This political organization operated mainly in the South and included members who were both communist and non-communist.

‘freedom from the colonial yoke’ “(Buzzanco, 2007), and given the social context at the time (i.e., an era dominated by decolonization and independence movements), North Vietnamese forces also had the support of the world behind them. Again we are confronted with the issue of ambiguity. The U.S. may have been self-serving in terms of its involvement in Vietnam, or it may have been trying to help. This idea of *self-serving* is a very important concern for America, because it is grounded in the “popular vision of national identity, a belief in the moral stature of the United States, a conviction that has enabled policy makers to pursue self-interest in the name of global benevolence”(Young M. B., 1993, p. 252). But any such involvement is bound to be problematic, because no outsiders could hope to understand the complexity of the situation. Not only that, but the difficulties were compounded by the realization that the U.S could not point to any tangible gains as a result of their involvement in this war. They were supposedly fighting against an idea - communism - and the “domino theory”, which argues that if one country falls under communist domination, then the trend is irreversible. But where was the territory to be gained or terrain to be occupied? The U.S was fighting an unconventional war where “winning” was measured in “body counts”(Daddis, 2011). Of course one may also point out that Vietnam was merely a surrogate for a larger enemy – that is, the threat to U.S domination posed by China and Russia. In any case, for some of my interviewees (as will be shown in the next chapter), this endeavor was doomed to failure from the start and they demonstrate their awareness of the costs incurred in money, material, and most of all in human lives⁶⁸.

⁶⁸ Robert D. Schulzinger (1997) explores this perspective in his insightful book *A Time For War: The*

In hindsight, one could argue that U.S policy makers might have committed a grave error in overlooking the deep sense of nationalism of the Vietnamese. Throughout their history, the Vietnamese have been forced to continually fight for their independence. They were first under the domination of the Chinese, then the French, and subsequently the Americans. This long history of oppression might have fostered a sense of passivity and despair, but in spite of this, the Vietnamese have shown their determination to create and maintain a national identity. It might also be said that their identity, to a great extent, spring from this history of oppression, and more will be said about this throughout the thesis.

At the more grassroots level, the situation can be framed as a conflict between two forces. On one side were those who supported Ho Chi Minh's policy of land reform, which was intended to eliminate the ownership class and thus the problems of inequality as well – and on the other side the supporters of Ngo Dinh Diem's regime and its anti-communist stance. It should be emphasized that for Ho Chi Minh, a partial control of Vietnam would not be enough – his goal was the reunification of North and South Vietnam in order to form one country under communist rule (Karnow, 1983). Although Ho Chi Minh's land reform campaigns could be seen as a success in terms of reducing the numbers of large land owners and reallocating resources, the Party became a victim of its own victory (Brigham, 2007). The wealthy landowners who had been forced to give up their holdings were now no longer in a position to pay high taxes. Because of this source of revenue was lost, it became necessary to impose taxes across the board, even on those

United States in Vietnam 1971-1945.

who had relatively little land, and therefore little ability to pay – sometimes these special taxes were collected at “gunpoint”(Brigham, 2007, p. 118). This meant that the peasants who had formerly supported the communists because of their promises of land reforms, would now turn against them.

When Ho Chi Minh returned to Hanoi in October 1954, after an eight-year absence, he was faced with severe economic problems. The war with the French had left North Vietnam devastated. They suffered serious rice shortages and loss of vital infrastructure. The departing anti-communist Vietnamese, mainly Catholics who fled to the South to avoid persecution, “had dismantled harbor installations, post offices, libraries, and hospitals, and stripped factories of tools and machinery”(Karnow, 1983, pp. 224-225). The rice shortage was especially critical since it is much more difficult to grow rice in North Vietnam and the separation of North and South meant that in 1955, Vietnam had to import rice from Burma with the help of the then Soviet Union, which financed this endeavor. If this had not been possible, the North probably would have experienced a disastrous famine, similar to one that had occurred ten years earlier. Thus the need for rice, a staple of the Vietnamese diet, could be seen as a crucial link cementing the North’s dependence on the Soviet Union at the time.

For Ngo Dinh Diem and his South Vietnamese government, the challenges were equally daunting. In the first place, the regime had to deal with an influx of almost a million refugees from the North. Land redistribution measures were carried out in order

to help resettle the new refugees⁶⁹. There were also sectarian conflicts among the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Binh Xuyen – each group was vying for power (Frankum Jr., 2007). The government’s Strategic Hamlet Program – a program headed by Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, aimed “to corral peasants into armed stockades, thereby depriving the Vietcong of their support” not only failed to produce the desired result but also alienated the peasants who resented being uprooted and severed from their accustomed way of life”(Karnow, 1983, p. 255). Adding to this resentment was the government’s action in withholding “the funds promised them until it was sure they would not bolt” (Ibid.). Ultimately, this helped turn many peasants into “Vietcong sympathizers” – not so much because of their conviction, but rather out of their defiance for the Diem’s regime. In Karnow’s view, “Diem and Nhu saw the strategic hamlet program as essentially a means to spread their influence rather than a device to infuse peasants with the will to resist the Vietcong”(p.256).

Diem also faced the difficulty of limiting American interference. Having just finished the war with the French, the Vietnamese were weary of all this and did not look kindly on foreign powers seeking to impose regime change. Diem in fact, became too reliant on American aid, but at the same time, was unwilling or unable to comply with American demands for “democratic reforms”, which were necessary conditions of their continued help. The form of aid received was mainly military, which confirmed that Diem was more focus on “waging a conventional conflict” and less on carrying out

⁶⁹ Vietnam was (and still is to a large extent) mainly an agrarian society and thus, it was vital that people were given land to farm. In practice, however, it was not an easy task to carry out such land reform program.

political, economic, and social reforms (Karnow, 1983, p. 259). In fact, as Karnow noted: “This suited Diem, who instructed his officers to avoid casualties. Their primary role, in this view, was not to fight the Vietcong, but to protect him against possible coups in Saigon” (Ibid.). This inability on the part of the South Vietnamese leader to successfully navigate these conflicting imperatives, most likely contributed to his assassination in November of 1963 (Frankum Jr., 2007, p. 124).

As can be seen, the internal conflict in Vietnam was most destructive to the peasant class, which is often the case in any war. It is true that Vietnam was victimized by external, powerful forces, beginning with China, France, and then the U.S. - but as the civil war perspective has shown, Vietnamese were also “self-victimized”. In other words, they became their own victims as the country turned on itself, with both sides were in no way perfect. Following from this, it is understandable that one would approach the analysis of the Vietnam War with considerable skepticism. This was the position taken by many of my interviewees, who found it difficult to believe in the “rightness” of either side. My interviewees’ “takes” on the war will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Vietnamese Diaspora and the Intellectuals’ “Takes” On the War

We have seen in the previous chapter that the Vietnam conflict is generally understood from the point of view of three different perspectives or competing victim narratives: Vietnam was victimized by the West (France and the U.S), Vietnam was victimized by the communist regime, and the civil war version in which Vietnam turned on itself and thus, is “self-victimized”. Each perspective offers its own justifications for why the war happened. I have also noted that for the Vietnamese, the war is seen largely from the first two narratives (at least officially), and that in the Vietnamese diaspora community in North America, the “communist takeover” seems to be the most widely adopted position. In this chapter, I will examine Vietnamese intellectuals’ narratives about the war to see how their perspectives on the conflict intersect or diverge with other narratives that I have already laid out in the previous chapter, and the dilemmas they face in their understanding of the war.

The Plight of Vietnamese Refugees: the Trauma of Exit

The saga of the modern Vietnamese diaspora began when South Vietnam fell under communist control in April 1975. It should be mentioned that a number of South Vietnamese with military connection had started to leave the country prior to the fall of Saigon. Additionally, in the 60’s a small number of South Vietnamese had also gone abroad to study under different government sponsored programs. However, the bulk of the refugees escaped by boat and became known as “boat people”. During the span from

the late 1970's to mid 1990's, an estimated 1.6⁷⁰ million people took to the sea in small, rickety, wooden boats to flee Vietnam – a phenomenon that became an international humanitarian crisis. In order for us to get a sense of what it was like for those who felt victimized by the communist regime and were “forced” to uproot from their homeland, I offer some of my interviewees’ accounts of their perilous escape and early experiences as refugees:

I was 17 in 1975 and the oldest son in the family. I was in my first year of college in Polytechnique in Thu Duc, and in 1975 the south lost so I had to go and studied Communism for a couple of weeks. After that the North Vietnamese government decided that I could not continue my education and I have to go to work. So that's what I did. In 1980, I left VN by myself, by boat. In my family we have 5 siblings and we left VN one at the time, because it was so dangerous that we did not want to lose everything at once. So I left first, then after that my younger sister, then the older sister, then another younger sister...one at the time. I had tried 3 times before and was successful the last time. I went to Thailand after I spent 7 days and 7 nights on the boat. We did not prepare well so we were without food for 7 days, and we were robbed 11 times. When we got to Thailand, I remember we had, basically, only one pair of underwear on us because we were robbed 11 times. We stayed here for 3 weeks and were transferred to a bigger refugee camp in Thailand. Here I stayed for 7 months and then got sponsored to go to the U.S. I was considered lucky because there were people who had to go to the Philippines and spent more time there. I basically got accepted to go to the U.S after 6 months I was there. (Thayer L.)

Another young female interviewee also shared that it took several failed attempts before she and her family succeeded and finally arrived at a refugee camp in Malaysia. In the process, she learned the art of “deceiving” state officials, a practice which was very common at the time when families had to provide explanations for missing persons in the household registry⁷¹:

⁷⁰ This is an estimated figure which can be found through various sources, including websites of Vietnamese communities (e.g., <http://congdongdallas.org/Show.aspx?fid=vietnameserefugees>) and other on-line archives of Vietnamese boat people/refugees (e.g., <http://archive.today/z8PaY>).

⁷¹ This household registration system, or “ho khau” in Vietnamese, was designed to regulate people's movement – which essentially was a measure to control over the population.

We escaped by boat with several failed attempts that I recalled, even when we were set up to leave at night, but were deceived – the boat would leave without us; they would take our money and then my mom would take us back to our home again. I was taught early to lie to state officials to say, you know, if they asked, “where’s your father” – to say “he’s working far away; he comes home once in a while” – that’s really an interesting part of my memory that I still retain. But finally we left after a couple of times of failed attempts and we landed in Malaysia at a refugee camp, and we lived there for about a year. (Niah L.)

For many of my interviewees, the journey at sea happened when they were too little to remember all the details. In spite of this, the stories seem to have also become part of their memory as they get to relive the experience through the narratives of their parents or older family members:

We left as boat people after my father left the reeducation camp. I was only two so I don’t have memory of the event. We spend about 6-8 months in Pulau Bidong Island, off the coast of Malaysia. I grow up hearing little bits of stories about life in the camp. Most of them were survival stories. For example, one of the stories was how my father had to fish everyday so we could have some food. Or how long the food line was or the hut we had to build so we could survive the element. My mom told me when we arrived, there was not much there at Pulau Bidong; we had to make best of the situation. I think for my parents just surviving was enough. They really didn’t contemplate family or stuff they left behind in Viet Nam. Or it could be that they never express those feelings to us here in the United States. I do have a story about leaving Viet Nam that my mother tells me all the time. It was that during the escape, I had a very high fever. Because there were blocks of ice on the top deck of the “fishing boat,” the water from the melted ice cooled my body down, calming me for the long journey. (Bill D.)

I was only five years old when we left Viet Nam and arrived in the U.S. so I don’t really have any concrete memories. However, my mother has relayed to me that, at the time, she felt very sad about leaving Viet Nam and more specifically, almost despondent that her mother was not able to make it out of the country and was left behind. She did not think much about her new life in the U.S. On the other hand, my father said that, at the time, he was also sad about leaving Viet Nam, but his main concern was how we were going to adapt to the U.S. and specifically if he would be able to find a decent job and place to live for our family. (Charles L)

After having made it to safety, refugees were often being shuffled between different refugee camps before they were allowed to settle at their final destination.

Understandably, the overriding concern was to “survive”. There was little time, it seemed, to be thinking about what had just taken place for them, much less realized or fully understood the extent to which how all of this could affect them in the future:

We were among the boat people who left at the last minute. We were in multiple refugee camps from May to September of 1975. I was 10 years old when we arrived at the refugee camp in Guam. Being very innocent and ignorant of the situation at the time, I actually view our time in the various camps in Guam and Arkansas as a vacation. I really had a great time seeing and learning new things and a new language. The view was different through my parents' eyes. They had said that they worried about the uncertainty of our future in America. They also wondered about their decision to leave Viet Nam. (Hal N.)

Another interviewee chose to share her experience in the refugee camp in a rather abrupt manner, as if it was too painful to take the time to recount it in full. I wish to leave this narrative in its entirety – the same way it was told by my subject, in order to convey this sense of ‘brokenness’ and a life that was fractured by the events of the war – a common experience shared by members of the Vietnamese diaspora, myself included:

Guam was scorched, with tin fish in chunks. You stood in line under blinding sun for it. Mother tied threaded rope through pieces of cardboard to use as sandals, and sewed underwear out of donated clothes. Roamed camp grounds to pick edible greens (no greens served). Tried not to think you couldn't go home again. Arrived in Camp Pendleton in June. Never thought June nights could be so cold. Tent city, in the dirt. Tried not to think you couldn't go home again. But nostalgia for Vietnam drips in songs. You loved those songs as safe placeholders for all the feelings about Vietnam that were corrosive. Craved a space to make into a home. Put blankets up to create family space. Long mess hall lines again. Fish sauce smuggled in, bought with meager money mother had gotten for her jewelry. Bought precious cups o' noodle for 25 cents and felt luxurious. Excited to learn English and volunteered at daycare. Curious about where you would live, after camp. (Hope N.)

The narratives above provide some very poignant details about the many lives that were disrupted and were to some extent, severed, as the result of the war. These accounts, although painful, are from the more “fortunate” victims who have made it to

safety to tell their stories. Undoubtedly, there are many others who died in their attempts to escape. It is important to point out that while it is evident that the communist regime caused unbearable living conditions from which people had to flee, Chomsky and Herman (1979) remind us that America is in no way innocent in all of this. In other words, according to Chomsky, the U.S (as well as the French) should be assigned responsibility for what happened to the “peoples of Indochina, victims of a long and agonizing U.S-sponsored cataclysm” (p. 59). Ultimately, it probably makes little difference who is at fault here, and in any case, the conflicting claims regarding guilt and responsibility are almost impossible to adjudicate. What matters is that regardless of one’s political orientation, it is evident that the Vietnamese community in the diaspora has its roots in a shared experience of trauma and dislocation.

Narratives on the War

It is often a useful exercise to structure one’s data by grouping responses into various categories or typologies. In the case of my subjects, for example, their “takes” on the war below as well as their views regarding the flag controversy in next chapter can be broadly conceived under several types of responses. Having said this, however, it is important to remember that reality often resists our best efforts to neatly categorize it. In grouping my subjects’ responses, my goal would have been to enhance clarity without doing violence to their experiences and modes of expression, which so often are nuanced and ephemeral in nature.

As I considered my data, it became evident to me that any attempt on my part to group my subjects' responses would in fact be counterproductive. I could have imposed arbitrary classifications on their responses, such as "subject A belongs in being ambivalent/skeptical category", or "subject B belongs in the exit category". However, I felt that the use of such terminology actually obscured more about their reality than it illuminated, and I wanted to respect my interviewees' responses as they presented them. It is in the nature of narrative research that a subject's response may not always be consistent within itself. A narrative can shift in the course of our interview, depending on many factors (e.g., issues associated with memories, comfort level of the subject, and circumstances and context of the interview). Thus I ultimately decided that I should not attempt to impose consistency on the sifting and fluid nature of my subjects' responses because for the most part they were, in fact, ambivalent and uncomfortable with categorization.

I asked a young male professor who was born a few months after his family's arrival in the U.S in 1975 for his view on the war. My subject showed that even though he did not live through the experiences of the war, there is a strong desire to know about the history that is so much a part of who he is, and at the same time, his response reveals inner conflict:

This has been the question that I have struggled with since I was a child...I think throughout a lot of my life, I was trying to figure out what went wrong or what happened. In college I took a VN War history class...I remember the professor said why do you want to do this. I said my grandfather was in the war. There was a book on the professor's shelf – I said this is my grandfather; this is part of me but I don't know what it's about. Do I think it was the right war? When I was in college I sort of took the middle way. I wish – I guess we could have seen what Kennedy did with a limited war rather escalation of U.S involvement – that it was a limited

involvement of advisors – whoever they were – in whatever capacity. I think it needed some involvement. Did it need a full-scale coordination and with political backlashes in the U.S, I think it could have been where things broke down. What do I think now? I don't know. I don't think a limited involvement was going to happen – sort of all or nothing proposition. (Duncan N.)

This interviewee's ambivalence is manifested in his constant questioning of his own responses. He asks himself "do I think it was the right war?" but can find no ready answer. He compares his present self with his past self, and even in so doing, cannot find evidence of certainty: "when I was in college I sort of took the middle way...what do I think now...I don't know. I don't think a limited involvement was going to happen".

My next interviewee is a young female professor who came to the U.S when she was 7 but her journey of escaping the country began when she was 5 years old. Her parents were separated and did not have any contact for 9 months when her father left for the U.S in 1975. After several failed attempts, mother and daughter made it to the refugee camp in Malaysia, and finally the family was reunited in the U.S in 1980. I asked for her view of the war and again, she expressed a great deal of ambivalence when it comes to showing support for the war and the U.S role in it on the one hand, and the tendency to be against it on the other hand;

I'm really conflicted because I come from an intellectual tradition (Asian American Studies) that has a very interesting perspective on the war in Vietnam, and that is it became a racist war – that the enemy became every Vietnamese person there is, and that Americans had this privilege of killing anybody who was Vietnamese, not knowing who the enemy is. And that was for the survivors and sort of the higher cost of the war. And so from that tradition, one can conclude that American involvement was a mistake in some sense because it elevated the war into a racist war.

My parents' perspective is American's presence was really important - and then my understanding of it is also American benefits from their presence in Vietnam. There was a whole industry of commercial ventures in Vietnam by American enterprises. So it's not just military presence but there was also corporations that were in Vietnam, and so it was American imperialism at its finest in this nation that

was being torn apart politically by multiple interests including the French and the U.S, and the National Liberation front. So there were all things that were going on that is highly contested, and Ho Chi Minh was really smart in articulating this idea that we needed to be liberated from colonialism. (Niah L.)

To further complicate this matter, the Vietnamese diaspora community also exerts a considerable amount of pressure on its members, particularly those who hold some kind of a “public” role, to conform to the community politics when it comes to homeland issues. Vietnamese intellectuals are often expected to act as “representatives” of the community whenever they carry out their role, whether it is in the public sphere or in a private intellectual creative work. Some of my subjects experienced this conflict and their reactions to it will be elaborated later in this thesis. The family is also another big source of conflict. During the war, many families had members fighting on both sides of the conflict, which caused deep divisions that quite often cannot be healed or erased:

It is difficult because my parents came when they were really young. I think they were more economic refugees than political refugees, and I did not grow up in a household with strong anti-communist or anti-war, and I think that my parents thought the war was bad and they thought that it should not happen. I think I grew up in a household where my dad was really anti-American colonialism and very critical of the U.S intervention and what that meant – but also was very critical of the limits of communism. More recently, I have gotten a lot of email from the [pro]-war (read: anti-communist) people, calling me a communist sympathizer, and saying that the kind of research that I am doing promotes communism and that kind of stuff. And actually the emails were really hard to receive from the Vietnamese American community in the U.S because they do not actually know the work that I am doing. And then in Vietnam... people always ask how do I feel about the war and what is my stance – that is also hard because I think that in Vietnam, most people had forgotten about it and in the U.S, (Vietnamese) people still hold on to it.

When the war happened, my dad’s side of the family was divided, some were on the side of the South and some fought on the side of the North, and they had not been reunited for almost 60 years. When I went back to do research, my parents wanted me to have some family connection so we met my family in the North. They work for the government, and the kind of conversation that my parents can have around politics and religion is not the same conversation that I can – and I think it is the generational difference; and my family in Hanoi is very anti-colonialism and I

understand that and I can sympathize a lot with that, but at the same time I had the luxury of being born in the U.S. I did not grow up during the war. My parents fled, and so I feel like I am very in the middle of this issue. (Kira H.)

Kira's frustration is evident. She has been experiencing pressure to conform to the political view which is dominant in the community, while at the same time recognizing that it may offer a one-sided interpretation of the situation. She has been unjustly labeled as a "communist sympathizer" – which can be very damaging to the individual, and in many ways functions as a mechanism of control. In addition, this subject had the added problem of coming from a politically divided family, which further exacerbates her sense of doubt and loss of control over the situation.

My next interviewee's remarks indicate that his sense of ambivalence regarding the war has increased over the years:

Having lived the first ten years of my life in Southern Viet Nam during the war, I was practically trained to support the American involvement in Viet Nam. The American's help in the 1975 exodus and our emigration to the U.S.A. further solidified my support for their involvement at that time. I have read a number of books about the Viet Nam war the past three decades or so, which prompted me to try to understand the different points of view from all who were involved. Intellectually, my opinion now is "I don't know" with regards to my support for the American's involvement. Both the South and the North exhibited "Good, Bad, and Ugly" behaviors during the war. Personally, my opinion is "three million or so people died so that I can have this good life in America." I wouldn't be living here if the Americans were not involved in Viet Nam. Who knows whom I'd become if I were to grow up in Viet Nam. The only certainty is that my Vietnamese would be a lot better. (Hal N.)

Again, uncertainty is the overriding theme here. This participant, like the previous one, cannot be sure of anything at all, except that in his view, none of the participants can claim any moral high ground. As he puts it, the only thing he can be sure of is that if he had stayed in Vietnam, "my Vietnamese would be a lot better". One's view can change overtime depending on a variety of factors. For Mallory P., taking a trip back to the

homeland became a major turning point for her in terms of helping to shape her worldview and consequently how she came to understand herself:

The way I feel about it changed over time. My early exposure to it was through the Hollywood movies, very black and white - mostly from the American point of view: Vietnamese were the bad guys you know. And then the narrative or the way it is talked about in the Vietnamese community was all you know: communists are evil. It was very black and white, pro-American. But then I went back to VN with my Mom the first time and she told me stories about her experiences during the war when Hanoi was being bombed. She wasn't political about it - it was just her experience...she remembered seeing this bridge that was commandeered by the American soldiers and one boy who was mentally ill tried to run across the bridge... he had his head blown off, and she saw that. She saw his head being blown off, and his body kept running – muscle memory – so his head kept running for a few more feet.

So I heard these stories...I've never heard these stories – of course in the war that happens right, but you never think about it until someone tells you...So it opened my eyes to another side of the war, and then I started to question like why did...you know, what did really happened; what was it all about; why were they even there right. So in my 10 months in VN I learned a little more about the war from the Vietnamese point of view... I'm very sensitive to black and white – I don't appreciate that, I appreciate the subtle shades of grey. My uncle (an artist) was giving a point of view, but there were subtleties to it, he taught me, he exposed me to short stories that were subtly critical of the government, but they had to do it through metaphors, because you can't be openly critical of the government, so artists found ways.

Mallory's remark is especially revelatory and interesting because she refers to a change in thinking – a discomfort with the moral certainty embodied in that which is “black and white”, and a shift to the moral ambiguity of “shades of grey”. As I indicated earlier, this may be emblematic of a rejection of traditional Confucianist thought and its emphasis on obedience, conformity, and the avoidance of introspection and critique. However there is always a price to be paid when one engages in independent thought and action. As Helen Rose Fuchs-Ebaugh pointed out in her study “Leaving the Convent: the Process of Role Exit and Self-Transformation”(1984), one can gain considerable emotional security as a member of a rigidly structured group, but in order to gain such advantages, it is necessary

to almost obliterate the self. The conflict between structure and agency always looms large and it is one which all of us have to negotiate. It seems that this was especially relevant (and painful) for my Vietnamese-American/Canadian subjects.

Most of my interviewees expressed strong opinions against America's role in the war and feel that the significance of the local conflict has been exaggerated because of such interference. One subject asserts: "the VN War was a tragedy that basically involved a civil conflict - that got exaggerated. The war became much bloodier and went on much longer because the U.S, Soviet Union, and China got involved. I think the two sides became more intransigent... because they had that extra support (Ishmael S.). Even with the realization that South Vietnam would eventually lose the war, my next interviewee, a young female professor in history whose research interest is in U.S foreign relations with a focus on Southeast Asia in the Cold War era, felt that it still would be "preferable" to what happened with American involvement:

I think U.S intervention was wrong. I think it exacerbated a very long and complex situation and a complex war that was already taking place in the country, and all it did was exacerbate it and made it bloodier and more violent. I say that knowing full well that the side at least my father was on would have lost earlier on, but I think that it's still preferable to what had happened, which was a protracted war where millions of Vietnamese died instead of hundreds of thousands had it remained a local war. So I think American intervention was devastating. (Hannah N.)

The remarks of my Ishmael and Hannah are consistent with the civil war perspective to some extent, but at the same time they point to further consequences of the involvement of powerful external players.

Thus not only do my interviewees express doubt about American involvement in VN, they also express anti-war sentiment in general. Their view of the war is both critical and

shot through with the recognition that such conflicts are inevitably complex. This is especially true with respect to their guarded and sometimes cynical view of America's role in Vietnam, which was apparently at variance with its stated intentions. General William Westmoreland's cavalier attitude towards the Vietnamese people - which probably goes further than mere colonialism – in fact, it represents brutality and racism - is illustrated in an infamous statement from General Westmoreland: “The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does a Westerner... We value life and human dignity. They don't care about life and human dignity” (from the 1974 Oscar-winning documentary “Hearts and Minds”).

It should be mentioned, however, that proponents of the war would raise concerns over this above statement being taken out of context. Westmoreland's supporters would argue this statement stemmed from his criticism about the conduct of the North Vietnamese military leader, General Vo Nguyen Giap. Giap was criticized for his blatant disregard for human lives and therefore, was willing to put his men in harm's way. This is evident in his famous quote: “Every minute, hundreds of thousands of people die on this earth, the life of hundred, a thousand, ten of thousands of human beings, even our compatriots” (cited in Karnow, 1983, p. 18). The war against the Americans, Giap further stated, would go on for “ten, fifteen, twenty, fifty years, regardless of cost, until ‘final victory’” (Ibid.). Westmoreland never seemed to fully grasp the mindset of Giap. From the perspective of a general himself, Westmoreland saw that to preserve one's forces would be the primary goal for any military leader - to do otherwise would be unthinkable and such a leader would not be able to last at all: “Any American commander

who took the same vast losses as General Giap would have been sacked overnight” (Ibid.). Regardless of the war strategy employed by the Vietnamese military leader (i.e., his willingness to sustain the losses of the lives in order to achieve the final objective), in the eyes of the world, General Giap is hailed as a heroic revolutionary figure, one of the most important military commanders of the 20th century, the “Red Napoleon” - who ousted military powerhouses, including the U.S and France. While acknowledging the important contribution of Vo Nguyen Giap, one must ask the question: if we accord such reverence to the general, are we, in effect, also condoning his “win at any cost” conduct in war?

In any case, the assumption that America would overpower an inferior Vietnam and that life is “cheap” in the East, in turn led to the bombings and killings of Vietnamese without conscience by the West⁷². One might concede that it is understandable, although regrettable, for a high-ranking military official to rationalize the killing of an “enemy” in this manner. In order to play his role, General Westmoreland and others in the same position have to ensure that their psychological boundaries remain intact and impermeable. They cannot afford to experience ambivalence. Many of my subjects, on the other hand, see the situation very differently:

As a principle, I am against any war because of the suffering and damages that they cause. With the Vietnam War I feel that it is a complex issue. I am against the idea that the U.S interferes with other nations’ affair, especially when it is political. In particular, I am against the U.S giving the go ahead to assassinate the South Vietnamese President and in a way, tried to have the regime changed. I am O.K with the U.S going to war for humanitarian purposes and not to take away resources from

⁷²“The Westmoreland Mindset” by Derrick Z. Jackson, from The New York Times “*Opinion*”, Friday, July 22, 2005.

other countries, but this can be difficult to distinguish for the general public. (Nehole T.)

If I were living in the States at the time, I don't think I'd support it. American involvement in VN had nothing to do with VN. It had to do with America. I'm a pacifist; I don't believe in war as a viable means of resolving conflict between nations of people. I think it's one of those barbaric and senseless acts that we still engage in. So I think that in that way, it is where it ends for me – and of course what I said to you earlier about going back to VN and seeing how it did not change anything – that reinforced my beliefs even more. (Moreen T.)

