Digital Diasporic Cultures and Everyday Media:

The Vietnamese Diaspora in Vancouver, Canada

By

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Table of Contents

Abstract ii

Acknowledgements iv

Introduction 1

Locating Vietnamese Diasporas Elsewhere: Exploring Vietnamese Diasporic Cultures and Digital Media

Chapter 1 37

Diversifying the Diaspora: Towards Constructing Vietnamese Canadian Histories in Vancouver

Chapter 2 77

Refreshing Digital Diasporas: Theorizing How Algorithms Shape Online Diasporic Cultures

Chapter 3 114

Everyday Media, Diasporic Events: Localizing the Futures of Vietnamese Canadian Cultures

Chapter 4 195

Cooking while Diasporic: Reconceptualizing Vietnamese Authenticity On and Offline

Chapter 5 237

Vancouver Never Plays Itself: Vietnamese Canadian Culture through Vietnamese American Frameworks

Conclusion 289

Works Cited 300

Abstract

Focusing on the contexts of Metro Vancouver, Canada, this dissertation examines how Vietnamese Vancouverites negotiate with and make sense of their everyday interactions with Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic cultures within their local contexts and through digital networks. For many Vietnamese diasporas, everyday practices of communication inherently traverse complex transnational narratives and cultures of war, exile, refugeeism, trauma, and resettlement. These communication practices, often aided by digital technologies, become daily methods of discovering, maintaining, and (re)building cultural identities, as well as playing an important role in mediating old and new relationships between multiple cultures, nation-states, and ideologies of "home" and homeland. With resettlement in various and often urban locations around the globe, the contemporary Vietnamese diasporic condition and their experiences are intrinsically linked to both specific local spaces and global digital networks. However, most research on the Vietnamese diaspora and their media use have often framed the diaspora as a singular entity, positioning the experiences and identities of Vietnamese Americans as representing *the* diaspora.

In highlighting the role of the local within diasporic identities, this project analyzes the offline activities of Vietnamese Vancouverites in relationship to everyday digital media use. As identity formation is always on-going, seemingly small and mundane mediated actions are constant and active processes that shape in various ways how we view ourselves and interact with communities around us. Through this analysis of the interplay between digital media and everyday life in Vancouver, we can begin to investigate the dynamic and often contradictory sites of commonality, difference, and friction that help shape how specific identities, ideologies, cultures, and communities of Vietnamese Vancouverites are negotiated and constructed on a

daily basis. Furthermore, in exploring these everyday mediated interactions within specific localities, this dissertation reveals the unique dimensions of migrations, histories, and cultures that provide the ideological underpinnings that drive the understudied Vietnamese Canadian communities in Vancouver. In doing so, the project argues for the need to diversify diasporas through the consideration of local contexts that produce a wide range of diasporic experiences.

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I want to first acknowledge that this project takes place on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded Indigenous territories of the ʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səl̓ílwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations. As a guest to these territories, I am thankful for having the opportunity and privilege of experiencing this wonderful land. I am also extremely grateful to all of my project participants, for which of course there would be no project without their kindness, time, and support. I came to Vancouver with only one solid connection to the local Vietnamese community—which is probably why I had a minor panic attack in the airport on the way to Canada—but I was fortunate to have many Vietnamese Canadians welcome me, a strange and foreign academic, into their homes, workplaces, and social (mediated) spaces. They told me life histories, intimate details, and personal beliefs. They put up with my constant social media stalking, as well as my nagging for scheduling interviews and emails with follow-up questions, while also directing me to other participants, sources, and organizations. Beyond the Vietnamese community in Vancouver, I also met a wide range of amazing people that continue to inform my everyday life and thinking. Reflecting on my time in Vancouver through writing this dissertation has made me angry, giggly, confused, hopeful, disappointed, inspired, depressed, and happy—all in the most productive ways. It is through these wide range of emotions that makes life (and research) interesting, frustrating, yet ultimately meaningful and memorable. Due to legal reasons I unfortunately cannot list specific names, but I am forever in debt to all that took the time to speak with me in any capacity. I hope our paths cross again.

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There are too many names to list here and due to my fear of forgetting somebody, I'll just say if I ever talked to you on the UW-Madison campus, thank you for contributing to my experience at UW. My fellow grad school colleagues are what make our program the best, as they are people I would want to engage with both within *and* outside the halls of Vilas. I would like to highlight past and current occupants of Vilas 2158, and although there was a direct

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expressions of love. Lastly, I want to thank L. Words cannot describe how much I am grateful for your support, patience, and love. Thus, I will offer none here.

Introduction

Locating Vietnamese Diasporas Elsewhere: Exploring Vietnamese Diasporic Cultures and Digital Media

Focusing on the contexts of Metro Vancouver, Canada, this dissertation examines how Vietnamese Vancouverites negotiate with and make sense of their everyday interactions with Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic cultures within their local contexts and through digital networks.[1] For many Vietnamese diasporas, everyday practices of communication inherently traverse complex transnational narratives and cultures of war, exile, refugeeism, trauma, and resettlement. These communication practices, often aided by digital technologies, become daily methods of discovering, maintaining, and (re)building cultural identities, as well as playing an important role in mediating old and new relationships between multiple cultures, nation-states, and ideologies of "home" and homeland. With resettlement in various locations around the globe and the ubiquitous nature of digital media, the contemporary Vietnamese diasporic condition and their experiences are intrinsically linked to both specific local spaces and global digital networks. However, most research on the Vietnamese diaspora and their media use have often framed the diaspora as a singular entity, positioning the experiences and identities of Vietnamese Americans—specifically those in Orange County, California—as representing *the* diaspora.

This project shifts away from California and highlights the role of the local within diasporic identities through the exploration of offline local activities of Vietnamese

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[1] In this project, I use "Metro Vancouver," "Greater Vancouver," and "Vancouver" interchangeably to refer to the metropolitan region that encompasses the city of Vancouver and its surrounding municipalities, including (but not limited to): Surrey, Burnaby, Richmond, and Coquitlam. I also use there term "Vancouverite" to refer to anyone living within the Greater Vancouver area; the use of Vancouverite and Vancouver in this manner is due to my participants' use of the term even if they do not live within the city of Vancouver. When discussing the specific city of Vancouver, will use "the city of Vancouver" or make a clear note.

Vancouverites in relationship to everyday media use. As identity formation is always on-going, seemingly small and mundane mediated actions—such as liking a comment or sharing a post—within our daily lives are constant and active processes that shape in various ways how we view ourselves and interact with communities around us. Through this analysis of the interplay between digital media and everyday life in Vancouver, we can begin to investigate the dynamic and often contradictory sites of commonality, difference, and friction that help shape how specific identities, ideologies, cultures, and communities of Vietnamese Vancouverites are negotiated and constructed on a daily basis. Furthermore, in exploring these everyday mediated interactions within specific localities, this dissertation reveals the unique local dimensions of migrations, histories, and cultures that provide the ideological underpinnings that drive the actions of understudied Vietnamese Canadian communities in Vancouver.

Of course, as these ideologies and identities operate both within the local and across networks, this project situates Vancouver's Vietnamese diaspora in a digital era not just between a simple binary of their homeland and adopted homeland, but also considers the influences of other nodes of diasporic groups within larger networks. By examining global diasporas of an ethnic group as multiple and diverse, this project highlights the hierarchies between diasporas and how these hierarchies operate within digital environments, as well as bleed into offline spaces and face-to-face encounters. In contrast to the liberating and democratizing discourses often seen in the discussions surrounding digital diasporas, this project argues pre-existing power structures based on global and local migration patterns are reproduced in digital spaces, which create tensions over who can define what it means to be both Vietnamese and part of the diaspora. In the case of Vancouver, this often means that identity and cultural formation occur in

constant relation to cultural flows from the United States, as well as other more established Vietnamese diasporic populations in Canada.

However, this is not a simple example of cultural imperialism; while digital technologies may fail in many of their utopian claims, they do create spaces for the everyday to speak back and curate culture in various manners. Thus, this project positions Vietnamese Vancouverites as located within larger and more dominant structures of other Vietnamese diasporas (mainly those in the United States), but also as active users who have the ability to negotiate, produce, and (re)package cultural objects and circulate them through the everyday. As such, this project ultimately argues for the need to diversify how we conceptualize diasporas to include the consideration of the specific localities in which diasporas exist, as well as consideration of the digital tools that help create, foster, and spread diasporic cultures and identities within the local and across transnational networks. In increasing our attention to the local and lived experiences of digital media users in understudied groups, we can create a more plural and diverse understanding of how different diasporas exist, struggle, and interact with each other across various sites, revealing not just how they construct their own identities and communities, but also their relationships towards other diasporas, nations-states, and ethnic groups.

Why Vancouver, or "Did you know Vancouver was shitty before you got here?"

When I tell people about my research interests in exploring contemporary Vietnamese diasporic identities and everyday media practices in Vancouver, Canada, a natural follow-up question is, "Why Vancouver?" One major reason is that Asian Canadian populations are heavily understudied, which Rob Ho argues is the result of the lack of developing institutionalized Asian Canadian Studies departments in the same manner as universities in the United States did with

Asian American studies.[2] When I did find materials on Vietnamese Canadians in my preliminary research for potential sites and topics for the dissertation, I always found Vancouver and British Columbia relegated to the margins or footnotes, ready to be mentioned but never featured. In terms of making interventions and exploring new ground, Vancouver seemed to be ripe for analysis.

Yet, as I was conducting research and as I currently reflect on the entire process, the question of "Why Vancouver?" morphed into something more than just filling a gap. While it took me some time to recognize and articulate the exact reasons, ultimately I will simply say my answer to that question is that Vietnamese Vancouverites are just *very* different from other Vietnamese diasporic groups in North America. In fact, they are *odd* and it is this oddness—which I say as a term of affection—that makes Vancouver special and a unique site of study. On paper, the community in Metro Vancouver looks fairly normal in comparison to other Vietnamese diasporic populations. A general overview of both local and national news coverage of the Vietnamese community in Greater Vancouver shows fairly similar themes that are seen in the other major cities in Canada and the United States. In the summer of 2015, the Syrian Refugee crisis was hitting its peak and for many, the imagery of war, overcrowded boats, water, and death seen in the coverage of the Syrian conflict immediately invoked Vietnam's "boat people" and Canada's response. These narratives all follow similar patterns: a recounting of trauma and migration related to war and the North Vietnamese communist regime, a difficult but eventually manageable process of adjusting in a new culture, and concluding with success stories built on a foundation of hard work and gratitude toward their adopted nation.[3] While there is a

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[2] Rob Ho, "Do all Asians look Alike?: Asian Canadians as Model Minorities," *Studies on Asia* 4, no. 2 (October 2014): 99.

[3] For instance, see Judy Trinh, "Vietnamese boat people of more than 3 decades ago now thriving, proud Canadians," *CBC.ca*, last modified Sep 11, 2015, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/vietnamese-boat-

dearth of academic studies specifically on the Vietnamese within Vancouver, the few that do reference Vancouver—often within the framework of refugeeism—do not illustrate any major differences, with many grouping findings under the collective term of "Vietnamese Canadian."[4] Overall, this is pretty standard and nothing about the Vietnamese community in Vancouver especially stood out.

Still, Metro Vancouver also showed flashes of being exceptional. Population-wise, the area has around 31,000 Vietnamese Canadians, making it the third largest metropolitan area in Canada (behind Toronto and Montreal) and 8th overall in North America. With a 34% population growth rate over the last 15 years—23,000 to over 31,000—Greater Vancouver is home to one of the fastest growing Vietnamese diasporic populations in both Canada and North America, far outpacing the national Canadian average.[5] Along with this growth came the establishment of multiple organizations centered on Vietnamese culture, as well as the only officially designated "Little Saigon" in Canada spearheaded by local grassroots groups (explored in Chapter 1), seemingly putting it on par with the Vietnamese populations in Orange County, California, which is often seen as the capital of the Vietnamese diaspora.

This apparent vibrancy of the community is only aided by the larger contexts of Metro Vancouver. Often ranked as one of the most livable cities in the world, Vancouver prides itself on transitioning from being a "terminal city" of the Canadian Pacific Railway to a global metropolis on the Pacific Rim. As a city on the "edge of wilderness" surrounded by water and

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people-of-more-than-3-decades-ago-now-thriving-proud-canadians-1.3223505; Tara Carman, "Refugees who fled Vietnam in the '70s band together to help Syrians," *Vancouversun.com*, Sep 20, 2015, http://www.vancouversun.com/health/refugees+fled+vietnam+band+together+help+syrians/11375355/story.html.

[4] See Morton Beiser, *Strangers at the Gate: The 'Boat People's' First Ten Years in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

[5] NHS Profile, Vancouver, CMA, British Columbia, 2011, http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CMA&Code1=933&Data=Count&SearchText=vancouver&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&A1=Ethnic%20origin&B1=All&Custom=&TABID=1.

dense, green rainforests, Vancouver sees itself as *the* central gateway between Asia, Southeast Asia, and North America, boasting a large population of Asian and Asian Canadians.[6] As an urban node in larger global flows of culture and people—as well as its reputation as "Hollywood North" and home to several animation and video game studios—Vancouver is in many ways an optimal place for someone interested in diasporic media and transnational movements of culture. Additionally, as a Canadian city, Vancouver allows for a transnational perspective when exploring the Vietnamese North American diaspora, expanding the overview of diasporic cultures and frameworks across the West Coast. Yet, even with all of these reasons, the Vietnamese in Vancouver and their relationships to various forms of media and identities had never received a full-length study that explored its specific contexts and culture, which again is partly what initially attracted me to the city.

When I arrived in Vancouver in the Fall of 2015, things were a bit different. While not necessarily Vancouver-specific, several of the Vietnamese cultural clubs that I had researched beforehand were no longer in operation by the time I had arrived, with many of the contacts established before I came simply disappearing. When I asked Vietnamese Vancouverites about these clubs, most had never heard of them, and if they did, had never interacted with these groups and had no idea how to contact them. For the organizations that still existed and accepted me, I came across several new experiences that challenged my own visions of the Vietnamese diaspora in North America, as well as the mainstream representations of the Vancouver community as being anti-communist. For instance, in the Vietnamese Student Clubs at local universities (discussed in Chapter 3), the club membership is split 50/50 among international Vietnamese and Canadian-born Vietnamese students and at one event I even saw the current

[6] John Punter, *The Vancouver Achievement: Urban Planning and Design* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003): 3-5.

Socialist Republic (communist) flag of Vietnam. In my past experiences with similar clubs in the United States, this is relatively unusual as there are sometimes two separate club that divide these groups due to the lingering residues of war, yet these groups seem to coexist fine in Vancouver. Additionally, as many of these student clubs in the United States lean towards anti-communism, the mere idea of having the current flag of Vietnam could start protests and fierce arguments in the U.S., yet it is casually used as a backdrop for pictures in Vancouver (anti-communism and the use of flags within Vancouver are discussed in Chapter 5).[7] As I moved around the city, in my first trip to Little Saigon, I missed my bus stop and getting off at the next stop, I was no longer in Little Saigon. New to the area, I thought I had made a mistake, but upon further exploration, Vancouver's Little Saigon is just very, very little. As I began to recruit for this project, I also discovered many of my future participants rarely visited Little Saigon, with even a few actually admitting they did not know it existed or how it came to be. I soon learned the difficulty of gaining access to a community space when there is no solid community, but rather multiple and unconnected small organizations or collectives of individuals spread across the Metro area.

As I was getting a better sense of Vancouver and conducting introductory interviews for this project, one core opening question to my participants was "What are your general thoughts about the local Vietnamese community?" For many, this produced both sighs and laughter, with quick and terse responses: fragmented, divided, broken, non-existent, and "the worst" in Canada and the United States. Many considered it somewhat existing in an imagined sense (although

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[7] For instance, a major organization that networks Vietnamese Student clubs around North America has it written in their by-laws that they must play the South Vietnamese national anthem and present the South Vietnamese flag. For responses to the current Socialist Republic of Vietnam flag in the United States, see James D. Spaniolo, "Concerning the UT Arlington Hall of Flags," *UTA News Center*, May 10, 2006, https://www.uta.edu/news/releases/2006/05/hall-of-flags.php.

unable to point to exactly where it exists), but as individuals, they were rarely involved with the so-called "community."[8] It is because of these beliefs about the local community that when I expressed initial interest in conducting research in Vancouver to potential participants, the question of "Why Vancouver?" had a different tone within the city limits. On one hand, many Vietnamese Vancouverites were intrigued by the prospect of being distinct and interesting enough to merit being an object of study, especially as a population that is not recognized on various levels. On the other hand, many expressed confusion or concerns over what I could study if the community here is so broken and fragmented, unable to see any value even as members of the targeted group—or as Lisa, who is heavily featured in the project, bluntly asked me, "Did you know Vancouver was shitty before you got here?"

To be clear, Lisa's phrasing is more reflective of her realistic personality than a sweeping judgement of the local community; as a very active member involved in various clubs and a founder of a youth mentorship program, I believe Lisa's question comes from a place of experience and love for the city and community (even if it is sometimes unrequited). However, her question does highlight an important theoretical approach to the sites we investigate as scholars. Based on my initial experiences—or lack of experiences in this case—the large Vietnamese American communities in Orange County with their established infrastructures of organizations and cultural production looked tempting under the California sun, especially as I stood under the dreary clouds and pouring rain of the beautiful, but depressing Pacific Northwest. It is no doubt that as *the* space of the Vietnamese diaspora, data for research would

[8] While I recognize that under various definitions of "community" that the Vietnamese diaspora in Metro Vancouver would not be classified as one, I use the term throughout this dissertation in the way many of my participants employ the word, which is to refer to anyone who identities as Vietnamese or Vietnamese Canadian in Metro Vancouver. While it is often used in as a singular noun, I believe "community" in this context is also seen as multiple, diverse, and in constant flux. Thus, when referring to the local Vietnamese community, I recognize its heterogeneous nature, but also its common use to refer to a theoretical or imagined collective of people.

not be especially difficult to obtain in Southern California. We can see this in the growing number of works on the Vietnamese diaspora over the last few years that center mainly on Orange County as a site of study.[9] This makes perfect sense as it is the adopted home of the largest population of Vietnamese diaspora in the world, as well as a central hub for diasporic media production. This becomes problematic, however, because as an optimal site of study, the diaspora within Orange County have often come to represent *the* Vietnamese diaspora, resulting in the conflation of the heterogeneous experiences of diasporas that exist throughout the globe. Thus, to ignore Vancouver and its "shitty" Vietnamese community—to use Lisa's term—would be a loss in that it is within the messiness and difficulty of this local "community" that emerge questions and perspectives that would never be explored or even considered in Orange County. Ultimately, in privileging or over-emphasizing certain dominant groups of the diaspora, we limit our understanding of how heterogeneous populations and cultural processes operate across different conditions and contexts, including those mediated by digital technologies. In other words, while this may explain why Vancouver is often placed in footnotes, it does not mean it should stay there or has nothing worthwhile to say.

Defining Vietnamese Diasporic Cultures and the Power of Orange County

I will admit that this desire to decenter Orange County as a site of research also stems from my personal experiences with the existing and evolving literature on the Vietnamese diaspora. As several scholars note, most works on the Vietnamese (American) diaspora have tended to

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[9] See Thuy Võ Dang, "The Cultural Work of Anticommunism in the San Diego Vietnamese American Community," *Amerasia* 31, no. 2 (2005); Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde, *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). As I explore later, it should be noted that Aguilar-San Juan's study of Little Saigon in Orange County, California is contrasted with Boston, Massachusetts.

overwhelmingly focus on the effects of trauma on Vietnamese refugees and to assess how well they assimilate into a host society through larger quantitative projects that focus on aspects such as employment, education, and language skills. In pathologizing refugees and the resettlement process, problems experienced by refugees often arose from cultural maladjustments, with many of these studies pointing to essentialized and static notions of Vietnamese culture as the root of the problem. Although there are often struggles, it is generally concluded over time that these refugees will successfully integrate into American society and become productive citizens in the realm of education and economics.[10]

I am fortunate to have been able to attend graduate school during a time where there has been an emergence of critical works on the Vietnamese diaspora. The works of Yen Le Espiritu, Linda Trinh Võ, and Mimi Thi Nguyen (among others) have shifted the perspective of how to conceptualize refugees and the Vietnamese diaspora.[11] Espiritu notes how past scholarship on Vietnamese Americans have often positioned them as passive victims within larger, more powerful global forces; under the framework of "Critical Refugee Studies," Espiritu urges for the centering of refugee agency within larger critiques of U.S. ideologies of imperialism, war, race,

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[10] For a critique of the current social science research on Vietnamese Americans and their limitations, see Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xviii-xix; 8-9; Kieu-Linh Valverde, *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 4-5; and Fiona I.B. Ngô, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Mariam B. Lam, "Southeast Asian American Studies Special Issue: Guest Editors' Introduction," *positions* 20, no. 3 (2012), 675. Some examples of these works include William Liu, et al., *Transition to Nowhere: Vietnamese Refugees in America* (Nashville: Charter House: 1979); Darrel Montero, *Vietnamese Americans: Patterns of Resettlement and Socioeconomic Adaptation in the United States* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979); Susan Auerbach, *Vietnamese Americans* (Vero Beach: Rourke Corporation, 1991); Paul James Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); and James M. Freeman, *Changing Identities: Vietnamese Americans 1975-1995* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995).

[11] See Linda Trinh Võ, ed., "Vietnamese American Trajectories: Dimensions of Diasporas," special issue, *Amerasia Journal* 29, no. 1 (2003); Yen Le Espiritu and Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong, eds., "30 Years AfterWARd: Vietnamese Americans and U.S. Empire," special issue, *Amerasia* 31, no. 2 (2005); Yen Le Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in U.S. Scholarship," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1-2 (February/August 2006): 410-33; and Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

and violence.[12] On a broader scale, Fiona I.B. Ngô, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Mariam B. Lam's introduction in the special issue of *positions* traces the nascent field of Southeast Asians American studies and how scholars are changing their approaches to Southeast Asian refugees from "psychiatric correction to an analytic for critical inquiry," as well as outline new directions for both Asian and Southeast Asian American studies.[13] In doing so, they begin to carve out spaces of interrogation that focus on Southeast Asian diasporas, as well as emphasize the need to (re)frame theory and analysis that incorporate the contexts in which these diasporas exist.

As a media and cultural studies scholar, perhaps the most directly influential works from this body of critical work were ones that focused on popular culture and media productions within the diaspora. As one of the first works on diasporic Vietnamese media, Australian cultural studies scholars Stuart Cunningham and Tina Nguyen use audience interviews to formulate categories that describe the function of diasporic media, including heritage maintenance, cultural negotiation, and assertive hybridity.[14] Nhi T. Lieu's *The American Dream in Vietnamese* builds upon this work to produce the first full-length project that explores Vietnamese American cultural expressions in leisure and entertainment, such as variety shows, beauty pageants, and internet websites. Crucial in Lieu's work is her emphasis on the key roles popular culture and media play in the construction of diasporic cultures and hybrid identities. In highlighting the importance of popular culture, Lieu showcases a postrefugee subjectivity that is not only bounded by tragedy and trauma, but can also include everyday desires, pleasures, and joy. In centering what most would consider frivolous or unworthy of study, Lieu skillfully

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[12] Yen Le Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study."
[13] See Fiona I.B. Ngô, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Mariam B. Lam, "Southeast Asian American Studies Special Issue," 667.
[14] Stuart Cunningham and Tina Nguyen, "Popular Media of the Vietnamese Diaspora," in *Floating Lives: The Media and Asian Diasporas*, eds Stuart Cunningham and John Sinclair (St. Lucia, Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 2000), 91-135.

illustrates the multiple dimensions and tensions around aspects such as gender, the nation-state, and "authentic" Vietnamese cultures that exist within the popular culture of the Vietnamese diaspora.[15]

However, as someone who identifies as being part of the Vietnamese diaspora, when I read these works, I often feel things are slightly *off*, where I can generally agree with the arguments, but not fully relate to their overall construction of Vietnamese diasporic cultures and identities. I believe this is due to how they define "Vietnamese Diaspora," which I argue ignores the consideration of specific localities and the possible ways in which these contexts can alter how people read and understand media. While Cunningham and Nguyen open their work with a detailed overview of the contexts of their study in Sydney, Australia, their eventual analysis and frameworks of how diasporic media operate within their specific diaspora elides any specific focus on how these contexts play out in the everyday for their research subjects. As the title of their work implies, their categories noted above are representative of the "Popular Media of the Vietnamese Diaspora" as a whole, and not specifically just the Sydney community in which they obtained their data. Likewise, Lieu uses the term "Vietnamese American" to frame her definition of the Vietnamese diaspora. Citing Monique T. D. Truong's definition of the term, Lieu considers anyone within this definition as part the Vietnamese diaspora:

> Americans of Vietnamese descent: including immigrants who may have arrived prior to 1975; refugees who started arriving in 1975; those who entered the U.S. as immigrants, starting in 1979, through the Orderly Departure Program; as well as the preceding generations who have been and will be born in the United States.[16]

While already sweeping in its scope, Lieu continues to expand the term "to include those who have settled outside of the United States that constitute the Vietnamese diaspora" without much

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[15] Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
[16] Monique T. D. Truong, "The Emergence of Voices: Vietnamese American Literature 1975-1990," *Amerasia Journal* 19, no. 3 (1993): 27-50, quoted in Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese,* xiv.

explanation of why she does this.[17] It is interesting that while Lieu argues for a recognition of cultural elites and hierarchies within the diaspora, her incorporation of any Vietnamese population outside of the United States removes the potential analysis of the power dynamic between Vietnamese Americans and other diasporic communities around the globe. For instance, in her discussion of her Web survey results on responses to Vietnamese diasporic media, Lieu notes she received responses from Australia, Canada, Austria, and Germany (as well as several U.S. states). However in her analysis, she never really considers how their location and their history and experiences in a specific country or locality may impact one's interpretation of media produced by Vietnamese Americans. In doing so, her definition of Vietnamese American, and thus Vietnamese diaspora, is very broad and potentially homogenizing a diverse population.

Yet while this definition is very broad, I would argue that based on the media Lieu analyzes throughout her work (which mostly originate from Southern California), her analysis mostly applies to the Vietnamese diaspora within Orange County, California. To be clear, this is not an argument that the analysis produced by Lieu or Cunningham and Nguyen are necessarily wrong. While I do not expect a universal theory or analysis that applies to all Vietnamese diasporas, the issue arises when there are statements or arguments made about the "Vietnamese diaspora" as a singular entity under these broad definitions when they do not necessarily apply to all. I sometimes think this is another example of scholars splitting hairs over terminology and language. I recognize that the use of the term may be due to a manner of speech and to be more efficient in language—it is hard (and unrealistic) to make arguments when one needs to constantly qualify and nuance every word. Yet, I also feel there are major implications in using

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[17] Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, xiv.

"Vietnamese diaspora" in this manner in which racial and ethnic commonality implies a position of reading regardless of other factors. In his overview of diasporic audience research, Ramaswami Harindranath argues works that construct collective identities on such a broad level are problematic "in their refusal to recognise the relevance of the politics of location of various groups in a diaspora, [and this] amount[s] to a disavowal of the critical issues of histories of migration, and the localised histories marking the changing relationship between such communities and the host culture."[18] In both the works of Cunningham and Nguyen and Lieu, I would argue that my specific history and experiences as a 2nd generation Vietnamese American who was raised in Arlington, Texas places me just outside these works geographically, where I am part of this larger umbrella term of "Vietnamese Diaspora/American," but not really belonging within the specific diasporas and contexts that they address directly (which most likely makes me relate more to Vancouver's status as a footnote in Vietnamese Canadian research). Thus, while previous works have revealed important dynamics of Vietnamese diasporas and their media, these works' conceptualizations of the Vietnamese diaspora as singular obscures possible differences that emerge through divergent histories and everyday experiences in specific, physical locations.

One implication in downplaying local and specific contexts is how we frame processes of identity formation. With the United States as a central point of investigation, most academic works focused on Vietnamese Americans have often operated under larger paradigms of Asian American identities and U.S. categories of race and ethnicity. As several works have demonstrated, the articulation of the term and category of an "Asian American" identity arose

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[18] Ramaswami Harindranath, "Ethnicity and Cultural Difference: Some thematic and political issues on global audience research," *Particip@tions* 2, no. 2 (December 2005), n.p., http://www.participations.org/volume%202/issue%202/2_02_harindranath.htm.

(and still continues to be formulated) from different, yet intertwined sites of identity formation, community organizing, and cultural production.[19] Originating in the late 1960s within the United States, people of Asian ancestry (mainly college students) began to recognize the common fate of those whose identity fell under the umbrella term "Oriental." Rejecting "Oriental" and inverting the power dynamic of racial lumping to produce a stronger and unified voice, these groups of Asians—mainly U.S.-born and English-speaking Chinese and Japanese Americans—declared solidarity through the term "Asian American" and constructed a pan-Asian ethnic identity and politics through the production of Asian American organizations, publications, studies programs, and news media. What united this pan-Asian ethnic identity was not a common physical "homeland" or origin, but rather a common history within the United States and the *potential* future of oppression and discrimination at the hands of the dominant group.[20] As both the political movement and identity category of Asian American grew to include more diverse groups such as South and Southeast Asians, including Vietnamese Americans, the politics, meaning, power, and appeal of "Asian American" has also grown to be more varied and complicated.[21] Yet, even while constantly in flux and uncertain, it is important to examine the operation of "Asian American" as a racial and political category in relation to Vietnamese American identities.[22]

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[19] See Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), Eleanor Ty and Donald C. Goellnicht, eds, *Asian North American Identities: Beyond the Hyphen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), and Eleanor Ty, *Unfastened: Globality and Asian North American Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

[20] Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity*, 31.

[21] For instance, Espiritu notes the difficultly of a clean insertion of newly arrived Vietnamese refugees, who were mostly politically conservative/anti-communist and supported U.S. intervention in Vietnam, into the Asian American movement, which generally was Marxist, left-leaning, and against the Vietnam War. The field of Asian American studies, which often focused on larger East Asian groups, was also unprepared to incorporate newer immigrants into their classrooms, research, and theories. See Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity*.

[22] See Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons*, 41.

In Canadian contexts, however, there has been less support and employment of an Asian Canadian panethnic identity or political movement. While literature scholars Eleanor Ty and Donald C. Goellnicht point to the early roots of an "Asian-Canadian consciousness" in the 1970s within Vancouver and Toronto—also centered on people of Chinese and Japanese ancestry—they also contend "Asian Canadian" as a category has received less institutional support, leading to no Canadian equivalent of the term "Asian American," as well as a "protracted birth" of Asian Canadian identities.[23] As Ty notes, the concept of "Asian Canadian" being employed on a broader national scale to evoke some form of unified Pan-Asian identity has only occurred since the mid-1990s (with most uses located within academia and literature studies) and often lacks the political connotations of its U.S. counterpart.[24] This difference in relation to "Asian American" results from different migration patterns and national contexts, such as Canada's history with British and French colonialism, its role during the Vietnam War (discussed in Chapter 1), and its national policy of multiculturalism (discussed in Chapter 3).

Perhaps most impactful on the conceptualization of Asian Canadian identities is the official discourse of the Canadian government on people of Asian origins. As Ty outlines, Asian Canadians are categorized as "visible minorities," which is defined as anyone who is non-Caucasian and non-Indigenous.[25] While the category of "Oriental" (and later Asian American) at least provided some geographical and/or cultural commonality for a panethnic identification, the category of "visible minority" is such a large and diverse group that it made it difficult to derive some form of ethnic coalition; rather than identify under the clumsy and vague concept of "visible minority," Canadians of Asian origins often identify themselves based on ethno-national

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[23] Ty and Goellnicht, *Asian North American Identities*, 6.
[24] Ty, *Unfastened*, xxiii.
[25] Ibid.

terms. As Lisa Yoneyama reflects on teaching Asian American and Canadian literature in both the United States and Canada,

> It seems to me that Canada's political reality—in which state-sanctioned multicultural and humanitarian nationalism are supplemented by the ethno-nationalisms of different diasporic and migrant populations—has made it especially difficult for many of my students to articulate a sustained critique from the position of "Asian Canadians."[26]

With "Asian Canadian" on a much more unstable terrain, the shifting boundaries of Asian diasporic identities within Canada often lie in tension between ideologies of ethno-nationalism and multiculturalism, rather than a larger pan-Asian identity or politics.

However, this does not necessarily mean "Asian American" operates outside the limits of understanding Asian diasporic populations and identities in Canada or that there exists a pure and self-contained distinct Vietnamese Canadian identity. Rather, these sites of Asian diasporic identities operate in parallel, sometimes intertwined and uneven manners in relationship with each other. While "becoming Asian American" is still a visible, active, and constant identity process for many of Asian origin within the United States, Nazli Kibria's work on 2nd generation Chinese and Korean Americans also reveals a wide range of meanings and identification with "becoming Asian American." In a similar fashion to Asians in Canada, Kibria notes that "for the majority of Asian Americans, their Asian American identity is powerfully overshadowed in importance by their ethnic national identity," which in some contexts makes concepts like a panethnic "Asian American" uncertain.[27] While specific to the United States, Kibria's exploration of 2nd generation Asian diasporas highlights the larger themes and tensions of the "multiple, fluctuating, and situational character" of ethnic and cultural identity which can be used as a starting point for other diasporic groups.[28] Likewise, in drawing attention to the

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[26] Lisa Yoneyama, "Possibilities of Asian/Canadian Transnationality," *Canadian Literature* 227 (Winter 2015), 197.
[27] Kibria, *Becoming Asian American*, 16.
[28] Ibid., 102.

inherent diasporic nature of Asian Americans, Lisa Lowe argues for a rejection of nationalist models of Asian American subjectivity and a movement towards "interventions that refuse static or binary conceptions of ethnicity, replacing notions of identity with multiplicity and shifting the emphasis from ethnic 'essence' to cultural hybridity."[29] In doing so, Lowe opens theoretical space for a diversity of Asian diasporic identities that form across national borders and between multiple cultural sites. For Lowe, Asian diasporic groups and identities are not contained within a nation-state, but rather nomadic and heterogeneous global movements that seep across various borders. Yet even though there are several parallels between Asian Americans and Canadians of Asian descent, we should still be critical of invocations of free flowing transnational hybrid identities that are unlinked from their material and historical contexts; as Yoneyama correctly warns, when theories of race and identity move into different locations, we need to be attending to theories' "situatedness in its geohistorical specificities."[30] Thus, while conceptualizations of Vietnamese and Asian American identity may provide points of similarity, influence, and contrast—particularly through online interactions—the Vietnamese in Vancouver are also grounded within specific locations and contexts.

There have been, however, scholars who have recognized the importance of locations and physical space in studying Vietnamese diasporic identities, and the possible roles in which locations can produce difference among the diaspora. In a Canadian context, Louis-Jacques Dorais has done comparative work on Vietnamese communities in Canada, France, and Denmark. Yet similar to Cunningham and Nguyen above, while his initial analysis is very location specific—for Canada he clearly positions his data within the contexts of Quebec—his

[29] Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1991), 33.
[30] Yoneyama, "Possibilities of Asian/Canadian Transnationality," 197.

conclusions elevate Quebec, specifically Montreal's Vietnamese population, as representative of a larger and unified "Canadian Việt Kiều [overseas Vietnamese] identity" (which Vancouverites in general would certainly dispute the notion that Quebec could represent them).[31] In a U.S. context, Karin Aguilar-San Juan and her study *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* skillfully explores the idea of multiple Vietnamese diasporas through the framework of physical place. Through the comparison of Vietnamese American Little Saigons and the processes of place-making in Orange County, California and Boston, Massachusetts, she clearly states in her introduction that "not all 'Little Saigons' are the same.[32] In looking at the various differences between the two locations in areas such as histories of migration, social contexts, and ethnic makeup, Aguilar-San Juan maps out the various and different tactics Vietnamese Americans "stay Vietnamese" across different environments.

However in her emphasis on physical places, which involve locations and physical forms, Aguilar-San Juan locates concepts like cyberspace and virtual networks as outside the boundaries of place, place-making, and their relationship to community. In a similar fashion, Lieu also describes the internet as "deterritorialized," something that is distinct from physical places.[33] While I understand in many ways this is Aguilar-San Juan creating necessary boundaries on her work (as well as the research starting in the mid-1990s), these conceptualizations of cyberspace reflects the early discourses of the internet as being boundless and deterritorialized. However, as several scholars have illustrated, the internet has not "deterritorialized" physical space and these discourses often obscure the physical infrastructures of networks that make digital technologies

[31] Louis-Jacques Dorais, "Vietnamese Communities in Canada, France and Denmark," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 11, no. 2 (1998), 122.
[32] Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons,* xi.
[33] Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 122.

work (this is further discussed in Chapter 2).[34] Additionally, in placing virtual networks and digital technologies outside of the local, we also ignore the diversity of ways users employ these tools to produce diasporic identities. For the contexts of this study, localities just do not impact how diasporic groups form identities, it also influences encounters with digital technologies, which in turn shape online and offline experiences and connections.

By situating the study of everyday media practices within the Vietnamese diaspora to the specific location of Vancouver, this project is not downplaying the influence of Vietnamese populations in Orange County or the significance of academic works explored above. Rather, this shift represents the challenging endeavor to question existing notions of Vietnamese diasporic identities through transnationalizing the study of diasporic populations across North America that include the recognition of the multiple diasporas across the continent and the historical and local contexts of their everyday lives that frame how they read, negotiate, and circulate digital media. While the diasporic condition is highly mediated across these groups, their employment of media technologies are diverse as their relationships and power dynamics between homeland, host country, and each other fluctuate across contexts. As mentioned above, the current literature on Vietnamese diasporas has been limited geographically yet applied widely, and this project's specific focus on Vancouver will produce a more plural and diverse understanding of diasporas. In doing so, this project follows E. Gabriella Coleman's suggestion of increasing our attention to the local contexts and lived experiences of digital media users in

[34] See David Morley, *Home territories: Media, mobility, and identity*, (London: Routledge, 2000) and Miyase Christensen et al., eds, *Online Territories: Globalization, Mediated Practice, and Social Space* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

understudied locations in order to further parse the broader cultural significances of digital media and their roles in constructing identities.[35]

In this area, ethnography seem most useful due to its ability to provide informative and descriptive data about local and everyday lived experiences. This "ethnographic turn" in audience research within media studies during the 1980s illustrated the shift from primarily a framework of textual interpretation towards a larger contextualization of media use in the culture of the everyday.[36] The most commonly cited examples of early ethnographic investigations within media studies include David Morley's *The Nationwide Audience*, Janice Radway's (1984) *Reading the Romance*, and Ien Ang's (1985) *Watching Dallas*.[37] However, these works have been criticized as being limited due to their lack of classic ethnographic features like participant observations and a long-term engagement with informants in their natural settings.[38] By mainly employing focus groups, interviews, and the solicitation of fan letters, these works brought audiences outside of their everyday structures and lacked the heavy contextualization necessary for the study of media use of the everyday. Likewise, in the scholarship discussed above that has focused specifically on diasporic Vietnamese media and audience reception, these works have also relied mainly on surveys and short-term interviews.[39]

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[35] E. Gabriella Coleman, "Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (2010), 487-505.
[36] Andrea Press and Sonia Livingston, "Taking audience research into the age of new media: Old problems and new challenges," In *Questions of Method in Cultural Studies*, eds M. White and J. Schwoch (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 175-200.
[37] David Morley, The Nationwide Audience, (London: British Film Institute, 1980); Janice Radway, *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination* (London: Routledge 1985).
[38] See Marie Gillespie, *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Press and Livingstone, "Taking audience research into the age of new media."
[39] Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese;* Stuart Cunningham and Tina Nguyen, "Popular Media of the Vietnamese Diaspora."

However, there has since been a growing attempt to by media and cultural studies to explore audiences within their everyday environments and build upon the works listed above, especially in relation to diasporic conditions. Through these studies, there emerge more complicated views of the relationship between media and diasporic groups. In her study of South Asian youths and their consumption of media, Marie Gillespie focuses on the everyday practices of "TV talk"—the incorporation of the topic and experiences of media into everyday conversation—and explored how these consumption practices and discourses were used to refine and redefine their local, yet diasporic identities. In "hanging out" and engaging youth through daily conversations within their everyday environment, Gillespie is able illustrate how daily media consumption practices and their resulting discussions are more than just simple talk, but provide sites where diasporic cultural boundaries were open to change and negotiation between various cultures, homelands, and identities.[40] Myria Georgiou's study of Greek and Cypriot diasporic identities in everyday life reveals a wide spectrum of Cypriot identities, which translates to a diversity of responses to media. Thus, a theoretical approach that automatically assumes a diaspora as having some connection to a "homeland" glosses over the diversity of relationships to the homeland, illustrating how relying only on a textual analysis of diasporic media can assume a lot about the uniformity of a diaspora.[41]

The rise of digital technologies has also complicated the role of ethnography in the study of audiences and diasporas, throwing into further question conceptions of participant observation and place-based research; for some researchers, the online digital worlds become stable environments that existed on their own terms, requiring minimal face-to-face contact between

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[40] Gillespie, *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change*.
[41] Myria Georgiou, *Diaspora, Identity and the Media* (Cresskill: Hampton Press, Inc., 2006).

informant and researcher.[42] In the realm of "digital diasporas," digital technologies are often seen as revolutionary tools that have allowed for the collapse of time and space, where cyberspace can replace notions of the physical homeland and alter power dynamics between homelands.[43] These claims have been interrogated and have been shown to be overly celebratory of the potentials of "new" media. David Morley argues that the discourses on nature of the internet, which positioned it as being able to transcend space and time, can actually "replicate and reinforce existing patterns of social, economic, and cultural division."[44] As Youna Kim notes in her study of Asian (South Korean, Japanese, and China) women studying abroad,

> the tendency to celebrate transnational mobility is often separated from mundane reality and obscures actual conditions and experiences; that is, the complex ways in which it is experienced by women within diasporic lives in larger relations to the social context of the world, which do not necessarily involve progressive dimensions.[45]

As these works show, these digital tools are not inherently revolutionary, but exist within larger power structures and everyday, mundane actions that help shape their employment within diasporas and the roles in which they create meaning within daily lives. And as the ubiquity of digital technologies grows, the everyday is becoming increasingly intertwined with the digital. As such, scholars continue to advocate for the supplementation of online participation with face-

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[42] See Patrick Murphy and Marwan Kraidy, eds, *Global media studies: Ethnographic perspectives*, (London: Routledge, 2003); Neil Whitehead and Michael Wesch, *Human no more: Digital subjectivities, unhuman subjects, and the end of anthropology*, (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2012); Sherry Turkle, Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the internet, (New York: Simon & Schuster 1995); Nancy Baym, *Tune in, log on: Soaps, fandom, and online* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2000).

[43] See Victoria Bernal, "Diasporas and cyberspace," in *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*, eds Kim Knott and Sean McLoughlin (Chicago: Zed Books Ltd., 2010). Also see Emily Noelle Ignacio, "E-Spacing boundaries: Bridging cyberspace and diaspora studies through ethnography," in *Critical Internet Culture Studies*, eds D Silver, A. Massanari, and S. Jones (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 181-193; Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal (eds), *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics, and Community* (Reno: University of Las Vegas, 2010).

[44] David Morley, *Home territories*, 187.

[45] Youna Kim, *Transnational migration, media, and identity of Asian woman*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 8.

to-face and other offline methods in order to contextualize the actions of users in digital worlds.[46] In bringing together these themes of Vietnamese diasporas, everyday media, and digital diasporas, this project continues the movement towards incorporating long-term ethnographic methods and approaches in the study of media practices and identity creation and maintenance within diasporic groups.

As most histories of the Vietnamese in Vancouver exist only as short summaries or small footnotes that rarely extend past the 1990s, Chapter 1 provides a detailed cultural history that helps contextualize this project and its participants. The first section provides a brief overview of Canada's involvement in the Vietnam War, as well as its role providing humanitarian aid and resettlement. The chapter then constructs a history based on interviews and life stories I collected from 30 members of the Vietnamese Vancouver community. Augmenting these life stories will be fieldwork notes, secondary sources, government documents, archival materials, mainstream press, and mediated representations. Through this history, we can begin to trace and analyze Canadian refugee and immigration policies, diverse migration patterns, and life experiences which highlights how the specificities of the local environment of Vancouver help to produce a community that is both distinct yet parallel in relation to U.S.-based narratives of the Vietnamese diaspora. We can also see the historical emergence of key characteristics and issues of the community that are locally particular to Vietnamese Vancouverites, including "nammer" culture, gangs, and marijuana grow-ops. It is these historical narratives, local contexts, and community characteristics that explain why many in Vancouver see the local diaspora as

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[46] See Daniel Miller and Don Slater, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (London: Berg, 2000); J. Fornas et al., eds, *Digital Borderlands* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002); Heather Horst and Daniel Miller, eds, *Digital Anthropology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012); and Tom Boellstorff, "Rethinking Digital Anthropology," in *Digital Anthropology, eds* Heather Horst and Daniel Miller (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

fragmented and broken, and as the following chapters illustrate, it is also these contexts and elements which help frame how participants employ media and local organizations to define local community and diasporic cultures. Overall, this chapter illustrates the need to diversify how we study diasporas to include the influences of the local as they move across borders.

While Chapter 1 focused on the specific cultural histories and contexts of the Vietnamese Canadian communities within Vancouver, Chapter 2 shifts to the digital technologies—specifically Facebook and Instagram—that mediate the everyday to further understand how these diasporic communities exist in a local, yet digitally networked society. It is through these technologies that Vancouverites become "digital diasporas" where they experience, share, exchange, and (re)define diasporic objects and cultures on both a local and (trans)national level. While past works have focused on "digital diasporas" within specific websites, email listservs, and message boards devoted specifically to a diasporic group, this chapter argues there needs to be more consideration of the contemporary digital contexts of how objects circulate online that require us to refresh our own conceptualizations of the ways technologies intersect with and shape digital diasporas. For many in this project, the construction of diasporic virtual homelands and identities exists not on diasporic-specific message boards, but rather on Facebook's Newsfeed alongside other digital objects, topics, news, posts, pictures, and memes that are under constant alteration and arrangement through underlying software and algorithms. In exploring algorithmic processes of social media sites, this chapter theorizes how cultural algorithms can potentially shape online spaces, experiences, and the certain types of diasporic culture one may receive, and how this plays out in the construction of Vietnamese Canadian identities within the context of Vancouver.

Chapter 3 explores the complex interplay between offline local cultural events and everyday online diasporic experiences. In bringing together theories of everyday media and the event, this chapter is anchored through a focus on two public cultural events produced by and featuring local members of the Vietnamese community and cultural organizations. As these events are often positioned as representative of "Vietnamese Culture" to both the local Vietnamese community and a broader, mainstream Canadian audience, examining these diasporic cultural events as texts can reveal how specific elements and definitions of diasporic cultures are reaffirmed or negotiated through celebration and difference. In addition to the analysis of these events, this chapter places these cultural shows alongside the personal histories and everyday media uses of their organizers and performers. In moving beyond just reading these cultural events as isolated texts in time and space, this consideration of the everyday practices of the community leaders behind the events allows us to expand on how the specific local histories and theories of digital circulation explored in the previous chapters manifest in the constant production and negotiation of Vietnamese diasporic culture in Vancouver. We can then begin to see how through the everyday circulation (or absence) of certain historical narratives, ideologies, and cultural objects among the organizers within on and offline networks potentially influences how transnational Vietnamese diasporic cultures are localized in Vancouver through a cultural event. I argue that while these cultural events often reflect the hegemonic images and structures of diasporic media and events seen in North American regions with "stronger" communities, these events also highlight a localized and ambivalent Vietnamese Canadian subjectivity that is reacting to both larger transnational flows of cultures, as well as local constraints and dynamics within the Vietnamese Vancouver community. In exploring the cultural event and the clubs and organizational leaders that produce them, we can unravel an

intricate yet messy matrix of overlapping and competing identities, anxieties, and ambitions that struggle over defining what it means to be Vietnamese in Vancouver. Through this selective process of localizing and re-circulating elements of Vietnamese diasporic cultures, I argue that the organizers of these shows are attempting to create new images of the Vietnamese in Vancouver to replace perceptions of a broken and stagnant community.

Chapter 4 uses Vietnamese food as an object of study to continue exploring the interplay between online and offline spaces. Taking a step back from ethnography and the everyday, this chapter builds on the audience work of Martin F. Manalansan and S. Elizabeth Bird and employs constructed "creation exercises" which have participants as a group select, watch, and respond to YouTube cooking tutorials on the bánh xèo, a savory, Vietnamese crepe.[47] In addition, I also had the groups go through the processing of cooking the dish, essentially translating digital global flavors into localized, material objects. These creation exercises are paired with interviews with two owners of Vietnamese restaurants in Vancouver who wish to reimagine and challenge the notion of the stereotypically "authentic" Vietnamese restaurant through their food, restaurant space, and online presence. In this case, we reverse the direction to examine how material foods are digitalized for Instagram and Yelp reviews. Overall in both cases, we can examine how Vietnamese diasporic identities through these translations are shaped and negotiated in relation to definitions of authenticity and Vietnamese culinary cultures. From this, we can see the various elements that participants and interviewees draw from—including knowledges and experiences based on national cuisines, local restaurants, family traditions, and

[47] See Martin F. Manalansan, "Cooking up the Senses: A Critical Embodied Approach to the Study of Food and Asian American Television Audience," in *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, eds Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu and Mimi Thi Nguyen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) and S. Elizabeth Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World* (New York: Routledge 2003).

larger histories—that are used to authenticate Vietnamese food, as well as how they negotiate its flavors within the local and among themselves. In doing so, they simultaneously draw and expand borders around Vietnamese cultures and cuisines, as well as larger notions of national identity, class, and global hierarchies.