As mentioned above, due to the country's long history of oppression, Vietnamese were weary of foreign presence and naturally many became strongly opposed to American involvement. Even though Vietnam is, for the most part, a homogenous society in terms of ethnicity⁷³, there are distinctive regional features in terms of culture, and differences in economic and social development. Even today, the basic mode of production in Vietnam is agricultural. However, the South has been blessed with land that is well suited to growing the staple crop – that is, rice. The North and Central regions, on the other hand, have not been as fortunate. Their land is much less fertile, the weather conditions are harsh, and these regions are prone to natural disasters. Even so, central Vietnam is famous for its storied past. The ancient city of Hue, in particular, is rich in culture and customs, largely because it was the imperial city during Vietnam's feudal era. Thus, the people of Hue are known to take great pride in themselves and their traditions. Such differences have been (and continue to be) a major source of tension, which exacerbated the internal divisions among the Vietnamese. During the war, the presence of the Americans worsened the situation. In fact, many of my subjects argued

⁷³ About 90% of the population of Vietnam is ethnic Vietnamese. Other ethnic minorities include the Chinese, the Khmer, and the Cham.

that with or without the Americans, the outcome would have been the same - that is an independent Vietnam. In that sense, military intervention and widespread loss of life achieved nothing:

My view has not changed...the American involvement was wrong...the U.S should not have gone in...much of the problems that happened can be laid at the feet of the U.S and the French basically in terms of their colonial and interventionist policies. But what did change I think, was that I got a fuller and more complex understanding of the Vietnamese side of things.

I think my growing up experiences were important for me. I grew up in San Jose in the 80's and I had a lot of resentment and empathy towards the South Vietnamese community because I empathize with the people. I understand emotionally how they feel and why they were traumatized, their various resentments and their understanding of history. At the same time, I disagree with them politically. I think that the South Vietnamese regime was a mistake to begin with, and that there's no easy answer, no easy solution to this. I mean the people really lost out with the Vietnamese. We were victims of this colonial history – that there was no way out of this situation except tragically – people suffered in one way or another, no matter how the situation resolved itself.

I went to Vietnam and I think throughout the readings that I did and my conversations with Vietnamese people and my being in the U.S, I got a fuller sense of how the different sides see the issue, and I got a better sense of how complex the history was and how all the nuances or the kinds of choices that the actors made were. But it didn't change my sense that in the end, the actual outcome should have been this way, which is an independent Vietnam. Basically I think Communist Vietnam really screwed things up in a lot of ways and that there are a lot of things that are wrong. But it's the Vietnamese that should run the show and that's the way it should be. We didn't need to go through this terrible war instigated by the U.S in order for us to reach that situation. (Victor N.)

The narratives above are emblematic of the way many of my interviewees feel about the war. For the most part they feel torn between giving their support to the U.S and showing their opposition to it. On the one hand they and their families risked their lives and everything they had to come to the U.S - a country that supported them in their defense against communist aggression. On the other hand, although they recognize the debt they owe to the U.S in this respect, it does not follow that their support for the war

will be unconditional. Their “questioning” of the war, I would contend, is due in large part to their exposure to the European/Western intellectual tradition, which promotes critical thinking and encourages intellectual freedom⁷⁴ and creativity (Lipset & Basu, 1976). Their tendency to challenge the status quo is to be expected because this is an activity in which intellectuals frequently engage. As Lipset and Basu (1976) assert, “intellectual criticism may be ‘leftist’ or ‘rightist’, but intellectuals are rarely defenders of the status quo”(p. 115). This critical attitude is demonstrated in the following narratives:

For me it’s about the question of how they should have conducted themselves when they were in Vietnam and the aftermath of the war, because for us, and in the Vietnamese community too, there’s a huge sense of refugee debt, of gratitude towards the U.S. It’s like thank you America for everything - for giving me a better life; and then with the assumption that had I stayed in VN, I would have been poor, desolate – I would have had nothing. That’s the mentality of a lot of the Vietnamese refugees that I’m meeting, but that’s not the case.

Yeah my family was poor and we had nothing in Vietnam, but had we stayed in Vietnam and not had our lives disrupted, that would have been our reality – we wouldn’t have known anything else. So I don’t think that my life would’ve been so much worse; I don’t think that’s the case. I think we just have a different life. And I have interviewed so many people who had a perfect, happy family in Vietnam until their lives were disrupted by the war, until their families were fractured, until they left and ended up with nothing and had to rebuild. So to me, inevitably the war happened and then the U.S got involved, and so my issue is how the U.S conducted in VN and how they choose to narrate that story. (Therese D.)

This respondent shows a keen awareness of what Weber calls the “paradox of consequences”⁷⁵ - that is, the realization that even if we assume actions are undertaken with the best will in the world, there is no way to predict the outcome. We will never know what might have been, or what life we would have had under different circumstances. To argue then, that the U.S “saved” the Vietnamese from a terrible fate is to ignore the fact that the future, for all of us, is open-ended - and Weber would recognize

⁷⁴ I use this term with hesitation as we all know “intellectual freedom” is a debatable concept; however we can also agree that intellectuals in the west have greater freedom to do their work than those in other places.

⁷⁵ From Weber’s *Politics as a Vocation*

this too. Thus the abovementioned subject reminds us that those who came to America may not necessarily have had a *better* life, they have simply had a *different* life. To assume that life in America is, by definition, superior to life in post- 1975 VN is central to the mindset of most of the diaspora Vietnamese who are generally anti-communist. But again, this thoughtful and reflective subject recognizes the inadequacy of such a viewpoint.

My female interviewee below appears more certain of her political ground, but as we have seen, that is a minority view, as far as Vietnamese intellectuals in the diaspora are concerned:

I do not know. How can we characterize American involvement now? I think it's minimal and superficial. Anything that the U.S government pays for in Vietnam is designed to make the U.S appear benevolent to the wider world, or to pave the way to make doing business there easier. I am against such imperialism. I guess I do NOT support the American involvement in Vietnam. (Lanya G.)

As the narratives above illustrate, the feeling of ambivalence is sometimes intertwined with a sense of deep-seated anger at their situation, which they often attribute to the impact of the war. However, it is also necessary to ask: to what extent is the war really responsible for this sense of “differentness” or separation from their families and community? Is it possible that the war serves as a surrogate for the tremendous difficulties in starting a new life and determining how to function effectively in a completely new society? Is this a form of “attribution” as has been elaborated by theorists such as Harold Kelly⁷⁶ and Bernard Weiner⁷⁷. Attribution theorists contend that individuals tend to attribute their successes to internal factors and “failures” to external ones in an effort to project a positive self-concept. In other words, when things

⁷⁶ Kelly, H. H. (1967). Attribution Theory in Social Psychology. In D. Levine (Ed.). Nebraska Symposium on Motivation (Vol. 15, pp. 129-238). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

⁷⁷ Weiner, B. (1974). Achievement Motivation and Attribution Theory. Morristown, N.J.: General Learning Press.

go wrong, we attempt to salvage our egos by avoiding responsibility for the results of our actions and fall back on the “it’s not me, it’s out there” narrative. While this form of “denial” serves to comfort one’s ego, at the same time it can take away one’s sense of responsibility for one’s actions, and thus might also obscure the need for self-change.

So far I have presented some of the narratives from my “younger” interviewees, who came to North America either when they were young or in some cases, were born here. This means that these individuals would not have had the same connection and experience with events in the past as their elders. Additionally, it is likely that they have received most of their education, if not all, here in Western institutions. For these reasons, I anticipated that older interviewees would be more oriented toward conservatism and that their perspective on the war would be more “in-tune” with the dominant view in the community. However, this was not the case.

My next interviewee is a professor in Economics who came to the U.S for his studies in the 60’s. He expressed his political views without hesitation when he said: “I am what you call a leftist. I participated in the antiwar movement” (Dustin T.). Dustin’s political stance seems to follow Neil Gross’ study on the social and political views of American professors⁷⁸. According to Gross’ findings, in the field of economics, the distribution of Democrats is slightly more (34.3) than Republicans (28.6) - the remainder of the distribution (37.1) falls in the ‘Independent’ category.

Similarly, another older subject who is a professor of physics at a Canadian university also showed his strong opposition to the war in Vietnam. As he explained:

⁷⁸ The Social and Political Views of American Professors, by Neil Gross and Solon Simmons; Working Paper, September 24, 2007.

I am against this and feel angry about the American involvement, because the war dragged on and I did not think it would end. America should not have gotten involved the way they did and should have acted differently with Vietnam – perhaps America should have favored the recognition of Vietnam in the time of Ho Chi Minh. Both the French and the Americans were there for their own interests and forget the values for the Vietnamese – forget what it means for the Vietnamese. I did not favor the 500 thousand troops in Vietnam and I did not favor the massive bombardment of North Vietnam. I think it was too strong of an involvement in Vietnam’s affair and finally, South Vietnam became a puppet regime of the American. There was a lot of corruption in South Vietnamese government. (Val T.)

Val’s view on the war is consistent with the findings in M. Reza Nakhaie and Robert Brym’s (1999) study on the political attitudes of Canadian professors. According to Nakhaie and Brym, “professors in the humanities, arts, social sciences, education, and the natural sciences are significantly more liberal than those in business and engineering” (p. 341).

The accounts above illustrate the complexity involved in attempting to understand and articulate one’s own point of view on the war. Even so, the implicit message seems to be that “it is time to turn the page and move on”, and there is the hope that it is possible to do so. At the same time these remarks also suggest that the need to transcend the interviewees’ sense of “victimhood” is almost a repudiation of their community. For the Vietnamese community in particular, this sense of victimhood is largely embedded in anti-Communist discourse - something that predominates in much of the community’s socio-political and cultural life, and is used as an important identity marker for its members. This anti-communist identity is especially relevant for Vietnamese living in America because their conditions of acceptance by the U.S were based primarily on their ability to prove that they “suffered severe reprisals from the communist government” (Bloemraad, 2006, p. 215). This interviewee’s observations illustrate the conflict vividly:

I was born in 1976, so I was born after the war. I lived through a lot of this history being a boat refugee, so it has a very central and analytical place in my mind. And especially for someone who grew up from the South in the U.S, really away from the Vietnamese community, so it has always been an interesting thing for me. But I think my own conception, of course as a sociologist and one who is very invested in understanding history of colonialism and critiquing empire and critiquing sort of the world's various colonial powers in trying to overtake developing countries. I am very invested in thinking about those issues and thinking about them in complicated ways and critical ways – critique why and how colonial power had taken place; how and why the right to self-determination for many countries was not established or achieved because of interference of colonial powers - so I'm very critical of that.

A few years ago, I had a friend...he wrote an interesting article...making the point that not all overseas Vietnamese constantly fixate on this anti-Communist view...and I think many of us basically agree that the time has come for us to, while being critical of this history and never forget this history, also to kind of move forward productively to think about ways that perhaps anti-communist discourses and practices and protests are sometimes unproductive.

So that was kind of the perspective and I kind of feel that and may be there's occasions of course and even now when I go to VN where I do feel this colonial past is so dangerous and I'm very critical of it. Then there are times when I feel that anti-Communist discourse is out of hand. I think also that this global and transnational period do have a large number of Vietnamese nationals – that is people living in VN who go away to get educated, who do have progressive ideas, who are becoming liberated, who are going back to make changes – while at the same time, we cannot ignore the reality that the kind of political corruption and political regime does still exist because of the Communist regime. But I think it's much more than an either or situation. I think many people see VN either as a Communist regime or not...it's much more complicated than that – it's not either or. (Hubert T.)

It is very difficult to be completely free from the past, to be sure, and in fact, it is important to “never forget this history” as the interviewee above noted. There is the need, therefore, to embrace one's history. But at the same time embracing such a history does not necessarily mean that one should be in a constant state of mourning for an irretrievable past – an unfinished war - which continues to divide a people, and a longing for the “what was”, “what could” or “should have been”. In other words, a home that is lost forever. Indeed the civil conflict in Vietnam was very complicated and one that

needs to be understood within the larger socio-political context of the world at the time.

My next respondent offers some insightful comments on the complexity of the conflict:

My thought is that the war in Vietnam is so complicated. I do think that the communists were very successful in propaganda. They were extremely good at that, so they were able to present themselves as the sort of noble peasant who are sort of successive to people like Tran Hung Dao, Hai Ba Trung, and Ngo Quyen who fought the Chinese and now they are equivalent of Tran Hung Dao, fighting American imperialist (sic). So they were able to convince themselves, the other northerners, that the South were the traitors, who had collaborated with the American imperialist & therefore it is the nationalist duty of the North, of the youngster of the North, to go and liberate the South, and they blocked out all the avenues that would disprove that. So you have youngsters coming to the South in 1975, they were just completely in awe because it didn't look like a place that needed liberation. And you know we were told that you guys were starving and that there's blood showing on the street.... So they didn't know what that meant.

The South on the other hand, to my mind, was very naïve and was never really quite able to present their fight as the fight against the tyranny of communism. Communism is very good – anybody who has the heart & an idealist is drawn to the notion that all people are equal, there should be no poverty – it is unjust when the land is owned by the minority of the population while the majority is starving, so you must redistribute the land. So the idea of Communism sounds very romantic and appealing. The South was never able to show communism as inherently tyrannical and as inherently anti-freedom.

At the same time you have to remember that this was the 60's. What we had was the situation where, not just Vietnam but many countries in the world were pulled in by the tide of anti-colonialism and colonialism and third world liberation, and the North was able to make themselves seem like – of course if you're against injustices, if you're against colonialism, if you're against European exploitation, of course you have to follow Ho Chi Minh. And only the losers who are the traitors would follow the South Government side, and it's very hard to fight against that historical tide. Countries like Burma and India were fighting off the yoke of colonialism and they adopted the kind of communist idealism – so Vietnam was part of that. And Ho Chi Minh was presented as Bac Ho who loves children – what about all the historical facts where he eliminated all the nationalists who were not communist? To me what he did was he created a false appearance of a very large umbrella: we had to get rid of the French and we're all Vietnamese together - we're going to be reunited, to get rid of the French. All the nationalists who were not Communist would join him, but the moment they joined him, he eradicated them and then he consolidated the nationalist movement under the control of the Communist Party. So it's a very, very authoritarian and tyrannical party. ((Laurence C.)

On the other hand, Lenise N., a news anchorperson from the western part of U.S, who came to America in 1975 when she was 5 years old, had a different view about the American involvement in the Vietnam conflict. Her account is filled with an air of irony. Vietnam, as a country, fought against and defeated American imperialism – yet Vietnamese diaspora is easily seduced by the good life that America offers:

Well if I didn't support it I wouldn't be where I am now. Actually the involvement came before I was even born, so supporting it doesn't make sense because it's already passed. Am I grateful for it? Of course I am grateful for it. If it wasn't for the American involvement, I wouldn't be where I am now; and I've been back to VN – I've seen the situation that people are dealing with back there. I wouldn't be fortunate and living the life I live now if it wasn't for the American government involvement. There were mistakes made. I probably don't know enough about the history and the politics of *our* (my own emphasis) two countries. I've heard my dad talked about it. I've met a lot of war veterans. I am grateful for it because I am where I am today because of that. Had the Americans handled it differently – would they have won? Maybe – and if they did, where would I be today? I have no idea. I probably wouldn't be here. Since we can't change the past, all we can do is concentrate on what we have today and move forward so that we don't make the same mistakes.

Lenise's use of the word "our" to refer to the U.S and Vietnam was intriguing to me and something that stood out from the accounts of my other interviewees. Her conception of "home" is a good indication of her sense of dual belonging – showing a strong attachment to both: country of origin and country of settlement. While it is understandable that first generation adult refugees rarely detached themselves from the memories and ties with the homeland, even though they might invoke painful feelings – it is quite another issue for their children: those belonging to the 1.5 and second generations who lack the memories and homeland connections of their parents.

Ruben G. Rumbault (2002) dealt this question of "attachment" in his study of children of first generation refugees and immigrants and found that "the level of

transnational attachments...is quite small” and that for many, “there appears no phantom pain, over a homeland that was never lost to them in the first place”(pp. 89-91). Despite this low level of attachment, the interviewee’s narrative above still conveys this sense of dual belonging. Being a journalist and an anchorperson, which is very much a “public” role, and being close to the largest Vietnamese community in Southern California, I believe provides her with the opportunities to form and sustain those “dual” connections.

Kara Somerville (2008) had pointed this out in her study of transnational belonging and identity construction where she found that second generation youth “negotiates identities within a social space that includes flows from their parents’ country of origin and country of settlement (p. 23). Further, my interviewee’s narrative also indicates a kind of “refugee guilt” that scholars such as Yen Le Espiritu (2006) has discussed in her work – that is the guilt feeling of being here and the deep sense of gratitude and indebtedness refugees feel they owe towards their adopted countries. According to Espiritu, this is a simplistic and uncritical view of history. By engaging in this kind of narrative, Vietnamese refugees help to legitimize the role of America in the war in that it “rescues the Vietnam War for Americans” and also perpetuates what Espiritu calls the “we-win-even-when-we-lose” syndrome of America that has “energized and emboldened” the U.S militarism (p. 330).

Theodore H., another journalist/columnist from Canada and who is also an active member in the Vietnamese community has a somewhat more positive view of the U.S role in the conflict, which he shared: “I do not support how the American strategy was executed, but I understand that their intentions were in the right place. I believe they have

since learned from their mistakes during the Middle East campaign”. I asked how his life would be different had the war never taken place and his reply was: “I would either be dirt poor or I would be extremely rich and very famous. There would be no in-betweens”. Unlike most of my “academic” interviewees who tend to stand more to the left of the political spectrum, T. Huynh identifies himself as “slightly conservative to moderate” when it comes to politics. This difference in political attitude does not come as a surprise because studies, such as the one conducted by of Neil Gross (Fosse & Gross, 2012) on professorial politics, have found that professors tend to be more liberal and hold more progressive views than individuals in other professions. Another interviewee, a social activist, journalist, and filmmaker from Canada expressed his view about the war this way:

I would say apart from the general history background, I think those historical events have different meanings to different people. So as a young person who grew up in Toronto Canada and not really having much relation to that, other than just hearing stories from my grandma and my dad - you know they tell me that they had homes and businesses and the communist took over this and that. So depends on... I think you get a lot of your views from your parents. If they hate the communist with a passion, you'll probably go out (even though you're not fully aware of the entire make up of the whole situation) and adopt what your parents feel. I think whatever your parents indoctrinate you with. I think as an activist, I'm really focusing on the immediate, what can I really do. I mean it's good to theorize and have discussions, but if you really can't change much, you know... I'd leave it to intellectuals, people in that field to handle that. (Patrick N.)

I found it was revelatory that all three of the above journalist respondents, either expressed their strong support of the war and the American involvement in it or they were not as resolute in showing their antiwar/anti-American sentiments as my interview subjects in academia. Perhaps one could argue that this might be connected to the issue of institutional freedom - or the lack thereof – where the media is concerned. One is not

free to express political opinions when carrying out the role of a journalist, since to do so would undermine the goal of objectivity. Lenise N., whose narrative was included earlier, recognized the importance of this issue, and as we will see in other remarks which will be included in chapter about ways to remember and commemorate the past, is well aware of the duality of her position. She recognizes that she is both American and Vietnamese, and both a journalist and a member of the Vietnamese diaspora community. She has taken a pragmatic approach to negotiating these sometimes these conflicting roles, and as we have seen, this pragmatism/realism is evident in the remarks of my other journalist subjects as well.

An older prominent leader of the Vietnamese community in Canada who came as a student in the early 1960's and was "forced" to permanently settle here as the result of communist take-over in 1975, was reluctant to express support for America's role in Vietnam, but explained that the country was still a lot better with American intervention:

In the context of the Cold War, Vietnam was important to prevent the domino effect. America had no choice when they saw how China and Russia were expanding. The Vietnamese are victims of foreign powers. When Kissinger secured the deal with China, America withdrew and never thought about Vietnamese people. Maybe they did but the interests of the U.S always come first. If Vietnam did not have the support of the U.S, then we would have fell to communism much earlier. At least we had 20 years of freedom – during which time Vietnam made advances in all areas. When the northerners came to the South, they saw how developed the South was. Some of them started to cry and felt sorry for Vietnamese in the South: all that was beautiful, all the developments... are lost or destroyed, and the people are put in jail. (Camden L.)

This interviewee's account, regardless of whether it is true or not, is a sobering reminder of how powerful historical memories can be. The fact that this subject remembers this particular aspect of history is especially relevance in terms of the importance of

commemoration. The work of theorists such as Rogers Brubaker and Maurice Halbwachs will be discussed in this context in the next chapter.

The Vietnam-American conflict, according to Tomes (1998), “triggered a series of public crises in relentless hammer-blow fashion, and American thought evolved rapidly and dynamically in response” (p. 7). Controversial questions such as the “initial causes and moral justification of the war”, and the “credibility of the American government” dominated the American cultural landscape, especially among intellectuals (Ibid.). If “idealism, moral exceptionalism, and a sense of mission run deep in American history” (p. 3), then they were shattered as a consequence of America’s contentious involvement in the war. If the Vietnamese intellectuals in my study showed that they are unsure of their position vis-à-vis the war (i.e., they are against it but sympathize with South Vietnamese side and the community), perhaps it is because they, like the rest of us, have been forced to confront the reality that everything – especially in the political realm, is ultimately perspectival.

As we have seen, my academic participants are profoundly ambivalent and conflicted. They often vacillate between several positions, which involve the understanding of Vietnam being victimized by the communist regime (anti-communist narrative), victimized by foreign powers (pro-communist narrative), and the problematic nature of both narratives (civil war narrative). At the same time their training as intellectuals increases their tendency to be skeptical and critical of any “received” version of “the truth”. The recognition that there is no one truth is deeply uncomfortable and disturbing. As we will see in later chapters on the flag controversy and identity issue, the

end result of such conflict is often the inability to choose *anything*. The accompanying sense of pain, loss, and bewilderment is palpable. How, then, do intellectuals navigate the ambiguity which is inherent in their position? There are several possible strategies available to them, each of which carry their own costs. These strategies will be discussed further in a later chapter.

CHAPTER 6

The Politics of Memory and Commemoration

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

- William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

As we have seen, the Vietnamese feel victimized by their own history, which is often a chronicle of oppression either on the part of French colonial power/American imperialism or more recently, the communist regime. In this next chapter I wish to explore the victim narrative embedded in the politics of memory and commemoration, that is, I want to examine the ways in which Vietnamese diaspora “celebrate” their past. There are many ways to carry out this act of remembrance, and as Durkheim reminds us, there are also many symbols that could be used to represent the collective memory⁷⁹. For the Vietnamese diaspora community in North America, the former flag of South Vietnam is arguably, the ultimate symbol for the community - one that epitomizes a shared history of victimhood, and at the same time, is seen as a beacon of hope, freedom, and democracy. The flag symbolizes, at least according to statements made by many community leaders⁸⁰, the longing for one’s homeland, which is felt by so many Vietnamese in the diaspora. But do all members of the community see the flag in this light? And what are the debates surrounding how this shared historical experience, that is, the war and issues associated with it, should be memorialized?

⁷⁹ For more in-depth discussion of Durkheim’s work, especially his two concepts: *collective conscience* and *collective representations*, please see: *The Division of Labour* (1893) and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912).

⁸⁰ See articles: “Santa Ana gives formal recognition to former South Vietnam banner” by Doug Irving/ *The Orange County Register*, Feb. 3, 2009; “Executive order gives yellow banner with three red stripes the state’s recognition” by Natalya Shulyakovskaya/ *The Orange County Register*, Aug. 6, 2006; “Official Vietnamese flag provokes protests, pain” by Tan Vinh, *Seattle Times*, Feb. 23, 2004

The Durkheimian tradition is useful for a better understanding of these questions. However, both his theoretical agenda and the broader diaspora literature tend to underplay internal conflicts and debates around sometimes contentious symbols. The Vietnamese flag controversy is a case in point. This powerful symbol supposedly acts as a unifying force, but often may actually be divisive.

Durkheim, of course, was deeply concerned with symbolism and commemoration. Nevertheless, as I have indicated, in empirical terms, it would be very difficult to find a group whose members are in agreement on important issues, such as commemoration, all the time. It may even be possible (following Simmel⁸¹) that such tensions could be generative rather than wholly destructive. As Lewis Coser reminds us in his discussion of Simmel's work, conflict may act as a "safety valve", allowing for "the release of hostilities which, were no such outlet provided, would sunder the relation between the antagonists"(Coser, 1956, p. 41).

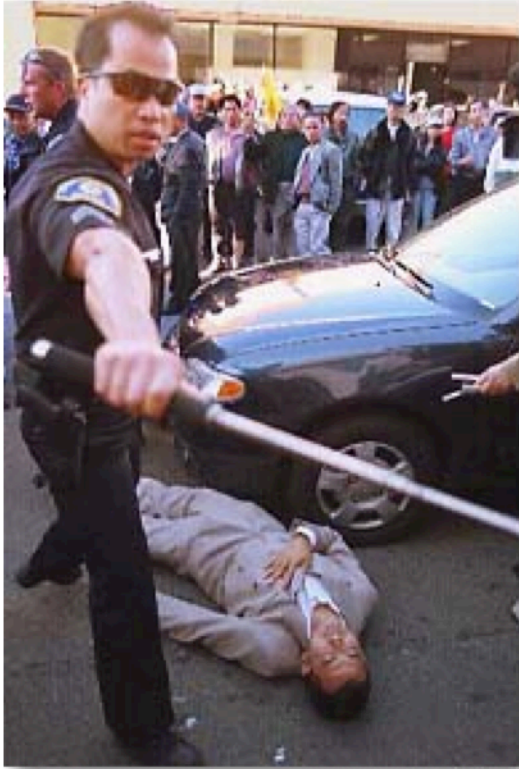
My concern in this chapter is to examine some of the ways in which the Vietnamese diaspora in North America remember the past and the symbols they use to represent this collective memory and their shared history of victimization. I then proceed to focus on the flag debate and investigate my interviewees' narratives regarding this almost "sacred" collective representation, and how their views can be understood within this larger debate about the politics of memory and commemoration.

The following stories are emblematic of the political schisms within the Vietnamese diaspora community and also of the powerful role that narratives play within the realm of

⁸¹ See for example, *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (pp. 409-424), and other selections by Simmel in Kurt H. Wolff, ed. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Glencoe: The Free Press.

politics and collective memory. As will be seen throughout this thesis, even though Vietnamese diaspora is diverse in terms of their social/political background and past experiences, they display some salient features of the “victim diaspora” that Robin Cohen has pointed out in his most influential work *Global Diaspora* (2008) - namely the idealization of the ancestral homeland, the commitment to its restoration, and a collective memory and myth about the homeland (p. 6). This chapter will address these issues by looking at flag debate in the Vietnamese diaspora in North American.

First Amendment vs. Memories of War



AP PHOTO

Figure 1. Picture of police helping Mr. Tran

In 1999, the Vietnamese diaspora community in Southern California staged what is considered to be one of the longest protests in U.S history. For fifty-four days and nights, the community demonstrated, held candlelight vigils, prayed, delivered speeches, and put up cultural performances. What started it all was a highly controversial act involving the owner of the store Hi-Tek Video, Tran Van Truong, who in January of that year, put up a poster of Ho Chi Minh and

the communist red flag on the wall of his shop. For the Vietnamese diaspora community, these images invoked some of the strongest and most raw emotions that they have toward the current regime and its leadership. In this part of the U.S (popularly called Little Saigon) which is known as the ultimate anti-communist stronghold, Ho chi Minh is not regarded as a hero (as he is in Vietnam) but is seen as “more an amalgam of Genghis Khan, Chairman Mao, and Pol Pot”⁸². In fact, protesters held up placards that read “Ho Chi Minh = Hitler”.

⁸² From *The Economist*: “America’s Vietnamese Tet Offensive”, February 18, 1999/ Los Angeles/ From the print edition

Mr. Tran was initially ordered to take down this display by the Orange County judge, but later won his case in a higher court - arguing that his action was protected under the First Amendment and that he was merely exercising his rights to free speech and expression. More protests ensued and violence broke out where protesters threw burning cigarettes and slapped Mr. Tran (as shown in the picture above). One protester cited: “We forgot about the communists, then he put up his flag and I remember my nightmare, I remember how my father died”⁸³. For Stuart Parker, a lawyer representing the protesters, the display of Mr. Tran “was not protected because the flag and the poster were ‘fighting words’ for a people still haunted by the memories of a country many of them fled when the war ended in 1975”. In the end, even though Mr. Tran won the court battle, it was not seen as “a victory of free speech” but “a victory of inflaming free speech”, according to the lawyer.

Red vs. Yellow: Vietnamese Swastika?



Figure 2. Artwork by Brian Doan

In 2009 VAALA (Vietnamese American Arts & Letter Association) in Southern California organized an art exhibit called *F.O.B. II: Art Speaks* (F.O.B. stands for Fresh off the Boat). This exhibit was meant to showcase the work of Vietnamese visual and performance artists.

⁸³ Article taken from the New York Times, February 11, 1999.