While the previous chapters have revolved around the circulation of digital objects from diasporas around the world, Chapter 5 focuses more on a direct form of mediated communication between the diasporas. Central to this chapter is an annual Vietnamese diasporic youth camp, which was taking place in Vancouver for the first time ever. As a transnational collaboration between an organization in the United States and its Vancouver branch, the youth camp represents the convergence of multiple Vietnamese North American diasporas in both mediated spaces and face-to-face interactions. As the camp in its various formats circulated through these specific contexts, its cultural and symbolic meanings and representations were in constant flux and subject to debate. Through mediated encounters, many members of the Vancouver branch perceived specific cultural and ideological differences from their more influential Vietnamese American counterparts. In order to localize the camp, the Vancouver branch requested during the planning process to modify some of the camp's long-running structure and programing, namely the addition of more "progressive" topics and the removal of the "political" South Vietnamese flag. In exploring the planning of the camp and the camp experience itself, this chapter details the relationships and power dynamics that emerged between members of the U.S. organization and the Vancouver branch and how various visions and goals of the camp were negotiated as the camp and its cultural meanings were imported into Vancouver. Ultimately, I argue the manner in which these debates took place and the resulting decisions reflect the continued hegemonic power of Vietnamese Americas in controlling what it means to be part of

the Vietnamese diaspora. However, it is these encounters and experiences with difference that allowed many within the Vancouver branch to better define their own future and goals.

Finally, the conclusion brings together the larger themes and threads of this work to summarize the intersections of diasporic cultures and everyday digital media. The conclusion also discusses the difficulties and limitations of this project and the use of ethnography to explore everyday media. Additionally, I will conclude the dissertation with an outline for future paths of inquiry.

As a project that incorporates and moves across multiple texts, individuals, organizations, technologies, and spaces, this work is shaped by media and cultural studies, (digital) anthropology, diasporic studies, and Asian and Southeast Asian American/Canadian studies. Accordingly, I employ a wide range of methods across the chapters of this dissertation, including textual analysis, archival research, and "creation exercises"/focus groups, but the bulk of my data comes from ethnographic methods such as participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, and "deep hanging out" with participants in both on and offline spaces. From September 2015 to September 2016, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Metro Vancouver, Canada (with some minor follow-ups via electronic communication in the months afterwards). When I first arrived in Vancouver, I used the first few months to become acclimatized to the field site and began the process of achieving what Karin Aguilar-San Juan describes as the "experience of place," or the "feelings for the special characteristics" of a city or region, and would continue throughout the fieldwork.[48] As I recruited participants, this process would include mimicking their movements, schedules, and activities to engage with everyday city space in a similar manner.[49] This

[48] Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons*, xxxii.
[49] Of course, this is done with their permission and knowledge.

experience was key in determining the overall rhythms, patterns, and atmosphere of the everyday and how people navigated and interacted with the spaces and people around them, as well as help shape broader observations and interview questions.

During this early period, I also attended as many social events held by local Vietnamese cultural clubs, as well as Asian Canadian-themed events, as possible. In order to create the widest network of connections, my general rule was to never say "no" to any invitation. Through these meetings, I began to introduce myself to members of the community and started to establish relationships and rapport with potential participants. To be clear of my intentions, I always introduced myself as an academic researcher, even at moments when I was not technically recording or collecting hard data, as well as at sites I had no interest in studying. Through these initial contacts, I focused on a few people of interest who were willing to share their stories. From here, I used snowball sampling—where the researcher asks participants to recommend other possible subjects with knowledge or experiences in line with the research objectives—to quickly expand the number of participants.

The first round of semi-structured interviews was always focused on personal histories and life stories in order to construct a cultural history (which is featured in Chapter 1). The core questions involved how someone (or their parents) arrived in Vancouver and their overall experiences in Vancouver, including with the local Vietnamese community. From these initial interviews, as well as information gleamed from my growing sense of Vancouver and archival research, I began to employ a quota method, where specific subgroups are identified and actively recruited by the researcher to participate in the research project. For instance, key themes that came up during interviews were the local Vietnamese reputation of gangs during the 1980 and the recent influx of international students and skilled workers during the 1990s and 2000s. Thus,

I began actively to search for people who met these categories to fill in gaps or flesh out perspectives. At the end of my fieldwork, I managed to recruit 30 individuals. Generally, the interviews took place over two meetings, but it depended on the schedule of the participant. Each interview was generally one hour in length, but quite a few reached the 1.5 and 2 hour mark. While most were one-on-one interviews, there were some group interviews at this stage.

During this time, I was also embedding myself into multiple organizations, which are featured in Chapters 3 and 5. This process included attending multiple events and establishing conversations with leaders of these groups. Eventually, I would request to sit in on meetings to explore how local Vietnamese diasporic events are designed and organized, as well as interview willing organization leaders. As a sign of appreciation and reciprocity, I would offer to help with the organizations in various manners (this is detailed in specific chapters). During meetings and events, I would mostly observe and take notes; these observations would then help formulate specific interview questions. For many of the leaders involved, these interviews took place over 3 to 4 meetings, usually before and after a major event or club meeting.

From these two groups of interviewees—the life histories and the organization leaders—I targeted a select group to explore their everyday media uses that would form the basis of Chapters 2 and 3. Through the process of "hanging out" both in on and offline spaces, I was able to observe their general media habits and through this guiding process of "following the media," I collected data where my participants were going in terms of digital media use. Like the clubs, these observations, as well as analysis of their social media profiles and activities, would form the basis of the interview's core questions. During the interviews, participants would often walk me through their daily media use, such as pulling out their phone and going through their daily routines. In many cases, these interviews took place over 2 to 3 informal meetings.

Ethnography as a methodology can provide a wealth of information and allow researchers to explore how social and cultural meanings of media texts are created and negotiated within complex environments, but its strengths can also produce some constraints and ethical dilemmas. While ethnographic methods are useful in highlighting and prioritizing participants' voices and experiences, it is also a complex, time consuming, and invasive process, particularly for research participants. Thus, even though I wish to obtain as much data as possible to fully understand media's place within everyday life, I am also aware that media use encompasses personal and private activities. In respecting the time and boundaries of my participants (and my inability to shadow them for extended amounts of time or be in multiple places at the same time), I recognize some directly observable aspects of everyday media will be out of the reach for this project, either processed through participants' perspectives or left as unknown gaps. Additionally, in observing and studying the everyday and the mundane, the questions asked and data collected are sometimes seen by participants as just that—mundane. As a result, this ordinariness sometimes made it difficult to produce concrete and empirical evidence from participants that would help approach larger themes and questions; a Facebook Like while riding a bus is just a Facebook Like while riding a bus, and anything else is reading too much into an everyday event. In attempting to ground my arguments within ethnographic data and observations, there were times when I was hesitant to make larger arguments or take care in formulating a balance between concrete evidence and abstract notions of identity and culture.

During this process, I also did a lot of self-reflection to constantly question the power dynamics between myself and this project's participants. As mentioned above, in order to be transparent, I always made sure that people understood my reason for being in Vancouver, even if they were not under direct observation. During interviews, I framed them as conversations,

where interviewees could always turn the question back on me, and I tried to answer truthfully as much as possible. In some cases, I did wait until the end of the interview to fully answer a question. For instance, on the topic of anti-communism (discussed in Chapter 5), one person who had no knowledge of the situation asked me for my opinion on the subject; in this case, I wanted to hear their opinion/thoughts first to document their reaction, even if it was based on not knowing the full picture. I felt in this specific instance, telling them my thoughts first would alter the rest of their answers. In the context of clubs and organizations, I was generally passive in group settings, but if an individual asked me a question that involved opinions or thoughts, I offered my honest responses. Overall, while I tried to create an objective space with my presence there, I ultimately believe Võ's contention that "all ethnographic projects are personal perspectives organized around a curation of partial facts and interpretations," or as James Clifford argues, "ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial—committed and incomplete."[50] Even with these drawbacks—which are partially alleviated by incorporating other methodologies such as archival research and focus groups—ethnography still has the potential to capture everyday media within its rich surroundings. Like every ethnography, this project is admittedly incomplete and limited in its overview of everyday media, but I believe this project illustrates the usefulness of exploring diasporic identities through the ethnographic lens of the everyday, both through theory and empirical evidence.

Yet, as someone who identifies as being part of the diaspora, there is a constant anxiety of "getting it right," especially for "your people." For instance, I felt crafting one of the first

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[50] Linda Trinh Võ, "Performing Ethnography in Asian American Communities: Beyond the Insider-versus-Outside Perspective," in *Cultural Compass: Ethnographic Explorations of Asian America*, ed Martin F. Manalansan IV (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2000), 31; James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of* Ethnography, eds J. Clifford and G. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 7.

cultural histories of the Vietnamese in Vancouver was an uneasy experience, as I purposely left out people and their histories and narratives. Even understanding from a theoretical sense that culture is not essential and always in flux, I still sometimes worry about misrepresenting Vietnamese (and Canadian!) culture as if there is only one right way. To help counteract some of this fear (as well as further reduce distance between the researcher and the researched), I have been open with my thoughts about the project and offering my writing to participants for critiques, suggestions, and sometimes approval. In this sense, my writing is shaped by the notion that there is a mixed audience made up of academics and community members. Although this is a tricky and delicate process, I have tried my best to balance the needs and expectations of both groups.

It should also be noted that while I am part of the Vietnamese diaspora, I am also Vietnamese American, which has certainly impacted how I research and the types of data I received. As Võ argues, the centrality of the "bi-polar insider-versus-outsider model" debate in discussions about ethnography only works to reinforce essentialized notions of cultural and racial categories, and for all ethnographers, we are always already insider-outsiders.[51] For instance, in a span of an interview I can easily shift from insider ("You know, we [Vietnamese] love that stuff") to outsider ("Well the difference between you [Vietnamese American] and us [Vietnamese Canadian]…"). I am a child of refugees, but my father left Vietnam before the fall of Saigon in 1975 and went straight to the United States, while my mother was a "boat person" and spent months in a refugee camp in the early 1980s. However, my father comes from a farming family and his journey is abnormal in that he was uneducated when he left Vietnam, while my mother comes from a (formerly) affluent and educated family. As such, I emerge from

[51] Võ, "Performing Ethnography in Asian American Communities, 19.

a mixture of many kinds of refugee experiences, some histories which match with those in Vancouver, some that do not. But in any case, I am part of the "cultural elite" of the Vietnamese diaspora. A key dilemma here is the paradox of my critique of Vietnamese American hegemony over Vietnamese Canadians, while at the same time I, a highly educated Vietnamese American, write a history of, make claims about, and essentially partly define Vietnamese Canadians. I do not have a clear answer here,but what this does illustrate is the need to reflect on my research and positionality and constantly ask who is speaking and who is being spoken for.

Following Võ's discussion of performing ethnographies within one's own community, I recognize it is difficult, even impossible to separate my identities as being part of the Vietnamese diaspora, Vietnamese American, and as an academic researcher (among a variety of other identities and aspects), nor is it necessary.[52] This does not mean a simple dismissal of power arrangements, but rather a recognition that fieldwork is a continuous collection of interactions with ongoing processes of negotiations, adjustments, and reflexive confrontations with oneself. As noted above in my initial experiences with Vancouver, the ethnographic process is one filled with dead ends, shifting research topics, and anxious moments in search of data, which all point to the "messy nature of fieldwork and the text," especially if the text involves humans and the constantly changing digital technologies that surround them.[53] Yet through this process, I hope there are benefits for those who participated, because if at the base level the participants—those who provided us researchers with data that gives us degrees, employment, and tenure—do not receive anything, what's the point of conducting research in our own communities? I will not say I am giving them voice (they had voices before I "discovered" them), nor will I attach

[52] Ibid., 24.
[53] George Marcus, *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 182.

hyperbole with the vast list of benefits that this dissertation provides (in the typical self-effacing Canadian fashion I have observed). However, I do hope through the proceeding chapters that the aspects of culture and identity that they find most important are featured and explored, and through this process, they have the possibility to better understand themselves and their community.

Chapter 1

Diversifying the Diaspora: Towards Constructing Vietnamese Canadian Histories in Vancouver

Introduction

In September 2015, the growing visibility of the Syrian Refugee crisis began to shift the focus of the 2015 Canadian federal election campaign to how Canada would respond to the growing number of refugees.[1] This renewed focus on Canadian policies towards refugees allowed, on various levels, for Canadians to reflect on their past relationships to refugee groups. For many in the mainstream national news services, the imagery of war, overcrowded boats, water, and death seen in the coverage of the Syrian conflict immediately invoked the Vietnam War and Vietnam's "boat people." This mass exodus of Vietnamese refugees began in the late 1970s when over 800,000 people fled Vietnam into refugee camps located in neighboring Southeast Asian countries, with over 120,000 eventually resettling across Canada under its refugee program.[2]

Sean Fine, a Toronto-based justice writer for *The Globe and Mail*, draws a direct parallel between Vietnamese boat people and the current Syrian crisis in his article, "Historic Canadian resettlement of Vietnamese sets precedent for action."[3] On the same day, CBC Radio program *Day 6 with Brent Bambury*, devoted an entire segment on Ontario-based Vietnamese Canadian

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[1] "Refugee crisis, drowned Syrian boy shift focus of election campaign," *CBC.ca*, last modified September 03, 2015, http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/syria-migrants-canada-drowned-migrants-leaders-respond-1.3213878.

[2] According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) statistics, camps received 839,228 refugees and asylum seekers from Vietnam from 1975-1997. However, as a mostly illegal and partly undocumented migration process, the exact numbers are most likely higher and do not include those lost at sea or who attempted but failed to escape Vietnam. See W. Courtland Robinson, *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response* (New York: Zed Books Ltd, 1998), appendix 1; Anh Ngo, "A Case Study of the Vietnamese in Toronto: Contesting Representations of the Vietnamese in Canadian Social Work Literature," *Refuge* 32, no. 2 (2016): 21.

[3] Sean Fine, "Historic Canadian resettlement of Vietnamese sets precedent for action," The Globe and Mail, last modified Sep 05, 2015, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/historic-canadian-resettlement-of-vietnamese-sets-precedent-for-action/article26235892/.

responses to the current refugee crisis and cites New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Tom Mulcair discussing current immigration policy in which he references Kim Phuc, the subject—and now Canadian citizen—of the iconic photo from the Vietnam War which shows a naked 9-year-old Phuc running towards the camera covered in burns from napalm.[4] Additionally, a CBC article featuring Montreal author Kim Thúy has her discussing her journey to Canada as a refugee.[5] Another popular story included an article with an embedded video by Judy Trinh, a CBC Ottawa reporter who was four when her family fled Vietnam, discussing how the current crisis "transported [her] parents back to the moment of their darkest fears." She concludes expressing confusion with how the national system that initially brought over 60,000 people—who after almost 40 years are "thriving"—could be so different in the current situation.[6] British Columbia also produced several multimedia pieces focused on revisiting stories of how Vietnamese Canadians came to be resettled in Vancouver, such as Tara Carman of the *Vancouver Sun* who interviewed three local Vietnamese Canadians about their stories as boat people and their first few years in Vancouver.[7]

However, there was one particular video on Facebook that was widely Liked and Shared among Vancouverites on my Facebook Newsfeed. Falling under four minutes, the video "I was a Boat Person: Vietnamese Refugees Look Back" was produced by AJ+ Media, an online news channel run by Al Jazeera Media Network, and Andrew Lam, a Vietnamese American author

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[4] Brent Bambury, "Vietnamese-Canadians reach out to displaced Syrians," *Day 6 with Brent Bambury*, *CBC.ca*, Sep 04, 2015, http://www.cbc.ca/radio/day6/episode-249-helping-syrian-refugees-the-real-weight-of-a-vote-a-canada-us-border-wall-and-more-1.3213278/vietnamese-canadians-reach-out-to-displaced-syrians-1.3214061.

[5] "Kim Thúy on how her Vietnam experience compares to Syrian refugee crisis," *CBC.ca*, Sep 28, 2015, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/kim-thuy-vietnam-syrian-refugees-1.3246678.

[6] Judy Trinh, "Vietnamese boat people of more than 3 decades ago now thriving, proud Canadians," *CBC.ca*, last modified Sep 11, 2015, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/vietnamese-boat-people-of-more-than-3-decades-ago-now-thriving-proud-canadians-1.3223505.

[7] Tara Carman, "Refugees who fled Vietnam in the '70s band together to help Syrians," *Vancouversun.com*, Sep 20, 2015,http://www.vancouversun.com/health/refugees+fled+vietnam+band+together+help+syrians/11375355/story.html.

and journalist based in Southern California.[8] Similar to the works above, albeit with a U.S. focus, the video recounts the traumatic journey of Vietnamese boat people and their resettlement in the United States through interviews, with occasional intercutting of archival footage and text to contextualize their stories. These narratives all follow similar patterns: a recounting of trauma and migration related to war and its aftermath, a difficult but eventually manageable process of adjusting in a new culture, and concluding with success stories built on a foundation of hard work and gratitude toward their adopted nation.[9]

As explored in the introduction to this project, these narratives illustrate how Vietnamese diasporas are always seemingly bounded by refugee narratives, only registering on national radars during events like the Syrian crisis or anniversaries of war-related dates. On a local and historical level, *The Chuck Davis History of Metropolitan Vancouver*, an almost 600-page history of Vancouver completed in 2010 has only one mention of the Vietnamese community—a small blurb on the arrival of the first Vietnamese refugees in the city.[10] Apparently, the Vietnamese diaspora in Vancouver has done nothing else since 1978. Within a Vietnamese American perspective, Nhi T. Lieu argues these repeated representations of passive refugees as victims

> serve to erase the history of U.S. involvement while homogenizing the Vietnamese as a monolithic group…these hegemonic representations of Vietnamese as war victims not

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[8] AJ+ Media, *I was a Boat Person: Vietnamese Refugees Look Back*, YouTube video, 3:41, October 01, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQTviKM9Mx0.

[9] These patterns are also common in several works on the Vietnamese diaspora within the United States and Canada. For a critique of the current social science research on Vietnamese Americans and their limitations, see Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xviii-xix. Some examples of these works include Susan Auerbach, *Vietnamese Americans* (Vero Beach: Rourke Corporation, 1991); Paul James Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); James M. Freeman, *Changing Identities: Vietnamese Americans 1975-1995* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995); and Sucheng Chan (ed.), *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

[10] Chuck Davis, *The Chuck Davis History of Metropolitan Vancouver* (Vancouver: Harbour Publishing, 2012), 388.

> only became the source from which these immigrants projected their identities but also form the blueprint that frames future studies of this group.[11]

We can see this homogenizing in the narratives above, as although they are from multiple Canadian provinces and two different nation-states, they show little difference from each other. To be clear, this is not an argument that rejects the significance or existence of the narratives of boat people or the works centered on these topics. Works on the emotional and physical scars and trauma—as well as the passing down of this trauma across generations—have been and continue to be necessary, as well as the invaluable documentation and circulation of their stories, struggles, and successes within systems of refugeeism and resettlement within the diaspora.[12] In fact, I contend that a history of any Vietnamese diaspora cannot be separated from the refugee experience and the roles in which the United States and various other nations took in both Southeast Asia and North America. By definition, the hegemonic ideologies of U.S. imperialism and its resulting discourses about the Vietnamese diaspora that transverse social and media networks will have some influence among the diaspora, either in perceived or concrete forms, and these discourses do appear in this chapter.

However, the issue becomes being confined to these refugee narratives that create strict binary categories, where no amount of action or time can shed the label of the refugee Other/model minority who has been gifted the opportunity of citizenship in the benevolent nation-state.[13] These repetitive stories, often centered around pain and suffering, become fetishized and commodified both within the mainstream press and the academy; these stories and

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[11] Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 2.

[12] For a wonderful source of oral histories, see The Vietnamese American Oral History Project at the University of California, Irvine (http://sites.uci.edu/vaohp/).

[13] Mimi Thi Nguyen describes the relationship between U.S. empire and refugees as a "gift of freedom," where the refugee is always in debt to the United States. See Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and other Refugee Passages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

research topics then become the only ones that are useful, "authentic," and/or worth documenting.[14] As these hegemonic discourses emerge from within and beyond Canada, they create conceptualizations and representations that erase diversity within diasporas, clouding our understanding of diasporic experiences and cultures on both a transnational and local level. How do we account for the contemporary experiences of 2nd generation Vietnamese Canadians and those who exist outside of the framework of boat people into current descriptions of the Vietnamese diasporic culture? How do we explore the implications of Vietnamese Vancouverites acknowledging differences between Vietnamese in U.S. and Canada when these differences and tensions are simplified, ignored, or omitted? How do we understand the current fragmented and evolving state of Vietnamese Canadian communities in Vancouver when most works focus on narratives that do not reflect or ignore the particular histories, traits, and geographies in which these communities exist and operate within?

This chapter provides a localized history of Vietnamese Canadian experiences in Vancouver and seeks to disrupt the limits of the discourses above that gloss over the ways in which difference and transnational relationships help to shape diasporic cultures. This chapter contextualizes this project and its participants and explores how the specificities of the local diaspora interact with larger transnational flows of policies, media, and cultures to produce both distinct yet parallel cultures and histories in relation to dominant U.S.-based narratives of the Vietnamese diaspora. As such, the themes and histories raised here will frame the remaining chapters in this project. In crafting this history, I argue for the necessity to diversify how we conceptualize diasporas to include the impacts of local and national contexts; in doing so, we not

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[14] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that for some communities, particularly those that are Orientalized, ghettoized, and Indigenous, "the stories that are considered most compelling, considered most authentic in social science research are stories of pain and humiliation." See Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 20, no. 6 (2014), 812.

only get a better sense of specific diasporas, but also highlight stories that are obscured in the monolithic construction of "diaspora."

I should note that this history also expands beyond this project. As there currently exists no cultural history of the Vietnamese in Vancouver beyond refugee narratives, I have also used this space to document different histories and narratives that are not seen anywhere else. Thus, while there are some aspects of history that will go unelaborated in this project, I felt they were important to be a part of this specific history. The core of this history is based on semi-structured interviews and life stories I collected with 30 members of the Vietnamese Vancouver community. The majority of these interviews took place in-person and across two meetings, though there often spawned informal conversations, as well as some follow-up questions via email. Before using any materials or direct quotes from informal conversations, I would ask for permission. Positioned as a conversation, I had a few core broad questions, including "How did you or your parents end up in Vancouver?" For the first interview session, other than telling them that the interview was about their personal history, I did not tell them any questions in advance. I wanted to understand what they knew within the everyday, and not what they researched to be a "good" interview. For our second session, although I did not require this, many participants came with additional answers and historical knowledge that would fill in gaps from their first interview. Because I want to focus on and ground my work on the voices of the local community, I present them in this project unedited in terms of grammar and syntax in order to get as close as I can to our conversations.

Augmenting these oral histories will be fieldwork notes, secondary sources, government documents, archival materials, mainstream press, and various media sources (blogs, websites, YouTube videos, etc.). As we are interacting with oral histories and memories, this constructed

history is not meant to represent the "Truth." As Viet Thanh Nguyen writes on memory, "total memory is neither possible or practical, for something is always forgotten."[15] As memories (and history) are linked to power and control, we make statements about ourselves and others through what we remember, forget, or misremember. While I do aim to correlate the oral histories I collect, I also realize that some of these histories are contradictory, overlapping, and may contest each other. These discourses are neither true nor false, yet still represent different forms of truth in people's lives and have emotional and material impact. While centered on the experiences of the Vietnamese in Greater Vancouver, this is also not meant to be a comprehensive account and as Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes, "any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences"[16] Some of these silences are intentional, while others are the limitations that exist in every scholar, field, and methodology. However, this is not designed to be *the* history of the Vietnamese diaspora in Vancouver, but rather hopefully just one of several. I start with a brief overview of Canada's role in Vietnam, which would greatly impact how Canada saw Vietnam as a nation and their overall policy on refugees. I then shift to exploring the major waves of migration and the various forms of difference they brought to Vancouver. I then conclude with the establishment of Little Saigon in 2013 that sets the stage for the remaining chapters.

Canada in Southeast Asia: Quiet Diplomacy and "no axe to grind"

As Robert Bothwell outlines in his overview of Canada's involvement in Vietnam, Canada's role is rooted in the collapse of French power in the aftermath of World War II.[17] With French

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[15] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 10.

[16] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*: *Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 27

[17] Robert Bothwell, "The Further Shore: Canada and Vietnam," *International Journal* 56, no. 1 (Winter 2000-2001), 90.

Indochina being absorbed into the cold war, the United States was invested in restoring the French colonial regime and sent various resources such as money, supplies, and military "advice."[18] After the significant defeat of French forces at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954, a ceasefire was called for Indochina and from 1954 to 1975, Vietnam was divided into two nations after the withdrawal of the French: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North/Socialist) and the U.S.-backed Republic of Vietnam (South/Nationalist). Led by the Soviet Union and China, an international conference in Geneva drafted an agreement that mandated free elections for all of Vietnam by no later than July 1956, though neither South Vietnam nor the United States fully agreed to fulfill the agreement. To ensure this process was fair, there was the creation of the International Commission for Supervision and Control (abbreviated as ICC), which would comprise of three countries that would represent the communists, the anti-communists, and a "neutral" position. While Poland was selected for the communist side and India was selected to be the neutral position, the representative of the anti-communist/Western world was up for debate. Emerging as a world leader after World War II, Canada's international reputation made it seem like a suitable fit; as a nation, Canada

> defined itself as untainted by European - even British - colonialism and as unmoved by the sometimes hysterical and always strident anti-communism that in the 1950s disfigured American public life. At the time, these qualities were considered moral assets.[19]

Seen as fair and reasonable, a spot on the ICC was offered to Canada.

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[18] "Indochina" and "Indochinese" refers to the geographical grouping and people of French colonies in Southeast Asia that include present-day Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. While I see the term as a residue of colonialism, I use it here in a historical sense as it was (and still is) used to describe the region and its people. For this work, I mostly focus on the Vietnamese but recognize Indochina encompasses a wide variety of people.
[19] Bothwell, "The Further Shore: Canada and Vietnam," 90.

As Bothwell notes, this invitation in global affairs was met with "incredulity closely followed by resigned acceptance."[20] Canada was wrapping up its involvement in the Korean War and did not want any involvement with decisions in Indochina; in fact, representatives of Canada had left the Geneva conference before the topic of Indochina had come up for discussion. As Bothwell describes Canada's diplomatic strategy at the time, the nation "had limited resources to spend and limited interest in Asia. Trade was slight, immigration even slighter. History, culture, and interest dictated an attitude of 'Eyes East,' across the Atlantic."[21] For the Canadian government and most Canadians, "Indochina" was only experienced through news reports documenting France's final defeat. According to Bothwell, the agreement to join the ICC was in the larger interest of ending the Indochinese conflict, as well as avoiding another military conflict in the region, especially with growing tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. Yet ultimately, Canada, which had an entire ocean between itself and Indochina, "had no expertise but also no axe to grind" in the overall situation.[22] As such, Canada's Vietnam policy was one of "Quiet Diplomacy," where Canada would publically support the lead of other nations (mostly the U.S.) and only offer critiques or demands in private or behind the scenes to avoid visible conflict between allies; overall, Bothwell sums up Canadian policy as just "to go with the flow" in Vietnam.[23] As the deadline for free elections passed, ceasefires were broken, and the U.S. increased its military presence in Southeast Asia, the ICC was just a background player. As Joel Sokolsky argues, there is much debate over the exact impacts of these polices and Canada's role in the ICC.[24] Some see this as evidence of direct collusion with the United States, thus

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[20] Bothwell, "The Further Shore: Canada and Vietnam," 93.
[21] Ibid., 91.
[22] Ibid., 101.
[23] Ibid., 112.
[24] Joel Sokolsky, "The 'Lessons' of Vietnam for Canada: Complicity, Irrelevance, Earnestness, or Realism?" *International Journal* 69, no. 3 (2014), 444-451.

implicating Canada into being complicit in the larger system of the U.S. empire, while other scholars see this situation as illustrative of Canada's lack of influence and continued marginalization on the international scene.[25] In any case, as the Vietnam War escalated, it started a chain reaction that would impact thousands in Vancouver, Canada.

Pre-1975: The Early Years in Vancouver

Statistically speaking, Walter is a unique person. A self-described "geek" in his early 40s, Walter is a highly educated working professional who resides and works Greater Vancouver. His distinctiveness is partly due to his background. Having been born in Vancouver in 1975, he is relatively old for a second-generation Vietnamese Canadian and is a rare case for not just Vancouver but in the Vietnamese diaspora overall, something in which he acknowledges in our interview about his family's trajectory to Vancouver:

> I always knew that we, our family, were different, than most people in Canada, especially at the time. I was born in 1975 and I think the first wave of immigrants didn't come several years later…my parents came here rather really early, I think in the 1960s and at that time the only Vietnamese community really were like the university students that were here.

The earliest documented Vietnamese migration to Canada was in the early 1950s, when a small number of students, mostly from Roman Catholic backgrounds, acquired bursaries to study at French-speaking universities.[26] From 1954 to 1975, both governments of Vietnam sent young Vietnamese students around the world to study in hopes that they would return with new skills to

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[25] See Robert Bothwell, "The Further Shore: Canada and Vietnam," 110. Both Victor Levant and Charles Taylor point to Canada's role in selling military supplies, providing humanitarian aid, protecting economic interests, and giving public support for objectives to only the U.S. and South Vietnam during the war, as well as being the "ears and eyes" of Washington while performing "neutral" diplomatic missions in North Vietnam. See Victor Levant, *Quiet Complicity: Canadian Involvement in the Vietnam War* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1986), *189* and Charles Taylor, *Snow Job: Canada, the United States, and Vietnam [1945 to 1973]* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1974), I; Joel Sokolsky, "The 'Lessons' of Vietnam for Canada," 448.

[26] Lisa Smedman, *Immigrants: Stories of Vancouver's People* (Vancouver, Vancouver Courier, 2009), 284.

help develop their respective nations. Due to the lingering impact of French colonialism, those that went to Canada mostly chose to study in the Francophone universities in Montreal and Quebec City.[27] Western Canada, particularly Vancouver and other predominately English-speaking cities, were not major destinations for these groups of students, making data more difficult to obtain for these populations. However in his study of the Vietnamese in Eastern Canada, Jacques Dorais notes that in 1974 there were about 1,500 Vietnamese living in Canada, with at least 1,100 residing in the province of Quebec.[28] This leads to an estimate, at most, of a few hundred living in the Metro Vancouver area just before the Fall of Saigon in 1975.[29]

While the goal of these programs was to have students return (and many did), the increased activity of war in Southeast Asia made the choice to stay abroad an easy one for many students. Walter's dad did not initially study in Canada. As Walter recounts

> [My father] was actually going to join the South Vietnamese military, but because he was also a law student, he was sent for academic training in the United States. So I think he was sent to Washington D.C. for some intensive language training. And then, so [laughs] one thing just led to another, you know what, I'm going to stretch this out as long as possible so not get sent back [laughs]. So my dad started living in the United States, and he just started migrating. He ended up at BYU in Utah for a while.

By the early 70s, Walter's father's education shifted from law to math and economics. As the news was showcasing a bleak picture in South Vietnam, Walter's father saw that his topic of

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[27] See Bong Duy Nguyen, *Monograph on the Vietnamese in Eastern Canada: A brief description of the communities of Vietnamese immigrants and refugees from the first wave*, (Ottawa: Multiculturalism Dictorate, 1979), 5-6; Louis-Jacques Dorais, "Vietnamese Communities in Canada, France and Denmark," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 11, no. 2 (1998): 109; and Louis-Jacques Dorais, Lise Pilon-Lê, and Huy Nguyễn, *Exile in a Cold Land* (New Haven: Council on Southeast Asia Studies, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1987).

[28] Dorais, "Vietnamese Communities in Canada, France and Denmark," 109.

[29] Nguyen states there were also small communities in London, Calgary, and Edmonton. Nguyen, *Monograph on the Vietnamese in Eastern Canada*, 8. The histories collected by Lisa Smedman also estimate that there were a "couple of hundred" Vietnamese in Vancouver. See Lisa Smedman, *Immigrants,* 282. Additionally, through Operation Vietnam "Babylift," eight orphans from Cambodia and Vietnam came to Vancouver on April 5th, 1975, however there is immense debate over if they were actually orphans, as well if this was a "kidnapping" or "saving." See Veronica Strong-Boag and Rupa Bagga, "Saving, Kidnapping, or Something of Both? Canada and the Vietnam/Cambodia Babylift, Spring 1975," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 39, no. 3 (September 2009), 271-289.

study, South Vietnamese law, might not exist in a few years. With his educational background, he was able to gain entry at a university in Metro-Vancouver, where he met Walter's mother.

Walter's mother also had ties to the South Vietnamese government, but was not strongly linked to the United States. Unsure of the exact situation, Walter explains that his grandmother worked for the South Vietnamese consulate and was able to leave Vietnam in the 1960s to work for the consulate in Hong Kong. After a few years, they would end up in Vancouver, though the selection process was focused on language:

> My mother's side on the other hand, their trajectory to Canada was slightly more straightforward. They were in Hong Kong for like 5 years. And then they flew to Montreal, because they, I guess it's easier to migrate to Canada, they thought. At first Quebec, because they kind of spoke French and thought it was a friendly background. And, this is my mom's story, when we went to Quebec, we listened to their French and we didn't understand a word they said, so we were just like let's get out of here, let's just go to Vancouver, so we went up to Vancouver.

After meeting in Vancouver, they gave birth to their first child, Walter, in 1975 and settled in East Vancouver. Eventually, his father would obtain his PhD at a university in the United States and become a professor in Canada, while his mother was a homemaker, raising Walter and his three siblings in Vancouver (through there were occasional periods in the United States and Eastern Canada).

As with most people in this wave of immigration, Walter's parents illustrate a migrant class with a much wider range of social, economic, and geographical mobility. Operating before any major refugee narrative, this group was highly educated with access to respectable employment options in the fields of engineering, civil service, and higher education. Similar to the United States, although on a much smaller scale, these factors allowed in Eastern Canada the creation of several ethnic associations, community organizations, and networks that would help

produce systems of stabilities and cultural baselines for the first wave of refugees.[30] For instance, Dorais notes that the pre-1975 wave formed organizations in Montreal and Quebec City that would eventually provide "services and a form of support and advocacy that the refugees would not find provided by governmental or other agencies."[31] However, due to the much smaller population in Vancouver, these organizations and networks would not be established, which would set up the contexts and frameworks (or lack thereof) that will produce a distinctive Vietnamese diaspora in Vancouver.

1975-1980: Boat People, Camps, and the Indochinese Refugees

On April 30th, 1975, the last U.S. helicopter officially and abruptly left Saigon; hours later, the city was captured/liberated by the People's Army of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (Viet Cong), essentially marking the end of the South Vietnamese government and the Vietnam War. While most remember or know the "last helicopter out of Saigon" due to the dramatic images that captured the event, most Canadians do not remember the withdrawal of Canada from Vietnam. As Peter Kent of CBC Television News reported in 1975, the Canadian embassy left the country at "a leisurely pace" on April 24th, roughly a week before the United States. During the previous weeks and days as chaos and panic were setting in among the Vietnamese in Saigon, the Canadian embassy issued around 14,000 visas for Vietnamese civilians, including many who were employed by the Canadian embassy and their families. For these workers, this was critical because many feared that any involvement with foreign

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[30] See Richard Nann, Phyllis Johnson, and Morton Besier, eds, *Refugee Resettlement: Southeast Asians in Transitions* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984).

[31] See Nguyen, *Monograph on the Vietnamese in Eastern Canada: A brief description of the communities of Vietnamese immigrants and refugees from the first wave*; Dorais, "Vietnamese Communities in Canada, France, and Denmark," 112.

governments—even "neutral" Canada—would result in persecution, as in the eyes of the Communists, "all white men are Americans." However, Canada did not explicitly inform those who had received visas that they must find their own transportation out of the country. As Canadian diplomats were packing their things on the 24th of April, the embassy told several hundred desperate Vietnamese nationals to come back tomorrow with proper paperwork for their visas. By midday, the embassy was closed and the entire Canadian staff, along with missionaries, relief workers, and a few Vietnamese, boarded the last Canadian plane in the country. While the plane had enough room for two diplomatic vehicles filled with artwork, their Vietnamese drivers had to stay behind. Of course, when many Vietnamese returned the next day with their paperwork, they found the Canadian embassy boarded up and abandoned.[32] Overall, this is fairly reflective of the Canadian policy in Vietnam, one of reluctance and distance.

For many, this meant a last minute scramble for evacuation by the United States. After the Fall of Saigon, those who were associated with both the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments and unable to escape, the new Communist government most likely meant prison time, re-education camps, relocation to New-Economic-Zones (NEZs), and the denial of citizenship and other rights, which would be passed down for generations. Facing these prospects, thousands of Vietnamese began to leave Vietnam as refugees. In an attempt to avoid backlash and further association with the United States after its disastrous involvement and withdrawal, Canada's immigration system allowed only a small and limited number of Vietnamese (and Cambodian) refugees and asylum seekers. With the United States, France, and Australia taking leads, Canada's immigration policies in 1975 were seen more as a "back-up

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[32] Peter Kent, "Canadians Pull Out of Saigon," *CBC Television News*, April 24, 1975, http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/canadians-pull-out-of-saigon-vietnam.

position" and seem to be aligned with the mostly negative general public opinion on the topic of refugees, as well as the War and Canada's involvement.[33]

Initially, applicants had to have a relative or connection already in the country; for the first year after the Fall of Saigon, some 6,500 refugees had been accepted into Canada.[34] In comparison, the U.S. took in 10,000 in addition the initial 130,000 Vietnamese evacuated during the final days in Saigon.[35] Due to the requirement of having a relative sponsor in this early wave of refugees, an estimated 90% went to Eastern Canada; like their relatives (and parallel to similar waves in the United States), this initial group mostly came from higher levels of economic, social, and cultural classes with various ties to both the South Vietnamese and U.S. governments. The rest of the refugees, numbering only a few hundred, were spread across English-speaking areas including Vancouver and British Columbia.[36] This lack of initial refugee resettlement in British Columbia was also partly due to the fact that the province in 1975 did not have any prior bureaucratic legislation to deal with refugees or their resettlement.[37]

As mentioned, for Vancouver this was a relatively quiet time in terms of accepting any Vietnamese refugees. However, as the numbers of refugees continued to increase and overload the resources of countries such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the Philippines, the media coverage also increased over the next few years. A critical moment— analogous to the increased media coverage of the Syrian Refugee crisis—was the *Hai Hong* incident in late 1978, in which a cargo ship of over 2,500 refugees was denied entry in Malaysia. During the resulting two week naval standoff, the refugees had no choice but to remain in the cramped and dangerous conditions.

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[33] For an extensive overview of Canada's involvement with the Indochinese refugees, see Howard Adelman, *Canada and the Indochinese Refugees* (Regina: L.A. Weigl Educational Associates Ltd., 1982), 32.
[34] Dorais, "Vietnamese Communities in Canada, France and Denmark," 109.
[35] Robinson, *Terms of Refuge*, 22.
[36] Nguyen, *Monograph on the Vietnamese in Eastern Canada*, 8.
[37] Adelman, *Canada and the Indochinese Refugees*, 80.

News of this situation, along with other massive ships being denied docking privileges, began to sway views on Canada's role in accepting refugees and numbers of admitting refugees rose along with the polls. By the end of 1979, Canada established a target goal of 50,000 refugees, jumping up from the previous declaration of 8,000. These refugees would be split among government and private sponsorships, which consisted of organizations (e.g. churches, non-profit groups, etc.) or groups of five or more people.[38] Sponsorships would include monthly payments for a year, access to language classes or employment programs, and overall assistance in adjusting to Canadian society (food, housing, winter clothes, etc.).[39]

It was not until this initiative of accepting 50,000 refugees that Vancouver (and even British Columbia) become involved in a larger level, finally adopting a provincial refugee policy in July 1979. This shift from 8,000 to 50,000 was also in part a response to the increasing number of refugees leaving Vietnam, which now expanded beyond political persecution. First, the new socialist economic policies put into place by the new Vietnamese government after 1975 were failing and not providing basic necessities, impacting everyone in the country. Enacting socialist and communist ideologies in practice, the Communist government felt the South was too urbanized and wealth needed to be redistributed. For Vietnamese families accused of being associated with the South Vietnamese government—whether true or not—this meant a confiscation of property, businesses, and statuses. This was often accompanied with relocation to NEZs, or land dedicated to producing new farms, which in theory pushed Vietnam towards the agrarian reforms championed by Ho Chi Minh and other socialist leaders. These actions were also heavily applied to the Sino-Vietnamese, or the ethnic Chinese diaspora in Vietnam. After

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[38] Ibid., 38.

[39] See Adelman, *Canada and the Indochinese Refugees*; Ed Martin, *Background paper on the Vietnamese Refugees* (Vancouver: City of Vancouver Task Force on Vietnamese Refugees, 1979); Michael J. Molloy et al., *Running on Empty: Canada and the Indochinese Refugee, 1975-1980* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

the end of the Vietnam War, tensions rose between China and Vietnam over border disputes (along with thousands of years of animosity between the two cultures). Vietnam, fearing an attack from within from the disloyal Sino-Vietnamese "fifth column," began to take away jobs and statuses from Chinese Vietnamese, relocate them to NEZs, and/or allow payment for legal passage out of Vietnam.[40] Several Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese tried to make life on the NEZs work, including James and his nine siblings. Now a maintenance worker in his mid-50s, James remembers the drastic shift in his childhood from an urban lifestyle in Saigon to an underdeveloped rural setting, recalling that his family used to have maids and were now reduced to hard farm labor. This difficulty was compounded by the fact that they also had no background or knowledge on how to actually farm. Of course, this caused food shortages not just for families like James', but also on a regional and national scale (additionally, as other documents note, a large portion of the land used for NEZs were unconducive to farming due to U.S. bombings and chemical warfare).[41] Recognizing this situation would not work, many individuals and families decided to leave Vietnam from 1977 to 1980, both legally and illegally on foot and via boat.

During this time, the Cambodian-Vietnamese War also started in 1978. Reeling from decades of war, Vietnam implemented a draft for service in Cambodia. Dennis, a settlement worker now in his mid-50s, remembers his decision to leave Vietnam was related to the draft:

> After the war ended…I was drafted into a military service, go to fighting Cambodia at that, 78 or 79, and my mom was worried. And I was worried too, because I don't want to fight [light laugh]. And most of my friends…they started leaving the country, so I asked my mom, 'I don't want to stay here.' And then my mom just, get some kind of connections to a neighbor and we paid like 4 pieces of gold like this [holds up hand to show size]. And in April 1980, I escaped.

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[40] Ed Martin, *Background Paper on the Vietnamese Refugees,* 4-5. Also see K. W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 614.

[41] Ed Martin, *Background Paper on the Vietnamese Refugees*, 4.

Born in Saigon, Dennis had a fairly stable childhood. His father was in the financial business sector, his mother worked in retail and distribution, and the family owned multiple homes. While done through illegal methods, they had the resources to purchase a passage out of Vietnam. Pham, on the other hand, took a different route. The same age as Dennis and currently a counselor in Vancouver, Pham was drafted into the army as a teenager and served in Vietnam's Special Forces in Cambodia. Also realizing that Vietnam had limited opportunities for him, he abandoned his post in Cambodia and walked across the border to Thailand, which hosted several refugee camps.

Once in refugee camps, people had a wide variety of experiences that led them to Canada and Vancouver specifically. With the increase of the number of refugees allowed came a shift in policies on how to accept refugees. In his comparison between the U.S. and Canadian policies, C. Michael Lanphier notes how the U.S. emphasized a requirement to have a "historical" and prior connection to the United States (similar to Canada's early policies). This could come in the form of being a former employee of the South Vietnamese government, through service with the South Vietnamese military, or by having relatives or a direct sponsor already established in the U.S. This of course favored certain demographics of Vietnamese refugees, including having a higher education and being from South Vietnam.[42] In contrast, Canada did not have these requirements. Instead, Canada used a "categoric" system which created a flexible framework where large "designated classes" could be quickly defined and redefined based on local circumstances and applied on a large scale. Thus, while the U.S. emphasized individual interviews with refugees to classify and decide admittance, Canadian officers could just have the criteria of the "refugee category" be simply dependent on birthplace or one's most recent

[42] This does not mean that the U.S. category was uniform, but based on policy, there are implications that the U.S. had a more uniform refugee group than compared to the Canadians.

location. This simplified interview procedures to quickly accept refugees to meet the 50,000 goal, and made it easier for individuals and large families (which some countries saw as difficult to deal with) to get visas.[43] However, this also created greater diversity within Canada's "refugee" category, including a wide spectrum of (former) class, education, and geographical origin (e.g. North, South, Central).

As the "categoric" system implies, the selection process, while semi-formalized, was often holistic, even sometimes random in application. On the 40th anniversary of the Fall of Saigon, CBC Radio's historical program *Rewind with Michael Enright* revisited media coverage of Canada's role with the boat people. Pulling from the CBC archives, the program features interviews with Ian Hamilton, the Chief Canadian Immigration Officer for camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Burma, and Scott Mullin, a 22-year-old fresh out of university. As the program notes,

> Canadian Chief Immigration Officer Ian Hamilton admitted that during the selection of refugees from the Hai Hong, immigration criteria were interpreted very "liberally"…Mullin and Hamilton interviewed nearly 1,000 refugees per day, taking only one short break and working past midnight.

As Mullin vaguely elaborates on how he decides whether someone gains entry to Canada, "it's a gut reaction…you have to go on your own reaction to the individual."[44]

On the other side, when asked about how they or their parents decided on Canada, a range of motivations and limitations were revealed. While Nguyen's research on the pre-1975

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[43] C. Michael Lanphier, "Resettlement as Mass Movement: Governmental Policy Implications: United States, Canada, France," in Refugee Resettlement: Southeast Asians in Transitions, eds. Richard Nann, Phyllis Johnson, and Morton Besier (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), 161-162. For an expanded and updated view of the Canadian refugee resettlement program, see Michael J. Molloy, et al., *Running on Empty: Canada and the Indochinese Refugees, 1975-1980* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).
[44] Michael Enright, "The Vietnam War: Canada's Role, Part Two: The Boat People," *CBCRadio Rewind with Michael Enright*, last modified April 30, 2015, http://www.cbc.ca/radio/rewind/the-vietnam-war-canada-s-role-part-two-the-boat-people-1.3048026.

immigrants in Eastern Canada indicate greater agency and choice in the selection of Canada, Chinh's account showed a much more restrictive and fuzzy process during this period:

> the refugees never had a chance to pick the countries. That is something we don't understand from this end, because we thought these people chose to come to this country. Refugees would try their best to get out of the camp as soon as possible. So often before any delegation of any countries that come to interviews to the camp, the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee] officer will call us up and say 'Do you want to go to this country? Fill an application.'

The one common theme was the desire to leave the refugee camps as quickly as possible. Phuc, a Sino-Vietnamese working professional in her mid-50s, was fourteen when she and her family of 11 escaped Vietnam in 1979 after their land and material possessions were seized by the Communist government. When Canada was the first to offer passage because it was prioritizing families with small children, her mother, even though she or the family had never heard of Canada, instantly took the offer due to camp's dangerous conditions. Justin, a working professional in his mid-20s, explains that his parents had specific countries in mind, though also focused on leaving the camp as soon as possible:

> There's three big countries that they had, so they were waiting for a larger country to take them in. So they have offers from Belgium, Jordan, other countries, but they wanted to wait for the other three, so either Australia, the U.S., or Canada because those are the ones with the most opportunities.
> *So was Canada their first choice?*
> They had no preference, to be honest, like any of those three they would take because they heard good things about them all.

While many had the United States on their radars, most felt their chances were fairly low, especially if they did not have any relatives or prior relationship with either the South Vietnamese or U.S. government. Nevertheless, having a relationship did not guarantee entry in the U.S. James, who left Vietnam in 1978 when he was fourteen-years-old with his family of nine, explains the initial goal was for resettlement in the United States:

> My dad was a U.S. Navy. When we get to Malaysia camp, the first thing was the Canada offer, he rejected, he didn't want it, he wanted to go to the States. So we wait for the immigration office of the States to come in, and they did, and they reject him three times. Over a year and half in Malaysia camp [light laugh]. So finally we're not waiting for you, I'm going to Canada!

As a more diverse group than the pre-1975 migrants and the initial wave of refugees in 1975, views toward the United States were not uniform. As Claire, a student in her early 20s (and featured in Chapter 3), describes her father's decision to come to Canada,

> He didn't want to go to the States…[because] when the US basically told him he was going to the States, he didn't take too well being told where to go [light laugh]. And I think he liked Canada better, at that point too. Because I guess the U.S. is very involved with the war in Vietnam, right, and he just wanted to go to Canada.

The pullout of the U.S. in 1975 was viewed as abandonment for many and soured the view of the United States, especially when those who did not get "rescued" had to go through the experiences described above. As James' and Claire's father's experiences illustrate, ambivalent and even hostile emotions towards both the U.S. and Vietnam were created.

Once applications were submitted, applicants had to go through an interview process. For Dennis, this process was fairly painless:

> I applied everywhere. I went to the French commission and the Australian commission…So I went to the Canadian commission and they were fairly generous. All they did was ask me a few questions, okay go. That's why I got a very short stay in the camps.