Many of artworks included in this exhibit were controversial, but one in particular evoked an especially strong reaction. This was a photo by Brian Doan depicted a young Vietnamese woman standing next to a representation of Ho Chi Minh, the iconic North Vietnamese communist leader. The woman's attire was especially inflammatory from the point of view of many in the community. She was shown wearing a red tank top with a yellow star in the middle, which was obviously meant to represent the flag of the Communist Party. Reaction against this piece of art was so strong that Santa Ana city officials closed the exhibit. However one protester named Ly Tong still managed to smear red paint over the photo.

In his account of the deep divisions within the community that were laid bare by this exhibit, Montague Hung⁸⁴ points out that this type of apparently irrational fervor may be incomprehensible to most outsiders. However, he asks the reader to imagine how members of the Jewish community in America would react to a photo of a young Jewish woman standing next to a statue of Hitler and wearing a shirt emblazoned with a swastika. For many Vietnamese in the diaspora, the red flag may be seen as their swastika.

Thus, because the identity of some the Vietnamese in the diaspora is so closely bound up with the flag, it becomes impossible for them to view this piece as a social commentary, satire, or simply an attempt to begin a conversation. Any cultural product may be viewed from a multiplicity of perspectives. In this case, one might ask: Is this photo meant to represent oppression and human rights abuses on the part of the

⁸⁴ From *Hardboiled* (2009), a student-run newsmagazine at Berkeley, California. The article "the chilling ghost of April's past" by Montague Hung appeared in issue 12.4, p. 3.

communist regime? Is it meant to symbolize the death of one's country, the death of identity? Has this young woman perhaps internalized the identity bestowed on her by her oppressor? Or, in wearing the symbol, has she somehow demonstrated her ability to transcend it, to say: "I am not what you make of me, I am not what you think of me"? Again such questions are provocative and troubling, but as I have indicated, to the extent that one's identity is bound up in a particular cultural symbol, it becomes more and more difficult to see such an exhibit as anything but an insult.

Hung points out that although such an extreme position, especially on the part of older Vietnamese in the diaspora is understandable, it actually results in the stifling of diverse voices, and ironically undermines the goal of freedom, which has been sacred to the Vietnamese who fled their homeland. Tram Le, one of the curators of the exhibit explained "I felt the community was on this slippery slope, that we were not progressing toward having open dialogue and being more tolerant of different political viewpoints"⁸⁵. In the same L.A Times article, Lan Duong, a co-curator says: "This piece uses the communist flag but isn't celebratory of communism. The communist flag isn't used just as a political symbol, but of what is going on in Vietnam and the kinds of modes of consumption that mark youth culture".

The photographer himself, Brian Doan, has been forced to repeatedly deny accusations of being a communist. He offers the following interpretation of his own photo: "She lives in a communist country, but look at her. She's looking away dreaming. She wants to escape Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh is next to her, but communism is not (sic) in

⁸⁵ Direct quotation from the article cited in footnote #3

her. She wants to dream of other things. Like Tram Le, who pointed out that the attempt to silence other voices is, by definition, oppressive. Doan asserts that he is also entitled to express himself, even if certain members in the community find this offensive. This leads us to the other side of the issue. It is true that freedom of speech must be respected, but according to Hung, it is necessary to approach this with sensitivity and empathy as well.

Hung expresses the dilemma in this way:

The Vietnamese American's intense opposition to the photo is justified. The artwork, whether intentionally or not, is insensitive to the traumatic historical experiences of the community. Most Vietnamese American fled Vietnam to escape the iron fist of the VCP⁸⁶. The party was violently oppressive and ruthlessly eliminated individual freedoms such as the right to free expression. During the war, in addition to the deaths of more than 400,000 South Vietnamese military personnel, the VCP executed as many as 3 million civilians on their way to Saigon, according to the Centre For Vietnam Studies. After the fall of Saigon, many first generation Vietnamese Americans became prisoners of war who were tortured and witnesses to the deaths of fellow comrades in the VCP's reeducation camp. (p.3)

⁸⁶ Vietnamese Communist Party

Between Past and Present

It is evident that for the Vietnamese, the flag debate is no trivial matter. In fact it is, and has been, a matter of life and death. This is particularly so for those belonging to the first wave of refugees and those who had to endure the sufferings under communist rule. Due to their conditions of leaving Vietnam and having to start a new life in the host country, the first wavers were of course concerned with their survival, with how to negotiate life in a place that must have seemed incomprehensible to them. They were forced to do this for the most part, alone, with almost no community support, because there had been no pre-existing community structure. This shock to the psyche on both the collective and the individual levels can only be dealt with by perceiving one's situation as temporary. Even a temporary readjustment is difficult to be sure, but if one can say, "this is very hard but it is not real - our real life is back home and someday we will return", then the pain is lessened somewhat. Thus for many, the assumption was that their stay was only temporary and they would soon go back once the war was over.

In a conversation with a family member who was able to leave on the eve of the Fall of Saigon due to his military connection with the former South Vietnamese Army, it was revealed that the most shocking realization for him at the time was the knowledge that his stay in the U.S was permanent, that going back to home - to Vietnam - was not an option anymore⁸⁷. At that point, his perception of reality had been altered in a painful manner that closed the past to him forever. The psychological distress caused by such a

⁸⁷ This was a telephone conversation I had as part of my initial recruitment phrase. Due to ethical considerations, specifically the issues of objectivity and voluntary participation, I chose not to conduct the interview with this family member, even after having obtained the informal consent.

realization is almost unimaginable to those who have not experienced it. To better illustrate this sense of permanent dislocation felt by the newly arrived refugees at the time, I wish to recount a segment from the movie “Green Dragon” (2001)

In this film, Vietnamese refugees experienced the same shock when it was time⁸⁸ for them to leave Camp Pendleton⁸⁹ to start a new life in America. The fear of not knowing what awaited them outside those barracks prompted many to not only refuse to leave camp but also demand to be repatriated as well. As shown in a conversation with Sgt. Jim Lance (played by Patrick Swayze), Tai (played by Don Duong), the camp translator, told Jim: “you know why they don’t want to go? Because they are scared - they are afraid, like I am afraid - afraid of how their lives will be like tomorrow – afraid of not seeing their friends or loved ones again” (excerpt from the movie Green Dragon, 2001). Indeed, many were hopeful that they would be reunited with their families again. With every busload of new refugees being brought to the camp, people anxiously waited to see each face getting off the bus, hoping to see their loved ones again.

As their lives become more settled and more established, first wave refugees tend to shift their focus from the mere concern of survival to the more fundamental issue about their “beginning” and the traumatic events that brought them here, in the host country, in the first place. In their work on collective remembrance, scholars Igartua and Paez (1997) identified several key factors that facilitate people’s “return” to the past, including an

⁸⁸ The amount of time Vietnamese refugees spent in the camp depended on how long it took to complete all the necessary paperwork, which mainly involved finding people or groups that were willing to be their sponsors. Because of this sponsorship concern, Vietnamese refugees were separated and dispersed throughout the different cities in the U.S, which added to the psychological distress for many of them.

⁸⁹ Camp Pendleton was one of the main military bases – and the largest - that provided accommodation for Vietnamese evacuees in 1975.

“accumulation of social resources in order to undergo commemoration activities. These resources can usually be obtained during one’s middle age. The events are commemorated when the generation which suffered them has the money and power to commemorate them” (1997, pp. 83-84, as cited in Eyerman, 2004, p. 72). This shift of attention to the past and the concern about one’s roots among Vietnamese refugees in the first wave are, to be sure, linked with the politics in the community surrounding the events of the war, anti-communist sentiments, and opposition to the current regime in the homeland. These issues are central to the community and are constantly promoted at cultural celebrations and community gatherings⁹⁰. Thus Vietnamese diaspora are always being reminded of the traumas of their past. Andrew Lam, a Vietnamese American writer, expresses the situation poignantly in his book *Perfume Dreams* (2005):

But no matter how articulate a Vietnamese becomes, dear Brother, when we set foot on the American shore, history is already against us. Vietnam goes on without us; America goes on without acknowledging us. We, like our defeated fathers, have become beside the point, a footnote in a small chapter of the history book. Our mythology is merely a private dream in America: there is no war to fight, no heroic quest, no territory to defend, no visible enemies. (p. 60)

According to Lam, this sense of invisibility, of irrelevance, is manifested in the demeanor of the Vietnamese. The first self-assessment of the Vietnamese refugees in America largely speaks to their own helplessness. As Lam observes: “it is characterized by blushing, by looking down at one’s feet, by avoiding contact, and by waiting: for welfare and food stamps, for the free clinic exams, for jackets donated by charity, for green cards” (p. 61). Even a person from the younger generation cannot escape this

⁹⁰ Examples include the display of symbols such as the yellow flag, artifacts, and monuments that represent the plight of boat people and the heroic soldiers of the former South Vietnamese military, and the re-enactments of military ceremonies.

history because at some point in life, she or he “comes to the brutal realization that ‘his’ side had lost and ‘his’ nation is gone; that his parents are inarticulate fools in a new country called America, and he must face the outside world alone” (Ibid.).

What is to be done then, with this experience of rupture from one’s past and at the same time, the futility (as least for the older Vietnamese) of attempting to take root in the new world? As we will see, involvement in the flag debate is a way of imposing meaning on one’s experiences and transforming one’s sense of loss into a sense of purpose. It is impossible to remain in the old world, but many diaspora Vietnamese take a piece of it with them – they carry with them the weight of their own history.

A Search for Historical Permanence

The flag of the former South Vietnam (the yellow flag) is, for many in the diaspora community, a resonant symbol of the collectivity that connects the group with its shared past – but there are different ways to commune with the past and different types of collective representations, as Durkheim would say. Memorial sites can be found in places in the U.S and Canada with a large Vietnamese population. One example is the Vietnam War Memorial in Westminister, California. It is a bronze, 12-foot high sculpture of two soldiers, one American and one Vietnamese, standing next to the flags of their respective countries. The memorial is in a quiet place that allows for reflection and examination of the past. Its history is controversial because it took six years of fundraising and political in fighting before the memorial could be unveiled. The artist who created the sculpture, Tuan Nguyen, was born in Saigon in 1963 and tried to escape Vietnam in 1988. This

initial attempt to escape failed, however, and Nguyen was captured by the communists and detained in a reeducation camp. He eventually escaped to Cambodia and finally made it to the U.S where he received a degree in fine arts.

The funding for this project came from private donations from the Vietnamese community, but as has been mentioned, the memorial was not completed without some difficulty. Its original estimated cost was \$500,000, but the final cost was actually three times that figure, and as might be expected, the decision to depict soldiers from both sides did not necessarily meet with the approval of all members of the community. The artist's intention, however, was to illustrate all those who fought in the war were doing so to uphold their idea of freedom, whatever it might be. When the memorial was unveiled on April 27th, 2003, members of the Vietnamese community seemed to be unified in their appreciation of it. It brought together many of those who had experienced displacement and the loss of family members. There are similar memorials in other cities in the U.S (e.g., Houston and Wichita) as well as in other countries such as Australia.

Another very different type of memorial can be found in Canada's capital city of Ottawa. It is the refugee mother and child monument that was erected on April 30th, 1995. It depicts a barefoot mother fleeing with a child in her arms, and it is the first monument in the world dedicated to the Vietnamese boat people. This memorial, like so many others, had its own controversial history. When the Vietnamese Embassy heard about it, they were dismayed and in fact, tried to halt the unveiling. Apparently the Hanoi regime was offended at the suggestion that refugees would want to flee Vietnam for Canada, or in fact for any other country, when the communists took over the South. The

Embassy attempted to place pressure on Canadian government officials to prevent the unveiling of this memorial, but because it was subsidized in part by the Vietnamese community, and in part by the city of Ottawa, their efforts were unsuccessful. The Vietnamese Embassy was told that in Canada, citizens have the right to pay for and erect any kind of statues they choose. The controversy surrounding this incident resulted in the Secretary of State for Asian Affairs postponing a scheduled trip to Vietnam.

The Vietnamese community in Canada also has another project underway, which is currently in development but has not been completed. It is the Vietnamese Boat People Museum (VBPM) located in Ottawa, which was launched by the Vietnamese Canadian Federation in 2005. The museum will feature a Memorial Wall commemorating the sacrifices of those who lost their lives seeking freedom. There will also be exhibition halls displaying historical facts and items, as well as the achievements of the resettled Vietnamese community. It received wide support from the Vietnamese community in Canada, as well as political support from many Canadians, including Marion Dewar, the late Mayor of Ottawa. Mayor Dewar is remembered with affection and gratitude by members of the Vietnamese community in Canada because of her work in establishing Project 4,000 in 1979. This project brought 4,000 boat people to Ottawa through private sponsorship. This number would have been impressive even in Toronto or Montreal, but for a relatively small city like Ottawa, it was a singular achievement.

The museum was designed by Washington D.C architect John Le who grew up in Ottawa and graduated from Carlton University's School of Architecture. He says, "I was trying to come up with something that spoke of Vietnamese culture", as well trying to aim

for “an optimistic vision of how you can blend western values and eastern values”⁹¹. His design is indeed evocative of the country and brings to mind images of a pagoda or a bird, however, it is meant to do much more than symbolically paid tribute to the Vietnamese boat people. The 5,000 square foot building is intended to be self-sustaining and will include not only the museum, but space which will allow people to talk, congregate, eat, and engage in various kinds of cultural activities. Thus it is meant to be a “living/active” space which will teach younger people about their past, but will also allow them to come together in a way which concretizes and consolidates their Vietnamese identity in the present. At the same time, the museum is not just intended to serve the Vietnamese community, but also to welcome other Canadians, who wish to learn about Vietnamese culture and history. The statement from the leader of the project, whom I interviewed reflect this concern for remembering the past as a way of moving forward:

All Vietnamese share common roots. Most people here are descendants of boat people or boat people themselves. We want to make sure the stories are not lost to future generation. They must know why their ancestors came here in the first place. In Vietnam, under the current situation, the stories are not told... not only hidden but distorted. The museum serves not only to Vietnamese in Vietnam and here but to society at large. In order to move forward, we have to know where we came from. We can't be prisoners of the past. If we don't tell stories, future generation will be lost. There will always be questions in their mind about where we came from. (Camden L.)

As we can see, there are many ways in which the Vietnamese memorialize and commemorate their history - nevertheless, it is the flag which is central to their experience, and therefore the importance of the flag debate, and the controversies which surround it, cannot be underestimated. Vietnamese in the U.S seem particularly vocal

⁹¹ From the article “Archival story: East meets West in tribute to Vietnamese boat people”, by Maria Cook, The Ottawa Citizen, Tuesday, April 29, 2008 (originally published Sunday, December 18, 2005).

about this issue. The yellow flag - officially known as the “Vietnamese American Freedom and Heritage Flag”, is seen as a “potent symbol of struggle and pride for Vietnamese Americans”⁹². Over the years, the Vietnamese have poured a great deal of effort into getting “formal” recognition for the flag in cities across the U.S.



Figure 3. Picture of 2 flags (ảnh: Diễn đàn người Việt, from: <http://bolapquechoa.blogspot.ca/2014/09/chuyen-co-quat-va-hoa-hop-hoa-giai.html>).

Since the war ended in 1975, Vietnam’s official flag has been the red flag with a yellow star (or just simply, the red flag), commonly referred to by the Vietnamese diaspora (and also many Vietnamese back in the homeland) as the flag of the communist regime. The old flag was yellow with three red stripes (or known simply as the yellow

⁹²“Vietnamese American ‘freedom flag’ endorsed” in *The Orange County Register*, by Doug Irving; published Feb. 3, 2009.

flag). Every year on the anniversary of the Fall of Saigon (April 30th or Black April)⁹³, Vietnamese diaspora in major cities across North America and Europe gather to commemorate this historical marker – an event which has given the community its beginning. Some common features of such an event include the singing of national anthems (of the former South Vietnam & that of the host country), the hoisting, saluting, and reverence paid to the now defunct yellow flag of the South Vietnam, moments of silence to remember South Vietnam and honoring the fallen and refugees (including an estimated one million who perished at sea in search of freedom). There are also speeches expressing love and longing for the motherland along with unbridled hatred for the communist government. Thus, for those fleeing the country following the events of April 30, 1975 and those who risked perilous journeys, the waving of the yellow flag on this anniversary has been and still is a badge of identity. Those who do not share these sentiments can find themselves estranged from the community, and this may even occur within one's family. One female professor from California recounts: "I see students go back to Vietnam, volunteer and do humanitarian work - they get kicked out of the house because family says oh you go back to Vietnam, you're a communist now, I don't want you in the house - and students want to go back to understand their parents or their culture better. It is so sad to see that" (Irene P.). She continues to say that she and her colleagues have faced "protests, death threats, insults, brutal attacks... we have to deal with the history, and history cannot be changed, it has to be respected".

⁹³ Yen Le Espiritu (2006) notes in her work: "The 'Fall of Saigon' is a U.S specific term that denotes a contained singular event and that refuses to acknowledge either the *before* or *after* of that day". In Vietnam, it is referred to as "ngày giải phóng" (Liberation Day). Vietnamese in the diaspora call this day "ngày quốc hận" (Day of National Resentment) and "ngày tưởng niệm" (Day of Commemoration" (Ibid. p.348).

Anti-communist politics is the key feature of the Vietnamese diaspora. However, it is important to point out that anticommunism carries more salience in the U.S than it does in Canada. As I have noted earlier, the primary condition for acceptance by U.S immigration was for Vietnamese refugees to prove that they were political refugees. Thus it is understandable that we would hear more incidents involving anticommunist politics in the U.S. In Canada, on the other hand, “opposition to the communist regime is expressed using the language of human rights”(Bloemraad, 2006, p. 218)⁹⁴. On July 27th of this past summer, an on-line magazine the “Front Page Mag” reported on the meeting between Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang and President Obama in Washington, which was met with strong protests from the Vietnamese community. I offer here some testimonies from the protesters:

I am here in solidarity with democracy activists who are imprisoned right now in Vietnam. Six years ago I was here, at the protest against then Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet. We, in the Vietnamese community here in the States, and elsewhere, we do not accept the Vietnamese Communist regime, and anywhere there is a Vietnamese communist leader, we will be present to protest. (H.T. Duy, protester)

Human rights are a human basic need. We Vietnamese are human beings, and demand that human rights be respected. Our Vietnam today, especially the communist leaders in Vietnam do not respect freedom and democratic rights of the people, that is why we are here to protest by joining the gathering today, to voice our concerns. We are standing in front of the White House right now, with about a thousand of our compatriots from everywhere. We come here not to have fun, but to voice our unity. We are all looking in the same direction. (D.V. Pham, protester)

These examples illustrate how there is still a strong assumption that the community is one homogenous body, united in one voice, heading in one direction, and having one

⁹⁴ Bloemraad further notes that human rights discourse has been increasingly used in the U.S starting in the 1990's when the flow of refugees started to come to an end.

shared goal. This way of thinking, in fact, is in tune with many of the literature on diaspora. But the question I must raise is can this be a true reflection of reality and does everyone truly share in this so called “community politics”? In raising these questions, my study complicates the notion of diaspora by showing that not all Vietnamese diaspora members “speak” with one voice, and that intellectuals might articulate somewhat different views of these matters because of their status as intellectuals, or as “in between” the world of the diaspora and the world of the U.S/Canada intellectual tradition.

Scholars with the poststructuralist lens point out that the significance of a symbol and what it really means “is fashioned through language and dialogue and may change depending on the context” (Eyerman, 2004, p. 68). Narrative is the “power of telling” which is intimately linked to the language used, but this raises the question of who can speak and to which audience. Instead of looking at issues in binary opposites, which are either anti-communist or pro-communist (or “communist sympathizer” as it is referred to in the community), I propose to look at them as a spectrum, ranging from total anti-Communism to a complete support of the regime. Existing in between is a continuum which allows people to locate themselves as well as to fluctuate their stance, depending on the different factors that come into play (e.g. personal history, social position, degree of integration, and stages in life). The challenge for Vietnamese diaspora intellectuals thus is to find ways to communicate such an understanding to the public. This challenge involves not only the practice of doing public sociology as Burawoy has called it, but also what Xiaoying Qi (2013) refers to as *intellectual entrepreneurship* – that is to selecting and combining “foreign knowledge with the local stock of knowledge” to transform it

“into effectively new patterns of thought and culture”(p. 7) – ones that might be specific to the members of the Vietnamese diaspora and their situations.

It is extremely difficult for a Vietnamese person to gain visibility or garner support from the community without making his or her anti-communist stance known in some way. To do otherwise would mean that one risks being labeled as communist sympathizer, traitor, unfilial, disrespectful, rootless, and so forth. The story about a recent election for the Houston City Council involving two Vietnamese candidates serves to illustrate this more clearly. Hoang Duy Hung who is a lawyer and a more experienced local politician, was “elected in 2009 and has a three-term limit of 2 years each”⁹⁵. He was defeated by a relatively unknown newcomer Richard Nguyen, who had little experience in politics and who admitted he “didn’t fully know what went into being a Houston city councilman or if it truly was a full-time position”⁹⁶. It was pointed out in a local Vietnamese community newspaper that in the previous election, “Vietnamese-American voters voted for him (Mr. Hoang Duy Hung) based on his strong anti-communist rhetoric” and that he failed to win the (current) election because of “his open overture to the communist government in Vietnam”. Hoang Duy Hung recently visited Vietnam for an “economic development” purpose where he met with high-ranking officials including the Vietnamese president. The community reacted strongly against his seemingly “close relationship” with various officials and viewed this as the act of a

⁹⁵ This article appeared in “Little Saigon Inside”, a local Vietnamese newspaper in Houston, on Sept. 28th, 2013

⁹⁶ This article appeared in the Houston Chronicle, November 10th, 2013.

“communist sympathizer” – a term often used by the members in the Vietnamese diaspora to stigmatize those who do not conform to anti-communist politics.

It is discrediting, and possibly dangerous, to be perceived as a “communist sympathizer” in other circles as well. An article from the *New York Times*, June 22nd, 2013⁹⁷ illustrates the legal ramifications that may result from the use of such language. This article details the circumstances surrounding a civil defamation of character case between Duc Tan and Norman Le. Norman Le, who is 78 claims that he became convinced that Duc Tan, 69, was a secret sympathizer with the communists in Vietnam. Both men live in Olympia, Washington but this case may be an example of an ideological battle, a misunderstanding, a vendetta between the two people involved – or it may be in fact be an on-going attempt at identity construction. Norman Le eventually went public with his accusation that Duc Tan “was a secret sympathizer with the Communists in their birth country”. This accusation was widely disseminated through social media. One of Norman Le’s claims may seem absurd to outsiders, but such claims are taken seriously within the Vietnamese community. Norman Le asserts, for example, that at a community fair Mr. Tan was wearing a cooking apron with a figure that Mr. Le claimed strongly resembled Ho Chi Minh. Mr. Tan, on the other hand, claimed that it was Santa Claus. In another instance, Duc Tan brought in a musician for a function, who – after having struck up a few bars of the national anthem of the current regime, stopped awkwardly. The musician then resumed with what everybody was expecting to hear: the South Vietnamese anthem. Norman Le accused Duc Tan of conspiracy, while Mr. Tan

⁹⁷ Article can be accessed on-line: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/23/us/communist-is-still-a-dirty-word-in-vietnamese-immigrant-enclaves.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

explained that it was an accident. Duc Tan ultimately sued for defamation of character in 2004 and won. The court of appeals overturned that verdict, but in May of 2013, Washington's highest court restored it and awarded \$310,000 to Duc Tan and to the Vietnamese Community of Thurston County, a civic group. Norman Le is still contesting that verdict. Duc Tan, on the hand, claimed that the accusations are insulting to him and his family, and are not based on facts, but rather are a result of Norman Le's vendetta against him, which has its roots in Le's political ambitions.

The example serves to illustrate how homeland politics still generate intense passion within the Vietnamese diaspora community, both in a positive sense as well as negatively. Demonstrations and protests have become less about ridding the homeland of communism but more to do with pointing out who is not anti-communist enough among its members. Of course some of this may be connected to generational issues. As my subjects have indicated, the whole question of whether one is pro-communist or anti-communist has lost some of its resonance, particularly among young people, and those who were born in the host countries. It is understandable that older Vietnamese would want to hold on to the past, particularly those who were socially well placed back in the homeland and who, as a result of migration, experienced downward mobility. This issue has been examined in Vic Satzewich's (2007) article on transnational ties and identities among immigrants. In citing Isajiw's work on the Ukrainian community in Canada, Satzewich points out that "Declassed immigrants...turned to the ethnic community and became obsessed with the formal trapping of status and power within those organizations

precisely because of experiences of downward mobility in Canada” (p.54). At the same time, the impact of such community politics should not be underestimated.

Andrew Lam’s (2005) account of one such tragedy in his memoirs *Perfume Dreams* illustrates both the schisms in the Vietnamese community, and the hypocrisy of supporting freedom of speech, but only when it serves one’s interests. Lam explains that during the cold war, several Vietnamese in America who have supported normalization with Vietnam were assassinated. Lam was particularly moved by the case of Doan Van Toai, who, like Lam, was beginning a career as a writer in San Francisco. Thus he was in a position to voice his opinion publicly, and in his writing he expressed his support for lifting the U.S trade embargo against Vietnam⁹⁸. Lam points out when Toai was killed not one person in the community condemned this act, and some of them, including a few of Lam’s relatives, quietly supported it.

Lam’s analysis of this situation is lucid and insightful. He recognizes that such violence may be a form of displaced aggression. The Vietnamese who supported this killing, in his view, were extremely angry at the communist regime, but were unable to do anything about this. They expressed this anger indirectly by turning on one of their own. Lam admits that at the time that he did not agree with Toai’s position, however he recognized the hypocrisy and inconsistency embedded in the mindset of those who would oppose him so violently. The Vietnamese in his community were very willing to praise the virtues of free speech, but again, it is easy to do that when free speech serves you

⁹⁸ In early 1994, former President Bill Clinton formally announced the lifting of U.S trade embargo against Vietnam, 19 years after the war ended. This was due in large part, to the co-operation of the Vietnamese government in finding the remains of missing Americans, as well as pressure from U.S business sector.

well. It is much more difficult to see the virtue in it when the speaker's ideas are at variance with your own. The failure to recognize that this is a right that applies to *all* does violence to the idea itself and undermines the goals for which many Vietnamese risked their lives. As Lam expresses it:

Democracy... can only flourish when opposite ideas are not only encouraged but [also] respected. Father, who first taught me this idea, was as silent as the rest of the thinkers and intellectuals of the Vietnamese community on the subject of Toai's murder.

And so I pitted my skepticism against my father's nationalist passion and my parents' Confucian mores. I swapped my Vietnamese name for an American – upon applying for U.S citizenship, I christened myself Andrew – and imagined a trajectory for myself radically different from that of the old man (pp. 40-41).

The majority of the Vietnamese in the diaspora thus adopted the dominant anti-communist view, which Andrew Lam found to be so unyielding in his father. As Yen Le Espiritu explains: “[the] anti-communist stance is also a narrative, adopted in part because it is the primary political language with which the Vietnamese refugees, as objects of U.S. rescue fantasies, could tell their history and be understood from within the U.S social and political landscape”(Espiritu, 2006, p. 340). The problem with “reducing the multifaceted histories of the Vietnam War and of their lives into a single story about persecution” is that, Espiritu continues, “Vietnamese Americans unwittingly allow themselves ‘to be used in justification of empire by those who claim to have fought for [their] freedom’” (Nguyen-Vo, 2005; cited in Espiritu, 2006, p. 340). Thuy Vo Dang also argues in her dissertation that more than a political ideology, anti-Communism is a set of “cultural praxis” in which the community engages in order to legitimize its presence (particularly in the U.S) and to make known that its members are the “deserving refugees” whose stories have generally been left out of dominant U.S and Vietnamese historical discourse

(Vo Dang, 2008). The Vietnam- American conflict, Vo Dang (and other Asian-American scholars such as Nguyen Vo Thu Huong and Yen Le Espiritu) asserts, is not only about “one” Vietnam fighting the superpower U.S, but it is also about the history of South Vietnam and generations of refugee stories.

The issue is complex, to be sure, and it is an even more difficult undertaking to try to bring this understanding to the Vietnamese diaspora. As Upton Sinclair⁹⁹ reminds us in this famous quotation: “It’s difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it”. Thus, if the very rationale for the Vietnamese to be here in the hostland depends on this seemingly simplistic way of thinking about their past, then it is understandable that such political attitudes continue to persist and dominate all spheres of life for the community.

As I have mentioned, skepticism with respect to either side in the Vietnam War and in the flag debate is the inevitable result of their realization that there are no easy answers. Many of my interviewees clearly did not feel comfortable with completely distancing themselves from the community, but at the same time, complete identification with its memory and understanding of the past was clearly not a realistic choice either. For many of my respondents, an acceptance of ambiguity with respect to the war meant that they would be severing their ties with the larger community. Membership in mainstream society, thus, often means expressing a strong degree of agreement regarding the dominant narrative. Those who deviated from this would, in a sense, be erased –

⁹⁹ Upton Sinclair (1878-1968) was an American author and supporter of socialism. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his novel “Dragon’s Teeth” in 1943 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upton_Sinclair).

excommunicated in a way. Included below are the remarks of a Vietnamese American television journalist, which reveal her internal conflicts.

I understand the passion behind it, but when it gets to a certain point, we have to realize that the flag alone can't make a difference. We can't pour all our energy, time, and effort fighting on this issue. A sea of yellow flags with 3 stripes makes a statement, but it's not going to change anything. Fly the flag if it means something to you, but to make a difference, you have to actually do something. I think it is wrong when people in our community with extremist views go out and point at others, accusing them of being Communists. To me that doesn't make sense.

The Vietnamese are so smart individually. We are one of the recent immigrant groups and look at what we've done. If we put all those smart brains together, I think we could contribute something great for society. There's so much infighting. That's one thing that bothers me a lot about the Vietnamese community. We're not good at supporting each other. I don't know if it's when we see someone who's better than us, it becomes a reflection of ourselves and we start pulling the other person down or what – I don't know. But until we stop fighting and start supporting each other, we're not going to be able to do anything big. In that sense, we're still a very immature community. (Lenise N.)

The account above points to two related but different aspects of maintaining a connection to the homeland: one is symbolic and the other is practical (Languerre, 2006, p. 46). The community's embracement of the yellow flag has a *symbolic* significance for sure, but as my subject points out, "a sea of yellow flags... makes a statement, but to make a difference, you have to do something". This subject then is less concerned with symbolism and commemoration, and more with the pragmatic – that is practical issues that concern members of the community.

My next interviewee is a lawyer turned writer who came to the U.S as a little girl with her mother shortly before the Fall of Saigon in 1975. She feels thankful for being too young at the time to really understand what was happening. She was told that they were "going on a vacation", which she innocently believed, until she finally realized that they were not able to leave the camp:

I completely understand the emotional attachment to the former regime's flag. I would never ever interfere a person's right to display that flag. At the same time, I would never interfere with an individual's right to display the flag of the current regime. To me that is what a democracy is about...people are very vocal about people who might want to display Ho Chi Minh's face, image, or Communist flag - to respond to it by advocating for a hand's down prohibition, is ridiculous – is to not understand the society that we live in. (Moreen T.)

Moreen's recognition of the symbolic significance of the flag is counterbalanced by her assertion that the rigid imposition of any value system is counterproductive. The freedom to express one's point of view is in fact, an ideal, which motivated members of the Vietnamese diaspora to come to America in the first place. It would be tragic and ironic if this freedom would be restricted by members of one's own community – as this interviewee expressed it – “advocating for a hand's down prohibition is ridiculous – is to not understand the society we live in”.

The participants in my study, like most of us in the Western world, do not live in an isolated ethnic bubble – they have jobs, relationships, and other responsibilities – which are not necessarily part of their lives as member of the Vietnamese community. As have been indicated, they may not even be in an agreement with the prevailing view of their particular community on specific political issues – the flag debate being one such example. At the same time, they also realize that they are not free to act or speak autonomously under certain circumstances. They are still compelled to be mindful of the hegemonic values of their “generalized other” - in this case, whether one espouses communism or anti-communism. Thus there may be a disconnect between the degree to which they, as individuals, care about this issue - but they also recognize that others may care about it very much. Therefore to continue to be part of the group often means

engaging in a discourse which is apologetic or vacillating, rather than one which is straightforward.

This points to the multifaceted nature of the role of the intellectual in the preservation of group identity. The use of the term “intellectual” in this context refers more to what individuals *do*, rather than who they *are*. They do not give voice to their own specific, idiosyncratic ideas and opinions, but rather they articulate the meanings of events in a way that makes them comprehensible to members of their own group and those outside of it. They explain the group to itself, and act as repositories of the collective memory. These intellectuals may be academics, to be sure, but as Eyerman (2004) points out, they may also be artists, film directors, “singers of song”, or “movement intellectuals” who may lack formal credentials, but who have particular expertise which allows them to analyze a specific situation which is relevant for the group.

Thus it is not the day-to-day memories of an individual’s life which are of concern here – e.g., “I remember the doll carriage my father gave me when I was six” – but rather the memories which, as Maurice Halbwachs (1992) has emphasized, derive from one’s group membership and are thus essential to the group’s perception of itself. These collective memories may have to be reconfigured to suit shifting needs, and thus may be more properly designated as myths or narratives. They cannot, as Eyerman (2004) argues (following Halbwachs), be accorded the same objectivity as “history”. History may of course be perspectival as well, but as an academic discipline, it is constrained by the need for certain rules of evidence. The “myth” or narrative of collective experiences, on the other hand, can be based on a much looser interpretation of the “facts” at hand (p. 67).

The intellectual then functions as the “keeper of the flame”. Yet if it is one’s responsibility to uphold the narrative of the group, this inevitably conflicts with the understandable desire to strive for agency and creativity.

My next respondent is a young female sociologist from Canada, who came as a boat person in 1980, after having spent several months in the refugee camp in Malaysia. She shared with me a story about her long trip back to Vietnam where she spent in the northern part of the country to learn art. She and a group of colleagues were invited to participate in an art exhibit organized by the Vietnamese Association, Toronto (or VAT). It was at this venue that my interviewee got to know “first hand, the politics in Canada within the Vietnamese community”. Her story needs to be presented here at length in order for us to get the full context and a real sense of the situation:

We were, I think it was by default, most of us happened to be from the North, but most of us grew up here in Canada. We were not aware of the politics. We were completely naïve about that. Our issue was to address this issue about Vietnamese Canadian identity, and how we express that and how we interpret our history through art. We had no idea how politicized that question was. So in our effort to host, to recruit artists, to get funding, to get the community support and advertise our activities, we faced a very steep uphill battle with the Vietnamese community. We were all accused of being Communist spies, and especially my experiences in Vietnam prior to that – because I spent most of that time in the North, they thought I was in an ideological boot camp.

My past activities made me a suspect and it also made the group a suspect. The rest of the group also had family background from the North, even though they were not part of the Communist Party. We were all boat people. The Vietnamese community in Toronto boycotted all of our activities. They made it very hard for us to advertise through Vietnamese newspapers. Everybody was afraid to advocate for us or advertise for us. We had Ta Duc, a Vietnamese composer who’s currently living in Toronto, wrote and produced a Viet Kieu play for us, and we actually hired actors like Ai Van from California to be the Viet Kieu, and she cancelled it last minute because of pressure from the Vietnamese community. So it was very serious, and then because we were a young group with full of young people...we were doing a lot of interesting things that the Toronto Film Festival hired us to be the community liaison to be their national film program that year – I think it was ’95-96. That year

the national film program was featuring Vietnamese films, so we were in competition with the Toronto Vietnamese Association to cooperate with the Toronto Film Festival to be on this program. They talked to both of us, our group and the Vietnamese Association in Toronto (VAT), and they decided to go for us and not the VAT, and that was when opposition really ramped up, because I think they felt like we were competing with them to forward the narratives about Vietnamese Canadian experience with a major mainstream cultural group – the Toronto Film Festival.

So I think there were community politics - community power struggle involved. They insisted that we fly the South Vietnamese flag, but we felt like that South Vietnamese flag doesn't have any symbolic significance for us - our experiences in Canada as Vietnamese, that flag doesn't really mean anything to us, so why would we fly it – so we refused to do symbolic things like that.

We didn't have any flag. We didn't want to make – our group was about art and culture, we didn't want to fly any flags, and so that upsets them as well. So we did a lot things that were outside of the box for them and yeah, that was a huge, huge learning experience for all of us... I still think it's a silly issue. I think that the Vietnamese community is really holding on to - if they still insist on the flag issue, they are really holding on to conflicts that are long buried I think - that has no relevance anymore to our real lives today and our real concerns today. It needs to be dropped, if the Vietnamese community wants to be relevant to the new generation. (Mallory P.)

Mallory's refusal to uphold the hegemonic narrative which is important to so many members of her group, is reminiscent of the dilemma faced by Ralph Ellison, who himself found it extremely difficult to navigate the distinction between "black intellectual/community spokesperson", and his own need to be an unencumbered artist. As Jerry Gafio Watts explains, Ellison's refusal to be politically engaged meant that many other black intellectuals viewed him as "deviant". Ellison "refused to let the highly politicized moments of the civil rights movement and black power era determine his intellectual/artistic style. That is, Ellison had long believed that he artistically created best when he was least actively engaged in politics (Watts, 1994, p. 13). But, as we have seen, such a stance is an affront to the group.

The creation and consolidation of collective memory can be a way of resolving group trauma (Eyerman, 2004, p. 74). The process of “we” formation, as Eyerman calls it, is a key element in transcending a painful history. “We” have been victimized and oppressed, but we have survived and flourished. We concretize this shared experience, and in so doing, we define ourselves. If there are victims, there must also be perpetrators – *someone must be held responsible*. Furthermore, Eyerman argues that it is not necessary to have personally experienced such events in order to be shaped by them, to share in a common history. Many black Americans, for example, have had no direct or even indirect experience with slavery, but they define themselves as sharing a history and a common fate with those who did (Eyerman, 2004, pp. 74-75). To that extent, the original traumatic event leaves a residue, which must be dealt with by later generations. It should be emphasized, however, that each generation reconfigures the past according to its own needs, the resources at its disposal, and especially, its collective ability to deal with a particular traumatic event. As Eyerman explains, the process may take years “... it may take a generation to group memory to public memory. Sometimes it may take even longer; sometimes it may never happen at all” (Ibid. p.75).

As well, the way in which we remember is a function of the group’s agenda – it’s political, economic, and ideological interests. Our interpretation of the past is thus related to our positionality – where did we start? An American from a northern state, for example would likely view slavery from an abolitionist perspective, while a southerner (at least one who lived during the 19th Century) might prefer to see it as benign and even useful institution (Eyerman, 2004, p. 75).

Eyerman's (2004) work on collective memory dovetails nicely with Dina Wardi's (1992) research on the experiences of the children of the Holocaust survivors that was discussed earlier in this thesis. Wardi argues that even for those who are not Holocaust survivors themselves, there is a legacy to be carried forward to the next generation – one that often revolves around a sense of shame and inadequacy, which must be overcome – but the task is exceptionally difficult one. Eyerman speaks of the legacy of slavery and its on going effects in terms of loss of pride and loss of identity. Eyerman quotes Elijah Muhammad on this issue:

Your slave-master, he brought you over here, and your past, everything was destroyed. Today, you do not know your true language. What tribe are you from? You would not recognize your tribe's name if you heard it. You don't know [anything] about your true culture. You don't even know your family's real name. You are wearing a white man's name! The white slave-master, who hates you! (p. 109)

Thus for Eyerman, as for Elijah Muhammad, slavery cannot simply be dismissed as a relic of the dead past. Eyerman asserts: “rather this slavery is lived and something living; it forms a habitus that determines current behavior and thus requires a radical spiritual transformation in order to be rooted out. The rediscovery of one's true past is central to this transformation” (p. 108).

As we have seen, much of Eyerman's work is concerned with the sense that one's past is a source of shame, and that this can only be overcome through work which is liberating and generative – in other words, through self-determination, rather than constructing one's identity through a cultural heritage imposed on blacks by those who have enslaved them.

Dina Wardi (1992) makes a similar argument regarding the children of Holocaust survivors, who have also been profoundly affected by a history that they did not personally experience, but from which they cannot truly escape. Wardi speaks of their anger and frustration, which emanates from their realization that because their parents were victims, they were too weak to protect their children. At the same time, Wardi's subjects grappled with the constant sense that they must somehow compensate for the past by protecting their town parents and living for them and for their persecuted people as "memorial candles". But to be a memorial candle, by definition, means that you have ceased to be a person, and that is an impossibly heavy burden to impose on anyone.

The situation of the Vietnamese is not exactly comparable to that of those who have experienced slavery or genocide, but they have obviously suffered from a long history of oppression and exploitation. It is not surprising then, that an awareness of the past, even if one has not lived through it, will affect how one perceives one's situation and the nature of one's interaction with family members. This is evident in the account of Irene P., a professor from the U.S, whose relatives were profoundly affected by their experiences – and by extension, she was as well. Irene P. shows great sensitivity to the emotional distress suffered by those who lost their accustomed way of life as the result of the war. Nevertheless, she does not fully feel herself to be part of it, nor is she comfortable with adopting the rigid anticommunist position of her family members, in spite of her awareness of their suffering:

My position is of empathy and I really try to educate how the trauma, the difficulties, and how hard it is to immigrate here as refugees and being child refugees, but not accepting excessive use of power. But in terms of the function of that politics - to be unified along the line of anti-Communism - I totally understand and I think actually if

you compare to all the communities, those that are most vulnerable and suffer the most are the ones that really hold on to the past the most and even more so when there are stories that are not understood and invisible - and in addition, if you have undergone trauma – even more so. So for sure those politics serve a function of group identity, and it's very real. My uncle was in re-education camp for many years before they let him out – made him crazy basically. I've seen how my aunt lived, all their kids had to be around to help him; they lost the house; they lost everything; people flee. I would be very angry myself. I don't think you can forget and forgive in a lifetime and process some of the stuff that people have lived through. So I totally understand that. (Irene P.)

It is evident that this interviewee recognizes that events in the past resonate more strongly with those who have direct experience, but at the same time she is empathetic regarding the suffering experienced by her uncle and his family. Yet her position contains elements of pragmatism and even emotional distancing. There is a clear distinction between saying: "I am very angry", which indicates a higher level of emotional engagement, and what she actually expresses – "I would be". The use of the word "would" in this context indicates understanding to be sure, but it also underlines her separation from the situation. This attitude is consistent with Wardi's argument about the complicated nature of the relationship between Holocaust survivors and their offspring. While they identify with their parents, and thus experience their suffering, even if from a distance, they also need to survive emotionally, and therefore cannot allow themselves to be completely subsumed by the past and by their role as memorial candles. Of course, guilt is the price we pay for survival.

My next interviewee, a female professor who came to the U.S as a teenager before the Fall of Saigon, shows a pragmatic approach to viewing the flag issue. She is sensitive to the sentiments behind it, but also points out the drawbacks of an excessive attachment to such symbols. Her narrative offers an example of "role-strain", i.e., the difficulty in

fulfilling the responsibilities of her “role” as a member of the collectivity, and how it is dealt with in discursive terms:

I got an email from somebody who was from Nebraska and she said that the library was putting up posters of authors, and they wanted to use my picture for one of the posters that would hang in their county library and they asked me if it would be ok. I said they could use the picture on my website at William & Mary and they did. And about 2-3 months ago, they sent me a copy of the poster as a courtesy, and I saw the Communist flag next to my picture on the poster, so I immediately wrote to her and said I know she meant well and that there’s nothing hostile or anything like that, but I cannot have that flag next to my face. I said you have to remove the flag or destroy all the posters because the Vietnamese in this country – those who left after 1975, fled not because we’re economic immigrants but because we don’t want to live under that system – anti freedom system, and if we’re here, we don’t want to have that flag represent us. I realize that it’s the flag that’s recognized by the UN and State Department, but it’s not the flag that the Vietnamese refugee community would want. So immediately the woman wrote back and was very nice and apologetic.

So just from my own experience, I would not want the flag there representing me. I think it would be great if there’s a flag – I think it’s called the “freedom & heritage” flag – it certainly can represent the Vietnamese community. The question is from a legal standpoint – whether it’s the city or the country adopting the 3 stripes flag as the flag of the Vietnamese community, whether or not that city is engaged in foreign affairs. Under the constitution, only the national government can conduct foreign affairs, so an argument has been made that states and localities have no power under the constitution to recognize any foreign flag or to recognize a foreign flag. It’s not the flag that’s recognized by the national government, so that’s the legal issue.

In many of these localities where they recognize the South Vietnamese flag, they’re not saying that that’s the flag of VN, they’re saying that that’s the flag of the Vietnamese community, and that’s a different issue because that doesn’t touch on foreign affairs. (Laurence C.)

Thus when this respondent asserts “I cannot have that flag next to my face” it is clear that her objections are not ideological in a personal sense, but rather spring from her recognition of what this action would mean to the members of her community – that is, her “generalized other”. In this way, her behavior must be adjusted in order to comply with the community’s expectation, whether it is really that important to her or not.

Clearly this is a source of role-strain, which requires its own explanatory discourse. Such

an accommodation is necessary if this interviewee wishes to continue being part of the group, even in a relatively limited sense.

The remarks of some of my interviewees with respect to the flag point to its unique and contested position as a collective representation. In general, the flag of one's country is meant to function as a unifying force, but for the Vietnamese this is not always so. This means that the flag, ostensibly the overarching symbol of one's country, may in fact divide rather than unify. This is especially the case if there is controversy regarding the question: which flag represent the true, the good, and the beautiful, and for whom. The account of my next subject illustrates this ambiguity:

It's hard because yes I think it's divisive but also something that brings people together – shared experience of displacement. It serves that function. I've seen it in VN – it's like an act of defiance. I don't abide by the flag with the star; I identify with the stripes. In the U.S, the flag brings people together, but the underlying thing is divisiveness. At any place or any given time, there are people who believe in many different things. I don't know what's going to happen in the future when the other generation – the one that had a lot of physical and emotional attachment to it – goes. And certainly the composition and complexion of what it means to be Vietnamese changes once the older generation is gone. And so I am curious about what that will look like – what all of us will make of it. (Duncan N.)

As the above account indicates, the flag is a symbol that both unites as well as divides members in the Vietnamese diaspora. This points to a fundamental issue associated with commemorating the past, and that is “powerful cultural objects”, which in this case is the flag, “are always ambiguous”(Brubaker & Feischmidt, 2002, p. 700). In fact, it has been pointed out that ambiguity “is a key part of what constitutes their power” (Griswold, 1987, cited in Ibid.). The flag is regarded as a powerful collective symbol, but it seems the Vietnamese are at variance about what it means to them, or how they identify with it, personally as well as collectively. To be sure, an individual's *personal* identity is

not always congruent with his or her *social* identity. While this interviewee is a member of the Vietnamese diaspora but his knowledge and understanding about such membership and the values and meanings he attaches to it can differ from those of the community (David & Bar-Tal, 2009, p. 355).

My next interviewee left Vietnam as a boy with his parents in 1975. They were among the boat people who left at the last minute when Saigon fell. They spent time in multiple refugee camps from May to September 1975 before they were finally allowed to resettle in the U.S. His view on the flag reflects a more pragmatic approach, one that focuses more on the concrete and the need to do something in real terms for the community and the homeland, rather than focusing on the symbolic:

Personally, I love the old South Vietnamese yellow flag with three red stripes. However, in reality, Viet Nam belongs to those who are in control and, right now, they use the red flag with a yellow star. As far as I'm concerned [regardless of whether I like it or not], that's the official Vietnamese flag that's recognized around the world today. I am more concerned with requesting for more support for human rights in Viet Nam and am not as concerned with its politics. (Hal N.)

In a similar way, my next interviewee - a sociologist who came to the U.S as a little boy with his family in 1975, shared with me that he favors the yellow flag, but at the same time, he understands that “the official flag that currently represents the country of Viet Nam is current red flag and yellow star”. The bigger concern for this interviewee is about the community accepting the differences in opinions among its members. He explains that while he supports community protest for human rights and freedom in Vietnam, the way in which this has been carried out has been “too extreme... the staunch anti-communists within the Vietnamese community seem more interested in stifling free

speech, expression, and dissent within their own community than in promoting free speech back in Viet Nam”(Charles L.).

As can be seen, the Vietnamese diaspora community overwhelmingly favors the yellow flag, but this icon is obsolete, as my subject above sees it. This seems to be the position taken by most of the participants in this study, which is understandable since many of them did not have direct experience of this part of history, although they also demonstrate that they cannot get away from it – a history that, for a *segment* of the community, involves an “unfinished war” and the glorious past that must be restored. However, this *segment* is not the majority and it is also shrinking in size, as my next interviewee points out:

I favor the current flag. For practical, almost non-ideological reasons: the alternative (yellow flag with three red stripes) existed for a relative brief period in Vietnamese history, and only for a shrinking minority of people from –the defeated – South Vietnam (they are dying off) – why should the absolute majority of the Vietnamese currently living, and especially those who were born after 1975, accept it? Now, just to be clear: this does not mean that I totally support the current regime, far from it. But the struggle should be for democracy and freedom for the whole country, and not to bring back the South Vietnamese regime before 1975. Fighting over flags simply distracts us from the current struggle, not to mention its unnecessary divisiveness. (Dustin T.)

The account above is from a male respondent who is from the older generation of Vietnamese but who came to the U.S to study in the early 1960’s. His statement “I favor the current flag... this does not mean that I totally support the current regime, far from it” is an important one which deserves further consideration. Thus the fact that many of my participants do not necessarily identify with the flag of the old regime does not mean that they are sympathetic to the communist regime. As the interviewee quoted above indicated, for him, the issue is one of convenience rather than ideology.

Another older male subject, a retired professor from Canada shows a strong sense of personal attachment to the yellow flag when he declares: “For me, I come from a country where the flag is three stripes, so until I die and even after, the flag is still three stripes”. At the same time, he shows great respect for democratic values and favors the idea of *majority rule*: “One day, if it happens that the country becomes a real democracy and we can go home in freedom, then the whole country can decide to change the flag, democratically, free speech, free vote and everything”(Harris N.).

The following participant is concerned with the diversity of voices within the Vietnamese community, and how the attempts to silence these voices are misguided, unrealistic, and even oppressive:

I was around when Garden Grove passed the Anti-Communist Resolution that specifically said that if you’re a Communist, you [couldn’t] come to Orange County because it is a communist free zone. All this happening in the early 2000, and I wrote a couple of editorials criticizing the flag issue – the way Orange County was doing it – this Communist-free Resolution, and I think I was criticized for it by various Vietnamese people. Although I just want to point out that one of them was signed by a lot of Vietnamese American and intellectual too. But I think the basic position is that it’s not about the flag per se. I mean getting into the technicality of whether the flag represents the community and whether or not the flag of the Vietnamese government should be flown here – that stuff I don’t find very interesting.

So my position in those editorials was much more about the underlying historical and political – and ultimately emotional issues between the Vietnamese American community and Vietnam, and my feeling that this particular politics of the most hard core anti-Communist of Vietnamese activists were not representative of Vietnamese American sentiment. I mean they’re representative of a certain segment of the population, but the problem is that this segment wants to represent the entire community and says this is what we think about this issue, not only specifically but also symbolically with the larger issue of Communism in VN and Vietnamese American.

And I wanted to get across - my feeling is that actually many Vietnamese Americans are much more pragmatic, and that there’s a diverse array of voices there; how to quantify this, I don’t know, that’s not my task or expertise. But there’s enough diversity that we can safely say that this particular position is one of many –

the anti Communist hard line position, and that there's actually more important issues that the Vietnamese American engage with in terms of VN, things that are happening in VN. Including economic issues, human rights issues, how Vietnamese people see things – that kind of stuff – and we haven't had that conversation primarily because that segment of the community tries to articulate everything through anti-communism. (Victor N.)

This attempt to articulate the community's interests through one voice is, as one might expect, a function of one's status in the community. In answer to the question: "Who articulates what is important for a given community?" The answer is likely to be those who enjoy a position of power of some kind. In the case of the Vietnamese, this often means high-ranking military officials associated with the *ancien regime*. In his book *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora* (2005), Andrew Lam reflects on his father's way of defining himself, and how it diverges on so many levels with Lam's own attempt to create and sustain his own separate identity. Lam speaks poignantly and with empathy, of his father's tragic situation. Lam's father had been a high-ranking South Vietnamese officer, now reduced to living in a state of permanent exile. His case is singular, but there are linkages between his experience and that of many others in positions of privilege who have been severed from their pasts. Yet to the extent that he could reclaim his old identity and experience validation by others within the community, Lam's father could sustain some sense of dignity and belonging:

His interactions with Americans were all out of necessity: he claimed none of them as his friends. But a Vietnamese general living in exile in America at least knew where he stood in relation to history. His identity, even if ignominious was assured. In war, after all, there are winners and there are losers.

As a Vietnamese community began to form around him and a culture of nostalgia defines a communal ethos, Father was becoming once more a visible icon of an unfinished war. Its extraterritorial passion gave rise to a new sensibility in the Little Saigons sprouting up and down the California landscape and across the United States, and it was one that dwelled on tragedy and grief. To be a fully active part of

this community, members mourn, protest, and, on occasion, gather en masse to demand a communist-free homeland. In this society, Father was a VIP, a guest at political rallies, an engaging speaker during Tet festivals, a symbol of lost heroism. I once saw him on a dais on the fairground in Santa Clara speaking with passion, his audience in rapt attention. He was spurring the collective to continue on with the good fight against their mortal enemy – the communist regime – even if only in thoughts and words. (pp. 33-34)

As I have indicated, Lam clearly understands the difficulty of his father's situation – or loss of situation, to put it more accurately. At the same time, one strongly senses Lam's understandable lack of respect for his father – and not simply because he is a dinosaur whose frame of reference continually revolves around the past. What is even more important, as Lam sees it, is his father's attempt to sustain an identity in exile by pandering to his fellow exiles and their own sense of loss and concomitant need for recognition. The most effective way to do this, of course, is to continually stir up tensions within the community, such as the demand for a "communist-free zone". This represents an important voice in the community, to be sure, but to focus on these issues to the exclusion of all others means that disparate voices will be silenced.

According to Brubaker and Feischmidt (2002), the meaning of cultural objects (in this case, the flag) is always ambiguous, and therefore, will always be contested. We have seen the Vietnamese flag(s) means one thing to Andrew Lam's father and other like-minded Vietnamese in the diaspora, but it might mean quite another to some of my subjects, for example, who either do not see the flag as particularly important, or who - as we will see - disavow nationalism entirely. Brubaker and Feischmidt frame the issue in this way: "It is now widely agreed that the meanings of such cultural objects are not fixed, given, or uniquely ascertainable, but instead are created and recreated in different

times, places, and settings through a series of ‘interactions’ or ‘negotiations’ between the objects and their socially situated, culturally equipped, and often politically engaged interpreters” (Hall, 1980; Griswold, 1987a, 1987b; Liebes & Katz, 1996; as cited in Brubaker & Feischmidt, 2002, p. 700). Thus, it is necessary to ask: To what extent do those in positions of power (or in the case of Lam’s father, influence would be a better word) impose their own definition of the situation? The following interviewee raises concerns about this kind of reductionism:

The Vietnamese have retooled it to symbolize heritage and culture and make it a symbol that isn’t threatening as opposed to being politically controversial in that sense, because it is not going to conflict with another nation’s flag. So that drive across the U.S - I’ve studied the flag resolution movement and I think it’s really interesting how different people use the language of heritage, culture, language, tradition and community in an effort to get the flag recognized, and really the recognition of the flag doesn’t have any physical impact. It doesn’t make any policy changes – it’s purely symbolic. Yeah, it’s still being hoisted especially around April, people still salute it, sing the anthem along with the American flag. I have reverence for it; it has sentimental values for me, but I wouldn’t organize around it. (Therese D.)

Other participants as we will shortly see, do not favor nationalistic symbols at all, because of their belief that nationalism itself, no matter whose point of view is espoused, is ultimately a divisive element:

I don’t support either flag, just as much as I don’t support the reverence that one feels for the American flag. I’m an anti-nationalist and I think that the flag is merely a potent symbol for nationalism. I understand the feelings behind the support that one feels for a flag, but for myself, I don’t subscribe to these sentiments at all. (Laurie D.)

The following interviewee elaborates further on the issue of nationalism as a potentially destructive force:

I discuss this with my mom all the time – it’s like who cares; it’s a piece of cloth. My mom is, again, pro-nationalistic and I’m just anti anything. It’s funny because I’ve seen it fought out so many times. My first lecture at UT, my institution right

now, I suggested I was going to give a talk and made up flyers about Vietnamese – well I wanted to give a talk about Paris By Night, or popular media – something like that – and so what did they do? They made a bunch of flyers without my approval – with the flag with the star.

My work doesn't talk about the flag; there's no nationalism, which is a whole different thing that's not necessary connected to - and then the semantic of the flag is really problematic. But you know in California, there have been measures that are put into law that only recognizes the flag with the stripes. It's been institutionalized in California and other states - but Americans and the rest of the world still recognize the flag that is currently flying. So I think it's an interesting symbolic contestation, but for me personally, it's a piece of cloth. (Niah L.)