For Chinh, the experience was frightening. Looking back, however, he is able to tell his experience with humor:

> Honestly, my English was not good enough, so we had to hấp thụ [to absorb]. You have certain questions, like people pass on for generations, right [light laugh]? So you got like…20 questions, it's been a long time, I don't remember. That's the number of questions you need to memorize, both the questions and the answers. So you go in, and because your hearing is not good enough, you have to pick and choose, you make a guess. When you hear…they say something and you get a keyword, right? That's how I got through the interview. It was a very scary moment…[The interviewer] paused like for a second and she said something, and then it ended with the word 'Canada.' And in

> the questions that I learned, there was one question 'What do you know about Canada?' So right away I thought that was the question, so I went on with the answer, and the two interpreters sitting next to, waved their hand, 'Not that one! Not that one!' [laughs]. I was so scared! [laughs]

At its peak, Canada would take about 60,000 refugees, with roughly 7,300 being resettled in British Columbia by 1980. From that 7,300, 47.5% would live in the city of Vancouver, 44.2% in the surrounding suburban cities (Langley, Surrey, Burnaby, etc.), and 8.3% in Victoria.[45] For the most part, nobody requested Vancouver specifically; the most common answer of how they ended in Vancouver was that their sponsors (mostly churches) were just located there. In fact, once Chinh found out he was headed to Vancouver instead of Toronto, he was strongly disappointed (but soon feel in love with the lush mountains). While it was not a strict requirement to live near their sponsors, it was often the most efficient setup, at least for the first year when the sponsor was legally required to support them, as well as assisting with other things besides finances. Of Vancouver's initial wave of refugees in the late 1970s, two-thirds were privately sponsored, while the rest were government sponsored. In line with Vancouver's economy, many refugees found employment (with the help of their sponsors) as mechanics, repairmen, machine operators, and in the field of manufacturing industries and food services.[46] In many cases, this also aligned with their previous work experiences and skills; as Ed Martin notes in his overview of refugees for the city of Vancouver:

> It appears that the refugees now in Vancouver are well equipped to enter the labour force as the vast majority of these people were blue collar workers in the service sector of the South Vietnamese economy.[47]

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[45] Employment and Immigration Canada, *Indochinese Refugees: The Canadian Response, 1979 and 1980* (Ottawa: Minster of Supply and Services Canada, 1992), 21.
[46] Phyllis J. Johnson, "Effect of Sponsorship on Initial Economic Experiences of Southeast Asian Refugees," in *Refugee Resettlement: Southeast Asians in Transitions*, eds. Richard Nann, Phyllis Johnson, and Morton Besier (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), 38.,
[47] Ed Martin, *Background paper on the Vietnamese Refugees*, 13.

Martin also notes in 1979 that there is an increase of North Vietnamese refugees coming to Vancouver and British Columbia. Similar to the current Vancouver refugee population, Martin points to the fact that many North Vietnamese are unskilled labourers, which makes Vancouver attractive due to its higher numbers of blue collar jobs in areas such as fishing, farming, and manufacturing (compared to Toronto).[48] However, this diversity of North and South Vietnamese would produce an unstable base for any form of community due to differing politics. But with the growth of North Vietnamese in Vancouver at the end of the 1970s, the infrastructures of anti-communism often seen in Vietnamese diasporas are unable to be established in Vancouver, as no group had clear dominance, whether culturally, economically, or politically.

1980-90: Chinatown, Arriving in Vancouver, and Adjusting to Canada

Just before the major influx of refugees, the Vietnamese scene in Vancouver was fairly non-existent, at least in the mind of Walter as he remembers his childhood during the early 80s in Vancouver:

> I think on and off my parents did introduce me to Vietnamese children. They were never in the neighborhood, they were in the city. They were friends of friends. So I would meet the odd Vietnamese kid around my age. But there wasn't any sort of set of Vietnamese homies in the neighborhood. And so when I started going to school and starting migrating towards my natural set of friends, they weren't Vietnamese, at least not in elementary.

In lieu of a strong Vietnamese presence in terms of space outside of his home, it was no surprise that Chinatown played a key role for Walter's family.

> Back when I was growing up there in the late 70s and early 80s, honestly don't remember going to any Pho restaurants. I remember my mom cooking pho. And when we went out to eat, she was more interested in taking us to Chinatown and wonton noodle houses. That was more of her thing. That was more of her scene, actually. But my mom has a unique sort of history. She left with her side of her family from Vietnam and they migrated to Hong Kong first. So she spent several years in Hong Kong, and she actually

[48] Ibid., 13.

> speaks Cantonese very well and she exposed us to as much Cantonese culture as Vietnamese culture, which is not…I don't think it's super unusual, just because the Cantonese population, especially back in the day, it was predominant. Yeah, my mom would go shopping and take me shopping, usually to Chinatown. There wasn't really a specific Vietnamese, like market or anything back then.

While Walter's contexts differed greatly with the new wave of Vietnamese, similar feelings and connections to Chinatown were also shared among many of the refugees. According to government documents, it was theorized that Chinatown in Vancouver would be a site of attraction and preference for refugees, many of whom were Sino-Vietnamese, or ethnically Chinese Vietnamese; this could also help aid in addressing emotional crisis and trauma due in an environment that was more similar to Asia.[49] Although no informant cited that Chinatown directly impacted their decision to go to Vancouver—that decision was mostly out of their control and was more directed by provincial policy and where funding was located—Dennis did believe being able to access Chinatown was beneficial during his first few years in Vancouver:

> Mind you we [Vancouver] have a big population of Asians, the Chinese in here…so we're not that as isolated, alone in terms of Asian culture, food, or all the other stuff. So there's a subgroup in the order, the bigger ethnic group in society. So it was kind of a tiny subculture in away. But it was fine for us in a way.

Chinatown also attracted several refugees because of the cheap rent in the area. As Dennis remembers, Chinatown was still prospering in the early 80s and the cheap rent allowed him to save extra money from his job in a sofa-loveseat factory and his side job of selling various goods on street corners. Soon, he was able to attend classes at a local university. Unfortunately, he also experienced the same racism that was common in Chinatown; as he explains, "At that time, there was racism over there too. Sometimes a white person would drive by, 'Oh go home you Chinaman, go fuck off,' that kind of stuff."

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[49] Ibid., 12.

Relationships with Chinatown, however, produced a diversity of results. For many Sino-Vietnamese, Chinatown represented an ambiguous space, as "Vietnamese of Chinese ancestry fe[lt] excluded from both the (Hong Kong) Chinese and the Vietnamese communities."[50] Chinatown further fragmented the already loosely connected Vietnamese community. In many instances, Sino-Vietnamese parents would encourage their children to speak Cantonese and identify as Chinese. This was done for various reasons; with a stronger and more established community, being Chinese in Vancouver could increase economic, cultural, and political benefits. Initially resettled in a neighboring city East of Vancouver near his sponsors, James describes his first year in Burnaby as being constantly picked on by White bullies. As he elaborates,

> Most of the time it's like shit in school because people like to pick on us because we don't speak English…so all my brothers and sisters, anyone go pick on them, I'll beat the crap out of them. Like I got a VIP spot in the principal's office every lunch hour.

James' narrative is not unique. As Tan Phan's qualitative study of Vietnamese refugees' experiences in Vancouver area schools during the mid-1980s illustrates, racism, bullying, and poor instruction were major problems for many Vietnamese youth. Additionally, the students also faced discrimination from school administrators, who were more likely to punish or harass Vietnamese students due to administrators' perceptions that the Vietnamese students did not know the "Canadian way."[51]

James and his family eventually moved near Chinatown on the East side of Vancouver in order for his parents to be closer to work, food, and shopping. Being Sino-Vietnamese, it also

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[50] Michelle LeBaron Duryea and J. Bruce Grundison, *Conflict and Culture: Research in Five Communities in Vancouver, British Columbia (*Victoria: University of Victoria Institute for Dispute Resolution, 1993), 107.

[51] Tan Phan, "Life in School: Narratives of Resiliency among Vietnamese-Canadian Youths," *Adolescence* 38, no. 151 (2003), 555-566.

helped his parents—who could speak Cantonese but struggled with English—communicate with people better. Living in Chinatown, James forgot how to speak Vietnamese, only relearning it later as an adult. Due to his experiences in the education system, James struggled in school and dropped out in 1983 after completing the 7th grade. As he explained, school was optional in Vietnam as he grew up during an unstable period of war. He also saw his parents struggle with money and felt time was better spent working, which included delivering *The Province* newspaper and picking berries at farms around the area. When his family moved to Chinatown, he also realized he could be the "big" bully in this environment. Not wanting his siblings to experience constant suffering, he eventually joined a gang in Chinatown where he collected protection fees around the area:

> I see all the things and my family were picked on, my brothers, and I hang out in a group—Asian Crime Unit they call it. So I was involved in that group, anyone that come near my brothers, sisters, or my family, like I'm the one that went out there and beat the crap out of them without any mercy. I probably see that happened from the day I entered Canada and get picked on until I moved to Chinatown where I know some people that I would like to be a part of and be tough because I don't want my family to be picked on anymore. I was sick of that.

Like his experiences in school, James' story reflects a common case for several young people who lived near Chinatown during the 1980s. As one of the poorest Postal codes in Canada, Chinatown and the Downtown Eastside was home to both a significant amount of Vietnamese refugees and high criminal activity.[52]

Unlike Eastern Canada and the United States, which had systems and networks developed by those in the pre-1975 migration that helped to prevent or address issues experienced by refugees, Vancouver lacked these support systems and community advocacy. As James explains,

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[52] See The Strathcona Community Centre Association, *The Vietnamese Work Orientation Project* (Vancouver: The Strathcona Community Centre Association, 1992).

> Like I'm not proud of what I did in the past, but that was just the force by nature. It's the same thing with the government, I look at the sponsor youth and there's no guidance of what's next step of all the refugees should take.

After his year of sponsorship was up, James and his family were basically left to fend for themselves; however, the type of support received from sponsors also varied. Phuc, who was 14 when she and her family of 11 left Vietnam, was initially assigned to be resettled in Calgary. While the Calgary government was having difficulty finding a place of residence for a family of 11, the city of Vancouver contacted Calgary and stated they had a private sponsor consisting of a group of doctors and farm owners that wanted a large family. As Phuc recounts,

> They owned farms and stuff and they wanted to sponsor us so they would, tax deductible and all that. But when we were shipped over, they were so shocked, because we were two year old, three years old, four years old. They were so shocked and not only we couldn't help them, they had to help us, right?

Similar to James, Phuc also worked in her spare time to help support her family, picking berries and broccoli. In several cases, her parents were being taken advantage of, making only $1 an hour for 18-hour workdays. However, her sponsors supported them beyond the one-year legal requirement, which she credits for helping her and her family be more successful than other refugees who were unfunded after one year (she eventually earned multiple university degrees).

Yet, this support was uneven across Vancouver and Canada. But with no unifying leader or community in Vancouver and coupled with an economic recession in the mid-1980s, this created a vulnerable population that was easily exploited; as one former gang member told me, "it was like 10 gooks fighting over one bowl of rice," where everyone put themselves first. Phuc, who now works with youths in metro Vancouver area (explored in Chapter 3), explains that gangs would just give Vietnamese kids $100 dollars for doing nothing and repeat the process a couple of times over a week. Since most of these teenagers had never seen that much money in their lives, they would view it as "easy money" and—either for themselves or their family—

work for the gang to both pay back the debt and get more fast cash. By the mid-80s, Vietnamese were highly associated with gangs, crime, and a large high-school dropout rate. Chinh, who also works with youth remembers, "the minute you introduce yourself as Vietnamese, it would trick their [the public's] mind, it's a gang. And so they treat you differently back then [1990s]. So, so bad! In one instance, police were called when we was taking out some youths for food."

It should be noted that gang and criminal activity—specifically Vietnamese gang activity in North America—is not unique to Vancouver; as Kevin Lam's study documents, it is also a significant aspect in some Vietnamese communities in North America, including Southern California.[53] However, I would argue that most communities outside of Vancouver had and continue to have better systems to either address these issues or provide and promote representation that counters "negative" images of the community. As Chinh states, while there have been some "success" stories in the community, "unfortunately the media and the people in the [Vancouver] community, seem to get, umm, attracted to sensational stories. So, you know, somebody has to be killed, imprisoned, this and that." When some of his students received full rides to universities or the Vietnamese community had their first bursary event, none of the press he contacted showed up; on the other hand, if there is story about Vietnamese gangs or crime, his phone is always ringing for a quote.

1986-1994: Expo 86, Birth of the Global City, and Economic Refugees

As the Vietnamese community in Vancouver was dealing with rising crime and unemployment, Vancouver as a city was on the cusp of a major change. In 1980, the city announced it would hold the 1986 world transportation fair, Expo 86, to celebrate the centennial of the city and the

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[53] See Kevin D. Lam, *Youth Gangs, Racism, and Schooling* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Canadian Pacific railway. With the theme of "Transportation and Communication: World in Motion – World in Touch," Expo 86 was in many ways "Vancouver's coming out party" to the world as a global city.[54] As Serra Tinic notes, the Expo was a pivotal point in a larger globalization strategy that coincided with two key events. One event was the enactment of the new Immigrant Investment Program in 1986, which was developed to attract a business class of immigrants that would bring in significant amounts of money to be pumped into the Canadian economy. Thus, Expo 86 was basically a large commercial to sell Vancouver as a global city. The target audience, though, was determined by the second event: the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to China. After its conclusion, the land of the Expo Site, which was owned by the provincial government, was eventually sold to Li Ka-Shing, Hong Kong's wealthiest property tycoon. While there are many questions over the sale—why it was sold to one person, how the price was determined, the potential of the site as government land, etc.—it is generally agreed that the sale to Ka-Shing was to "stimulate massive Asian investment in Vancouver real estate" and promote Vancouver to Hong Kong corporations and entrepreneurs as their new potential home.[55] It seems the strategy worked. As Katharyne Mitchell argues, "in 1989 this city was transforming almost before our eyes from a provincial backwater, an achingly beautiful yet placid city, into a global metropolis, a gateway between West and East."[56]

Of course, this was just background news for many Vietnamese in Vancouver. In terms of impact, this new wave of ultra-rich Hong Kong nationals further cemented the Vietnamese's

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[54] Cheryl Chan, "Expo 86: When Vancouver wooed the world—30 Photos, 30 Years Later," *Vancouver Sun*, May 14, 2016, http://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/expo-86-when-vancouver-wooed-the-world-30-photos-30-years-later.
[55] John Punter, *The Vancouver Achievement: Urban Planning and Design* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 194.
[56] Katharyne Mitchell, *Crossing the Neoliberal Line: Pacific Rim Migration and the Metropolis* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 2-3. See Serra Tinic, *On Location: Canada's Television Industry in a Global Market* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 38

reputation of crime and refugeeism. It was also in this context of linking finances to migration that a new wave was emerging from Vietnam: economic refugees. The term "economic refugees" is a loaded and complicated term. According to Lieu, the term came into popular use during the late 1980s to negatively describe the excessive amounts of people leaving Vietnam as not being under persecution, but just in a bad economic situation.[57] In governmental and public discourses, Adelman notes how many pointed to the fact that many "refugees" paid for their escape in good as further proof that they were not "true refugees"—while there was no doubt suffering, these specific contexts for some did not qualify this group as "refugees" because the act of *persecution* was lacking.[58] In addition to indicating some humanitarian exhaustion towards the Vietnamese, the term raises some debate over whether this group fits the definition of being people that are being persecuted under certain conditions (though they were legally classified as refugees at the time).[59]

For Myra, a bank teller and student in her early 20s (who is featured in Chapters 2 and 5), the term just describes her parents:

> Both of my parents were economic refugees, meaning that they primary came here looking for, in pursuit of making more money here because they were living in poverty in Vietnam.

This group of economic refugees also complicates Vancouver's refugee landscape. With each successive wave, the social-economic diversity increases. Although no wave is perfectly uniform, the massive wave of Indochinese refugees in 1979 did have large groupings, such as the Sino-Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, and those who come from a business background. Additionally, although their businesses were confiscated, they at least had sets of skills and

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[57] Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 148.
[58] Adelman, *Canada and the Indochinese Refugees*, 2.
[59] See ibid., 4-16.

experiences that pointed to eventual jobs in the middle-class. For economic refugees, however, they came from all over Vietnam, representing a much wider diversity of skills, jobs, and social classes. Adding to this equation is also the lack of political allegiance to any government, North or South. What attracted this group of refugees to B.C. were it employment opportunities in fisheries, farm labor, the logging industry, and other manual, blue-collar jobs. The result of this wave would further create a disconnected community in Vancouver; of the limited organizations in Vancouver that existed, this wave did not have any interest in joining any community. As Myra contends, they are here for "fast cash," not nation or politics. Resultantly, the strong culture of anti-communism often seen in the Vietnamese diaspora is further undercut within the contexts of Vancouver.

With imagery of gang violence and "fast cash" economic refugees, Vancouver did not have a stable Vietnamese community, even for those who went searching for it. During the early 1990s, Walter was beginning to become interested in Vietnamese culture and history, something he admittedly wished his parents had pushed on him stronger as a child. Perhaps part of this lack was due to their early migration to Vancouver and the city's absence of a strong Vietnamese base, which made it difficult for even his parents to retain Vietnamese culture. When Walter turned 18, he began to reach out to more Vietnamese people in order to reconnect with his Vietnamese roots. Due to the increasing discourses about Vietnamese and gang life, Walter's parents were weary of his new friends. In 1993, Walter joined a Vietnamese student club while attending a local college in Vancouver, which was made up of only half a dozen Vietnamese students, though Walter was the only member born in Canada. While he enjoyed his time with them, Walter also noticed he was different, describing the other students as "fresh off the boat"

or "having one foot in the hood" as their parents were working class. While Walter was attempting to reach out, his parents were doing the opposite:

> At the same time, my parents, no Vietnamese friends, they had no interest in cultivating like being part of the Vietnamese society and I think part of it is because my parents were very unusual in leaving Vietnam like at a different time when a lot immigrants did, so I think there is like a bit of an economic or social stratification between my parents and like more recent Vietnamese immigrants.

However, once the wave of refugees would end, a new wave of migrants from Vietnam would further complicate issues of class, immigrant generations, and politics.

1994-2010: The End of the Refugees, Nammers, Grow-Ops, and a New Generation

In the larger sense, Walter and his family are abnormalities within the community. Describing her childhood during the early 2000s, Myra notes a continued pattern seen in James' life story:

> Just looking at the general statistics…Vietnamese kids who are in gangs, because…if you think about it a lot of them came here as economic refugees, especially in Metro Vancouver, so the idea of making cash very fast, it is very appealing to them. They learn that from their parents or like they feel like I can't do anything at school so I'll just do this because I can support myself like that.

The focus on "fast cash," combined with the high rates of gangs and high school dropouts continued to dominate discourses about Vietnamese Canadians up until the 2000s, creating a Vancouver-specific slang term: nammer. According to Urban Dictionary, nammers are "Asian of Vietnamese background…[who] often starts fights…do not mess with them or you will get chopped."[60] Referring to both genders, nammers are Vietnamese gangsters and the women that date them (although in current times, not all nammers are in gangs). When asked about nammers, most 2nd generation Vietnamese Canadians would describe them in the same manner: for men, their uniforms include puffy North Face jackets, Adidas track pants, black Versace

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[60] "nammer," Urban Dictionary, last accessed December 15, 2016, http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=nammer.

shirts, and spiked hair; for women, TNA tracksuits, BeBe shirts, blonde bangs, and "tramp stamps" make the typical appearance. And nammer is a truly Vancouver term that is born out of its specific history. In the video "Asian Canadians vs. Asian Americans" by the Asian American YouTube group Fung Bros., Vietnamese Vancouverite YouTube star Linda D (of LeendaDProductions) made the argument that "nammer" was a Canadian term for an "Asian gangsta." She had to make a follow-up video to apologize after comments from all over Canada made the point that only Vancouverites use the term.[61]

Growing up in Vancouver during the 2000s, all Vietnamese had to interact with the nammer stereotype. When I ask about nammers, Claire rolls her eyes and states "it's the bane of my existence." She points to Boss Nguyen, a character created by Vancouver-based YouTube star Chengman (who is Chinese Canadian), as the prototypical nammer: loud, misogynistic, and materialistic with brands like Gucci and Prada. In "A Day in the Life of An Asian Gangster," Boss Nguyen is seen always wearing sunglasses, thrusting in a swimming pool so he can "perform at the most optimal level in and out of the bedroom," and meeting his "bros" at a Pho restaurant for a gang fight.[62] While supposedly a parody of the nammer, Claire states it hits too close to home because the nammer represents one of the many reasons she feels the community is apathetic and adverse to community-building. Additionally, it just continues the stereotype with a wider audience who do not understand the contexts. For Myra, the nammer created distance between her and other Vietnamese people:

> "I feel like I'm different than other Vietnamese kids…I don't know. I don't know them or they're nammers.

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[61] Fung Bros., "Asian Canadians vs. Asian Americans," YouTube video, 6:31, posted [August 4, 2014], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuiWxIm3yiI.

[62] Chengman, "A Day in the Life of An Asian Gangster," YouTube video, 5:41, posted November 2, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4RiV5qTXZs.

Myra also felt limitations were placed on her as a student in high school, as well as her imagination in regards to future careers and goals:

> I didn't know too many Vietnamese scholars, so that's why I felt very different from Vietnamese people in general. How many Vietnamese people do I know who went to post-secondary school in Vancouver? In Canada?

Danny, who is in his early 20s, currently attending professional school, and featured in Chapter 4, recalls in high school that the nammer played a key role in his identity:

> I wanted to fit in, not only that, I wanted to be Vietnamese in a place where, you know, you have to act like a nammer in order to be Vietnamese, that would be in Vancouver. Elsewhere I would probably wanted to be Vietnamese in their way to fit in. That's the thing, fitting in.

For Danny, nammers also included the "nammer lifestyle," which involved "acting tough" and having a certain "macho demeanor."

Another aspect of the "nammer lifestyle" that was also central to Danny's history is the presence of Vancouver Grow-Ops, or the illegal cultivation of marijuana plants, mostly in the basements of residential houses around Metro Vancouver. Another distinctly Vietnamese Vancouverite aspect—though it has been reported that the methods developed in British Columbia by the local Vietnamese community have spread as far as the U.K. and the Netherlands—the increasing involvement of Vietnamese gangs in drug distribution opened up the opportunity for Vietnamese to enter the Grow-Ops market.[63] Formerly dominated by the motorcycle gang, Hells Angels, the Vietnamese radically changed the weed production scene in British Columbia. Before, the Hells Angels would grow their product in large fields in the forests, which meant if there was an accident or police bust, there would be a large loss of capital

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[63] See Aidan Radnedge, "Police Raid Three Cannabis Farms a Day," *Metro News*, March 12, 2007, http://metro.co.uk/2007/03/12/police-raid-three-cannabis-farms-a-day-158074/; Yvette Schoenmakers, Bo Bremmers, and Anton van Wijk, *Vietnamese Cannabis Cultivation in the Netherlands*: *Research Summary* (Amsterdam: Bureau Beke, 2012), 4.

and product in one incident. However, the Vietnamese dispersed their product and production in basements across Metro Vancouver; thus, a police bust would not destroy one's entire inventory. This system also made it difficult for the police to track drug production, as everything was highly mobile and could be shifted from house to house. With most homeowners getting fines rather than jail time if they were caught, the risk was well worth the profit.

According to multiple informants, it is estimated that at least half of the Vietnamese in Vancouver are somehow connected to the Grow-Ops movement, either as landlords, drug dealers, or cultivators, with close to 100% knowing someone involved in the business.[64] As Danny reflects on his childhood, when he was raised in a Grow-Op in suburb just outside the city of Vancouver, he theorizes Grow-Ops continue the fragmentation of the community. Due to the illegal activity, his parents would never let friends come over to his house; additionally, his parents never connected with the Vietnamese community due to fear that they would get caught, as well as be exposed to theft organized by other Vietnamese Grow-Ops. For Danny, this created an isolated childhood in relation to any interaction with Vietnamese culture. Likewise, Phuc also believes Grow-Ops fueled distrust and paranoia among the local Vietnamese community, but they also impacted the community's relationship to the government and law enforcement. As she explains, if there was a theft from a rival Grow-Op, calling the police was not an option, but that mentality expanded beyond reporting crime to foster an avoidance or fear

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[64] Susan C. Boyd and Connie Carter would most likely disagree with this statement and estimate. Critiquing common statistics used in city discourses, they argue that media coverage (including with support from some in the Vietnamese Vancouver community) racialized marijuana producers by linking Vietnamese to marijuana grow ops and, resultantly, bad parenting. In crafting the Vietnamese as Other, organizations like the police department can wage a larger war on drugs using fear tactics, as well as justify further police intervention, funding, and pass harsher drug policies. See Susan C. Boyd and Connie Carter, *Killer Weed: Marijuana Grow Ops, Media, and Justice* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2014), 112. In any case, what is important here is that many in the community *believe* these stats, which in turn influences their larger ideologies about the local community.

of accessing government or community services and assistance that would benefit individuals and the community overall.

However, Chinh doesn't necessarily see Grow-Ops in a solely negative light. As he argues,

> I like to think of it as a positive way, you can't change it...What came out from that? There's a lot of kids that totally depend on the material lifestyle. They have money and they spend money and use expensive cars. But a lot of families who went through that, took advantage of the condition that they had and invested in their children, right? The other thing that people often do not recognize, it's so obvious, that they pushed the economies, the local government and economies. These are people who spend money: housing, cars, the restaurants. They spend money like this!

Though he makes sure to make a caveat: "So, there's always something…I mean I wouldn't promote that [laughs], but you got to be reality, right!"