The attitudes of the two aforementioned interviewees were unique in many ways, because their rejection of ethnic group boundary maintenance and identity construction is at variance not only with most members of their own group, but also with the attitude on this issue as expressed by many social scientists. For example, the work of Ohad David and Daniel Bar-Tal (2009) focuses on the importance of maintaining a collective identity and thus distinguishing how one's group differs from "others". The flag is but one manifestation of one's collective identity of course. David and Bar-Tal, like Robin Cohen (2008), view the experience of sharing a "common fate" as foundational in terms of collective identity. When one speaks of a "common fate" then, it refers to the sense that one's future is inextricably linked to the fate of all members of one's group. It is, therefore, a function of one's group membership rather than one's private individual identity, although the two often coincide. The experience of sharing a common fate leads to higher levels of connectedness with members of the group, and following from this, to a greater willingness to act on behalf of the group. Such altruistic behavior towards the group is discussed in Gary Johnson's (1997) work on the evolutionary roots of patriotism. For Johnson, patriotism is a form of altruism and it is important to maintain some degree

of patriotism because without it, the group would cease to exist. The language used to describe “belonging” is emblematic of this: “members of a nation are perceived as a foliage of a single tree, an extended family that had grown from one seed. Phrases referring to family relations, such as ‘our fathers’ or ‘our sisters’, which affirms a belief in the unity of the collective, are common within the national discourse” (Johnson, 1997, as cited in David & Bar-Tal, 2009, p.362). In addition, political discourse tends to emphasize that in spite of internal divisions, ultimately all members of the collectivity will act as one, especially during times of crisis. As well, the “common fate” discourse assumes that members of the community living within the state (if it is possible for their members to do that) and those living in the diaspora form as single unity as well. They are one national community.

David and Bar-Tal (2009) further argue that group members need to be aware of the uniqueness of *their* collectivity and how it is to be distinguished from others. Thus if members were asked, “who are we”, their answer might include reference to shared “cultural beliefs, values, norms, symbols, territory, language, and more...”(p. 362).

David and Bar-Tal see this as a so-called “positive” way of defining national identity. On the other hand, identity is also defined by delineating boundaries between “us” and “them”, and this “negative” approach to the issue is necessary as well: “This is an essential mechanism for the consolidation of one’s own identity because without it the collective members’ perception of themselves as a unique unit is meaningless. Nevertheless, nations differ in their emphasis on the extent and quality of the (sic) differentiation from other nations” (p. 362).

As we have seen, all of my interviewees do not share David and Bar-Tal's emphasis on the need for delineating between self and others in order to consolidate group membership. They concede that this need not be done in an antagonistic manner; it may even involve a dialogue between disparate entities and a desire for mutual recognition (Sagi, 2000, as cited in David and Bar-Tal, 2009, p. 363).

At the same time David and Bar-Tal argue that the need to differentiate oneself from others, to map one's place in the social world is essential to the human experience. We need to categorize in order to discover who we are. If there is no *self* without *others*, then we must be able to recognize those who are similar to us and those who are different from us. David and Bar-Tal make use of Brewer's (1991) optimal distinctiveness theory, which suggests that at the macro level, the collectivity is formed when two needs – that is the need for inclusion and the need for differentiation – are satisfied at the same time (Brewer, 1991, p. 66; also cited in David & Bar-Tal, 2009, p. 359). Human beings, by definition, need to be inclusive – we need to belong. But if we need to belong, we also must specify exactly who belongs and who doesn't. The more group membership is important to us, that is, the more inclusive we become – the more the need for differentiation increases. David and Bar-Tal point to the on-going need among various ethnic groups to distinguish between the real or original members and those who are newcomers (Papademetriou, 2006; Schieruo, Hansen, & Castles, 2006; as cited in David & Bar-Tal, 2009, p. 363). These differentiations can be made on the basis of culture, language, customs, territory, and other characteristics, which express the collective self. However, these entities and the meanings we impose on them are not static, but rather are

continually in the process of construction and reconstruction. They are negotiated through our interactions with others inside the groups as well as those outside of it.

David and Bar-Tal make a strong argument for the necessity of such cognitive mapping, but some of my interviewees express concern about whose agenda is being served under such circumstances and the possible danger of the imposition of a false consensus. For some of them the flag is an important issue, although they recognize that not all Vietnamese may feel the same way. Once again, we are confronted with the uncomfortable uncertainty of the intellectuals:

I'm not as invested in it as other people do and so I don't have a problem with either of them. I think it's important to be sensitive to those who care about that issue, like the older generation - and so to fly the flag in places where more people still care about the issue. People always say that when you go to VN and you come back, people will think you're a Communist sympathizer, but I don't think it carries the same...it's not as loaded for me in terms of the history and memories and all of these things, as it is for other people. And that's not to say that I don't care or I'm not empathetic with people who are invested in these issues – it's just I don't... I'm not as invested in these issues. (Kira H.)

My next respondent is a sociology professor based in California. He left Vietnam as a 3-year-old boy in 1979 with his family, and spent 3 years in refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines. The family was sponsored by a charity organization and finally resettled in a small town in the state of Mississippi in 1982. His view on the flag issue is equally distant from the community view:

Because I'm not so interested in the political structure, I mean it has been interesting to observe and to keep myself up to date, but I think this must have started to happen 10 or 12 years ago – my view is that people should just raise what ever flag they want (laughing) – you know, freedom of speech, freedom to express...I think it's all a question of symbolic belonging for a lot of Vietnamese people who raise these flags and I think those questions are certainly important for certain people – you know the question of symbolic belonging to the nation, to the history. (Hubert T.)

This next interviewee, however, is less concerned with the flag and more with other aspects of Vietnamese identity, which resonate with him forcefully. This subject is from the older generation but left Vietnam after high school to study in Canada in the late 1960's. His view regarding the war and the communist regime took a turn when he arrived in Canada. He shared with me that he was originally against the communists when he left Vietnam, because he thought they wanted to invade the South and take away all the freedom. However, he later saw the war as a much more complex issue. He became opposed to the American involvement and thought the Americans were “too imperialistic in their approach” and were in it for “their own interests”. While he acknowledges the atrocities and failings of the communist regime, he also pointed out the shortcomings of the South Vietnamese government as well. Thus, the yellow flag - which is imbued with both anti-communist fervor and patriotic sentiments for the old regime of South Vietnam - does not hold the same meaning for him:

I am neutral on this issue. The flag doesn't mean much for me. I see the flag as a symbol of an old country and I have no problem saluting it at meetings, as well as singing the old national anthem. What's more important are Vietnamese culture, the songs, and Vietnamese identity... I value this very much. This is something that has shaped me and will stay like this - this identity is with me until I die. I see the flag as symbol of VN now. The Communist side also fought in the war, it's their country, they have the right to fly their flag, and I have no problem with it. It is the official flag that represents VN - It is VN now. (Val T.)

This final interviewee is very engaged and demonstrates the force of David and Bar-Tal's argument concerning the need for both inclusion and differentiation. It is important to note that, like Andrew Lam's father, this interviewee is a community leader, whose position is tied to the community politics and its prevailing anti-communist sentiments:

The yellow flag is very important. It's the beacon of hope, the beacon of freedom and democracy that we all look forward to. The VCF (Vietnamese Canadian Federation) over the past 32 years has always displayed the yellow flag and even the Canadian Citizenship Minister, Jason Kenney, accepts the yellow flag as the flag of the Vietnamese community. So it's a very important symbol- a beacon of hope for a new VN, for a democratic and free VN. The other one, the red flag represents the atrocities the Vietnamese Communist regime committed. It's blood – a bloody flag – red reflects blood. Whenever I see that red flag, I think of all the atrocities the Communist regime committed against Vietnamese people over the last 60 years. So I will not accept that. So you see, wherever you go, in social events, the Vietnamese community always displays the yellow flag. (Camden L.)

As indicated by the interviewee above, it is particularly important for the Vietnamese to remember and commemorate their past, and to do so publicly. This is understandable, and even expected, Yen Le Espiritu explains, “given the innumerable losses suffered by Vietnamese diaspora, and the ongoing erasure of *South* Vietnamese accounts of the war, not only in the United States but also in Vietnam... a necessary retelling of their history, lest it be forgotten by the American public and/or next generation of Vietnamese Americans”(Espiritu, 2006, p. 340). As one female interviewee observes: “The older generation is very sad. They feel that the U.S had betrayed us and are traumatized about it”. She further explains that people in the older generation still need “to process and voice all of this out, but no one is listening, especially in the U.S culture – they don't want to hear about them losing – you don't want to hear if you're on the losing side”. Thus, “the Vietnamese community is not being heard – the U.S doesn't want to hear it; it reminds the U.S of the fact that they need to be accountable” (Laurie D.). Vietnamese scholar Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong poignantly sums up the situation this way: “In such an economy of mourning, Vietnamese Americans as refugees occupy the position of self-mourners because no one else mourns us”(Nguyen-Vo, 2005, p. 170).

It should be emphasized that the need to preserve the collective memory is enhanced if it can be carried out in a form, which transcends not only historical but also spatial limitations. To be physically present at a commemorative event has a great impact, of course, but that is not always possible. Technology (such as films and videos¹⁰⁰) allows for a kind of mass memorialization – potentially, all members of the Vietnamese diaspora community can participate, if only from a distance. Of course one must raise the question that if such events are continuously available to us – if they are no longer “occasions” – they may lose some of their significance, but that could be a fair trade-off.

Eyerman points out that work of Atom Egoyan is a good example of such “remembrance”. This Armenian-Canadian filmmaker has devoted considerable attention to the genocide of Armenians by the Turks in 1915 – an event that has become integral to their national identity for almost 100 years, in spite of the fact that they do not have a specific “place” to call “home”(Eyerman, 2004, p. 70).

As we have seen, there are deep divisions within the Vietnamese community regarding how history is to be understood and transmitted. How do intellectuals navigate such tensions and divisions, and is it possible for the intellectual to be both an autonomous individual and a member of the collectivity? The work of Jerry Gafio Watts on Ralph Ellison will illuminate the difficulties involved in attempting to construct a dual identity. What strategies might intellectuals employ in order to transcend the constraints imposed upon them, and to what extent are these strategies successful? We will explore

¹⁰⁰ Entertainment videos such as those from *Thuy Nga Productions* and *Asia Entertainment* often promote different political themes through messages, songs and images that evoke strong sentiments and nostalgia for the past, which help people maintain a connection to their history and to the lost homeland to which they long to return.

these questions in the next chapter where I develop the concept of the *diaspora intellectual self-concept* (DISC).

CHAPTER 7

The Diaspora Intellectual Self-Concept (DISC)

“Where there is power, there is resistance.”

- Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality 1: An Introduction*

As we have seen, the flag controversy is extremely important for the Vietnamese community. The conflicts it engenders are often vocal, and even violent, but it is also necessary to explore the inner tensions felt by my respondents. The flag debate is played out publicly. It is an exterior aspect of the Vietnamese identity in the diaspora, but my interviewees experience conflicts within themselves – yes, in relation to their public roles – but nevertheless, it is interior and therefore must be dealt with by them based on a personal decision making process. Admittedly, we do not make important decisions in isolation. They are always made within a social context, but within the parameters available to them, human beings have a range of possibilities, which they may explore. Such exploration and decision making is not arrived at without difficulty. I wish to examine this sometimes painful process engaged in by my interviewees, as they attempt to navigate the complexities involved in reconciling their personal and public selves.

In the last chapter, I have pointed out and discussed some of the ways in which members of the Vietnamese diaspora sought to mobilize memories and to commemorate their past - but how do my interviewees feel about this? Here I wish first to gauge their thoughts on such commemorative practices (e.g., the building of monuments and the constructions of museums as sites for remembrance and commemoration) in the Vietnamese community and any tensions which participation (or non-participation) may

cause for my interviewees. A number of them applauded the idea and believed that the act of commemoration is important. As one female interviewee from Canada points out: “I love the idea of commemorating the Vietnamese community in any form. I think they're often monuments/museums to honor Vietnam War veterans, so it'd be nice to see more focus on refugees and their experiences” (Jacqueline L.). In a similar way, the following interviewees stress the unifying function of commemoration:

Commemorative practices are important in every culture. It helps preserve the past and promotes dialogue. For relatively newer immigrants, such as the Vietnamese, I think it serves many purposes including giving the earlier generations a purpose to strive for, and the later generations, a door to their past. It can create unity in working toward a common purpose. The mere process of raising funds is an accomplishment and to see the projects come to fruition is a victory. (Lenise N.)

I think that it is great. Vietnamese people, in general, are attached to their birthplace, their roots, and their ancestral village and are very proud of achievements by their ancestors. The commemorative practices will enhance this pride, to remind younger generations about country/village history and their roots. It's a way to unite people and enhance their identity, their patriotic feelings towards the country and give them a goal, purpose for living. (Lavon G.)

I think the museums and monuments are important. Refugee communities have few relics, and it's important to create something that is tangible and has history and can last. I think that concrete investment, whether temples, churches, parks, etc, serve as a cultural and historical touchstone that serve immediate purposes as meeting places for people in the Vietnamese community now, and for future generations can cycle back to. (Duncan N.)

They seem to be performing a unifying function. For example, the monument of two statues -- ARVN and US -- in Westminster commemorating the war seems to be a unifying event. It's also one place where the ARVN soldier is remembered. These are things that a community does to celebrate its historical markers. The Jewish community, for example, helps fund holocaust museums. It seems pretty standard practice for a community with the funds to fund things that commemorate significant events in its history. (Laurence C.)

As the interviewees above indicate, commemorative practices serve many positive functions, especially in terms of consolidating group identity. Within the Vietnamese

diaspora community, there is still a great amount of emotional attachment to the past, which is understandable given the tremendous losses and struggles its members have experienced. Moreover, as I have mentioned before and as many Vietnamese scholars (e.g., Thu Huong Nguyen-Vo, Yen Le-Espiritu, and Thuy Vo-Dang) have also pointed out, the South Vietnamese account of historical events has been conspicuous by its absence both at home and abroad. Thus, the community's persistent efforts to memorialize the past serve to counter this "erasure of its history, gesturing toward the U.S. betrayal of its former allies as well as the failure of Vietnamese communism"(Duong & Pelaud, 2012, p. 250). As one female interviewee writes in her response to my follow-up question on her thought on commemorative practices: "...these would be helpful since Vietnamese abroad who were associated with the Republic of Vietnam do not have any official monuments/museums since their country fell in the aftermath". She also points out that recognizing the past might also "help them to become assimilated in their adopted countries" (Hannah N.).

The account from a female interviewee below speaks to this issue of inclusion and the need for "spaces" where the Vietnamese diasporic community can participate in "conversation" with the larger American public when it comes to idea of remembering the Vietnam War:

Generally speaking, monuments and museums can be a psychologically healthy part of remembering and understanding the past... I've long thought that there is a vacuum for Vietnamese Americans with respect to public spaces where they can participate in the American conversation and the public remembering about the Vietnam War. Would a former ARVN veteran or a family member of one or the widow of one feel welcomed or acknowledged at a Vietnam War memorial? When they fought in the war, they were not Americans, but they are certainly now and so are their families. The continued elision of their participation in the war can only further cement the

insidious idea that Asian Americans are not part of the American fabric and are perpetual foreigners. (Moreen T.)

Being “closer” to the community in Southern California, and having studied and written about the issues of war and memory within the Vietnamese diaspora community, the account of my next interviewee also speaks to the need for the voices of the Vietnamese to be included in the larger discourse of the war. However, he also points out the problem of “exclusion” in this struggle for inclusion:

They are responding to their exclusion from both American memory and Vietnamese memory. In American memory, they do not count as "Vietnam veterans" who can be commemorated in American memorials or buried at Arlington. In Vietnam, their cemetery has been neglected and parts of it razed. So they have a strong incentive to remember themselves, although the irony is that they also forget those people or events that they consider to be beyond their concern. That said, there is a range of emotion in their monuments and museums, from the heroic celebration of the soldier in the Vietnam War Memorial of Orange County to the mournful and sorrowful tone of the Vietnamese Museum in San Jose. (Victor N.)

A young female interviewee from the U.S also supports this idea of documenting the past for the Vietnamese diaspora community, and to make sure it continues for future generations. She feels it is especially important to have this history told from the Vietnamese perspective rather than from the American point of view:

I think it's great to document our past and to make sure that our cultural and immigration history is well documented so that later generations can learn from them. I think it's may be especially healing for Vietnamese refugees to have the opportunity to tell their story the way they want to tell it. So much of their story has been appropriated by the U.S. and told from the U.S. soldier perspective instead of from the Vietnamese perspective. (Nehole T.)

In a similar vein, another interviewee reflects on the community's deep emotional attachment to the past and the home country, and the strong desire to pass this on to future generations:

For a refugee community who (sic) still has deep emotional connections to their home country like the Vietnamese, these kinds of monuments and museums certainly make sense. They promote ethnic solidarity, educate the younger generation about their ancestral history, and keep the flames of activism and resistance alive. In terms of the actual content of such commemorative practices, I don't expect them to be completely objective and instead, they are probably designed to present one side of the story. (Charles L.)

While this interviewee recognizes the importance of maintaining a connection to the past, he raises the important question regarding the “content” of memorial practices (e.g., who or what should be remembered and how to remember or represent the past), but more crucially is the struggle over who should make such decision. Commemorative practices are often imbued with individual biases and personal/political agendas. An exercise of power is thus inevitable. The following account delves further into this issue:

I think of them like I would any commemorative activities. I reflect on how they are efforts to advance a particular narrative of the community or nation...I tend to be critical of the kind of vision they advance, and the versions of history they try to preserve as reflecting a particular set of interests and perspectives (to the exclusion of others). The narratives don't resonate with me, or my vision of being a Vietnamese Canadian. (Mallory P.)

One female participant who, in the chaos of those final days of the war, was barely three years old when she became separated from her mother and came to the U.S with her father and five older siblings, explains her support for commemorative practices in the Vietnamese diaspora community. However, she also points out that this need for “inclusion” of stories from the South Vietnamese side is also incomplete, as it has not taken into account the role and participation of women in the war. Thus she calls for the inclusion of women’s voices in this larger public discourse as well:

The commemorative practices of the Vietnamese community... are important for this community to lay claim to the space that is U.S. national culture. I am thinking

specifically of the ways that the monument in Orange County of the ARVN¹⁰¹ soldier who stands alongside the American (or white) soldier is key for those who participated in the war effort to feel recognized for their participation in a war that divided their country so bitterly. In my opinion, it does the impactful work of commemorating the comrade-in-arms who does not receive any or very little attention in U.S. representations of the war in political or cultural discourse. But it is still a local and insular effort. Meanwhile, the Vietnam War for many Americans is a “mistake” and a “tragedy” that should not be repeated in the wake of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Also, as a feminist, I see that the war from the South Vietnamese side is still a masculinist discourse about those who won and lost and those who died and survived. Most of those commemorated are men. I would like to know more about how women experienced war and how they survived during wartime in the South. Such stories do not get produced as much or do not get circulated as much. (Laurie D.)

Laurie’s comments speak to the different, and perhaps even competing, dynamics at work. On the one hand, we see the influence of the past on the present and the future for some members of the community, especially those with ties to the South Vietnamese government or military. On the other hand, her declaration that she is a “feminist” points to the influence of the present on her perception of the past. This position is shown by many of my interviewees, who are of the younger generation and who have been - to a large degree - socialized in the West. Unlike in the Confucian tradition, Western institutions of higher learning encourage freethinking and questioning of received knowledge. Ironically, however - as Laurie points out - those in positions of power do not always apply this exercise in reflexive critique to their own situations. Laurie emphasizes that most narratives on the war, even if supposedly “liberal” in their orientation, nevertheless proceed from a masculinist viewpoint. They do not carry critique of this war – or indeed of war in general – far enough. As Laurie argued, more reflexivity is needed. The war was not a tragedy simply because the Americans lost or

¹⁰¹ Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or South Vietnamese Army.

the South Vietnamese lost, or because soldiers on both sides were killed. It was also a tragedy because so many innocent people, especially women and children who had no say in the decision making process, were killed as well – and for the most part, they are not even commemorated

My next interviewee, a U.S born Vietnamese writer who has recently made Canada her new home, shares her skepticism about these communal activities, even though she recognizes the their positive contribution for the community as well as the greater public:

As with most things, I think the devil is in the details. In theory, I don't see any problem with a commemoration of April 30th. In fact, it is beneficial for the world to be reminded of the longstanding wounds of war. Of course, it's probably a fine line between remembrance and instigation, and one that gets crossed often, given how high emotions are likely to run. (Beatrice T.)

An older male interviewee, also a Vietnamese Canadian, elaborates on this problematic nature of such practices:

I believe commemorative practices are generally good for the Vietnamese-Canadian community. They reminded us of our roots and would be a positive binding element for the present generation as well as for future generations. The plan for building a museum on “boat people” is a good example. What is however regrettable is that these projects can be turned into events for expressing political views that are sometimes a bit extreme, and there is no room for recognizing anything good from the present situation in Viet Nam. Perhaps with time, there will be a more objective approach to commemorative practices, and then these will reach out to a larger percentage of the Vietnamese Canadian community as well as the Canadian public at large. This will foster support for the projects, and will allow us to accomplish much more as an integral part of the Canadian population. (Val T.)

Similarly, another male interviewee who is from the older generation also expresses support for commemorative practices in the diaspora community. However, he is against these practices when they are used for political purposes:

I'm all for the construction of monuments and museums in the Vietnamese community, unless they have a divisive political message. To commemorate the

Vietnamese settlement in a certain area, or the diaspora in general, is great, but to have a monument for “Bac Ho”, or for that matter, for the old South Vietnamese regime is much less so! (Dustin T.)

My next participant explicitly speaks of reverence for the past and the importance of passing it on. As he explains: “I think that these commemorative efforts are very important because they are intended to pass on to young generations the memories, experiences of the previous generations. They also tell the public the reasons why we have come here in the first place” (Camden L). Further support regarding the importance of commemoration and its deeply emotional significance, especially for older Vietnamese, is offered by my next interviewee, a journalist/community activist from Canada. He elaborates on a particularly poignant incidence, which could have been handled with greater sensitivity:

I think it is extremely important in maintaining our Republic of Vietnam heritage, history, and culture. I personally see how important even the smallest commemorative gestures are to the older generation of Vietnamese Canadians who fled to Canada for freedom. I’ll give you one recent example: I was hosting a charity concert and the Canadian and Republic of Vietnam flags were on stage. During intermission, an elderly gentleman, dressed with full navy medals on his suit, gingerly made his way towards the stage to talk to the stage manager. He politely asked the stage manager if he could move the two flags closer to the audience because they were partially blocked from view. The stage manager denied the request. I chatted with the veteran right after and moved the flags for him. It never ceases to touch me, whenever I see that type of patriotic passion from the older folks that sacrificed so much to come here. And then I worry, and wonder if that passion dies with them. The only way to somehow ensure that the passion is handed down to the next generation is through cultural programs, community events, education...and commemorative practices. (Theodore H.)

The account above illustrates the “seesaw” nature of commemoration. To the extent that one is emotionally engaged in the life of one’s own group, and derives one’s identity from it, it becomes increasingly difficult to be critical of it. Participants become

enmeshed in “restorative nostalgia”, the memory work of the exile. On the other hand, as emotional engagement decreases, it becomes possible to consider one’s past reflexively. “Reflective nostalgia” allows community members to consider their situation with greater openness and acceptance of ambiguity. Viet Thanh Nguyen discusses the tension between “restorative nostalgia” and “reflective nostalgia” in his article: “Refugee Memories and Asian American Critique” (2012).

At the outset, the author notes that he is working with the ideal typical construct. It would be extremely difficult to find “pure” examples of either restorative or reflective nostalgia in the real world (Nguyen T. V., 2012, p. 913). Restorative nostalgia, in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s view, often holds us in its “velvet grip”(p. 912). It is compelling because it posits a past and a national identity, which has meaning and unity – one people, one history, one future. This is comforting, to be sure, but Nguyen reminds us that the minute we become pragmatic, we also become reflexive – at least to some degree. Most Vietnamese (and other immigrants) know that they will probably not return to their homeland. Even if they could, it would not correspond to their cherished vision of it. They must instead, focus on practicality and adaptation: their jobs, their children, and their practical day-to-day activities. As they do this, inevitably, they move away from pure nostalgia, and towards realism and critique. Yet, Nguyen recognizes that even the most practical among us carry within ourselves traces of sentimental, restorative nostalgia:

Thus measured and tailored by the past in dissimilar fashions, restorative and reflective nostalgics seem to stand opposed. While restorative nostalgics perceive the past via nationalism’s corrective lenses, reflective nostalgics deploy another set of optics in which the bright light of the nation’s dominant memory is dimmed. Darker

lenses allow reflective nostalgics to see a “rubble of recognition” otherwise lost in the glare, the countermemory of all those minor peoples and cultures struck down by the ruler of narrative... It is the focusing of the nostalgic gaze through both restorative and reflective eyes that allows the study of Southeast Asians in the United States, a population sharing some common history but in other ways hard to define.(pp. 912-13)

As the accounts of my interviewees above have indicated, commemoration has many positive functions, but it is important to distinguish between restorative nostalgia and commemoration, which is uncritical of the status quo - and reflective nostalgia, which is much more nuanced and questioning in its approach to history. In his other discussion on memorial work and the ethics of remembrance, Viet Thanh Nguyen (2013) reminds us that the act of remembering one’s own version of the past is, at the same time, also the act of “forgetting of strategic others – the enemy outside, the minority within, the ideologically disagreeable...”(p. 151). This does not mean that the act of recalling one’s own (while disregarding others) is an *unethical* one. In fact, the author argues that “it is ethical and necessary to recall one’s own, even with the danger of possibly serving jingoistic or imperialist purposes. If we do not recall our own, then who will?”(p. 152). However, we need to realize that this very same question also “justifies the other side’s memorial work as well. When it is the other side recalling her or his own, we do not have an ethics of recalling the other, just an ethics of recalling one’s own as seen from another side” (Ibid.). Viet Thanh Nguyen thus proposes a kind of memory model called “doubled ethical memory”. As he explains it:

My model of ethical memory identifies two ends of a spectrum along which the argument over defining just memories slides: the ethics of recalling one’s and the ethics of recalling others, with each end looking suspicious and even unethical to its competitor. While acknowledging the validity of these singular ethical positions, I propose a model where both are necessary. In a doubled ethical memory,

remembering is always aware of itself as being open-ended and in flux, rather than being satisfied with fixity and conclusiveness.(p. 151)

Viet Thanh Nguyen's idea of ethical memory points to the need to be more inclusive of other voices, which he sees as necessary to build a collective memory. This is often not possible to achieve, of course, because something is always forgotten. One's memory is selective and thus forgetting is often necessary to individual memory. However, what is important in a doubled ethical memory is that we are aware of this forgetting:

What is necessary for a doubled ethical memory the awareness of forgetting, which reminds us that all classes and groups are invested in strategic forgetting for the sake of their own interests. This includes the ironic exploitation of the sometimes pious injunctions about "always remembering" and "never forgetting" the terrible events that define particular populations. The "always remembering" and "never forgetting" of supposedly unspeakable historical traumas in fact always require something else that is uncomfortable to be forgotten and rendered literally unspeakable. Haunted by the inevitability of forgetting something, ethical remembering constantly tries to recall what might be overlooked.(p. 154)

In their article: *Vietnamese American Art And Community Politics: An Engaged Feminist Perspective* (Duong & Pelaud, 2012), authors Lan Duong and Thuy Pelaud offer a radical critique of the idea and practice of commemoration itself which they see as inevitably shot through with patriarchy, misogyny, and a supposed reverence for the past, which in their view functions as a thinly disguised mechanism of control.

Duong and Pelaud's work highlights the difficulty in doing research or engaging in community activities in a different voice. According to these two scholars, any forms of commemoration that challenge the received version of events, will be met with strong protest. Both scholars hope that their research will result in a dialogue with more conservative members of their community, but this has not happened yet. Instead, as organizers of the previously discussed art exhibit in 2009 called *F.O.B II: Art Speaks* in

Santa Ana, California – home to the largest Vietnamese diaspora community - they have been subjected to graphic forms of humiliation which seem intent on discrediting or degrading the messenger, rather than engaging intellectually with the message:

The protests and the posturing by local politicians were characterized not simply by nationalism and anticommunism, however. The semiotics of the protest were steeped in patriarchal rhetoric and sexist imagery aimed at disciplining the curators and organizers as women... Sometimes during the protest, the anticommunist activist Ly Tong, well known in the Vietnamese community and revered by some as a hero, taped a pair of red panties and a sanitary napkin on Brian Doan's picture, *Thu Duc, Viet Nam 2008*.(p. 247)

Thus we can see condemnation and rejection, not just of practices but also of ideas in its most vehement form, using the strongest possible images. As Lan Duong and Thuy Pelaud see it, the more regressive members of the community feel somehow defiled by images they refused to accept or even try to understand. The perceived level of threat is so intense that it is translated into a kind of “moral panic” which compels the anticommunist faction of community to characterize the “others” as disloyal betrayers. Thus it becomes permissible to expel them, just as one would attempt to expel any form of danger. As is so often the case, the existence of a shared enemy fosters stronger bonds within the group, but at what cost? In the “imagined community”¹⁰² – which is really a fictitious world – everyone speaks with one voice. Yet we cannot all speak with one voice, and the attempt to impose unanimity points not to the rightness of one's cause, but ironically, to the insecurity of one's position. As the authors explain it:

¹⁰² Lan Duong & Thuy Pelaud used this term in their article to refer specifically to the Vietnamese community of “Little Saigon” in Southern California. In quoting Christian Collet and Hiroko Furuya (2010), they write: “We contend that Little Saigon has evolved beyond the physicality implied in the place concept and is better conceived as an ‘imagined political community’: a label for a nation that is inventing new traditions and building a public culture to achieve recognition from the state”(Duong & Pelaud, 2012, p.263).

Exemplified in acts of shaming that center on women's sex and sexuality, these actions by anticommunist Vietnamese Americans show how the community's borders are managed by way of punitive and public displays of anger. Positioned in between U.S and Vietnamese nationalistic narratives of the war, of how it was lost and won, this community lacks cultural power within a national or international context, but it nonetheless maintains a symbolic order from which members can be cast out, particularly if they are seen as collaborating with the enemy or with outsiders.(p. 248)

“Familial politics”, in fact, have their roots in the Vietnamese language itself. As I have discussed in the methodology chapter, the Vietnamese language emphasizes order, hierarchy, status, and the concomitant notion of the family, which extends to the whole group. This can be seen as a form of “altercasting” which imposes a heavy burden on “family members”, especially women, in terms of piety and obedience. According to Lan Duong and Thuy Pelaud (2012):

This ideal of the community is highly problematic since it assumes that the spaces of the family and community are always safe and that members need to prove their filiality to the communal family. As a result of these dynamics, a “paternal hierarchy” of power, in which gender inequalities are reproduced, becomes sanctioned and normalized within community politics.(pp. 248-49)

One of my interviewees expressed similar concerns about the rigid and patriarchal nature of the Vietnamese community, which in fact, led her to avoid participating in communal activities. As she explained:

I have been to several of these communal activities and they are always run by the hardline elder males who bully the younger generation into making demonstration of shared values. In other words, the ones I've been to and read about don't seem “authentic” in that they are organized by men who are able to morally shame everyone else into pretending that they care. (Lanya G.)

This respondent is evidently pessimistic about the possibility for change. However, Lan Duong and Thuy Pelaud do propose a tentative solution. They critique exclusionary practices, and instead advocate the creation of spaces that would allow for the recognition

of diverse voices. In the authors' view, the diasporic community needs to go beyond attending to the more obvious political issues, and should instead focus on the other hidden concerns, which are often obfuscated by the endless focus on communism/anticommunism.

Vietnamese language may propagate the notion of one big and supposedly “happy” family – but every family has its dysfunctional aspects: “Indeed, such narratives about the community as one’s family circulate within a smaller public but nonetheless work to prohibit other kinds of narratives – for example, narratives dealing with sexual abuse, domestic violence, and corruption, which attack the sanctity of the family and its hierarchical nature”(Duong & Pelaud, 2012, pp. 251-52). Some of my interviewees have also spoken of the need to go beyond the usual debates within the community, which may sometimes be sterile and repetitive, and instead turn the group’s energy to more practical concerns:

Whatever we do, let’s make sure it makes a difference too. I know that personally I would like the Vietnamese to have a bigger voice. I want it to be the community that people support, that people know us as a united force. Right now I don’t think we have that... we don’t yet because I think there’s still too much fighting within our own community. Everyone wants to be on top and they forget – they kind of lose track of what the goal is. (Lenise N.)

I’m very sensitive to the past and to an individual’s experience in history... I do hope though, that the Vietnamese community abroad can move beyond this sort of knee-jerk, anti-communism. One can still be very critical and work towards furthering human rights, exposing human right abuses in VN and so on, and do it in a way that’s more constructive... open dialogue with VN and not this sort of community knee-jerk anti-communism that at times, ends in violence, which I don’t like that kind of mob behavior. (Hannah N.)

When people come - and this is going back to the whole idea that when there are art exhibits or things from VN and people boycott them and demonstrate - again, it’s their right to do it, but ... really, is that the way that you want? I mean if you truly

want to affect change in a “Communist Vietnam”, the best way is to have some sort of cultural exchange, you know. You don’t change people’s opinions by isolating them, you do this by having a dialogue & it’s foolish not to want to have a dialogue. (Moreen T.)

The Vietnamese community...if they still insist on the flag issue, they are really holding on to conflicts that are long buried...that have no relevance anymore to our real lives today and our real concerns today... Vietnamese immigrants’ experiences in Canada today don’t revolve around that flag or the issues that that flag represents. They revolve around finding work, dealing with poverty, and domestic violence in the community... real issues that get ignored when they focus on the flag. (Mallory P.)

Thus these interviewees also recognize the need for critique and reflexivity, although they know that it is not easy to put theory into practice. That recognition in itself is a source of tension for Vietnamese who advocate change – especially when it is not the kind of change favored by hardliners.

Another interviewee also speaks of the need to be “practical” and to make a “real” difference when it comes to political activism in the community, whether it involves a commemoration of the Fall of Saigon on April 30th or a political rally. However, he seems to favor a more radical kind of action that would lead to change instead of an exchange of dialogue: “Doing a rally for a rally, no – if tomorrow there is a movement, a real movement of people going back and fight to have real independence, yes. I don’t want to have what we call in French ‘politique de salon’ – people talk just to talk” (Harris N.).

As has been indicated, Lan Duong and Thuy Pelaud (2012) are in favor of the creation of “free” spaces, which would allow for narratives previously characterized as threatening or marginal, at the very least – yet they’re aware that as activists and academics, it is challenging to deal with such controversies. Every potential action needs

to be evaluated from the viewpoint of how it will be perceived and received by others:

For instance, when we invite a writer or an artist from Viet Nam to visit our universities, we must think about whether or not we will be protested. As professors and community organizers, we deliberate carefully, deciding on distance, safe locations where protesters may not be able to come, or estimating the size or nature of potential protests to gauge whether or not a film, artwork, poetry reading, or other showcase warrants an invitation... We are apprehensive about losing support of those we aim to work alongside if we are labeled communists.(pp. 253-253)

The tensions generated as a result of this dilemma are obvious. If we cannot choose whose work we should display or sponsor, or the ideas we would like to express, then we have no real agency, at least not in this situation. When we have to be constantly aware of how every action will be “interpreted”, we are in effect being silenced. Interestingly, Lan Duong and Thuy Pelaud do not advocate an “exit” strategy as a way of dealing with these tensions, but rather remain determined to continue with both activism and their work as academics. I have discussed their suggestion that ideological spaces need to be opened up within the community. They also strongly recommend that in the future, cultural products of all kinds should become artist-centered, rather than community-centered. Again, this means respecting the artist’s point of view, even if one does not necessarily agree with it, rather than trying to impose a monolithic discourse about what is considered “right”. Another aspect of the artist-centric approach is the awareness that “they must be informed ahead of time about decisions that concern them, particularly on such aspects as programming, framing, sponsorship, and location. If a controversy is expected, “artists need to know” (p 254-255). Ultimately the goal of this artist-centric approach is a move away from the rigid communist vs. anticommunist framework and towards *healing*. This healing process cannot be achieved without difficulty, but Lan

Duong and Thuy Pelaud believe it is possible. Pelaud explains how she does this in the classroom context:

Healing is a key component of my pedagogy. In my teaching, I address the role literature plays in individual and collective healing, but healing moments can occur in the classroom itself as well. In order to move away from a communist versus anticommunist framework, I begin my Vietnamese American literature class with a two-week session on Vietnam's history that includes the Chinese presence, French colonization, the 1954 Geneva Conference, Agent Orange, the Cold War, Vietnam's civil war, refugee policies, human rights violations, and Vietnam's wars after 1975. The class examines issues of colonization, civil war, immigration, and empire while simultaneously analyzing the role of external and internal racism, sexism, and homophobia in shaping identities.(pp. 255-56)

As we have seen, reverence for the past and ancestor worship are integral to Vietnamese commemorative practices. Lan Duong and Thuy Pelaud have demonstrated the constraining effects of such practices. Dina Wardi also explores this issue with great sensitivity in her book "Memorial Candles" (1992). Her research on the children of Holocaust survivors speaks to the long lasting effects of loss and dislocation, as well as the heavy emotional responsibilities imposed on them by their elders.

The recognition that trauma, according to Wardi, is not necessarily a lived, first-hand experience is of course common to many groups whose members have been brutalized and decimated – in particular the children of Holocaust survivors. Wardi argues that the children of these survivors suffer from a plethora of psychological difficulties, including the sense that they must somehow "rescue" their parents, that it is their responsibility, in the conduct of their own lives, to impose meaning on their parents' (and their people's) tragedy, and in so doing, to attempt to transcend it. Yet because this is by definition an almost impossible task, these children of survivors also suffer a lack of self-esteem, a sense of futility, and a profound inability to trust others. Wardi recounts her reaction to

reading the work of her relative, Primo Levi. This compelling account must be quoted at length:

When I read this book (*Is This a Man?*) in Italian, the language of the author as well as my own native language, I was overwhelmed by intense emotion. I especially remember what I felt when I read one fragment in which the author describes how he was once standing in the yard at Auschwitz, as naked as the day he was born, in the middle of one of the selections, suddenly I stopped reading, struck by a razor sharp thought: Instead of Primo, or at his side, could have stood my grandfather, my grandmother or some other member of my large family, who had been saved from this fate only by a miracle. At that moment of revelation I was overwhelmed by a strong wave of pain and sadness I actually tried to force myself to return to the imaginary picture in which my grandfather and grandmother were standing naked in the shower in a queue of people marching to their death. The feeling of terrible humiliation and anxiety caused by this picture was so strong that I couldn't bear it, and had to detach myself emotionally from the picture. Only after some time was I able to return to it. At these moments it seemed to me that I had experienced a tiny taste of the intense feelings and anxieties in the depths of the soul of every child of survivors. (p. 4)

Wardi's work was a powerful reminder of my own reaction to a similar experience – the unexpected and violent distress I felt when watching a film on Vietnamese boat people entitled “*Journey from the Fall*” (Tran H. , 2007). Interestingly, although Wardi herself is not technically a child of Holocaust survivors, she was able to empathize so strongly with the experiences of her family members that she took their pain into herself, into her psyche. My experience, in contrast, was firsthand, and I think it is important to recount some of it here. In doing so, I do not intend in any way to diminish the relevance of Wardi's account, or the narratives of her subjects, but rather to add another “voice” which substantiates her research. In a very real sense, then, I am my own subject.

This film, “*Journey from the Fall*”(Tran H. , 2007) recounts the experiences of a Vietnamese family who were separated after the fall of Saigon in 1975. The father, Long, is imprisoned in a North Vietnamese “reeducation” camp, and his wife, son, and mother-

in-law escape in order to start a new life in Southern California. At first, Long gives up hope that he will ever see his family again, but when he realizes that they are still alive, he becomes determined to be reunited with them at any cost.

Some of the film deals with the problems associated with relocation and assimilation, and those are real enough. But what resonated most for me were the scenes of life on the boat, the struggle for survival, and the arbitrary and random nature of that reality. To realize once again that there is no such thing as safety or continuity was staggering, and I could not watch the film in its entirety in one sitting. I had to dissociate myself from the events it depicted in order to protect myself psychologically.

As Dina Wardi (1992) has argued, the dilemma faced by the children of Holocaust survivors is that they can never be good enough. Their parents were the original victims of this tragedy, but in putting their children in the position of having to live for their people and validate their existence, the victim/oppressor relationship is carried forward into the next generation. Yet these children can never undo history, they can never obliterate their parents' pain, and therefore they will always feel inadequate, and somehow fraudulent. In the case of many of my subjects, it is not only their parents who have imposed these expectations, but the larger community as well. The account from an older male interviewee is a testament to this on-going effort to place responsibility of carrying *their* history forward on the younger generation:

It's very important for young people to understand the real issues in Vietnam... issues that they would not know if they go for a 2-3 weeks visit. They have to live there to know, and many don't have that opportunity. The older generation is aware of this because we had bitter experience with the communists... but not young people.

In 2007, VCF (Vietnamese Canadian Federation) organized a workshop called “Passing the Torch”, which aims at passing the responsibility for leading community to younger generation and set up “youth action committee” to help with this effort of transferring responsibly from older generation to younger generation. (Camden L.)

Undoubtedly, the burden of the past weighs heavily on a number of my interviewees as they expressed the sense of responsibility and obligation they feel towards “their” history, whether or not they had experienced it firsthand. The fact that they are here serves as a constant reminder of how the war has determined their lives, and the sacrifices made by their parents and the elders in the community. An account from an interviewee of the second-generation illustrates this point:

I feel there’s part of me that wants to be able to move on from that history... I think it’s important to move on and to have Vietnamese American go back and work in VN and feel tie to the place and to move from the past. But on the other hand...I think it’s an important history that cannot be completely obliterated from history books. Nancy Bui has collected some 500 stories on this – and even her, she’s been called a communist sympathizer – the Oral History Project is an important part of this moving forward. I think the politics around whether you’re Communist or anti-Communist...they inhibit us from moving forward. I understand where they’re coming from and I can sympathize with them, but it’s hard...even someone like her, doing this kind of work, has a hard time moving forward.

I think it’s important to remember the history and archive it and make sure it’s written in history books – but I also think it’s important to be able to move forward, and I think about ways in which VN is growing and developing really rapidly and where that’s going now and what our ties are because I think very few people will ever feel fully American. In many ways whether we were born here or not, a part of us will always be Vietnamese, and so it’s important to have these ties and these relationships and not constantly be stuck in this past. (Kira H.)

This interviewee is expressing considerable ambivalence and tension, which she is not fully able to resolve: “I feel that there’s a part of me that want to move on from that history”. She is also aware that much of the discourse regarding history is shot through with often unexpressed power relations. As she points out, any attempt to inject a new voice into the conversation is often met with misinterpretation or hostility: “the Oral

History Project is an important part of moving forward. I think the politics around whether you're communist or anticommunist... they inhibit us from moving forward".

It is evident, then, that one of the difficulties involved in commemoration for the Vietnamese diaspora community revolves around the communist/anticommunist controversy. Dina Wardi's "Memorial Candles" – that is, children of the Holocaust survivors – were forced to carry tremendously difficult psychological burdens, but their experiences were not politicized in the same way as that of the younger Vietnamese in North America. The Vietnamese are not in total agreement about how the past should be viewed, and are still struggling to have their "voices" heard and included in the general discourse regarding the Vietnam War. The Jewish community in North America, although perhaps to a lesser degree than the Vietnamese, also experiences conflict as to how they should commemorate their past. For example, not all members of the Jewish community believe that a constant focus on commemorating the Holocaust is generative or productive. However, it seems the difference with Jews is that there are no competing narratives of the causes of victimization, as there are for the Vietnamese.

In the *Canadian Jewish News*, October 8th, 2014 issue, the role of commemoration, and the controversy surrounding the most "effective" way of doing this from the point of view of the Jewish community in North America, was analyzed by Toronto author David Bezmozgis and American writer Arnold Eisen, a leading authority on Jewish-American life. They participated in a panel discussion on the possible drawbacks of a continuing emphasis on Holocaust commemoration as the lynchpin of Jewish identity in modernity. The panelists emphasized that different commemorative practices should be implemented,

which would focus less on the past, and thus be more inclusive. Younger North American Jews might understandably balk at a form of identity construction, which revolves around memorializing events that (although admittedly crucial and tragic) are remembered first-hand only by their grandparents. Thus, Bezmozgis proposes Hebrew language and literacy training as a way to draw North American Jews into their culture:

We should be teaching Hebrew even to Jews who aren't religious... to hear the culture, go to the land, listen to the music. If I was in charge of North American Jewry, I'd say, 'Here's a bunch of money, let's put it toward teaching [young Jews] Hebrew.' I would give less money to Holocaust education, which I don't think is the priority now, and less money to Israel. We in North America need it more than they do, I think.¹⁰³

The above quotation speaks to not only the controversy regarding commemoration – because Bezmozgis' ideas may not be accepted by all members of the Jewish community – but also the need to “reinvent” cohesion rituals, as Durkheim would remind us. Memorial practices that resonated with past generations may no longer be relevant, and as the accounts of my interviewees have demonstrated, this is an issue that also confronts members of the Vietnamese diaspora community. Bezmozgis' suggestions refer as well to the costs of assimilation and the resulting loss of identity, which may occur when the group becomes too integrated into the host society. New strategies need to be considered which will strengthen boundaries and return group members to the fold, albeit in a fashion that reflects the demands of modernity.

Now would be a good time to return to the previous discussion of Robin Cohen's (2008) work on the characteristics of the diaspora and the effect that the experience of being part of the diaspora has on its members. As we will see, although Cohen's work

¹⁰³ <http://www.cjnews.com/canada/division-fixation-past-threaten-jewish-future-panelists>

highlights factors that are common to many diaspora communities, there are important differences between his account and that of the Vietnamese community, which should be emphasized. The following overarching characteristics are especially important, as Cohen sees it. First, there is expulsion from one's homeland as a result of a catastrophic event (the destruction of the Jewish temple in 586 BC, the Armenian genocide of 1915, the potato famine in Ireland in 1848 (Cohen, 2008, pp. 2-3)). Cohen recognizes as well that the inability to sustain oneself economically in one's homeland can be equally traumatic and therefore, speaks to the "labour exile".

The victims of such catastrophic events are therefore forced to disperse, often to several countries. The effects of such dispersal on a psychological and group level are profound. They include idealization of the lost homeland, a collective dedication to remembering and honoring symbols and events of which some members may have no lived memories, and a commitment to either the possibility of returning to the homeland (which seldom happens) or the restoration of the homeland to its former glory. The assumption is that all members of the diasporic community share the same perception of events – that they are bound together by their shared history, which revolves around the experience of victimhood – and that they will consolidate and honor this experience as they move forward. The shared sense of victimhood and identity is especially crucial, because as Cohen (2008) argued, one of the central aspects of the diasporic experience is the sense of separateness, of never being fully accepted by the host country. This sense of separateness may be well founded, but at the same time, it is an important aspect of

boundary-maintenance, and therefore many members of the group, especially older ones, may be reluctant to relinquish it.

Cohen's (2008) analysis of the characteristics of the diaspora is predicated on the assumption that it can be treated as a real entity with empirically measurable and verifiable effects. His position then is that the boundaries created by this experience are real, and that they are the result primarily of the host country's unwillingness, in varying degrees, to accept these displaced people. On the other hand, as Rogers Brubaker (2005) points out in his article "The 'diaspora' diaspora" (sic), boundary maintenance requires separateness and therefore, members of a diasporic group may in fact resist assimilation, rather than being excluded from the host community.

Thus, self-segregation may be necessary if one is to speak of the diaspora as a distinctive community, with transnational linkages (p. 6). Brubaker further points out that there are countervailing forces at work, which contribute to almost inevitable boundary erosion. It *may be* that it is in the interests of some community members to see that boundaries are maintained, even through self-segregation - but this is extremely difficult to achieve in modernity with its strong counter-currents of porosity and difference. Brubaker quotes Stuart Hall on this issue: "diasporic experience...is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by the conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*" (Hall, 1990, p.235, italics original, as cited in Brubaker, 2005, p.6). These counter-currents are especially important for the literature on transnationalism, which often combines earlier studies of diaspora and seems to gain popularity in recent years

among interested scholars. It is expected that any diasporic group would want to maintain its boundaries, but the more relevant question to consider here is “to what extent and in what forms boundaries are maintained” intergenerationally?

Brubaker (2005) offers an even more provocative question when he considers the reality and verifiability of the diaspora itself. He argues that diaspora scholars may have gone too far in reifying this concept – that in fact some of its central tenets such as strong sense of group identification and boundary maintenance may be unworkable. If we are *all* in the diaspora, does that mean that *none of us* are in the diaspora? Brubaker thus argues that rather than seeing diaspora as a real entity, it may be more useful to see it as a metaphor. As Brubaker himself expresses it: “an idiom, stance, and claim”(p. 1). In part, this is due to an extension of the meaning of the term, as Brubaker sees it, “to accommodate the various intellectual, cultural, and political agendas in the service of which it has been enlisted. Thus has resulted in what one might call a ‘diaspora’ diaspora – a dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space”.

Whether one agrees with Cohen’s (2008) perspective or Brubaker’s (2005) more radical position, it is necessary to consider the ways in which the Vietnamese experience is different from others. As has been mentioned, there is no overarching agreement on how commemoration should take place within the Vietnamese diaspora community. In addition, the North-South divide among the Vietnamese has been and continues to be crucially important. It is in fact a measuring stick, which determines how one’s relationship will proceed. This is clearly not the case with the Jewish diasporic

community, although there may be difference to some degree on issues such as support for Israel, ultimately they are all Jews. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, are deeply divided in terms of their support for the communist regime. Those whose families left the North in 1954 (when Vietnam was divided) as part of “Operation Passage to Freedom” are perceived very differently from those whose families remained in the North, and those divisions are still relevant today. As I mentioned in the methodology section of this thesis, one of the first questions my older subjects asked me indirectly revolved around political affiliations and the North-South divide. My accent, for example (even when I speak in English) reveals that my family was originally from the North. However as Catholics, we relocated to the South through the “passage to freedom” program cited above. My interviewees would ask where my family was originally from, if they had moved to the South, and when did I escape from Vietnam. My answers to these questions would establish my “credibility” in their eyes. In other words, it was necessary for me to “prove” that I was an “authentic” refugee with the right political affiliations.

This brings me back to my previous discussion about the Vietnamese diaspora, which is a deeply divided community. This, of course, is not unique to the Vietnamese alone. Other groups, such as the Jewish community, are also divided over the issue of commemoration of their history, as I have pointed out earlier. For many of my subjects, there is the sense that they have been, and continue to be, “twice victimized”: by the war and by their own community. It is evident that the Vietnamese diaspora community has not been able to put the war behind them - and it is reasonable to expect that this situation will continue for some time. As Viet Thanh Nguyen writes: “All wars are fought twice,

the first on the battlefield, the second time in memory”(2013, p. 144). This on-going war for the Vietnamese, particularly the population in the U.S, involves not only efforts to resist communism in the homeland, but also the suppression of other voices. Such exercise of power and domination (on the part of certain segments in the community) seems ironic given the fact that they have gone through so much in order to have these democratic ideals of free speech and free expression. How then do the subjects in my study navigate the tensions and challenges involved in carrying out their role as intellectuals/artists - which demands freethinking and critique, and as members of the community, which stresses loyalty, relationships, and obligation to one another? Here, it useful to return to the work of Jerry Gafio Watts(1994).

It should be noted that the issue of tension is experienced differently, of course, depending on one’s “location” (e.g., proximity, level of attachment or engagement, and types of professional/intellectual activities) in relation to the community, the size and characteristics of the community, as well as the conditions and practices of the host society. As I have discussed earlier, Vietnamese community in Canada in general tends to be less politicized than their U.S counterparts. Several of my Vietnamese Canadian respondents indicated that they do not experience any tensions from the community, even in big cities with a large Vietnamese concentration, such as Montreal or Toronto:

In the Vietnamese community, I’ve experienced nothing but support and opportunities to help the community from both elders and young people. No tensions, only support for what I do. And I’m very appreciative and thankful to be part of such a great Vietnamese community. (Theodore H.)

I don’t feel any tension or conflict. Among the people I know who are Vietnamese, many are professionals, some with PhDs from Europe and/or Vietnam. (Mallory P.)

I don't have much contact with different organization and associations in the Vietnamese-Canadian community. I occasionally meet with some of the community leaders and our relations have always been cordial. In fact, some of my good friends don't share my views on the current situation in Viet Nam but we still communicate with each other and share our experience related to our country of origin. (Val T.)

I consider that tensions, big or small, are always present in any working situation, in any country. I see it as the natural outcomes of human relationships. So I do not let it bother me. If I cannot avoid it, I will work around it... In NL, the Vietnamese community is small, so there is little tension as everyone is busy with their own work and no two individuals are working in the same field. (Lavon G.)

Returning to Watts (1994), the issue of distancing is one that figures prominently in his examination of Ralph Ellison's life and work, which I have already discussed briefly in connection with the "victim narrative". Watts is of course primarily focusing on the black/white issue and the various strategies of identity construction exemplified by Ellison and other black intellectuals, including Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin. Ellison chose to adopt, insofar as it was realistically possible, a disengaged approach to identity construction. For Ellison, the issue was always the effort to become the best writer he could be and not the best "black" writer. He attempts to transcend any effort at reductionism, which denies his true self, and as he puts it, renders him "invisible". As Ellison (1995) expresses it:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. (p. 3)

This, then, is the burden of such reductionism. When one is defined by one's identification with a "victimized" group (which necessarily would have well-delineated boundaries) by definition it becomes almost impossible to be an individual with your own intellectual work, your own interests, even your own personal problems. The self

becomes subjugated to the demands of one's role. Ellison recognized that in order for him to write and to live in the way that was necessary, even essential for himself, he would need to dissociate that "self" from the expectations of his group, even when that meant holding himself apart from other black writers with whom he would *presumably* identify. When offered the chance, for example, to interact or brainstorm with other writers such as Toni Morrison, Albert Murray, and James McPherson, Ellison respectfully declined:

It's an interesting grouping for writers whom I respect; still I am by instinct (and experience) a loner. There is no question...that we share what Malraux has termed a "collectivity of sensibility"... But as to our constituting a school, that kind of thing – no. I don't think it's desirable even though it offered one relief from the loneliness of the trade. For when writers associate too closely there is a tendency to control one another's ideas. I'm not implying that association is itself necessarily a negative matter, but I suspect that the loneliness of writing causes us to seek for a kind of certainty among our peers – when very often it's the *uncertainty* of the creative process which leads to new insights and to unanticipated formulation. (Watts, 1994, p. 111)

Watts points out that "heroic individualists do not take their cues from the masses"(p. 111). He explains that this does not necessarily mean that they never align themselves with a particular group, but rather that they do not wish to be *forced* into doing so. If they choose to do this, it will only be done on their own terms and not as a result of a perceived sense of obligation - and certainly not because the expectations of others impinge on their behavior (Ibid.).

For Ellison this meant that in order to truly devote himself to being a writer, he could not be generous with his time, his devotion to "black" causes, or with anything else that would require him to metaphorically cut out pieces of his flesh in order to please others. In that sense his method of identity construction was at variance with the approach taken

by Langston Hughes and much closer to the approach of James Baldwin. As Watts observes, Hughes was an example of a writer who capitulated almost entirely to his group's demands for involvement. Some of this may have been pleasing to Hughes as well since it allowed him to receive attention and validation, but in Watts' opinion, this came at the cost of his productivity as a writer. Watts (1994) explains the distinction between Hughes and Ellison in this way:

In many respects, it is Langston Hughes and not Baldwin who represent the polar opposite of Ellison. In reading Rampersad's biography of Hughes, I was struck by the almost manic public intellectual life of Hughes. In effect, Hughes was too busy to write well. He would read to school children, attend every black person's opening night, write encouraging book reviews, appear on radio talk shows, and try to broker young black writers into print. Hughes was a literal one-man black intellectual infrastructure. Moreover, Hughes understood the value of being a public intellectual. In some respects, Hughes paid a terrible price for his generosity, for he was never able to hone his craft sufficiently. (pp. 112-113)

As has been mentioned, James Baldwin recognized the difficulties in this situation, and in order to cope with them, would distance himself – not only psychologically, but also physically, by leaving the United States:

In order to write, you have to sit down and concentrate on that. Which means you've got to turn your back on everything else. It is impossible to do that in the situation in this country now...

For me it was necessary to move out so that I could see it because you don't see the situation very clearly when you are in it. You can't. You spend all of your time reacting to it, resisting it or resenting it, but you are not able to obtain any distance from it. Everything is too urgent. It is a matter of life or death. You must react everyday to what is happening. But that is no way to write a book or a sentence. (As cited in Watts, 1994, p. 113)

Watts admits that there may be a middle ground between the hyper-generosity or hyper-involvement of a Langston Hughes, and the relative disengagement of Baldwin or Ellison. In this connection Watts mentions Lorraine Hansberry, Ishmael Reed, Alice

Walker, and Amiri Baraka. But in Watts' view, the problem with attempting to navigate the so-called "middle ground" is that for intellectuals and artists, the need to compete and to be recognized may supersede the demands imposed by their discipline – which requires almost unending focus, devotion, and solitude (Watts, 1994, pp. 114-115).

Several of my participants opt for this "distancing" position, because it is extremely difficult for them to be "objective" in their work. This is generally the case in areas with a large concentration of Vietnamese, particularly in big U.S cities:

As a journalist I sometimes recuse myself from stories involving the Vietnamese community because I know in being objective-and having to present both sides of the story-- I will be judged by the community as being pro-(other side). For example, I never covered the anti-communist protests in Orange County because I knew that people with passionate views will [*sic*] see my presenting of the other side as "taking sides." Being objective - the core of journalism-- is not something extremists recognize. I believe the community sees me first and foremost as a Vietnamese, THEN (emphasis in original) a journalist. (Lenise N.)