Parallel to all of this activity was the emergence of a new source of difference. By 1995, the majority of the camps were closed, with many refugees returning back to Vietnam (which was experiencing significant economic growth under new policies). As the number of refugees entering Vancouver reached zero, a "new" type of migrant from Vietnam began to account for the majority of Vietnamese immigration by the year 2000. As Chinh explains,

> The face of the community has changed recently, because a lot of people are coming from Vietnam to this country, not through the refugee, it's the invest, investment categories, students, and entrepreneurs categories. Those are wealthy, often what you call the "red capitals."

One example of a "red capital" is Linh, a working professional in her mid-20s, and her family. Born in Eastern Europe where her parents were part of government international labour exchange programs during the early 1990s, her family eventually moved back to Vietnam where she was raised for most of her childhood.[65] In the late-2000s, her family immigrated to Canada

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[65] For more information on these labour exchange programs, see *Review of Vietnamese Migration Abroad* (Hanoi: Consular Department-Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Viet Nam, 2012).

under the skilled worker program in the field of business, which, according to Linh, was advised to her parents as being an "easy" way to leave Vietnam. Eventually, she studied at and graduated from a local university in Vancouver. As this will be further explored in Chapter 3, Linh (and others like her) provide an interesting dynamic in the local community because she challenges notions of what a "normal" 1st generation Vietnamese Canadian is typically. As "red capitals" or "BOBAs" (Brought Over By Airplanes), this group's class status is similar to those of the pre-1975 wave, though their politics are different due to their experiences under the Vietnam communist system of the 1990s. As Chinh believes, because these migrants are entering Canada not as refugees but under classifications such as investors, skilled workers, and international students, this new wave most likely has ties to the Communist government. Through my interviews, this connection between newer migrants and the Communist government is not guaranteed, as there is a wide range of feelings towards the Vietnamese government. However, what is important to note is that Chinh's beliefs, whether true or not, is widely held by many who came here as political refugees. So while he is open to working with people as a youth counselor, he is very careful and selective in his personal interactions outside of work. However, Chinh is more open-minded than many and for the most part, this new wave of "BOBAs" continues the process of fragmenting any sense of community.

Conclusion: Establishing a Vietnamese Community in Little Saigon?

We can see these differences and fissures when we look at the establishment of the Little Saigon in Vancouver. In 2011, the city of Vancouver voted to name a small strip of the Kingsway corridor "Little Saigon" after a grassroots movement by a local Vietnamese organization, the Little Saigon Vancouver Foundation, collected over 300 signatures. In a commemorative book

published by the organization that collected various community letters to the city council, the initial letters by the group were Pro-South and reflected an anti-communist stance:

> For more than 3 decades, Vietnamese refugees as a group have contributed to Canadian history, culture, education and economic development. Vietnamese Canadians have lived under the Vietnamese Communist regime, we as a people were subject to deception, cruelty, and injustice. Millions of people risked their lives to try to escape this totalitarian regime in an attempt to regain their human dignity, regain their freedom…the two most significant symbols for the Vietnamese people are the Freedom flag and the Capital, Saigon. They represent the struggles and sacrifices of our forefathers and are a proud part of the history, heritage and character of our Vietnamese community.[66]

While the organization promoted the naming of the area as "universally accepted" to the city council, there was actually a sizable portion of the community that disapproved. Some saw the area that was being named more of a multicultural space, where Filipino, East Asian (Korean and Chinese), French, Mexican, Italian, and South Asian businesses also existed, and not just the Vietnamese. Perhaps more serious was the sizable North Vietnamese population, who disagreed with both the name and the use of the South Vietnamese "Freedom" flag (yellow with three red stripes) in the banners that would line the street.[67] However, according to Dennis, what was most frustrating is that this group believed they could represent the entire Vietnamese community *and* be political; if anything, for Dennis, the claim of having a unified community within Vancouver was the most ridiculous and arrogant aspect of the whole situation. As the debates continued, the Little Saigon Vancouver Foundation softened their stance, pushing the

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[66] Little Saigon Vancouver Foundation, *Welcome to Little Saigon Vancouver* (Vancouver: Little Saigon Vancouver Foundation, 2015), 27.

[67] See Erica Bulman, "Big Trouble in Little Saigon," *24 Hours Vancouver*, November 3, 2011, http://vancouver.24hrs.ca/News/local/2011/11/03/18921881.html; Tristin Hopper and Jeff Lee, "'The remembrance of the war hasn't healed us yet': Plan to call Vancouver's Vietnamese community 'Little Saigon' refuels old tensions," *National Post*, December 4, 2011, http://nationalpost.com/g00/news/canada/the-remembrance-of-the-war-hasnt-healed-us-yet-plan-to-call-vancouvers-vietnamese-community-little-saigon-refuels-old-tensions/wcm/; Laurent Vu The, "Little Saigon name doesn't sit well for all in Vancouver Neighbourhood," *AFP News Agency*, November 28, 2011, https://www.facebook.com/notes/afp-news-agency/little-saigon-name-doesnt-sit-well-for-all-in-vancouver-neghbourhood/251960418190951/.

South Vietnamese flag in the background of the banner design, where it was still visible, but not a major feature of the banner. As they write a few months later:

> The Vancouver-Kingsway commercial area is where a large portion of Vietnamese people reside and work. We have great respect for the Kensington Cedar Cottage region and only hope to enrich this multicultural area with artful banners for Little Saigon. Our banners, we hope to represent the integration of the Vietnamese culture into Canadian culture. The Banner will include bright yellow, red, and blue colours as well as the Canadian maple leaf.[68]

In addition to using discourses of multiculturalism to address other concerns, the South Vietnamese flag was reduced to colours rather than a direct mention of the flag. Although Little Saigon is still political in its name, several layers of politics were stripped by the time the entire project was approved in 2013. Yet by that time, lines had already been drawn, mostly around the already existing cracks within the community. Dennis, who actually was one of the first people who pushed for the Little Saigon name, was blacklisted by the Little Saigon Vancouver Foundation for attempting to convince them to be more open. For people like Linh, who are recent migrants, Little Saigon's underlying politics is not appealing and she stays away from the space. Myra and Claire, who are both 2nd-generation Vietnamese Canadians in their early 20s, watched from afar and determined this was "an old person's fight" and just representative of the continuing division that their community faces, further cementing their ideas on the role of politics in their lives (this is further explored in Chapters 3 and 5). Thus, in an ironic twist, the construction of Little Saigon in a centralized space also seemed to push people farther out in different directions.

A few months into my fieldwork, as I am trying wrap my mind around all of these themes of migration patterns, divisions, and gangs, I'm having a conversation with Myra about the

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[68] Little Saigon Vancouver Foundation, *Welcome to Little Saigon Vancouver*, 29.

general idea of Vietnamese communities. As we are talking, she begins to list several issues about her local community, and concludes in an almost exasperated tone, "You [Vietnamese Americans] have a history." I found her statement interesting. At this point, we have had multiple discussion and I know that she knows the Vietnamese in Vancouver have a history, including the rich history of her parents which she so passionately narrated to me. As this chapter has illustrated, while not always picturesque, the history of the Vietnamese in Vancouver is a complicated mixture of agency, refugeeism, economic mobility, drugs, humor, distrust, and ingenuity, all with its own local flavors of complex migration patterns and everyday interactions.

Yet, even with this knowledge, the lack of community and a written cultural history made her feel that the Vietnamese presence in Vancouver was just a blip in a 600-page history book—according to Myra, maybe her community has not done anything since 1978. While I believe this is completely wrong, Myra's statement shows the hegemonic narrative that emerges from the United States that seems to overpower the diversity of diasporas and their histories. *We*, Vietnamese Americans, have a history and culture that is normal, successful, and established. In the next few chapters, we'll explore how local flavors, narratives, histories, and sites of difference play out in constructing the diasporic experience in Vancouver.

Chapter 2
Refreshing Digital Diasporas: Theorizing How Algorithms Shape Online Diasporic Cultures

Introduction

I'm sitting in a coffee shop across from Lisa, a working professional in her mid-20s. We're in the Financial District in downtown Vancouver, which is a rare meeting site considering not many Vietnamese Canadians live or work in the area. Although Vancouver in general is saturated with a stereotypical laid-back Pacific Northwest disposition, downtown Vancouver (during certain hours) would be the closest site of an urban energy where people in business attire rush to their next meeting. Just after the end of her work hours, Lisa's appearance and demeanor is very reflective of the business-minded latter, her speech fast and straight to the point. We're talking generally about her online activities and the idea of being "Vietnamese" in Vancouver and online. While she identifies as Vietnamese Canadian and is active in promoting Vietnamese culture and identity in Vancouver—her participation in a North American Vietnamese leadership camp will be discussed in Chapter 5—she does not consider herself to have a strong online identity in any manner and points to Facebook and Instagram as potential sites where it is *possible* that she sometimes expresses herself as Vietnamese (Canadian). She points to her occasional use of Vietnamese on Facebook and her recent sharing of a business article/success story on Uber CTO Thuan Pham, a Vietnamese American who came to the United States as a refugee. However, she admits that she spends more time perusing the content from other people and pages than spending time crafting her own profile. Throughout our conversation I can see this in action, as whether it is through habit or boredom, with a high possibility of both, she consistently looks down towards her phone which has Facebook opened and flicks downward. Through this process of flicking, an animation of a circling arrow appeared and refreshed her

Facebook News Feed, bringing up different, sometimes new updates and links posted by her friends.

While a simple motion, the downward flick initiates a complicated and even mysterious process; Facebook's algorithms go to work, analyzing nearly 100,000 data points to rearrange Lisa's News Feed, bringing to the top of the feed what it believes are the most relevant and timely posts at that moment. While in many ways complex and dynamic, this algorithmic process has also become part of our everyday. As Michelle Willson argues,

> algorithms are being increasingly delegated the function of performing or enabling everyday practices enacted through technologies. And in turn, the practice of delegation of functions to algorithms is itself becoming an everyday practice, that is, increasingly mundane and normalised. In this delegation process, data (actions, relations, and objects) of the everyday are translated, framed, and reconfigured.[1]

More than simply than shuffling pictures and Facebook posts, algorithms have the potential to disrupt, govern, and reconfigure how we understand and engage the world as users. For Lisa, her everyday life may be shaped by her interactions with Facebook and its algorithms, but the functions of the algorithm also depend on the input (or lack thereof) it receives from her. As someone who regularly reads and engages with business news and articles from financial magazines, Facebook's News Feed algorithms will most likely output similar articles and sources, creating certain conditions and framings within Facebook. But as an active user, Lisa also has the ability to choose, subvert, or ignore the work of algorithms. In any case, the everyday engagement with algorithms is an on-going and active process that plays various roles in how users experience their daily lives and construct their identities. Of course for Lisa, this includes an impact on the diasporic elements of her identity. In that moment of refreshing, Facebook not only curated potential sites of identity formation and cultural exchange overall, but

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[1] Michele Willson, "Algorithms (and the) everyday," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 1 (2017), 146.

also shaped the possibilities of her online experiences and interactions as part of a digital diaspora.

Andoni Alonso and Pedro Oiarzabal define "digital diasporas" as the "distinct online networks that diasporic people use to re-create identities, share opportunities, spread their culture, influence homeland and host-land policy, or create debate about common-interest issues by means of electronic devices."[2] Previous studies of diasporas in cyberspace have often focused on how diasporic communities have used email lists, websites, and online message boards to (re)construct "virtual homelands" and/or digital diasporic cultures through free and non-hierarchical exchanges of cultural commodities and information across transnational digital networks. As Victoria Bernal notes, these studies often come with tropes of unboundedness, deterritorialization, and new possibilities of communication, critique, and circulation as "there are no editors or censors in control."[3] In one of the few and more recent studies of online Vietnamese diasporic identities, we can see these tropes in Nhi T. Lieu's work on "cyber Vietnamese-ness," in which she describes the internet as a "boundless, deterritorialized space" and "new borderless terrain," and it is within these virtual spaces that members of the Vietnamese diaspora can forge and circulate "anonymous cyber-critiques" on message boards that potentially disrupt cultural and national power structures.[4]

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[2] Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal, "The Immigrant Worlds' Digital Harbors: An Introduction," in *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics, and Community*, eds Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal (Reno: University of Las Vegas, 2010), 11.

[3] Victoria Bernal, "Diasporas and cyberspace," in *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*, eds Kim Knott and Sean McLoughlin (Chicago: Zed Books Ltd., 2010). Also see Emily Noelle Ignacio, "E-Spacing boundaries: Bridging cyberspace and diaspora studies through ethnography," in *Critical Internet Culture Studies*, eds D Silver, A. Massanari, and S. Jones (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 181-193; Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal (eds), *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics, and Community* (Reno: University of Las Vegas, 2010).

[4] Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 122-125. Also see Valverde's on Vietnamese diasporic message boards in *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

Yet while these works illustrate important contributions to understanding the growing role of cyberspace within diasporic lives, they also illustrate several limitations as they do not fully reflect the contemporary environment of how some members of diasporic groups construct or experience online communities and identities. First, works on digital diasporas often gloss over the structures embedded in the digital technologies that allow users to access and interface with the internet (which is itself structured). In ignoring these aspects of digital technologies, we are unable to consider the ways in which diasporic experiences and the circulation of digital objects and commodities over online networks are impacted through restrictions, thresholds, and invisible mechanisms established by platforms, software, and algorithms. Relatedly, the objects of study in the research on digital diasporas are also outdated for certain demographics and groups, further ignoring the specifics of ways people access and interact with networks. As danah boyd and Nicole Ellison note, early public online communities and discussion forums have critically helped to shape the organization of digital communities, but the rise of social network sites shifted networks organized around topics or interests to people and personal networks where "the individual [is] at the center of their own community."[5] This is not to argue websites, message boards, and email lists devoted to a specific diaspora and the works that study them no longer have an impact; these online objects and sites still exist and in some contexts still enable vibrant and active online communities. These works operate as historical snapshots (as will this chapter) and the documentation and discussion that emerges from these works and sites most certainly inform contemporary practices and our understanding of them—Facebook in many ways incorporates aspects of message boards and chat rooms.

[5] danah m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (2008), 219.

But these case studies often skew toward older, 1st-generation diasporic populations and overlook or ignore how younger and 2nd-generation diasporas currently use digital technologies. Part of the difficulties in keeping up with digital diasporas in contemporary contexts arise from the time and speed of technological shifts. With digital technologies undergoing constant modification, being up to date with current technological parameters, uses, and contexts will be almost impossible, especially for academic works that may take years to be published; for instance, Facebook updates its News Feed algorithm daily, making even blog posts attempting to document Facebook's algorithms potentially outdated on some level by the next day. Additionally, due to their proprietary nature, algorithms are often inaccessible or hidden in black boxes. Still, there needs to be an attempt to continue rethinking the online experience and how digital diasporas use the internet. For our contexts, we need to consider that for the vast majority of my informants in Vancouver—most who are Canadian-born or came to the country as very young children—Vietnamese diasporic websites and message boards are never visited, but rather social network sites like Facebook or Instagram dominate their daily lives and act as *the* digital space(s) where online diasporic interactions, identity-formations, and circulations of cultures occur.[6]

While Chapter 1 focused on the specific cultural histories and contexts of the Vietnamese Canadian communities within Vancouver, Chapter 2 considers the digital technologies—specifically the algorithms of Facebook and Instagram—that mediate the everyday to further understand how these diasporic communities and identities exist in a local, yet digitally networked society. It is through these technologies that Vancouverites become "digital

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[6] Even for those who do engage with websites or listservs devoted specifically to issues pertaining to the Vietnamese diaspora—which are only a few and are all over the age of 50—they also use Facebook on a daily basis, often in conjunction with these sites and email lists (e.g. promoting issues, links to news stories, etc.).

diasporas" where they experience, share, exchange, and (re)define diasporic objects and cultures on both a local and (trans)national level. For many in this project, the construction of diasporic virtual homelands and identities exists not on diasporic-specific message boards, but rather on Facebook's Newsfeed alongside other digital objects, topics, news, posts, pictures, and memes that are under constant alteration and arrangement through underlying algorithms.

To further explore the relationships between algorithms and diasporic identities, this chapter focuses on the social media practices of two sets of siblings. As mentioned above, while Lisa often avoids posts centered on Vietnamese culture or identities, her younger sister, Myra, is much more active online in crafting a Vietnamese Canadian identity. A university student in her 20s, Myra's Facebook and Instagram, while not completely Vietnamese in terms of posts, are heavily infused with elements of Vietnamese culture, including photos and videos featuring music, fashion (áo dài), and food, as well as memes and jokes about being Vietnamese. In additional to news articles similar to the ones Lisa consumes, Myra also shares articles that cover a wide spectrum of topics related to Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora. In a similar fashion to Lisa and Myra, siblings Kevin and Samantha's News Feeds are also drastically different. Both university students in their early 20s, Kevin identifies as mostly Canadian and for the most part does not engage with Vietnamese people outside of his family in any space; this is reflective in his social media use, where he does not label himself as Vietnamese or share Vietnamese-related posts. Samantha, on the other hand, is similar to Myra, although this interest in Vietnamese culture is a relatively new thing. Over the past few years, Samantha has had a growing interest in sharing and producing Facebook and Instagram posts that explore Vietnamese diasporic identities, as well as contemporary Vietnamese art that include paintings and modern pop music.

In situating the diverse social media uses of this pair of siblings alongside the algorithmic processes of Facebook and Instagram, this chapter theorizes how algorithms can potentially shape online spaces, experiences, and the circulation of certain types of diasporic culture one may receive, and how this plays out in the construction of Vietnamese Canadian identities within the context of Vancouver. In considering the impacts of algorithms, I contend the potential experience of discovery and interaction with sites of diasporic identities and cultures will vary widely for each of these people. However, these online experiences crafted through algorithmic outputs are also influenced by, yet reflective of attitudes towards, Vietnamese culture and the local community. It is not surprising, then, that users like Myra and Samantha—who consume and circulate a wide range of social posts about Vietnamese culture—are more likely to be exposed to a wider variety of posts and topics related to Vietnamese culture due to what they input into Facebook's algorithm. Likewise, users like Lisa and Kevin, who feed the algorithm little data related to Vietnamese culture, are less likely to encounter a diverse representation of online Vietnamese culture. Overall, this range of exposure to online Vietnamese culture potentially impacts how they understand Vietnamese (diasporic) cultures and identities. Yet, it should be clear that algorithms also do not operate alone, but perform in specific contexts and collaboration with various technologies, data, and humans. Thus, while algorithms do have impact on diasporic identities, we must also remember they operate within larger histories and circuits of cultural exchange.

As mentioned above, the study of algorithms creates several difficulties for researchers, including algorithms' dynamic nature, inaccessibility, and invisibility. In terms of general use, recent research on the interplay between Facebook, algorithms, and users has revealed a wide variety of beliefs, awareness, and understandings of Facebook and its underlying algorithmic

codes, illustrating the difficulty of even producing a productive or generalizing summary for groups when systems employ algorithmic curation to produce similar, yet individualized experiences.[7] While ethnography is useful in observing the potential ways people engage with Facebook or Instagram on a daily basis, the wide range of the awareness of algorithms also highlights the limitations of ethnographic methods. With many users unaware of how algorithms operate, it is challenging to discuss and obtain empirical data about something that participants do not know is occurring; in other words, how do we fully study a person's engagement with algorithms when they do not feel like they are engaging? To alleviate some of these issues, this chapter has also relied on less academic sources like marketing blogs to help augment our understanding of how algorithms organize feeds on Facebook and Instagram. Although impartial and informal—and possibly more "gut feeling" than computer science—these points of data begin to produce a general overview of the algorithms that shape users' feeds that can help shed light on the potential impacts on everyday diasporic identity creation.

The Digital Stuff of Diasporas: Regimes of Value and Cultures of Circulation

With the growth of social media sites like Facebook, the concept of sharing and circulating data, information, and culture has undergone a transformation. Jose Van Dijck argues that Facebook's employment of the Share button has subtly shifted the definition of online sharing from user-to-user exchange to a "meaning that naturalizes the sharing of personal data with anyone on the

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[7] See Kevin Hamilton, et al., "A Path to Understanding the Effects of Algorithm Awareness," *CHI EA 2014 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (2014), 631-642; Motahhare Eslami et al., "'I always assumed that I wasn't really that close to [her]': Reasoning about Invisible Algorithms in the News Feed," *CHI* 2015 *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (2015), 153-162; Emilee Rader and Rebecca Gray, "Understanding User Beliefs about Algorithmic Curation in Facebook News Feed," *CHI 2015 Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (2015), 173-182.

planet"; sharing, as Van Dijck continues, then became part of several "powerful ideological concepts whose impact reaches beyond Facebook proper into all corners of culture, affecting the very fabric of sociality." With Facebook's growing intersection with digital diasporas, the act of sharing and circulating diasporic cultures has also taken new dimensions. However, before and beyond the digital realm, the movement and exchange of things has always registered as significant practices in diasporic populations who are displaced, dispersed, and disconnected from homelands. Commodities and material objects feature strongly in diasporas because, as Philip Crang notes, the production, circulation, and consumption of the "stuff of diaspora" are often heavily linked to diasporic imaginaries, identities, and communities due to them being representative of one of the few links to a homeland and culture.[8] Objects in these contexts do not just operate as a single entity, but also are imbued with the idea of its origin and journey.

In thinking about the movement of things, Appadurai moves away from production as a central point of analysis—though certainly not its complete removal—and an increased consideration of points of exchange. In shifting the focus to the "dynamics of exchange," Appadurai defines a commodity as "any thing intended for exchange," allowing us to consider both the producer *and* the consumer as the exchange becomes a contact zone between the two where meaning and value are created and negotiated in specific situations.[9] For Appadurai, rather than producing an unproductive "magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things," this refocus on the commodity within a certain context of its social life "means breaking significantly with the production-dominated Marxian view of the commodity and

[8] Philip Crang, "Diaspora and Material Cultures," in *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*, eds. Kim Knott and Sean McLoughlin (Chicago: Zed Books Ltd., 2010).
[9] Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social life of things : Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 9.

focusing on its *total* trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, and to consumption."[10] As he explains, "it is only through the analysis of…trajectories that we can interpret the human transaction and calculations that enliven things…it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context."[11] With the expanded and multifaceted definitions of value and the focus on the trajectories and exchanges of commodities, we can begin to see how economic objects circulate in and across different "regimes of value" in space and time.[12] Here, value is not a universal figure, but dependent on specific social and human situations and contexts in which these "regimes of value" exist. It is in these contexts that the desires, demands, and relationships within *and* between communities involved in the exchange process help to shape the multiple dimensions of commodities' values and meanings.

Although using slightly different vocabulary, Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma seem to recognize the usefulness of concepts like "trajectory" and "regimes of value" in developing a cultural account of the exchange of commodities. Coining the analytic construct *cultures of circulation*, they follow Appadurai's lead by shifting the analytical focus onto the circulation (trajectory) of objects in relation to the communities (regimes of value) that circulate them. As they write,

> [circulation] must be conceived as more than simply the movement of people, ideas, and commodities from one culture to another. Instead, recent work indicates that circulation is a cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint, which are created by the interactions between specific types of circulated forms and the interpretive communities built around them. It is in these structured circulations that we identify cultures of circulation.[13]

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[10] Ibid., 13, emphasis in original.
[11] Ibid., 5.
[12] Ibid., 4.
[13] Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma, "Cultures of Circulation: The Imaginations of Modernity," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002), 192.

Hence, circulation is not a neutral process, but one determined and controlled by various forms of human and community agency (and algorithms that will be discussed below). This begins to stress the analysis of how people and groups decide to circulate objects, what objects they deem are important enough to circulate, and how these circulations are structured. Most objects do not just enter circulation by themselves or move through distribution channels unfettered—there are regulations and agents that on various levels permit and/or stop this movement throughout the chain of circulation.

Elaborating on the construct, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Elizabeth A. Povinelli argue that these interpretive communities "set the protocols for interpretation by inventing forms, recognizing practices, founding institutions, and demarcating boundaries based primarily on their own internal dynamics"; by analyzing cultures of circulation, then, "it is more important to track the proliferating copresence of varied textual/cultural forms in all their mobility and mutability" as it begins to reveal the underlying practices and structures that are active in forming meaning within groups and people.[14] In other words, this foregrounding of circulation rejects a fixed mode of textual reading and meaning (often employed in the analysis of a book or media product), and instead points to meaning being created in the interplay between temporality, flow, space, form, and audience, as well as the demarcating of boundaries around cultures and "regimes of value." Thus, reading and value-making do not only exist in the moment of interaction with the main text, but occur well before through one's interactions with "cultures of circulations" and the understanding of how certain methods of circulation influences one's process of meaning before and after the exchange.

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[14] Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Technologies of Public Forms: Circulation, Transfiguration, Recognition," *Public Culture* 15, no. 3 (2003), 391.

In a similar manner, Henry Jenkins, Joshua Greene, and Sam Ford, use aspects of "circulation" within their notion of "spreadable media." Broadly speaking, they define "spreadable media" as an "emerging hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways."[15] The stress on (active) participation gives users and communities increased agency in setting the protocols within cultures of circulation. As they argue, "we see these acts of circulation as constituting bids for meaning and value," which include meanings in the realm of the personal, cultural, and political.[16] Overall, they contend that with the increased ability to circulate media from the bottom-up, "spreadable media expands the power of people to help shape their everyday media environment."[17] Thus, meaning-formation within communities is not limited to the remixing or repurposing of a commodity, but is also shaped by the knowledge of the user in the ability to circulate things in both predictable and unpredictable ways. Thus, the desire (or non-desire) to circulate certain meanings can affect what commodities are circulated, and our understanding of this can help theorize the lifecycle of certain objects and meanings, and why and when they trend or become obsolete or culturally exhausted.[18]

This focus on the interplay of circulation, space, and "regimes of value" to create borders around meaning and value reverberates especially strongly in the study of diasporic communities, as diasporas are linked to ideas of movement across time and space; in many contexts, the diaspora itself is a form of circulating commodity resulting from (neo)imperialism

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[15] Henry Jenkins, Joshua Greene, and Sam Ford, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 1.
[16] Ibid., 44, 35.
[17] Ibid,, 294.
[18] See Will Straw, "Music as Commodity and Material Culture," *Repercussions* no. 7-8 (Spring-Fall 2002), 147-172.

and the expansion of global capitalism. It makes sense that diasporic groups seem to be aware of circulation, as there is always the tension between questions of "where are you *from*?" and "how did you get *here*?" As Hall eloquently describes, diasporas constantly grapple with "the so-called return to roots," as well as the "coming-to-terms-with our 'routes.'"[19] The process of meaning and identity formation on both an individual and community/national scale is not always restricted to the object itself, but also includes the origins of objects and the understanding of *how* and *where* an object is able (or unable) to circulate. In some instances, the trajectory of a commodity is more important in establishing a link to the "homeland" than the object itself. For example, although a product is produced and available within a diasporic community, a similar product from the "homeland" may have different values associated with it due to its difference in the process of circulation. For the latter, this circulated form is being exchanged by two "regimes of value" separated on a global level ("homeland" and diaspora) and is often processed through different interpretative and evaluative frameworks than the similar, yet locally exchanged product. On one level, there are different forms of "authenticity" at play in this context, but there are also factors that include practical knowledge of how the circulation of an object occurred. For physical objects, as one informant explained, this may include knowing a friend broke Canadian border customs to bring a food product from Vietnam, even though there are accessible versions of that product in Canada. From a digital perspective, some of my informants in Vancouver who were born in Canada were weary of digital objects—such as images, memes, or posts—related to Vietnamese culture from and circulating within Vietnamese

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[19] Stuart Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity'?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. S. Hall and P. du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 4.

and Vietnamese American social networks, as it was often assumed to be either overtly "political" or non-relatable (this will be further explored in Chapter 3 and 5).

There is an assumption, however, that circulation is necessary for meaning and identity formation—as Jenkins et al.'s tagline states, "if it doesn't spread, it's dead."[20] But as the previous example illustrates, we can also consider how the *lack* of spreadability and circulation can come into play in relationship to identities, meanings, and other forms of circulation. Specifically within Vietnamese diaspora and other exilic diasporic cultures, the tension between "homeland" in the imagination and the current nation-state is strenuous to say the least. For many Vietnamese diasporas that left in 1975 and as boat people, "homeland" is a currently physically non-existent democratic, pre-1975 South Vietnam, while the current Vietnamese nation-state is a corrupt communist nation. Here, the capacity to circulate in one space but not another created lines of difference that were key in identifying "us" versus "them," locating Vietnamese diasporas outside the realm of the communist government. In some Vietnamese diasporas, this means circulating discourses and objects—such as the flag of South Vietnam—that symbolize ideals of "freedom" and "democracy" that is then perceived to be unable to circulate in the homeland. In other words, in believing the South Vietnamese flag is banned and unable to circulate in communist Vietnam, the flag can acquire additional meanings that are emphasized by its banning and knowledge of non-circulation. Whether this perception of how the Vietnamese government sees the flag is true or not (or a site of ambivalence), it can be seen that considerations of circulation and the understanding of the ability to spread by producers and consumers in relation to other spaces can provide additional insights on what commodities become symbols of larger group identities and how their meanings evolve within a specific

[20] Jenkins et al., *Spreadable Media*, 1

historical moment and location. But we can also take this lack of circulation from another perspective to consider how the avoidance of circulation from a community can establish meaning. As a counter to the dominant discourses of the Vietnamese Americans, it is sometimes the refusal to circulate digital (and physical) objects and ideologies from the United States—and vice versa—that positions Vietnamese Canadian culture in Vancouver as different, unique, and even superior (this will be further explored in Chapter 5).

Digital Networks and Circulating Cultures

With the everyday practices and communication being mediated through digital technologies, digital networks have become a central feature in the circulation of diasporic culture and, relatedly, the formation of diasporic identities. Yet while considering the concepts "regimes of value" and "cultures of circulation" opens interesting avenues of research and insight into cultural accounts of commodity exchanges, several works that focus on circulation and digital diasporas are limited by their lack of considering the physical and technological constraints of the paths on which these flows of commodities travel in contemporary society—the networks themselves. Often, discussions on the effects of circulation within cultures elide how networks, their designers/creators, and their physical and technological infrastructures shape and direct commodities before, during, and after the circulation process. In other words, it would be an incomplete analysis of circulation (and the cultural production of meaning) in a digital diasporic environment without a consideration of the networks that allow and transmit these acts to occur on a global scale.

While it is interesting that Lee and LiPuma and Gaonkar and Povinelli never mention networks—though they do mention the increased speed and dynamics of global circulation and capitalism—there seems to be space where considerations of the effects of networks can be incorporated into the study of "cultures of circulation." In their discussion of circulation, Gaonkar and Povinelli argue "it is no longer viable to look at circulation as a singular or empty space in which things move," implying an acknowledgement that networks are not just neutral, one-way conduits.[21] Similarly, Lee and LiPuma describe the processes of circulation as being "critically" created and animated by "the forms that underwrite and propel the process of circulation itself."[22] Although these statements are a bit vague and open to interpretation, there seems to be a recognition that other forces and parameters are integrated in the spaces in which commodities flow. To consider circulation and flows as more than just "empty space" and to fully understand the "forms that underwrite and propel" commodities, it may be helpful to turn to theories about networks.

As Castells defines them, networks are broadly "a set of interconnected nodes," allowing his definition to scale to include the ultimate "networks of networks," the internet.[23] Due to the global expansion of capitalism and the rise of information technologies over older industrial practices, Castells notes the appearance of

> a new communication system, increasingly speaking a universal, digital language is both integrating globally the production and distribution of words, sounds and images of our culture, and customizing them the tastes of identities and moods of individuals. Interactive computer networks are growing exponentially, creating new forms and channels of communication, shaping life and being shaped by life at the same time.[24]

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[21] Gaonkar and Povinelli, "Technologies of Public Forms," 392.
[22] Lee and LiPuma, "Cultures of Circulation," 192.
[23] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture Volume I* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 470.
[24] Ibid., 2.

According to him, this has created "a fundamental redefinition of relationships between women, men, and children, and thus, of family, sexuality, and personality."[25] With networks allowing people to transcend "traditional" limits of language, time, and space, a new logic has appeared that has influenced how people communicate and view themselves and each other. Overall, there seems to be a universal acceptance among scholars of the pervasiveness of networks in contemporary society (especially within developed areas) and that these large-scale networks provide the *primary* social and cultural organizational logic for contemporary society.[26] As Wellman and Rainie succinctly summarize in *Networked*, "online and in-person interactions—and lives—are intertwined"; in other words, the lines between networked online and offline cultures have become so blurred that they are both just part of everyday culture.[27]

While the deterritorializing discourse of networks has often been a site of critique, when it comes to works on digital diasporas, however, deterritorialization has had a paradoxical impact. As mentioned in the introduction, several works on digital diasporas envision the internet and cyberspace as "boundless" spaces. It is perhaps the centrality of transnational movement, displacement, and ties to a distant homeland to the diasporic condition that makes the rhetoric of the collapse of time and space especially appealing to diasporic studies. Yet, the influence of networks on boundaries around issues such as national identities are also a bit more complex. While Rainie and Wellman seem to posit bounded identities and nation-states as

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[25] Ibid., 2.

[26] See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture Volume I* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002); Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*, (London: Pluto Press, 2004); Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012); Jose Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (London: Oxford Press, 2013); Wendy Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016).

[27] Rainie and Wellman, *Networked*, 119.

starting points that networks disrupt, Alonso and Oiarzabal's edited collection, *Diasporas in the New Media Age*, argues the boundaries of diasporic populations are inherently fragmented and in constant flux through transgressions. In some cases, networks provided space where boundaries of the nation were reconstructed in attempts to reconnect with the "homeland." The internet can provide a space where boundaries of an alternate and imagined nation can be constructed to produce a memory of a homeland, as well as distinguish oneself from another territory, thus strengthening the borders between them.[28] Instead of the collapse of time, space, and categories of identities, networks have produced new dimensions of social logics of boundary construction and maintenance into contemporary online spaces; thus, while some boundaries have become destabilized, new boundaries (and their resulting power structures and flows) have also been demarcated and reinforced. As the following chapters in this dissertation will illustrate, national identities still matter and are perhaps reaffirmed in relation to motherland, adopted homeland, and to other diasporas in different nation-states. Thus, circulation over networks, while seemingly appearing to be timeless and spaceless, is always interacting and being compared in relation to the spatial and temporal aspects of circulation and cultures of circulations that occur in the offline world. There needs to be a better balance between the considerations of the specific allowances, thresholds, and constraints of networks in relation to commodities, interpretive communities, and flows of cultures, as they are inseparable in our current and increasingly digitizing media ecosystem.

Algorithmic Culture: The Case of Facebook and Instagram

[28] Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal, eds, *Diasporas in the New Media Age*.

Turning to the works of Lev Manovich, Alexander Galloway, and Jan Van Dijck, we can begin to critically consider how cultural software, protocols, and platforms can influence how people experience and share digital media across networks. It is through frameworks like software that networks form thresholds, format limitations, and conditions that are required for digital commodities to circulate. Manovich employs the concept of "cultural software" to broadly "refer to certain types of software that support actions we normally associate with 'culture,'" which he argues currently exist "as a layer that permeates all areas of contemporary societies."[29] Pointing to categories such as tools and software that create and share information online (Wikipedia), allow communication with people (email, social networking, photo tags, etc.), and provide access to participating in online spaces by expressing preferences (Facebook's Like button), Manovich argues cultural software "re-adjusts and re-shapes everything it is applied to—or at least, it has the potential to do this."[30] One way of this re-shaping is through the application of protocols, which is explored in Alexander Galloway's *Protocol* as the underlying systems of control that allow global networks like the internet to exist. According to Galloway, in order to have global networks of heterogeneous operating programs, these networks (like the internet) paradoxically must have a homogenous and standardized system/language that produces an underlying level of control in a decentralized network.[31] Defining "protocols" as "a set of recommendations and rules that outline specific technical standards," Galloway illustrates how usability is governed and managed by the programming code and languages of the internet. Ultimately, these technological protocols provide a set of instructions and rules that users are

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[29] Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 21; 15.
[30] Ibid., 23; 32-33.
[31] Alexander Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 142.

required to obey if they want to participate in the mediated flow of commodities and information.[32]

Additionally, protocols also exist on the level of platforms, which provide the interfaces that mediate contact between humans, networks, and digital commodities. If we imagine networks as highways bounded by protocols such as lanes and speed limits, humans rarely come into direct contact with highways; this contact is almost always mediated with another technological interface (in this case an automobile) which has its own set of protocols (tire pressure, engine structures, etc.). For digital networks, this interface is often a platform. As Jose Van Dijck defines it, a platform is "a *mediator* rather than an intermediary: it shapes the performance of social acts instead of merely facilitating them."[33] Overviewing five major concepts that underpin and control platforms—(meta)data, algorithm, protocol, interface, and default—Van Dijck employs a similar argument to Galloway in illustrating how users must submit to certain rules and hegemonic logics established by platforms and how this began to "normalize" certain actions and interpretations in online spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr. In other words, if a user wishes to circulate a digital commodity on Facebook or Instagram, it must be compatible with the protocols of the network and interface. Here, control is centralized with the creator of the platforms. Although platforms have lowered the difficulty of using networks to share or circulate digital media with user-friendly interfaces, it has becoming increasingly difficult to modify these platforms from the users' position beyond what is allowed by the platforms' programmers; if there is increased control, it is generally through the design of the creators, and sometimes this control is not broadly transparent. If one is to really

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[32] Ibid., 6.
[33] Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 29. Also see Tarleton Gillespie, "The Politics of 'Platforms,'" *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (2010).

understand how a digital object is being circulated and received, one needs to understand the multiple layers of meanings that are partially constructed by the paths it takes, as well as the technologies that allow us to access and consume them. Thus, for commodities to circulate through networks, they must be formatted in specific types of digital objects that best optimize a specific social media platform, which can influence aspects such as audio-visual aesthetic qualities and/or the requirement of specific software, affecting how users produce and receive meaningful objects to circulate.

While an object can meet a network or platform's protocols, it is also additionally subject to algorithms that organize it within a stream of content such as Facebook's News Feed; media is not created equally, nor is it circulated equally. Algorithms' underlying purpose of helping to organize our social media feeds illustrates Ted Striphas' notion of "algorithmic culture," which he describes as "the many ways human beings have been delegating the work of culture—the sorting, classifying and hierarchizing of people, places, objects, and ideas—to data-intensive computational processes."[34] For many researchers, algorithms and their processes of curation and recommendation have become an influential part of everyday digital life and how we experience and discover culture.[35] In exploring the relationship between power, control, and algorithms, David Beer argues the consequences of classification through algorithms is "undoubtedly an expression of power, not of someone having power over someone else, but of the software making choices and connections in complex and unpredictable ways in order to shape the everyday experiences of the user."[36] In other words, power in this case is not dominant

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[34] Ted Striphas, "Algorithmic Culture," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4-5 (2015), 396.
[35] See Jeremey Wade Morris, "Curation by Code: Infomediaries and the Data Mining of Taste," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18 (2015) and note 8.
[36] David Beer, "Power through the algorithm? Participatory web cultures and the technological unconscious," *New Media & Society* 11, no. 6 (2009), 997.

control, but more of influence through who and what we encounter through various formats. Here, circulation and border construction through networks does not occur in a neutral manner, as cultural software provides the algorithms and interfaces in which diasporas mediate and experience communication and community building processes.

While algorithms are significant in how we process and encounter the exchange of media over networks, they represent significant challenges in terms of research. As part of cultural studies and humanities, many scholars lack the technological skill to fully investigate the code and theory behind complex software and algorithms. Yet while scholars can learn to code, perhaps more difficult is that the specific details of most algorithms remain within a technological black box, unknown beyond corporate walls, and protected by proprietary and trade secret law, noncompete clauses, and nondisclosure agreements. Furthermore, the multiplicity of software and individual experiences makes algorithms difficult to pin down and even define or generalize. As journalist Will Oremus writes,

> To speak of Facebook's news feed algorithm in the singular, then, can be misleading. It isn't just that the algorithm is really a collection of hundreds of smaller algorithms solving the smaller problems that make up the larger problem of what stories to show people. It's that, thanks to all the tests and holdout groups, there are more than a dozen different versions of that master algorithm running in the world at any given time.[37]

Nevertheless, though complex and unavailable to study directly, and with constant updates that outdate any writing, scholars of cultural studies can still (and should) consider notions of the algorithmic; as Beer argued, there perhaps needs to be a development of engagements with parallel actors, including programmers, marketers, and users that are interested for various manners in how the algorithm works for tasks such as placing businesses

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[37] Will Oremus, "Who Controls Your Facebook Feed?," *Slate.com*, 3 Jan 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/cover_story/2016/01/how_facebook_s_news_feed_algorithm_works.html.

and people in the top spots.[38] In this manner, this chapter will rely on journalistic accounts and business and marketing websites that attempt to break down Facebook and Instagram's algorithm, as well as the official sites of these companies. [39]

Introduced two years after its founding in September 2006, the News Feed was designed to simplify the browsing of Facebook. Rather than have users jump from profile to profile manually, the News Feed aggregated the activity of users' friends and presented them as a "personalized" list of news stories. As Victor Luckerson documents, even though the News Feed was initially met with mixed reviews and mild revulsion, the most overlooked impact of the News Feed was that it did not show everyone everything; according to Facebook, the average user has about 1,500 new posts daily, but for the most part, only 300 of those posts are looked at or consumed.[40] Ultimately, Facebook's News Feed algorithm determines what users will likely see and read for the day. Initially, the algorithm was relatively crude and based on arbitrary judgements by Facebook's software designers—such as images having more "value" and was then more likely to be ranked at the top of users' News Feeds—but the algorithm eventually evolved into "EdgeRank" in November 2007. EdgeRank considered three main factors: affinity (relationship between user and content/source), weight (the type of action taken), and decay (how current is the content).[41] One key addition between the introduction of the News Feed and EdgeRank was the addition of the "Like" button. As mentioned above, the Like functions as many things, including generating commodified data for Facebook. But for our contexts, the

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[38] David Beer, "Power through the algorithm?", 999-1000.
[39] See https://newsroom.fb.com/news/ for Facebook's blog that introduces official release of updates.
[40] Victor Luckerson, "Here's How Facebook's News Feed Actually Works," *Time*, July 9, 2015, http://time.com/collection-post/3950525/facebook-news-feed-algorithm/.
[41] For elaboration on EdgeRank, see Matt McGee, "EdgeRank is Dead: Facebook's News Feed Algorithm Now has Close to 100k Weight Factors," *MarketingLand.com*, August 16, 2013, http://marketingland.com/edgerank-is-dead-facebooks-news-feed-algorithm-now-has-close-to-100k-weight-factors-55908.

main factor is that it provides a key feedback loop in determining a user's News Feed (which will be further augmented by the eventual addition of "Dislike" and other reactions).

Around 2011, Facebook began to phase out EdgeRank towards the current algorithm, simply named "Facebook News Feed Algorithm" which incorporates aspects of EdgeRank but ramped up the factors to consider roughly 100,000 individual weights. These weights may include how people react to the post, if they comment, if they click on or share a link, the time spent browsing through a post or article, and a user's history with different types of media (e.g. if a user is more likely to engage with videos, more videos may appear). According to Josh Constine at *Techcrunch.com*, a rough equation of "News Feed Visibility" of a post is equal to a score based on the creator of the post and their relationship to the user, the post's performance among other users, the type of posts the user prefers, and the "recency" of the post (how new is the post).[42] In a rare glimpse into Facebook's news feed software team, Will Oremus explains the purpose of the algorithm from Facebook's point of view: "the post you see at the top of your feed… has been chosen over thousands of others as the one most likely to make you laugh, cry, smile, click, like, share, or comment."[43] As Emilee Rader and Rebecca Gray note, while the News Feed algorithm is similar to other recommendation and curation systems, the main difference is that users of Facebook (or Instagram) are simultaneously content producers, consumers, and distributors. Thus, while recommender systems like Netflix or Spotify work with a relatively stable corpus of media, Facebook or Instagram's algorithms work with a relatively dynamic corpus that come from their users (as opposed to solely major studios or

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[42] Josh Constine, "How Facebook News Feed Works," *Techcrunch.com*, September 6, 2016, https://techcrunch.com/2016/09/06/ultimate-guide-to-the-news-feed/.
[43] Will Oremus, "Who Controls your Facebook Feed?," *Slate.com*, *http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/cover_story/2016/01/how_facebook_s_news_feed_algorithm_works.html*.

corporations). In addition to providing ratings such as Likes, users then also create content that affects the characteristics of the corpus as well, impacting in more direct ways the digital content that shows up on their own feeds as well as other people's feeds.[44]

In a parallel manner though much more recent, Instagram, the internet based photo-sharing application, follows a similar method of rearranging users' feeds. Released in 2010, Instagram was purchased by Facebook in 2012. Initially and for quite some time, Instagram was simple in its feed—it chronologically ordered posts. However, in June 2016, Instagram rolled out its version of an algorithmic Instagram feed, and faced responses of annoyance and anger similar to Facebook's initial deployment of the News Feed. Stef Lewandowski of *Makelight*, an "online learning platform and community for creative makers and doers" focused on "lifestyle" blogs and Instagram accounts, points to "signals" as factors that influence how Instagram orders a feed of images, many of which overlap with Facebook's weights. These signals include, but are not limited to: how regularly users open the app, how old the image is, what kind of media the post is (pictures, multiple pictures, video), the "genre" of the post (food, fashion, etc.), and whether the user has commented on or liked another user's posts.[45] A key point here is Instagram does not receive or produce as many data points as Facebook because the platform is much simpler. Thus, focusing mostly on pictures and text (with an increasing element of audio and video) and with less options for interaction, Instagram's pool of "signals" for its algorithm is much smaller. Ironically, this has led to more confusion and debate over how the algorithm works; for some, the lower amount of signals creates a better chance of understanding the

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[44] Emilee Rader and Rebecca Gray, "Understanding User Beliefs about Algorithmic Curation in Facebook News Feed," 175.

[45] Stef Lewandwoski, "Demystifying the Instagram Algorithm," *Makelight.com*, February 9, 2017, https://blog.makelight.com/blog/2017/2/8/demystifying-the-instagram-algorithm.

algorithm, while others argue the formula is more complex to make up for smaller datasets. In any case and just like Facebook, these algorithms remain both understandable and a mystery.

While there are new blog posts every day that gives users tips and tricks to create the most spreadable Instagram account or Facebook posts, the users' awareness of algorithms and other factors of networks continues to complicate how scholars can understand how users understand the algorithms that make up their digital environments. Just as algorithms help produce individualized streams of content, they also produce a diversity of experiences and practices that is difficult to generalize. As Motahhare Eslami et al. and various studies illustrate, there is a wide range of the awareness of algorithms, with many completely unaware or unsure of the exact processes that algorithms run.[46] Additionally, there is an option to turn off the algorithm and have Facebook display posts chronologically, which has been highlighted by Facebook on their official blog; however, while not representative, many of my informants were unaware of this option. Of course while protocols, platforms, and algorithms have growing control over the curation of the digital media that many experience and discover, we should not forget the human element in these contexts and cede all determining power to machines and code. These same studies also show how people can adapt or recognize algorithmic processes, even if they are unable to fully communicate their specific impact. Likewise, there have always been ways in which people "game the system" to reach trending status or influence programmers through their everyday habits; as Tim Highfield notes, "social media behaviours created by users and gradually adopted en masse, despite not being part of a platform's initial architecture, may become supported by the platforms."[47] Ultimately, Jeremy Morris argues that we need to

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[46] Motahhare Eslami et al., "'I always assumed that I wasn't really that close to [her],'" 153-162; also see note 8.
[47] Tim Highfield, *Social Media and Everyday Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016), 38.

remember that "algorithms and recommendation engines are fundamentally human in their construction, if not their execution. Most recommendation services adapt to or depend entirely on how, and how many, users are using them."[48] Thus, the results of algorithms are in part shaped by users, and while users may be highly influenced by them, these choices to click, share, or circulate digital commodities do not occur within cultural vacuums or free-flowing space, nor does this mean contact with media or certain cultural objects do not occur.

Towards a Vietnamese Canadian Digital Diaspora

In thinking about these various theories and frameworks, how does this alter our thinking of digital diasporas within an age of social media? As people shift away from specific websites or message boards to social media, what are some of the ways Facebook and Instagram impact and shape the ways in which Vietnamese diasporic people experience and share culture online? For one, these sites (for the most part) emphasize a personal identity that is rooted in the offline world, a move away from the discourses of pure anonymity seen in some works of digital diasporas. With content and profiles being more solidly linked to a personal identity, the stakes of presenting a diasporic identity has changed. Returning to Lisa from the introduction, when I ask about her comment about "not go[ing] out of [her] way" to post anything about being Vietnamese, she answers that she does not want to "pigeon-hole [her]self into one particular topic." Citing a diverse set of friends and understanding that her Facebook profile and posts are in many ways a commodity that circulates, she believes her Facebook identity can have a direct influence on both her personal and professional life and sees a necessity of being represented in a

[48] Jeremy Wade Morris, "Curation by Code," 456.

multidimensional manner, which also bleeds into her offline life. Her recognition of the ability of her posts and profile being circulated also guides what type of Vietnamese culture she shares. As she explains, when she does decide to share or craft her profile towards a sense of "Vietnamese-ness," she prefers it to be both "super neutral" and "tasteful." When she elaborates, "super neutral" refers to an avoidance of politics or anything possibly controversial, and this may include conversations about the current Vietnamese communist government or any political stance, both in Canada or Vietnam (this concept of politics will be further discussed in Chapters 4 and 5). In lieu of these topics, she prefers "tasteful" posts in terms of culture, which she describes as something beautiful, appropriate, and refined. She points to her recent profile cover photo, which features both a Vietnamese word and its English translation in cursive on a black and white photo of flowers. If clicked, the photo's description appears and, in English, elaborates on the translation and uses the word in an inspirational quote. Another example is the article she recently shared on the Vietnamese American CTO of Uber, which reflects both her personal interest in refugee success stories and professional interest in the business world.