The narrative above is a good illustration of the tensions that many of my intellectual subjects experience due to expectation from the wider Vietnamese community. They are expected to act as "representatives", as the "voice" for the community and to speak out on causes that the community believes in – but this often clashes with their own understanding and beliefs, and their roles as intellectuals. Another female subject, a professor from the U.S, elaborates on this issue:

I find that my role as an academic, I'm often expected to speak for the community when I'm in the university setting, and when I'm in the community, they look at me – of course Vietnamese prioritize – they like the degree right, 3 letters besides your name, that prestige that it affords, so they do like the association of me with the university as well, because that's something that they can claim. So I understand that drive to claim someone as their own who's made it well in the mainstream institutions.

For example, when the *Nguoi Viet Daily News* had an article about the Oral History Project - they're syndicated.... and they printed the article about the project,

but they also printed a picture of me that they found through the UCI communication. So they used that photo really big on the front-page with a huge logo from UCI next to my head. So I'm seeing the kind of driving force in the Vietnamese community expecting you to represent them. (Therese D.)

For a community that has been deeply scarred by the war, the emotions are still very strong and deep for a many of them. Even the sight of something as simple as the color red, which generally represents happiness, celebration, and luck in Eastern and Asian cultures (e.g., Chinese and Vietnamese brides wear red on their wedding day and money is given in little red envelopes as gifts during Lunar New Year), is taken as a communist symbol and can stir violent reactions:

I was the faculty adviser the now defunct [Vietnamese] Student Association (VSA) at [Sacramento] State. We used to work very closely with the [Vietnamese] community here in the Sacramento area, especially on fundraiser during Tet Ta¹⁰⁴, Tet Trung Thu¹⁰⁵, etc. The last time that we worked with the community, our students were accused of being communists. Apparently, they put together an Ao Dai show and had red as the background. You can probably finish the story. VSA, as a group, decided never to work with the community again. I supported their decision. I find some of our elders to be so much less mature than our younger generation. (Hal N.)

It is not uncommon for Vietnamese students to experience a sense of rejection and suffer ostracism, even in their best efforts as putting what they've learned in the classroom into practice. As Thuy Pelaud (2012) points out: "...Vietnamese American students run the risk of being blacklisted in the community they sincerely want to serve as a result of their community organizing"(p. 257). She provided this poignant example to illustrate the seriousness of this problem: "in an effort to experience their culture more directly, Vietnamese American students have gone to Viet Nam to volunteer for humanitarian organizations, only to discover when they return that they were now seen

¹⁰⁴ Tet Ta = Lunar New Year

¹⁰⁵ Tet Trung Thu = Mid-Autumn Festival

and treated as traitors by their community” (Ibid). In another instance, a student was even disowned by her own family when it was found out that she “supported her professor in bringing the current socialist Vietnamese flag to a community college” (Ibid). The student was asked to “move out immediately” and was told, “she was no longer their daughter” (Ibid).

Some of my participants experience tensions not only at the community level but also in the classroom environment. The overseas Vietnamese community has become more diverse in recent years due to changes in immigration patterns and characteristics of the immigrant themselves. In the past, the majority of Vietnamese came as refugees or under the category of family reunification. Now we see more and more Vietnamese arrive as international students, skilled workers, or through marriage. Many of these “newcomers” were born after the war and are from a more well to do background - and in the case of Vietnam, this often means having connections to the current government. Thus, their views about events in the past and community politics regarding the homeland would be different from those who fled communist persecution. Thuy Pelaud(2012) explains the difficulty of teaching students about empowerment through the study of racism and the analysis of their own experiences in America in a diverse classroom:

But as a teacher of Vietnamese American literature, I find that the idea of ethnic empowerment is not enough when working with a student population whose parents have experienced civil war. This is exacerbated by the fact that I have more international students from Việt Nam with each passing year. In the same class are students whose parents were imprisoned after the war and yet other students who were born and raised in postwar Việt Nam and are more ambivalent about communism. In extreme cases, students have physically attacked one another as a result of their differing political ideologies.(p. 256)

In a similar way, an interviewee below reflects on the two types of situations that

could create tensions for him in his role as a university professor. As was the case with T. Pelaud, the classroom can also be a political battleground. As well, even though this subject is not physically close to the community, his intellectual work is not always immune from criticism:

There are two potential situations that might involve some tension. The first is in terms of dealing with Vietnamese Americans, particularly older ones who tend to be more opinionated and "activist" in their position in opposition to the current government in Viet Nam. Although I have never really encountered any such situation (perhaps because I live far away from Little Saigon, or any of the large Vietnamese American communities in the U.S.), it's conceivable that some of them may object to parts of my research and/or teaching that they perceive to be sympathetic to the Vietnamese communists. If something like that ever happens, my plan is to basically ignore it. As the popular idiom goes, haters will be haters.

The second potential situation of tension, which is on the opposite end and which I have experienced, is dealing with Vietnamese nationals, especially international students from Viet Nam studying in the U.S. Although I don't have a comprehensive summary of them, my guess is that most of them come from privileged backgrounds in Viet Nam and/or have some ties to the Vietnamese government. As such, they tend to have their own skewed understanding of the Viet Nam War that favors the communists. There have been a couple of instances in which, in meeting them for the first time, I told them that I was from Sai Gon and they said, "Don't you mean Ho Chi Minh City?" and I firmly replied, "No, I mean Sai Gon" after which the conversation basically ends or at least doesn't move past superficial pleasantries. In those situations, I basically don't have the energy to engage them in a prolonged debate about the war, so unless they show genuine curiosity about learning more about the war from the South Vietnamese perspective, we basically end up agreeing to disagree. (Charles L.)

There is another interconnected issue that must be addressed here, and it is one that as I have already noted, is sensitively explored in the work of Andrew Lam (2005). Lam is a Vietnamese-American writer/intellectual, who has in some ways constructed his identity based on the (supposedly) hegemonic values of his adopted country – that is, the importance of individuality and freedom – but he cannot fully disengage himself from his

past, or from the expectations of his family, in spite of his avowed desire to be a free, creative individual, rather than a representative of his community. Lam writes:

There is that treacherous space between the traditional “We” and the ambitious American “I” where we had to navigate. Then there is that struggle against the constant thread of discrimination and racism. There is, more importantly, the constant search to define and redefine ourselves in a pluralistic, global society that remains at best ignorant and at worst hostile to our presence, our histories, our biographies, our stories. (p. 45)

Therein lies the conflict: is it really possible for anyone, even the most committed artist, to live autonomously, without the support of his or her group, at least on some level? And if we are speaking of the artist/intellectual, in a politically charged situation, as Watts (1994) does, the endeavor becomes even more ambiguous. As Watts recognizes, *some* artists (such as Ellison) wish to forgo the responsibility of acting as a kind of group mascot, because the obligations this role carries are so heavy, that one’s individuality, one’s freedom, and even one’s ability to work are undermined. Yet to repudiate this role – to refuse, for example, to speak on behalf of one’s tragically victimized people – is to repudiate one’s group as well. Again it must be asked: is it really possible to do this, and what are the consequences for one’s identity? My interviewees’ responses revealed a range of experiences and coping mechanisms. Although quite a few of them opted for the “exit” strategy, advocated by Ellison, not all of them chose to do this. At the same time, few of them were comfortable with the level of commitment and activism manifested by Lan Duong and Thuy Pelaud (2012). The following interviewee has experienced pressure from the Vietnamese community, but has chosen to delineate her own boundaries:

The Vietnamese American community in NYC is not as populous, vocal, and organized as it is in Orange County, San Jose and Houston. The tension I feel here as a Vietnamese American writer is therefore often from organizations that attempt to

cast me in the role of expert, not even on the topic of Vietnamese Americans but on the topic of Vietnam and the Vietnamese. I have had to explain that I am not fluent in Vietnamese, that I am not necessarily up to date on the political and social issues in Vietnam, and so on. I resist strongly these attempts to thrust me forth as an expert. I am qualified to comment on, write about, and opine about a variety of topics, but those topics are for me to define. (Moreen T.)

Thus it is evident that the strategy employed here is not one of complete exit, but rather a cautious approach, which allows this interviewee to maintain a good deal of autonomy in the face of community pressure. As she said: “I am qualified to comment, write about, and opine about a variety of topics, but those topics are for me to define”.

The need to define oneself according to one’s own standards is also expressed in the following interviewee’s remarks. She does not wish to completely disregard her community, but nevertheless feels unable to capitulate to prevailing notions of what a “Vietnamese American writers” should be:

Yes, I have experienced tensions in my role as a writer. This has lessened over the years as the population ages, but when I began writing, in my early 20s and would travel to do readings, if I encountered other Vietnamese, they would often ask, very early on in the conversation, when I emigrated. When I answered that I didn't, that I was born in the US, this immediately landed me in a category of my own, of "other." It's a familiar story, told by many individuals whose lives have been touched by war, feeling neither "this" enough nor "that" enough. It was doubly distancing, as it was true within my own family as well since my parents never encouraged me to speak Vietnamese, which all 6 of my siblings do, some in a more rudimentary fashion than others.

On an institutional level, again, this has become less of an issue as the years pass. Earlier on, when there were fewer Vietnamese American writers getting published, if I was invited to submit to a literary journal, it was often with the expectation that I would write something related to the war or "my culture." As more writers have entered the scene, the label of "Vietnamese American writer" has expanded to encompass more. This, actually, was our mission when Monique Truong and I were editing *Watermark*: to help expand the definition of Vietnamese American literature. (Beatrice T.)

My next interviewee also experienced tensions from the community due to his views on the war and issues around remembering the past. Nevertheless, he sees that in order for him to be true to himself and his role as an intellectual, he needs to free himself from the politics of the community:

My views on war, memory and politics are "progressive," from a general American standpoint, but would be "radical" in the Vietnamese American community, even "communist" in the eyes of some. My research project is looking at how the war is remembered from all sides, which from the perspective of some in the Vietnamese American community would be too sympathetic to their enemies. And my forthcoming novel is written from the perspective of a communist spy in the South Vietnamese army--I'm afraid some Vietnamese Americans will hear "communist spy" and automatically hate the novel (and me) without reading it (the novel satirizes everyone, including Americans and communist Vietnamese, but it's often the case that people being satirized will only focus on what's being said about them; so southern Vietnamese will find that they are being criticized and remember only that). I don't hold back in what I say, but I choose not to dwell in a Vietnamese community to avoid the possibility of being protested by them. (Victor N.)

The above narrative indicates that this interviewee is interested in examining the act of remembering from an implicitly Weberian viewpoint, which emphasizes the perspectival nature of truth. He recognizes that how his work is perceived is a function of one's preexisting agenda, and is keenly aware that it will not find favor with everyone. His choice is to not "hold back", but at the same time, he also opts for a *safe* physical distance from the community to "avoid the possibility of being protested by them".

Thus all three of these interviewees have chosen to take the middle ground, in between outright exit and intense involvement in the Vietnamese community. This middle ground was not appealing to Ellison who chose complete disengagement, but it is perhaps a more realistic and pragmatic approach to such a situation.

Andrew Lam's work elaborates on the complexities of group membership and the obligations involved. He offers insightful and nuanced reflections on his own experiences in his collection of essays, *Perfume Dreams* (2005) and also in his later work *East Eats West* (2010). Lam's dilemma is reminiscent of the struggles experienced by Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and other African American writers who refused to compromise themselves as individuals and as artists. Yet in his own way, like the respondents whose experiences were recounted above, his identity has been - if not completely formed by his past - at least influenced by it. Lam recounts his own path to identity formation, in particular as it forces him to confront his tragic and difficult relationship with his father. In *East Eats West* (2010), Lam reflects on the mixture of emotions he experienced while visiting the Vietnam War Memorial in Orange County. He had heard a great deal about it from his parents and was determined to see it for himself. His turbulent emotional state exemplified the tension felt by Ellison and others. Lam explains his feelings in the following way:

Standing in front of it, I was of two opposed minds. I felt something akin to patriotism for my long lost homeland re-stirred in my blood, and the deep sadness for the men who fought and died and those who survived broken; I felt, at the same time, a dire need for distance...

It occurred to me then that while one strand of history still defines those men in army uniforms and, of course, my father, another strand of history was redefining me. My father considers himself an exile living in America, part of an increasingly small population; I see myself as an American journalist who happens to make many journeys to Vietnam without much emotional fanfare.... The irony is that because he holds Vietnam so dear to his heart, my father cannot return to the country to which he owes allegiance, so long as the current regime remains in power. His is a rage left over from the Cold War with no end in sight. History, for my father and for those men who still wear their army uniforms at every communal event, has a tendency to run backwards, to memories of the war, to a bitter and bloody struggle whose ends spelled their defeat and exile. And it holds them static in a lonely nationalistic

stance. They live in America but their souls are still fighting an unfinished war in Vietnam. (p. 65)

Thus Lam's relationship with a father who cannot truly understand him, but who nevertheless defines him, at least to some extent, mirrors the symbiotic relationship between victim and oppressor elaborated by Watts. In Lam's case however, the situation is slightly different because the father represents so much for his son. He is not only a parent with whom the son identifies and therefore wants desperately to please. He is also the concretization of Lam's ethnic origin and the expectations of his community. Lam's connection to his father is thus conflict ridden and ambivalent on many levels. He feels oppressed and constrained by the very person who supposedly should love and understand him the most. This dichotomy is almost impossible to bear, as we can see, it is an experience shared by many younger Vietnamese whose self definitions are often at variance with the worldviews of their elders. Andrew Lam, for the most part, has made use of Ellison's strategy of disengagement. His own words revealed his inner pain and conflict however. An on-going theme in Lam's writings revolves around the question: Can one ever fully disengage? Will the father/oppressor allow the child/artist to do this? And if the child/artist identifies strongly with the oppressor, this may make disengagement even more difficult. The status of "victim" is akin to a childish state of dependence. For the African-American artists/intellectuals discussed by Watts, this was the case in metaphorical terms, but for Lam, this was true in both a metaphorical and a literal sense. Perhaps the only way for Lam to be true to himself was to become what his father unequivocally could not be - an American. This need to separate oneself (even if it

cannot be done entirely) from the simultaneously loved and hated oppressor is typical of the victim/victimizer relationship according to Watts (1994):

The victims are actually torn between hatred and envy of the victimizer. In desiring to be like the victimizer, the victims internalize values that are antithetical to their freedom, for in effect, they valorize the victimizer for denying their own freedom. In this sense, the victims are torn between their hatred and envy of the victimizer. The state of being torn is one in which the victims simultaneously adhere to their own values (the desire to be free and the values that support that desire) and the victimizer's values (the desire to deny freedom and the values that rationalize this domination. (pp. 18-19)

Watts (1994) identifies this internally divided state as the *victim status syndrome*, and argues that it is integral to the identity of African-Americans, but as we have seen, this syndrome is not unique to them. Andrew Lam (2005; 2010) displays a keen awareness of his own internally divided self, and this is manifested in the accounts of several of my interviewees. For example, Lanya G., an anthropology professor and a “child of the war” who was born to a Vietnamese mother and an American serviceman, reflects on her self development and her trouble relationship with her family and with the Vietnamese community: “Family members see me as a failure. They grudgingly accede that getting a PhD is an accomplishment, but for them, I am still a failure because I do not share their values, their ideas, their aesthetic”.

In response to my question: Looking back at your entire life story, from past to present to future, what can you identify as the central theme or personal philosophy that runs through it - she responded as follows:

The central theme is the downward spiral: from happy and healthy and social and sweet child to the present unhappy, unhealthy, anti-social, nasty old lady. The personal philosophy that runs through the story is this: don't let others determine your relationship with yourself.

As an Amerasian in America, an intellectual in an anti-intellectual family, a feminist in a conservative environment...I am and have always felt like an outsider. That probably shines through in many of my bitter statements. (Lanya G.)

As is the case with Lam, Lanya G. has experienced a great deal of criticism and rejection, in particular from her own family, who have vilified her for failing to live up to their notion of what a compliant daughter should be. Her family does not see her life and her professional accomplishments (a tenured professor in anthropology) as an example of creativity, drive, and determination. Rather they view her choices as a manifestation of ill will on her part - rejection, abandonment, and betrayal. This attitude has, in turn, affected Lanya's perception of herself, and is in part, responsible for her characterization of her life as a "downward spiral", although other factors such as poor health and the frustrations of academic life played into this as well.

My next interviewee, a male sociologist and part of the first wave of refugees who arrived in the U.S when the war ended in 1975, illustrates the victim status discussed by Watts and the closely connected issues involved in the responsibility of being a so-called "memorial candle". I asked Charles L. what or who has had the most positive influence in his life, he responded by saying that: "It is the academic communities of Sociology and Asian American Studies. It is within these communities that I have found much better understandings of myself and my world and where I find the most acceptance, comfort, and sense of community". One would not expect, however, that this interviewee's own ethnic group – the Vietnamese community that has had the most negative influence on him. As he expresses it:

Ironically, I would say the Vietnamese community to the extent that after I began studying Sociology and Asian American Studies in college, my ethnic identity was

reawakened and after initially rejecting it, I began to embrace my identities as a Vietnamese American, an Asian American, an immigrant, and a person of color. I then tried to reconnect with the Vietnamese community near where I lived (Orange County, CA) after basically trying to avoid them up to that point. Unfortunately, I was no longer fluent in the Vietnamese language. Upon learning of this, many in the Vietnamese community shunned and even ridiculed me. This experience was quite painful, but illustrated for me the difference between being Vietnamese, Vietnamese American, and American and how I could demonstrate my Vietnamese American identity in other ways besides speaking Vietnamese. (Charles L.)

The narrative above raises the issue of who is authentically Vietnamese. This is a question that “visible” ethnic individuals or groups often face, especially with younger generations as they become more integrated into the host society. As Vic Satzewich and Nikolaos Lioudakis note in their book *“Race” and Ethnicity in Canada: a critical introduction* (2013), there is a widespread use of derogatory terms such as “coconut, oreo, and banana” to refer to those who are brown (South Asians), black (African Americans/Canadians), and yellow (Southeast Asians) on the outside but white on the inside. Charles’ account echoes Andrew Lam’s recognition that especially for many older Vietnamese, allegiance to their country and their history can often mean that they are stagnant, that they can never “move forward”. Lam saw his father as a kind of pathetic ghost, unable to live in the world because it would mean relinquishing his identity. The aforementioned subject realizes that it is necessary to transcend such a morbid attachment to the past. An endless obsession with revenge is counter-productive. As one of Lam’s friends told him, “my success is the best revenge”. Lam (2010) notes that many of his friends, including the one quoted below, have actually returned to Vietnam, in spite of their dislike of the regime, in order to assist in the rebuilding of the country:

It is a worthy goal after all to move beyond hatred and resentment and find the resilience with which to deal with the tragedies one has experienced personally. Having been victims of the war, these people have emerged as victors of the peace. They've managed to remake themselves and go on with their lives, and more important, by refusing to let rage and thirst for vengeance dominate their hearts, some have become active agents in changing the destiny of Vietnam itself. (p. 67)

But as Lam points out, it is often difficult to let go of old hatreds and allegiances because those who cling to them may prefer to feel hatred rather than to experience the pains of loss and uncertainty:

It is true once the hatred is gone, in its place is pain. Those who cling so strongly to hatred, I suspect, are often those who fear what's after it. But it is true also that many of us have moved on beyond the old rancor, beyond that us-versus-them mentality. We have learned to absorb our pain and grief and are negotiating our positions between East and West, memories and modernity, traditions and individual ambitions, old loyalties and new alliances, such that we are in the process of creating a whole notion of what it means to be Vietnamese, a definition that is both open-ended and inclusive. (p. 67)

This “rebuilding” effort is often a difficult one to be sure. Thayer L., an engineering professor from California, recounts how he faced strong reactions from his own (Vietnamese) students when they learned that he was collecting books to send to Vietnam, which he reasoned as a good way to help “improve life for the people. The students were strongly against this and saw his generous act as “helping the communists”. It is indeed very challenging to navigate between his personal beliefs and the community politics. With a sad tone in his voice, Thayer shares that because he does a lot of work in Vietnam, he's received invitations from the Consulate General of Vietnam to attend the annual Tet celebration, but: “I never go because I see my friends protesting outside while the event takes place inside. If I go, I would feel as if I've betrayed my friends”.

Not only it is difficult to do work in Vietnam, as the account above illustrates, it is also equally challenging to engage with the Vietnamese community here in North America. Vietnamese artists/intellectuals often face strong opposition from community members for any kind of creative/intellectual activity that does conform to the dominant anticommunist sentiment. As one Vietnamese American professor shares: “When my book came out, there were bloggers in the Vietnamese community who labeled me anything from a communist sympathizer to an apologist for the vanquished Saigon regime. I opted not to engage” (Hannah N.). The art exhibit that was discussed in the last chapter is a good example of how difficult it can be to engage with the community. The event provoked prolonged protests and was forced to shut down “because of community politics and the actions of local politicians”¹⁰⁶. As I have indicated, the art exhibit was meant to showcase the creativity of young Vietnamese artists and intellectuals. To some degree, it was intentionally provocative and therefore could not be considered a “commemorative” event in the traditional sense of the word¹⁰⁷. However, it was considered inflammatory to some segments of the Vietnamese community that abuse was heaped on the organizers, and as we have seen, they were forced to cancel the event for fear of violent reprisals.

Thus it is evident that the Vietnamese community in the diaspora is generally extremely conservative ideologically and politically. This means that other voices, such

¹⁰⁶ From VAALA (Vietnamese American Arts & Letters Association) Website: <http://www.vaala.org/fob-ii.html>

¹⁰⁷ The art exhibit entitled *F.O.B. II: Art Speaks* was held in January 2009 in Santa Ana, California. The event showcased the work of over 50 visual performance artists and aimed to illuminate a “diversity of political and aesthetic perspectives” of Vietnamese artists in the diaspora. Some of the themes raised through these artworks included “sexuality, identity, refugee histories, and contemporary political issues like Obama’s presidency and Proposition 8 in California” (Duong & Pelaud, 2012, pp. 243-244).

as those attempting to be heard during the “F.O.B. II: Art Speaks” exhibit would almost inevitably be silenced. Gerry Gafio Watts (1994) discusses the consequences of rejecting the hegemonic victim/oppressor narrative, especially as they pertain to intellectuals:

The black intellectual who tries to step outside the logic of the victim status syndrome in whatever form it has assumed in his or her genre and historical moment will be called *ethnically marginal*. Such individuals are in pursuit of greater artistic freedom and human agency than that which is typically allowed under the hegemonic victim-status ideology. I use the term *ethnically marginal* to highlight their deviancy within their ethnic group.(p. 20)

Nevertheless, according to Watts (1994), there are certain ideological/creative free spaces that would permit intellectuals to transcend the “dictates of the prevailing victim status”(p. 20). Watts refers to these as *ethnic marginality facilitators*. What forms might such facilitators take? How can any of us get outside of our own skins, or escape our own histories? Watts argues that for some black intellectuals, a commitment to Marxism could be such a facilitator. If one is part of such a socio-political struggle, which involves many different people with a shared ideological perspective, then the color of one’s skin or one’s ethnic origin supposedly becomes irrelevant. In this way, the black intellectual could redefine himself/herself in a manner that no longer makes reference to old master/slave dynamics. Of course, Watts recognizes that not all black intellectuals are necessarily attracted to Marxism – Ralph Ellison, the main subject of his study, was not, and in fact, was opposed to overt involvement in political struggles in any form.

Thus, perhaps the question regarding the role of the intellectual should not simply revolve around a simplistic dichotomy of “engagement” vs. “disengagement”. Rather, as Ellison’s life and work demonstrates, perhaps the more salient question might be: What kind of engagement are we talking about here, and how does the artist manifest and

concretize such engagement. In other words, what “facilitators” can be brought to bear in the process, and must they always be political in nature? Through Watts’ examination of Ellison’s life we can see that Ellison did not want to be totally disengaged, but rather, he wanted to engage *differently*. Again, he was opposed to the more showy and obvious form of political engagement, which might actually be self-aggrandizing. He preferred to engage in a way that was more personal, but at the same time, would ask more of his readers. Thus Ellison was engaged in the struggle for black freedom in the only way he knew – through art. His “free space” was to be found in writing, because one’s thoughts can never be chained:

Ellison cherished the solitude and distance of the traditional intellectual life... Ellison would never ground his artistic legitimacy in terms of popular black acceptance. Sure he wanted black readers, but he did not believe in following their dictates. An elitist, Ellison did not take his cues from the masses. Ever an individualist, he would remain suspicious of political movements, particularly those that assumed a posture of incontestable morality... The idea of being linked to a social or political movement is seen by Ellison as intrinsically dysfunctional to his artistic life. (Watts, 1994, p. 95)

Ellison considers protest as a form of art, to be sure, but he does not believe it needs to be carried out in the public realm. He explains his position in this way:

It might appear in a novel as a technical assault against the styles which have gone before, or as protest against the human condition. If *Invisible Man* evens “apparently” free from “the ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in this country,” it is because I tried to the best of my ability to transform these elements into art. My goal was not to escape, or hold back, but to work through to transcend, as the blues transcend the painful conditions with which they deal. The protest is there, not because I was helpless before my racial condition, but because I put it there. If there is anything “miraculous” about the book it is the result of hard work undertaken in the belief that the work of art is important in itself, that it is a social action in itself.(cited in Watts, 1994, p. 79)

Artists do not need to employ their talents in the service of propaganda then, in order to demonstrate their engagement in the life of their group. The work of the Vietnamese born, award-winning Montreal writer, Kim Thuy, echoes this point, and speaks to the criticism she has received for supposedly not being “political enough”. In an interview with the Montreal Gazette on September 27th, 2014, Ian McGillis discusses Kim Thuy’s work and its political and social implication. Kim Thuy points out that she has been criticized by the Vietnamese community for failing to take a strong stand against communism:

The Vietnamese community doesn’t read me a lot, because they take for granted that they already know the story. In the case of *Ru* (her first novel), most of us here are boat people or came during that period, so the thinking was ‘It’s not a new story’. It was really only when it became a hit that the community started to be interested. Some people who read it thought that I didn’t take a strong enough stand against the communists. I got criticized for being too soft.

Implicit in Kim Thuy’s evaluation of her work and her role in the community is her recognition that she is indeed engaged in it, albeit in a singular fashion – she speaks to her readers in a voice which is not constrained by the political, but is instead her own. Kim Thuy has discovered that this voice, this particular way of unfolding her experiences, also has meaning for others:

Then there were the students who read *Ru* because it became part of the curriculum at many schools. They would come up to me and say, ‘You’ve told my parents’ story. I understand it so much better now’. It became an excuse to open a conversation with the parents. And then parents would come up to me with their children, and start telling me things. One time, I could see on a daughter’s face that this was the first time she was hearing these things. I asked her about it later and she said, ‘My mother didn’t want us to bear this heavy story on our shoulders. She thought we should feel free, we should be Canadian’.

We can thus see a linkage between Kim Thuy’s way of envisioning her role as a writer/artist, and the path taken by Ellison. Both Kim Thuy and Ellison speak through their work, rejecting the blatantly political, and opting instead for a way of communicating which is intended to increase insight and awareness on the part of the readers. In order to do this most effectively, it is often necessary to engage in self-critique, and critique of the commonly understood versions of events dominant within your group. Thus writers, by definition, are frequently ethnically marginal. If they reject the political as a means of carving out an overarching free space, which will grant them an identity apart from their skin color or ethnic origins, then it may become necessary for them to act as their own facilitators. In Ellison’s view, a writer’s “real way of sharing the experience of his group is to convert its mutual suffering into lasting value”(Watts, 1994, p. 72). When one engages in this way, it may in fact be the best proof that indeed (with thanks to C. Wright Mills) the personal is political, and the political is personal. The following interviewee, a professor from California, expresses her commitment to socio-political issues through her teaching and research:

My teaching is very important to me because I love interacting with students. I know that I fulfill certain role model function for them, for my women of color students – by being in front of the classroom, I’m already doing something important. So I take that very seriously. In my classroom as well, I take a feminist perspective – so I ask my students what does it mean in certain films when women are positioned in a certain way, and women are sexualized or when men are given the privilege to look at women. How does this reinforce certain gender stereotypes and how is it rooted in our society. So those are the kinds of questions I always ask in the classroom, and I’m always pushing students to think differently, especially about gender, and that goes to literature and film. (Laurie D.)

This interviewee also expresses considerable anger against the U.S for its part in the war and as an imperialist power in general. She thus repudiates the received version of

the U.S as a kind of benevolent rescuer: “The war has brought us here. I’m upset at the U.S, even the French before. I’m angry with the U.S.... anger fills my research.

Intellectually, I try to be academic about the war, but it has touched my life and my family in a lot of ways” (Laurie D.). As a teacher, she sees her role as helping “students see this larger picture” - referring to the impact of the war and how it affected ordinary people. Laurie thus channels her anger into socially useful, generative activities, which also provide a free space for her own self-expression, just as Ellison did in his own time.

Irene P. also uses her position as an academic to communicate with her students and to help them understand the larger social issues embedded in the experiences of refugees, like their parents - and those who are seen as outsiders or outcasts. During the course of our conversation, she shared with me the difficulty involved in navigating the education system in the U.S and to have finally earned her “spot” in academia. Much of that experience had to do with her racial/ethnic background. She expresses the importance of carrying out her role as an educator and a community activist:

Now I use that spot to help include voices of people like me and like you to be heard, to be incorporated into the fabric of this nation. There’s a lot of invisibility, so I try to convey that to the mainstream... to help students understand why their parents are the way they are – so it’s about inclusion, about being included. That’s always resonated with me because I was an outsider, an outcast. But that’s not enough. Inclusion is not enough. Fighting racism is not enough, because there’s also about adding...

My job both as an academic and a community organizer and an activist is to carve an alternative space where artists and Vietnamese Americans can come together, find strength, can articulate their identity and their story in the way that they want to without being pressured to write a certain way; because sometimes, certain stories are more valued and more publishable than others; but also include certain voices that may be in the community – there’s not too much for them; they’re excluded sometime – like gays and lesbians and mixed race, and people who try to explore different ways of being Vietnamese Americans – this also goes back to VN.

I'm trying to create space that's open to differences...to push the boundary from the mainstream to have these voices included, but also from inside the community to be more open... because the community is very polarized in terms of the politics, and that's hard for me because I always try to explore different ways, and that some time doesn't coincide politically with the community. It's the misunderstanding that's very hard. It poses difficulties when things are polarized.

So maybe in order for dialogue to take place and to move away from nostalgia, revenge, or critical identity – to share more stories with other Vietnamese outside the U.S...In some ways, making space for me also, because my family had been scattered...there are a lot of stories that are similar that could inform and distract and provide those discussion, and I think everybody will benefit from it.

Even with all her good efforts, it has been difficulty for this interviewee to feel included due to her mixed race background. With sadness in her voice, she tells me that she has been both “included and rejected by both Vietnamese and French, and others”. Nevertheless, she remains committed to making a positive change: “I'm loyal and I do work for the community, but I don't come too close... I'm very private because it's safer for me. I do the best I can to give to the community, but at the same time, I stay private”.

My next participant, Therese D., is very much aware of the importance of articulating her people's stories and is also aware of the diversity of voices within the community. She makes the point that although conservative voices are most often heard in public, there may be a disconnect between what members of the community say in public and actually express in private: “There's a public presentation of Vietnamese politics, and then there's what happens underneath that public presentation. It's how people really feel, how they live their lives, how they think, how they conduct themselves – and it's very ambivalent, very complex”.

This participant thus sees her mission as one of doing justice to these diverse voices, giving them space, and allowing for critique while simultaneously recognizing her

identification with her group and her compassion for its members. In her role as an academic, this interviewee also tries to bridge the generational gap through teaching and mentoring students - especially training them to communicate and interact with the elder members in the community:

In the intergenerational aspect, I do the brokering by teaching and mentoring my students. With the Oral History Project for example, I train students to go talk to the elders, and the elders also have the chance to interact and learn about the technology side of things from the students. It's a give and take relationship that we're developing there. It has its challenges but it's a good place to be – the in between, like you have your feet here and there so you can connect different issues. I also do the bridging through arts & education with my involvement in VAALA (Vietnamese American Arts & Letter Association).

Unlike my previous respondent, who stated that her research is “filled with anger”, the tone of this interviewee's remarks speaks to the need for inclusivity and reconciliation:

My good friend and colleague has much more critical view of the community. She is from a more distant perspective. She challenges the community to be held accountable for things that the community can be very patriarchal, violent, dismissive of a very challenging place for... Vietnamese American woman scholar to work in. I'm a bit more compassion... I feel an affinity towards this community that I would defend it. As much as I want to hold the community accountable to academic discourse, academic inquiries, and critique and challenge, but I will also stand up and defend the community.

I work with people, not hard documents, and people have feelings. Some people feel that I'm an apologist, that I'm biased because I'm so close with the community, but that's not how I see it. I feel that area studies like ethnic studies, Vietnamese studies... have been done pretty much by elitist – white male historians, and we need to correct that; we need to provide alternative analysis; we need to provide perspectives that are rooted in the community, because in the community, there are full of people who are educated, smart, intuitive, and who understand the complexity of how culture and politics are intimately tied together. I have a really deep and profound kind of respect for community folks.

I asked her about any conflict she might have experienced between her own views and those that are dominant within the community, and she responded in this way:

Yes there certainly is tension, and the issue for me – I’ve been asked to speak about one issue, anti-communism to different audiences – so how to translate what we do in the university and academic field with our theory and publication and all of that – how do we make that relevant to people that we study – how do we bring that research back to the community – that’s the question that we’re always asking. So I’ll present usually knowing the audience that I’m speaking with and knowing the issues are going to be quite different.

So in a liberal American university that expects you to espouse particular sort of progressive views about history and about race relations, and then you go back to your community and often times the politics are very conservative or it can be very limiting – how to make it work. How to make all of your training in a western institution works for a community. That’s something that not many people can do because it’s hard. But I think figuring it out as I go is the joy of this work because I continually learn from the elders that I work with... there’s no absolute. I come in with my ethics training, my background, knowing that every story is complex, every story has multiple perspectives – there’s no black and white. That helps me to leave my mind open.

What is striking then about this interviewee’s response is the success she has had in navigating her dual role - as an academic and a community member, in a manner which allows her to bring the best of herself to both of these worlds. As this interviewee has indicated, she feels it is her task to decide what is most relevant in her experience as a teacher and researcher and offer it to the community in a way that will enrich their experience and unite rather than divide.

My next interviewee also recognizes the existence of diversity within the community, and is aware that as an academic, one must respect these differences. At the same time, one must also be aware of the problem of positionality – one’s interest in a particular group or issue never arises in a vacuum, and that there are always factors, however subtle they may be, which influence our choices – as he says “... you can’t escape that positionality”.

I think as an academic, you have to learn to write for different audiences. There’s some part of my work that speaks to the interest of the community, then other part of

my work that speaks more specifically to a particular anthropological framework that's probably not very interesting to the community. I think figuring out how to speak to different audiences is important. But yes, there is always that assumption – people know you're Vietnamese American, that you're somehow representing something broader than yourself. I find it's very helpful to talk to other Vietnamese American academics about our kind of shared position during research. You know, that kind of subject position even comes up in field research itself when you go to VN.

I think a lot of academics try to remove themselves from the personal element because they don't want to be seen as “oh you're studying VN because you're Vietnamese”. So a lot of people try to distance themselves from that. But I think there's always a starting point of why you're interested in a particular place, whether you come from something of a more personal perspective that's why you're interested in the community, or whether somebody else comes from a more exotic perspective that's totally different. But there's always... you can't escape that positionality. (Ishmael S.)

As this interviewee indicates, the task of carving out a space in which one can tell stories is a difficult and challenging one, shot through with ambiguity and the need to recognize one's own biases, and perhaps, failures. As Ellison realized, it is necessary to challenge one's audience, not patronize them. Engagement in the political realm may be tempting, and some time even necessary, but as Ellison, Kim Thuy, and many of my subjects have demonstrated, it is not necessary to involve oneself in a transcendent political/ideological drama in order to make a difference. The most salient point here is that we can become our own facilitators, and as my research demonstrates, this can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Engagement takes many forms, and the old archetypes no longer apply. Watts elaborates on Ellison's position as it applies to the position of ethnic facilitator:

...Ellison's exceptional Negro is not the archetypal exceptional Negro. The archetypal exceptional Negro, based on the idea of exceptional Jew in post-emancipated Europe, is a parvenu who bases his own advancement on his distinctiveness from other members of his ethnic group who are deemed guilty of living in the stereotype manner. Ellison's exceptional blacks do not try to divorce

themselves from their ethnic group, nor do they attempt to gain access to broader white society by reinforcing the stereotypes visited upon the black masses. Instead they are the standard-bearers of ethnic possibility and, by inversion, the representative black. They are heroic black.(Watts, 1994, p. 92)

Thus, heroism need not be played out in the public sphere. It can be engaged in quietly, through the choices one makes in one's work, and the conduct of one's everyday life. Ellison believes that we can ultimately achieve "freedom" in our own minds and through our own wills and imaginations. As a writer himself, Ellison experiences freedom in his own writing (Watts, 1994, p. 90). Implicit in such a discussion of the possibility of heroism, however, is the notion of a trajectory, which in spite of possible difficulties, somehow moves ever onward and upward. If the story is to have meaning at all, it is almost imperative that such a trajectory be imposed upon it, or what would have been the point of living through one's tumultuous history, of enduring almost endless suffering, if the end does not justify it? Yet we know that in real life, coming to America does not always mean the end of suffering, and the beginning of happiness, success, and fulfillment - if not for oneself, then at least for one's children. As my interviewee Mallory G., expressed it, in spite of her many achievements, her life has been a "downward spiral". We have seen that she speaks of experiencing alienation, depression, and a sense that although she was born in America, she really does not belong anywhere, since she does not truly perceive herself as either American or Vietnamese.

There are no easy answers, because nothing is binary. We cannot complacently speak of zero or one, of engagement or disengagement, of pro-communism or anti-communism, but we can, all of us - and in our own way - tell our stories. We can then become our own facilitators, and in so doing, offer a reason to hope. Andrew Lam writes

eloquently of the possibility of hope in his memoir *East Eats West* (2010), and of the ambiguities which all of us must confront:

The old curse ends. Some internalized threshold for previously subjugated people is breached. To live in America fully these days is to learn to see the world with its many dimensions simultaneously. And where others hear a cacophony, the resident of the cosmopolitan frontier discern a new symphony. His talent is the ability to overcome the paralysis induced by multiple conflicting narratives and selves by finding and inventing new connections between them. He refutes simplification and holds opposed ideas in his head without going crazy. He knows now it's within his powers to articulate and reshape his new world and, regardless of the color of his skin, play a central character in the script of his own making. (p. 121)

It is important to emphasize that my interviewees are doubly constrained by the demands of “interaction ritual chains” operating on *two* levels – institutional demands for reflexivity and critiques which are specific for their roles as intellectuals – and conflicting community demands for conformity. These community pressures require them to stifle any inclination towards independent thinking and critique of hegemonic narratives. Many of my respondents felt that the need to conform to the overarching notion of what it means to be “Vietnamese” in the Confucian sense actually imposed the heaviest constraints on their behavior.

Thus my academic respondents were, for the most part, more comfortable with institutional demands for reflexivity than they were with group demands for compliance. As Michele Lamont (2009) has pointed out, reflexivity is a cherished tenet of the canon, although academics do not always live up to this normative requirement. According to one of Lamont's interviewees, reflexivity involves being:

Self-conscious about the very nature of historical narratives, about one's own practice when one insets oneself into the telling of history... Because these kinds of academic practices are cultural practices, you know, they're not natural, they have

their own culture... What's involved in being theoretically astute is that this is a form of ongoing self-criticism. (p.185)

The issue of reflexivity requires further elaboration, and I will return to it in the conclusion of my thesis, where I will connect it with Jurgen Habermas'(1984) views on discourse ethics and communicative action.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined various perspectives on the Vietnam War – the anti-communist view, the pro-communist view, and the “civil war” view. I have been concerned with the effects of this history on the Vietnamese diaspora community. I have focused on the ways in which Vietnamese intellectuals/academics have articulated and navigated the tensions within the community, particularly with respect to the flag debate and the issue of identity construction. My research indicates that the tensions within the diaspora community are profound, and as some of my interviewees have pointed out, while the constant focus on commemoration may enhance cohesion in some ways, it may also be destructive – preventing the community from giving attention to more practical issues and undermining any attempt at unification and healing.

I have been inspired by Neil Gross’ (2008) study of Richard Rorty’s intellectual development - that is, the situational and cultural factors that affected the trajectory of his academic career and formation of the self. Neil Gross was, of course, working with one subject, acting as a kind of intellectual “biographer”, but I have chosen to work with a somewhat larger group of individuals, not all of whom could be considered “intellectuals” in the strictest sense of the word. Moreover, Neil Gross was concerned with the “American “ experience, and while some of my interviewees are also American born, and this certainly impinges on them, the notion of diaspora has also affected their way of viewing history. For obvious reasons, Gross’ examination of Rorty’s life does not speak to this issue, since Rorty was American, and Gross was concerned with American intellectual life. At the same time, there is some overlap between Gross’ portrait of

Rorty's role as an intellectual and the tensions my own interviewees faced. They are part of their own communities but also stand outside them, observing and evaluating, using their well-honed "repertoire" of cultural capital in order to better dissect *every* narrative – including their own. This sometimes means, unfortunately, that academics end up only speaking to each other, and not to members of their community or to the public at large. One of the goals of my research involves an attempt to bridge this gap. As Vietnamese Studies scholar Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong expresses in her article "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?"(2005):

I have found it so difficult to speak of my/our history in the U.S. As an academic, I could not find a way to speak that would be intelligible to a broader community that also would not be an act of betrayal to my own. Both the Left and Right have constructed Vietnamese immigrants as needing tutelage in this country. (p. 161)

Yet Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong is also mindful of the divide between left and right, which permeates every attempt to communicate, often rendering it impossible:

Those on the Left, caught up in a drama of revolution and national liberation, simply branded all those who are not fighting with North Vietnam as puppets of U.S imperialism, thus erasing any legitimate position for those from the South acting in extremely complex reality of the war. Any displays of "anti-communism" here in the U.S by Vietnamese immigrants simply confirm the progressives' dismissal of Vietnamese American politics as reactionary. (p. 161)

A concrete example of the deep division between North and South Vietnam is evident if one visits the military cemetery located in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). On one side of the highway, we see the so-called "martyrs cemetery" carefully tended with "raked gravel paths" and "beds of flowers"¹⁰⁸. This, of course, is the place

¹⁰⁸ "The War Story's Missing Pages: Vietnam Forgets Those Who Lost", The NY Times Archives: <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/24/world/a-war-story-s-missing-pages-vietnam-forgets-those-who-lost.html>

for the victors, the communist side of the war. Across the highway, however, what we see is an abandoned graveyard where South Vietnamese soldiers are buried. The flag of South Vietnam is certainly not allowed here. In effect, South Vietnam has been written out of history - both in Vietnam and in America.

Jurgen Habermas (1984) addresses the problem of failing to recognize the self in “the other”. His discursive approach is closely connected with the need for reflexivity and self-critique which I have addressed in the previous chapter. He asserts that a turn toward communicative rationality and discourse ethics may offer a way out of the seemingly endless cycle of domination and control, which is manifested in the constant need to win, even when what is won is merely the prize as “best victim”. It is not my intention here to offer a full exposition of Habermas’ ideas. I could not presume to do justice to his work. However, the following elements are central to my discussion.

To begin, what does Habermas mean by communicative action (ethics), and how might it help us to overcome this need to dominate? Furthermore, how could an understanding of Habermas’ project possibly be applied to address the divisions within the Vietnamese diaspora and the homeland? Habermas explains that these components are crucial:

I shall speak of communicative action whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding... In this respect the negotiation of definitions of the situation is an essential element of the interpretive accomplishments required for communicative action.(pp. 285-286)

Implicit in the above quotation is the assumption that it is necessary to recognize the “other” as a sentient being with valid feelings, memories, and aspirations. This exercise

in understanding, as Habermas has argued, requires the renunciation of empty and destructive egocentrism. This also compels us to listen to the other, to understand concerns which may not necessarily be in our own interests – that is, to empathize – and when necessary, to offer a sincere apology for our mistakes and wrongdoings.

Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong's (2005) position on the importance of "subjecthood" and "liberatory discourse" mirrors Habermas' concern with recognition and acknowledgment of others and the possibility for change through communicative action (discourse ethics), which this project offers. For Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong, this means that those on *both sides* of the war need to recognize that all of them are "subjects", not objects whose histories (and in fact futures) can be manipulated at will to serve the need of those in power. Transcending such egocentrism begins with acknowledgment of their shared humanity. Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong frames her position in the following manner, which emphasizes that no one has a monopoly on truth:

Such a position ties subjecthood to a liberatory discourse. Neither puppets nor enslaved people could be seen as occupying human positions with their full implication of human agency. Remembrances from such people cannot be taken seriously as significant of their free will. Progressives thus could not bring themselves to take seriously post-war refugee stories. While correctly noting the Right's warning of bloodbath in Vietnam did not take place with a communist takeover, those on the Left often missed the violence inflicted through post-war policies of dislocation and imprisonment.(p. 161)

Thus, as Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong (2005) explains, "a single version of history means a single version of ourselves condemned to retrace dead-ended paths... allowing others to consume our history for their own ends, as though we have all died"(p. 172). What then is the solution to this conundrum? It is evident that both sides seem to be engaged in a standoff, and neither side is willing to capitulate since that would imply defeat. But is

this really the case? Perhaps the creation of “free spaces” as Lan Duong and Thuy Pelaud (2012) have advocated, would allow enhance opportunities for discourse. A good start, possibly, could be “memorial” spaces in Vietnam that would permit those on both sides of the conflict to be recognized and honored. The cemetery for the soldiers of South Vietnam could be cared for in the same way as the one that honors the fallen soldiers of the North. If the flag is such an important symbol that soldiers on both sides sacrificed their lives defending it - which obviously is the case - then it seems logical that both flags should be flown in these cemeteries. A group’s history should not be obliterated – regardless of either side. Surely everyone needs acknowledgment and recognition – because that is central to our *human* existence. As Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong argues: “One does not become recognizably human until one acts in one’s history. And for that, one needs to have a history”(2005, p. 159). To do this, of course, would require an act of good will on both sides. Some might doubt that this could ever be possible, but I would argue that history teaches us otherwise.

The commemoration of the Battle of Iwo Jima between Japanese and American forces could serve as a model for the Vietnamese to emulate. Both sides fought fiercely for control over the island during WW II. Japan was defeated and suffered tremendous losses as a result. Of the 21,000 Japanese soldiers, only 1,000 survived. The image of five U.S marines raising the American flag atop Mount Suribachi was a very significant symbol of the war and became one of the most recognizable and reproduced images of the war¹⁰⁹. In terms of its symbolic importance, the image of the flag illustrates the extent

¹⁰⁹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Iwo_Jima

to which soldiers are willing to sacrifice, including death, for this ultimate form of “sacredness” (to use Durkheim’s language) – that is, the nation. The island remained under U.S military occupation until 1968 when it was returned to Japan. Both sides have since reconciled and memorial services are held periodically to honor the fallen on *both* sides. The American flag is still being flown today on the island of Iwo Jima¹¹⁰.

This sincere gesture of reconciliation between Japan and the U.S is something that the Vietnamese could work toward. Intellectuals would be in a unique position to facilitate this process of reconciliation and renewal. As I have indicated, they are often at one and the same moment, part of their group and yet stand outside of it. This is integral to their role and status as intellectuals. They act as repositories of the group’s memories and aspirations, while retaining the ability to critique them. The objectivity this affords could enable intellectuals to bring about *rapprochement* between both sides of the conflict. But in order to do this they need to be able to speak to both sides, rather than, as intellectuals so often do, simply speak to each other.

It should be emphasized that such gestures of reconciliation are valuable no matter which party is considered to be “at fault” (even if this could ever be objectively determined). One could point out that the Japanese may have a great deal to answer for in terms of their treatment of the Chinese (the Rape of Nanking) and that the Americans have also been guilty of acts of aggression – again, that is not the point here. The real meaning of this exercise is the recognition and validation of the *other* – and the realization that both have suffered.

¹¹⁰ *Uncommon Valor, Common Virtue: Iwo Jima and the Photograph that Captured America* (NY: Berkley Publishing Group, 2006), edited by Hal Buell.

In this connection, I am reminded of Andrew Lam's comment on the endless continuation of this fruitless argument, which is no longer about communism, if it ever really was. As Lam (2010) expresses it:

“...the business of regime change has turned into the business of keeping Little Saigon from changing, and the bulk of these efforts is in the realm of the symbolic: flying the flags of South Vietnam in shopping malls, erecting war memorials for fallen soldiers, and, lately, fighting over the names of business districts – actions that have no apparent effect on Vietnam itself”.(p. 66)

Thus the irony here is that so many Vietnamese in the diaspora agitate for regime change in their homeland, but at the same time, they don't recognize the necessity of self-change. As Lam expresses it, “Little Saigon”, in their view, must be eternal. Only other people are expected to change, not the Vietnamese in the diaspora. This is in fact a central aspect of the diaspora experience with its emphasis on the victim narrative. By definition, the victim does not need to change, because he or she is not at fault. As well, the victim cannot be guilty of prejudice, because the very nature of his position exempts him from this. The victim status thus confers an almost impregnable sense of moral superiority, and that of course is one of its attractions. However, this also means that “victimhood” can devolve into a kind of contest and the prize is awarded to the group that has suffered the most. Often, the tendency to cling to the notion of *victim as victor* means that one becomes oblivious to the suffering of others.

What, then, could be done in order to facilitate enhanced communication and understanding among members of the Vietnamese diaspora community? One strategy might involve making the work of Vietnamese intellectuals/academics available to the larger audience. This is a worthy goal, but certain problems need to be considered.

While it is understandable that many Vietnamese intellectuals/academic in the diaspora are more comfortable working in English due to the fact that they have mainly been trained in Western institutions, I would argue that this might not reach a wide enough Vietnamese audience. Not only are academic journals often inaccessible to the general public, but they are also written in English, using a kind of specialized language that is mostly accessible only to experts in the field. If the intention here is to bridge the generational gap within the community, which I believe is the case, then a Vietnamese translation of these writings would make sense. Along with this effort, a wider distribution of such work through different Vietnamese media outlets would also be quite productive.

The Vietnamese community is, in some respects, similar to the black community in Ralph Ellison's era. As Watts (1994) explains, black American intellectuals not only lacked the resources to carry out their work, but they "also had to confront the inability of their ethnic group to sustain ambitious, traditional artistic and intellectual activity"(p. 15). The Vietnamese in the diaspora for the most part do not give high priority to intellectual/artistic activity. This is understandable given the dire situation in which they found themselves as the result of displacement – inevitably they were more concerned with practical issues related to survival. Thus, it is difficult to have the kind of "critical" audience needed for "communicative action". Nevertheless, I believe making the works of Vietnamese intellectuals/artists more approachable and reachable to the extra-academic Vietnamese audience is a worthwhile effort. Moreover, given the fact that Vietnamese culture does not really encourage "verbal" communication (especially when it comes

from the younger generation addressing their elders)¹¹¹ and places constraints on outward expression, written forms of communication such as prose and poetry seem to make a lot of sense.

Is it really the case, according to Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong (2005), that to mainstream American society - including the academic community – the Vietnamese diaspora is mainly known for its anti-communism? The idea of “fighting communism” seems questionable to me. Most of us today would tend to agree that communism, as an ideology, is antiquated and has proven to be untenable. If communism is basically a dead ideology, what then, are the Vietnamese in the diaspora fighting against?

It is now widely understood that Vietnam is communist in name only, just as is the case with many other so-called communist countries, such as China. Since the mid 1980’s, Vietnam has adopted a free-market economy with certain socialist orientations – and the real meaning of this terminology is clear to no one, even those in power. Even with today’s advanced technology, there is no GPS that can point to a “socialist” direction. In fact, the current Party leader, Nguyen Phu Trong, was quoted as saying at the National Assembly in Hanoi in October, 2013: “it’s not even sure if Vietnam could achieve socialism by the end of this century” (my own translation)¹¹². Does this mean that “communism” (like the word “diaspora”, as Brubaker sees it) is a metaphor, an idiom, and a figure of speech, which we should take care not to reify?

¹¹¹ Confucian teaching stresses self-restraint and a “proper” outward display of attitude and behavior. This often clashes with younger generation Vietnamese who’ve learned the value of being able to express oneself and to speak one’s mind, instead of an emphasis on “silent listening” found in Confucian culture.

¹¹² From “Tuổi Trẻ On Line”: <http://tuoitre.vn/tin/chinh-tri-xa-hoi/20131023/du-thao-chua-vang-vong-nhu-loi-hieu-trieu/576098.html>

One of my interviewees shares her hope that those in the Vietnamese diaspora will “work towards a more expansive notion of community, so that it’s not always binaries us/them, communist/anti-communist, patriot or betrayer - because most people fall somewhere on the spectrum of not either ends” [sic] (Therese D.). In my view, if this fight against communism persists, the Vietnamese diaspora will become what I would describe as *a community without a community*.

As I have discussed in the methodology chapter, my project has its own challenges and limitations. Nevertheless, it should be reiterated that this investigation is meant as a kind of exploratory research because - to my knowledge - there has not been a systematic sociological study of Vietnamese intellectuals in North America. It is hoped that this study will serve as a possible springboard for researchers interested in scholarship on intellectuals and diaspora studies. I have mentioned that as separate academic fields, sociological studies of intellectuals enjoy a rich tradition and diaspora studies have gained considerable traction in recent decades. However, literature on diasporic intellectuals still lags behind. This study has attempted to combine both areas of scholarship, and in so doing, it extends Gross’ theory of “intellectuals self-concept” (ISC) by introducing my notion of the *diaspora intellectual self-concept* (DISC).

Randall Collins has pointed out that the intellectual is, by definition, in the position of constantly seeking attention for his or her work, and it is to be hoped that such work offers something of value for others, as well as for himself/herself. But Collins’ view of the intellectual/academic still posits the need for a certain degree of egocentric self-gratification. As he expresses is: “A realistic image of science, in fact, would be an open

plain with men scattered throughout it, shouting: “Listen to me! Listen to me!” (Collins, 1975, p. 480; also cited in Gross, 2008, p.249).

It is my hope, on the other hand, that Vietnamese intellectuals in the diaspora will transcend the need for such self-aggrandizement (even if it is often justified), and instead turn their talents to facilitating the healing process within the community. As I have mentioned, this could take various forms, including making scholarly work on the subject accessible to a wider Vietnamese audience - both at home and abroad - by translating relevant works. It is worth noting that the very act of translation enhances one’s capacity for reflexivity because it forces both the author and the translator (even if they are the same person) to consider the meanings of one’s words more deeply as one engages in this process.

As well, representatives of both sides could be brought together to speak authentically on this issue, or as Habermass would put it, to engage in discourse. Commemoration of key events in Vietnam’s history should also be encouraged on both sides, but not in a way which involves the endless rehashing of past wrongs. Instead, there should be forums available (or what Lan Duong and Isabelle Thuy Pelau have called ‘free spaces’) which will allow everyone who wishes to do so to tell his or her story without fear of judgment or ostracism. I believe that making a difference begins on this level – that is, it starts with telling one’s own story, as my interviewees have done throughout this thesis.

I realize that these goals will be difficult to achieve, and I have no definitive answer as to how any of this will play out in the future, but I believe that it is important – even

essential - to continue to try, and that intellectuals can be a decisive and positive force in this process. My goal in writing this thesis then, has been twofold. On a theoretical level, I have attempted to intertwine two areas of study, which in the past have tended to be considered separately – that is, diaspora studies *and* a consideration of the role of intellectuals in that context. On a practical level, it has not been my intention to criticize in a manner which would be destructive to the my community, but rather, I hope that my work might offer constructive suggestions which would allow the Vietnamese diaspora to move forward and transcend a past which has been marked by tragedy, loss, and painful self-estrangement.

Robin Cohen's (2008) work offers a useful template for understanding ethnic identity in the diaspora, but his model is, in my opinion, rather one-sided. He overemphasizes commonalities between members of the same ethnic groups, and thus fails to recognize the existence of intra-group tensions. As my research demonstrates, these tensions extend to include ambiguity regarding what it means to be a "real" member of one's group. In particular, for the Vietnamese diaspora community this means that one's "validity" as a group member will be questioned if one's politics are suspect. In fact, it is not adequate to simply be "anticommunist" – one must be anticommunist "enough" and "in the right way".

Vietnamese intellectuals thus must navigate the terrain which is risky and treacherous politically, and in addition they must meet the challenges posed by competing "interaction ritual chains" (IRC) (Collins, 1998). As I have indicated, they must – if they wish to be considered bona fide members of their group, be "Vietnamese" and exhibit their

allegiance convincingly. At the same time, other conflicting interaction rituals require them to demonstrate objectivity and distance – even skepticism. To what extent can the self be compartmentalized? Cohen's (2008) work overlooks the dilemma of the fractured self, and I believe my research addresses this gap. Although I realize that my work in this thesis is not the last word on this subject – and I would not want it to be. I hope I have made an original contribution in this regard.

As I reflect on my work, I realize the degree to which I have brought myself and my own experiences to this project. I am aware of my own positionality, but nevertheless, it is that positionality which has made this research so meaningful and so visceral to me. No matter what we write about, we cannot escape the fact that we are all people living in the world who bring our past experiences to every situation. I hope I have done justice to my interviewees' stories, and I am grateful for their honesty, their insight, and their generosity. It is their contributions which have made my research possible.

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