What is crucial here is to understand that part of value and meaning is derived from Lisa's understanding that these digital objects are being shared and circulated to a wider public under her personal name. In this context, since Facebook is both open beyond a specific diasporic group and linked to a personal account, Lisa is navigating multiple regimes of value that include Vietnamese, Canadian, and everything between and beyond. In a surface reading of her profile, we could probably make some inferences about views on Vietnamese culture and politics, but it would remove much of the complexity of Lisa—for instance, she has strong opinions on political topics and as mentioned above, is relatively active in the local community (this is further explored in Chapter 5). In considering circulations, this may illustrate a hierarchy

of culture that represents her selection process of sharing culture beyond a diaspora, and hints at a much more discerning practice when we talk about digital diasporas within a larger social network site like Facebook. Within a website devoted to a specific diaspora, it would be difficult to be "pigeon-holed" through the act of sharing ethnic identity considering there is often the common goal of connecting to a homeland culture or identity; however, in the context of Facebook, which incorporates a much wider set of identities, Lisa is negotiating between various identities. Sharing and forming diasporic culture on these social network sites, then, takes on multiple dimensions of meaning that need to be fully explored beyond a simple textual reading of a Facebook post. For Lisa, her online diasporic identity operates in conjunction (and often under) with her image of professionalism and her audience of multicultural friends.

Relatedly, in discussing what people like or share on Facebook in relation to Vietnamese and Vietnamese Canadian culture, we also need to consider the roles in which algorithms may continually reproduce these similar cultural objects through feedback loops to further cement views and beliefs regarding diasporic cultures. As we scrolled together through her News Feed, we did not really see much "Vietnamese" content and that seems to be reflective of Lisa's (non)use of Facebook in crafting an online Vietnamese identity. However, upon reflection to my question about whether she ever encounters Vietnamese digital objects in her News Feed, she notes that she occasionally sees and is more likely to engage with news articles about Vietnamese refugees and their success stories, which are usually featured with a business/financial angle similar to the Uber CTO article. Of course, while we cannot completely confirm this is the actually process of Facebook's algorithms, it does seem likely there may have been an algorithmic push of these articles to be featured in her News Feed as she is more likely to both read and share them, data points that are supposedly highly valued by Facebook's

algorithm. As it will be explored in Chapter 5, Lisa is very adamant towards removing the community's mainstream reputation of gangs, nammers, and grow-ops. Through social media, she does this by consuming and sharing specific types of articles focused on upward mobility and economic success, which in turn, is reproduced through Facebook's algorithm. In doing so, there seems to be feedback loop that reproduces this very narrow diasporic point of identification that also seems to reflect her general attitude towards being Vietnamese Canadian. Thus, while she does not deny being Vietnamese Canadian, Lisa's main interest in regards to the local community concern encouraging youths to attend college, rather than any specific aspect of Vietnamese culture.

Lisa's News Feed and practices contrast greatly with her sister, Myra. When I ask Myra why she emphasizes her Vietnamese identity online, she gives me a confused look and responds with a "Why not?" as if I asked a stupid question. For her, being Vietnamese Canadian is an important part of her life and she wishes to express that in both on and offline spaces. An analysis of her Facebook profile showcases a wide range of posts and shares centered on Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic cultures, including news articles on Vietnamese films, reviews of Vietnamese Canadian literature, and an online piece on a local Vietnamese Canadian palm reader.[49] While she does have some overlap of posts with her sister that celebrate success in the Vietnamese diaspora—as mentioned in Chapter 1, Myra also feels bogged down by the negative representation of Vancouver's Vietnamese community—Myra's diversity in her posts and engagement produces a more varied online experience when it comes to encountering Vietnamese diasporic media within Facebook.

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[49] Talluah, "Vancouver People Project—Volume 38—Joan Trinh Pham-Modern Palmist, Palliative Care Nurse," *Vancouver is Awesome*, January 4, 2016, http://www.vancouverisawesome.com/2016/01/04/vancouver-palmist/.

When Myra refreshes her News Feed, it is more likely to contain articles and posts from Facebook friends and pages that concern aspects of Vietnamese culture, such as poetry, Vietnamese food recipes, or Vietnamese wedding dresses/accessories. While it is unclear here if the algorithm has the ability to increase the range of topics that emerge in Myra's News Feed (or if it is Myra's browsing that guides all results), Myra's refresh results in comparison to her sister indicate a potential for a more diverse experience in relationship to Vietnamese culture. As someone who is interested in learning about Vietnamese culture, Facebook's algorithm in this case seem to promote a more sprawling presentation to Vietnamese culture, and resultantly, Myra is often more engaged in different ways in expressing herself as Vietnamese Canadian in offline spaces compared to her sister, such as cooking Vietnamese food, speaking Vietnamese, and discussing her culture with friends.

We can see a similar pattern in Kevin and Samantha. Kevin sees Facebook as a way to socialize, but also mainly as a site to burn time with jokes and memes. In a broader sense, he identifies as mostly Canadian and for the most part does not engage with Vietnamese people in any space as this makes him feel "out of place and uncomfortable." This is reflected in his social media use, where he does not label himself as Vietnamese or share Vietnamese things; rather in a multicultural sense, he identifies as Canadian because "by being Canadian, it doesn't imply what race I am and I like that." In his discussion on other people expressing their Vietnamese-ness online, he states "honestly, I think it is annoying [laughs]. It's a bother, it feels kind of weird." Samantha, on the other hand, is similar to Myra, although this interest in Vietnamese culture is a relatively new thing. Over the past few years, Samantha has had a growing interest in sharing and producing posts that explore Vietnamese diasporic identities, as well as contemporary Vietnamese art that include paintings and modern pop music. Parallel to Lisa and Myra, Kevin

is less likely to encounter circulations of Vietnamese culture online, while Samantha is both more likely to receive posts about Vietnamese and experience a more diverse representation of Vietnamese (diasporic) cultures.

Other than content, algorithms can also shape the temporal aspects of digital diasporas that may influence how digital cultural commodities are received. In a website devoted specifically to a diasporic group, users for the most part actively access the site and experience its virtual components on their own schedule; as an active choice, users are aware that they are going to engage in a specific digital diasporic culture. Facebook and Instagram take away some of that temporal control. As sites not limited to just diasporic cultures, the News Feed is constructed with a wide variety of topics and posts that, depending on the user and their friends (along with those other 100,000 data points) may or may not feature content aimed towards a diasporic group. For some like Samantha and Myra, their daily Facebook and Instagram encounters generally offer daily diasporic content because they actively engage with that topic every day on their social media.

For people like Kevin, though, encountering a post that contains a Vietnamese cultural object is random and sometimes jarring. Unlike his sister Samantha who is primed with a specific "regime of value" and framework of interpretation, Kevin's encounter is one of surprise; on seeing a YouTube video in his Facebook News Feed that featured a Vietnamese man covering a pop song, he recalls thinking "I don't really see anything Vietnamese related here, but when I do, I think 'Whoa! What are you doing here?' It feels out of place." In this minor shock and surprise, Kevin is more confused about why it is in his News Feed and eventually does not click on the video to consume it as he was unprepared to have this specific encounter. In this context, Kevin has a clear protocol and evaluation system when it comes to Facebook, and Vietnamese

cultural commodities do not pass the threshold, as the algorithms have reinforced Facebook as having little Vietnamese-ness. In labeling objects like this as "out of place," he constructs Facebook as a Canadian/Western space where the presence of anything coded as Vietnamese is abnormal; thus, even though he claims Canadian in order to elide any discussion of race or ethnicity, there is an implied centrality of Whiteness. This structuring of Facebook also extends to his vision of the larger network of the internet. As he explains, "in my mind, Vietnamese people be like…like in my mind, Vietnamese people are in Vietnam and they are hanging out on the internet and that's kind of weird." In both cases of online and offline spaces, there are clear boundaries of identity and ideologies toward Vietnamese diasporic culture that are being drawn, and these lines partially stem from how algorithms have organized his News Feed. In normally reproducing non-Vietnamese posts, it is only when an algorithm inserts—erroneously?—a post about Vietnamese culture that Kevin is forced to negotiate his identity and media use to craft a specific identity that downplays his Vietnamese-ness and normalizes his vision of a Canadian identity.

As unknown entities, algorithms always exude some sense of randomness. Even for Samantha, with a feedback loop that is heavily imprinted with likes and shares of posts regarding Vietnamese content, daily interactions with diasporic media are not guaranteed on Facebook or Instagram. In an inverse manner to her brother, Samantha is surprised not to have Vietnamese content (or at least a wide variety) in her News Feed. As she states, "I used to like some pages on Facebook that had to do with Viet news, but I haven't seen anything from them on my clogged feed in a while so maybe they aren't active or maybe the algorithm's off." As her statement showcases, Samantha is well aware of Facebook's algorithm and is expecting certain content to be featured in her News Feed. When it does not, she points to various factors,

including the suggestion that the source has stopped producing content, Facebook's algorithm is "off," or that her feed is "clogged." While we cannot fully know what is happening, this shows how social media sites are unstable sites for digital diasporas and under constant flux and change. However, this inability to know the algorithm may also create instability in other sites. As Samantha reflects on her recent lack of posts related to Vietnamese culture, she also ponders if it is her own browsing habits that have altered what she sees when she refreshes. As someone who self-describes as a person just recently "getting in touch with her Viet side," she questions if her interest in Vietnamese culture and her own identity is wavering, and perhaps moving on to other interests. Although she admits to rarely getting this "deep and meta" about her social media use, she does state that she sometimes notices "waves" of different posts that are related to certain topics, such as 1950s French films or Canadian artists, and thinks about if Facebook or her own interests have produced these waves. Although she is unclear herself about the role in which algorithms play in how she constructs her identity, her comments illustrate an intriguing interplay between (perceived) algorithmic processes and reflections on identities, within categories of Vietnamese Canadian and beyond.

This also illustrates how digital diasporic cultures in these social media sites will exist and compete alongside other digital cultural commodities. For Facebook, this is an enormous body of Facebook-compatible objects, such as articles, video, audio, text, gifs, etc. Even though thresholds are in place that limit what can be circulated, the popularity of Facebook and its central role in people's lives as a social activity and news aggregator has made it open for several types of digital media. While this larger corpus is useful in providing a centralized location for overall internet use, it also is a site of larger cultural competition that may overpower a digital diaspora's circulation of cultural objects. An example of this is that Myra desired for more posts

on Vietnamese food on Facebook, but this was only interspersed with various other topics. To solve this issue, she turned to Instagram, which has less variety of content, to get her fix on digital commodities involving food.

Similarly, for Samantha, Facebook is sometimes overwhelming, which is why she also shifted over to Instagram as her main source of consuming and circulating digital cultural commodities related to Vietnamese diasporic cultures. With a more limited protocol of what it allows to be circulated, Instagram, according to Samantha, produces a more "streamlined" and "organized" structure that emphasizes a version of online Vietnamese culture that she prefers, which includes content that she feels has more aesthetic depth due to Instagram's core focus on one format (images). She also highlights how the platform's difference in profile construction also seems to encourage more posts towards identity construction. While Facebook's interface allows for extensive editing of one's profile—cover photo, profile picture, employment information, favorite books, etc.—Instagram is limited with one profile image, a 150-character limit biography, and one URL link. As Samantha notes, she is unable to establish herself as Vietnamese in her Instagram profile, and if it is important enough for her, she is forced to do this in the content she produces. In addition to creating a feedback loop in Instagram, the protocols and interface of the platform help play a role in guiding what types of digital commodities Samantha will create, circulate, and exchange. Additionally, the employment of Instagram by both Samantha and Myra point to at least a recognition of how certain digital tools and, on a more uncertain level, their corresponding protocols and algorithms can be used to address certain desires and needs when it comes to crafting and producing certain diasporic identities. As explored in this chapter, circulation across networks is not a neutral process and reveals the myriad ways in which algorithms can potentially shape the media contents of a digital diaspora

across Facebook and Instagram feeds. However, as active agents, users are sometimes able to respond to and recognize the various ways in which social media and its algorithms are potentially shaping how they experience and construct digital diasporas and identities.

Of course, while this chapter has focused on the potential roles in which algorithms may play in guiding diasporic identities and cultures, what a person likes or shares on Facebook is not limited to the digital or algorithmic and may be impacted by their historical and everyday contexts. For instance, since they live together, Samantha often shows her brother various videos and memes related to Vietnamese culture, which do not register within his algorithm or browsing history. Thus, these cultural objects also exist within larger circuits of circulations. In his discussion of the "digital" in digital music, Jonathan Sterne argues that scholars should avoid the hype that often accompanies the digital as a revolutionary game-changer in society, as he concludes there is not that much digital in digital music.[50] In a similar manner, if we take a closer look at the specifics of some of digital cultural objects being commonly circulated in this chapter—music, fashion, language, etc.—they are pretty much the same major objects and themes that have been widely circulated in the past through different non-digital means. For instance, in Lieu's analysis of Vietnamese American popular culture, beauty pageants, and variety shows, the objects related to music and fashion that were circulated via the analog VCR are often subjects of posts within my group of participants.[51]

This is not to say the digital has no impact; I believe digital networks have altered the diasporic condition in several ways as illustrated above, including giving individuals (in addition to major production companies) more variety in the ability to access, circulate, and curate

[50] Jonathan Sterne, "What's Digital in Digital Music?" in *Digital Media: Transformations in Human Communication*, eds. Paul Messaris and Lee Humphreys (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 95-110.
[51] Lieu, *The American Dream*, 82-83.

cultural objects. If anything, the digital has perhaps made a definition of digital diaspora much more difficult in the realm of social media networks. Even with a case study of just four people, digital diasporas within these larger social network sites have been shown to be somewhat unruly and complex, as all four versions of digital diasporas diverge and converge in different and uneven manners. But by placing emphasis on the circulation of digital cultures and how it is organized by algorithms, I believe we can highlight different relationships and encounters that have emerged more prominently in the digital age. In doing so, we can begin to understand how digital diasporas are not just negotiating with a single text, but rather the entire trajectory of the object, including its origins, its mode of circulation, and the algorithms of the platforms that carry and mediate these objects. Objects—even digital ones—do not move freely through time and space, and by looking at various aspects of their circulation, we can begin to understand different dimensions of how diasporic cultures are created and/or maintained. While I do not believe diasporas have significantly different experiences with social media in comparison to non-diasporic communities, the consideration of larger cultural flows and the digital parameters of the networks that carry them produces and reveals different understandings of the various dimensions of culture that animate specific diasporic groups. If there is an impact, digital technologies have made trajectories of objects more visible. As the next chapters will illustrate, diasporic populations are well aware of where digital objects come from and their relationship to those sites, whether it is in Vancouver, Eastern Canada, the United States, Vietnam, or elsewhere. And it is in these exchanges of digital commodities that value, meaning, and relationships are formed, contested, and negotiated in both online and offline spaces.

Chapter 3

Everyday Media, Diasporic Events: Localizing the Futures of Vietnamese Canadian Cultures

Introduction

I was sitting in a local Vietnamese restaurant with about 20 Vietnamese and Vietnamese Canadians, most who were students at a local university. We were all attendees of "Phở Night," an event organized and planned by their university's Vietnamese Student Club (VSC).[1] The evening started with much activity on social media, with many taking pictures of their bowls of phở and/or posing for group shots to be uploaded to Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat, accompanied with #pho and captions in Vietnamese and English. As the night concluded, there was still activity, but with more variety. While some continued to document their presence with Vietnamese people in a Vietnamese space, others were waiting to pay for their meals and, with conversations waning, begin glaring down at their phones looking at websites, checking emails, texting, and scrolling through various social media platforms with an occasional tap for a "like." Some just sat in silence, observing others or staring off into the distance, while others walked to their bus stops and using mobile apps, checked for the next incoming bus.

As a scholar who is interested in the intersections of Vietnamese diasporic cultures, identities, and digital media, it would seem most practical to hone into the borders of the cultural events and digital spaces constituted of photos, videos, and #pho that illustrate the negotiations and representational work that go into (re)constructing online Vietnamese and Vietnamese Canadian subjectivities. The rest of the observations—such as those who did not participate in the event or digitalize their experience, those checking bus times or siting in silence, etc.—would

[1] All names, clubs, and organization names have been changed.

probably fall into the unrelated, mundane, and non-exceptional. These acts are seemingly boring and historically irrelevant, appear to highlight no resistance, political uprising, or radical community building, and illustrate no new trends or different paradigms of thinking often touted in discourses on "new" media or the digital age of social networks. In other words, these are normal, everyday non-events.

However, if we remove the normal and the everyday in our discussions of the organized events that highlight, produce, and influence any culture, we lose the local (mediated) actions, contexts, and beliefs that shape the multiple ways in how we can understand an event, as it is through the processes of the everyday and mundane that help inform our decisions and meaning-making during such events. On a general and surface level, we can point towards a contained event and read an Instagram photo and #pho created at the event as specific examples of cultural artifacts that illustrates an instance where a person is presenting themselves as Vietnamese online and the possible elements that define their version of Vietnamese culture. But if we consider a person's wider activity within the everyday, we can begin to ask questions that nuance the meanings of these digital objects within specific events and beyond. If this social event and Instagram post are considered abnormal or uncharacteristic in relation to one's daily life and media use—i.e. "I don't really consider myself 'Vietnamese' anywhere"—or if this event and post are considered by a person as a part of their normal everyday, just one of several social gatherings and posts revolving around Vietnamese culture and food this week alone, that context changes what messages a person is trying to produce through an event or post. For either of these instances (and everything in-between), what can we say about the event's and users' relationships towards diasporic cultures and communities when we frame them within the everyday? How does incorporating the everyday allow us to see productions of local cultural

events and diasporic media in a different light? In what ways do people's daily media use or non-use influence how they define diasporic culture and how does that translate when they construct an event centered on a diaspora and its culture?

In order to explore the complex interplay between everyday media and the diasporic event in Metro Vancouver, this chapter analyzes various sites of Vietnamese diasporic identity and culture formations. This chapter is anchored through a focus on two public cultural events—a Tết (Vietnamese New Year) Cultural Show and a Vietnamese Cultural Festival[2]—produced by and featuring local members of the Vietnamese community and cultural organizations in 2016. As organized and public entities, these events ground and translate abstracts ideals, politics, and hierarchies revolving around Vietnamese cultures into material performances and tangible representations. As these events are often positioned as representative of "Vietnamese Culture" to both the local Vietnamese community and a broader, mainstream Canadian audience, examining these diasporic cultural events as texts can reveal how specific elements and definitions of diasporic cultures are reaffirmed or negotiated through celebration and difference.

In addition to the analysis of these events, this chapter places these cultural shows alongside the personal histories and everyday media uses of their organizers and performers. In moving beyond just reading these cultural events as isolated texts in time and space, this consideration of everyday media practices of the community leaders behind these events allows us to expand on how the specific local histories and digital diasporas explored in the previous chapters manifest in the constant production and negotiation of Vietnamese diasporic cultures and identities in Vancouver. In tracing how community leaders employ social media within the

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[2] Tết is the Vietnamese New Year and corresponds with the a calendar. In this context, I define "cultural program" or event as a planned and staged showcase featuring multiple acts, performances, and components focused on cultural aspects of a group.

everyday, this chapters illustrates how individual social media activity works in tandem with offline interactions and histories to form Vietnamese Canadian identities and cultures, as well as reflect attitudes and relationships toward the larger Vietnamese community in Vancouver.

We can then also begin to see how through the everyday circulation (or absence) of certain historical narratives, ideologies, and cultural objects among the organizers within on and offline networks potentially influences how transnational Vietnamese diasporic cultures are localized in Vancouver through a cultural event. I argue that while these cultural events often reflect the hegemonic images and structures of diasporic media and events seen in North American regions with "stronger" communities—such as the Vietnamese American-produced *Paris by Night* (*PBN*) variety show and websites of cultural clubs Eastern Canada— these events also highlight a localized and ambivalent Vietnamese Canadian subjectivity that is reacting to both larger transnational flows of cultures, as well as local constraints and dynamics within the Vietnamese Vancouver community.

In exploring the cultural event and the clubs and organizational leaders that produce them, we can unravel an intricate yet messy matrix of overlapping and competing identities, anxieties, and ambitions that struggle over defining what it means to be Vietnamese in Vancouver. Within an Asian American context, Lisa Lowe argues that "culture is the material site of struggle in which active links are made between signifying practices and social structure," and it is within these links that the identities of individuals and groups and begin to speak.[3] Through this analysis of the cultural event, we can map the various and multiple ways community leaders envision future pathways for Vietnamese diasporic communities in Vancouver and Canada, and the ways in which these pathways become (re)digitized to be

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[3] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 22.

reinserted and circulated among various transnational networks. Through this selective process of localizing and re-circulating elements of Vietnamese diasporic cultures, I argue that the organizers of these shows are attempting to create new images of the Vietnamese in Vancouver to replace perceptions of a broken and stagnant community.

This chapter is based on data collected through various methods, which include the textual analysis of events and digital media, including websites and Facebook and Instagram profiles, as well as ethnographic methods such as participant observation, interviews, and "deep hanging out."[4] In addition to attending these cultural events, I was also an active participant in the events' planning processes, which included participating in the majority of planning meetings, fundraising activities, and behind-the-scenes activities before, during, and after the events. These observation at these sites help to formulate questions for interviews with leaders of the hosting organizations during the planning process, as well as a debriefing after the events had concluded. Beyond questions on the cultural events and the planning processes, these interviews (some which are featured in the previous chapters) also covered topics related to personal histories, definitions of Vietnamese culture, perceptions of the local Vietnamese communities, and everyday media use. For the topic of everyday media, these interviews were augmented through the process of "deep hanging out" with informants in both digital and physical spaces, which allowed me to observe and discuss everyday media in a more informal and daily context.

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[4] As Ben Walmsley explains, the term "deep hanging out" was used by Clifford Geertz to "describe the fieldwork method of immersing oneself in a cultural, group or social experience on an informal level." According to Geertz, it was a method to re-root anthropological research away from static descriptions to a more flexible, decentered account of culture in motion. See Ben Walmsley, "Deep Hanging Out in the Arts: An Anthropological Approach to Capturing Cultural Value," *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, (2016): 6; Clifford Geertz, "Deep Hanging Out," *The New York Review of Books*, October 22, 1998.

As an active participant in these clubs, meetings, and the social lives of this project's participants, I am fully aware that my presence potentially altered how these cultural events came into being. To minimize my impact, my position was mostly to act in a supporting role; in this case, this meant seldomly offering any ideas or thoughts, especially towards questions, debates, and decisions on cultural topics or performances. When I was prompted to take a more active position—i.e. actually be useful to the groups—it was usually in the realm of logistics or manual tasks, such as stage setup, running errands, or serving food. During these times, I usually followed instructions from organizing members. Of course, these precautions do not erase my interactions with others or completely remove my influence from this environment, nor do I wish that they do.[5] In any case, I believe the resulting events still represent and showcase the larger ideologies and politics of these individuals and cultural groups.

This chapter will first provide an overview of the theories conceptualizing everyday life as a site of active identity and cultural production. I place these theories in conversations with recent work on digital technologies and social media to contextualize how everyday life operates in a digital environment that allow users to create and circulate their own media on a daily basis. The chapter then explores how scholars can approach the everyday through the event, which I argue is an accumulation of everyday processes that allows scholars to map out the roles of how the everyday shapes constructions of culture within a local community. The chapter concludes with a case study that explores how local contexts and everyday media practices of key leaders in Vietnamese cultural organizations relate to the planning and execution of two cultural events in Vancouver.

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[5] The implications of completely removing myself from this situation would imply an invisible, objective researcher, as well as the possibility of a "pure" research site. This is problematic on several layers, including obscuring complex power dynamics between the researcher and participants and my position as an outsider to this specific community.

Situating Everyday (Digital) Media and the Diasporic Event

If the example of "Phở Night" is any indication, digital media can be seen as ubiquitous on some level within the daily lives for many in contemporary society in North America. While "Phở Night" was a non-daily organized event, various commonplace media uses seeped into the temporal and physical boundaries of the event, ranging from selfies to checking ones' emails unrelated to the event. This intense saturation of digital media in everyday life has led Andreas Hepp et al. to argue that media are "part of the very fabric" of society and culture as it is the "cultural air we breathe"; for Mia Lovheim et al., this ubiquity of digital media illustrates how it has been integrated into social life where it is simply "a natural part of how we 'do' everyday life."[6] Unable to clearly distinguish between online, offline, "real life," and the everyday, these authors note the difficultly of being able to explore either digital media or everyday life without referencing the other, as they are often inseparable in daily experiences.

However, even before the proliferation of interactive digital media technologies and the highly portable devices that allow an almost seamless insertion into our daily lives, scholars have long called for increased attention to the importance of the everyday.[7] On a broader scale, Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* views the everyday as a site of constant and simultaneous alienation, action, and contestation, though optimistically concludes it is ultimately

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[6] Andreas Hepp, Stig Hjarvard, and Knut Lundby, "Mediaization. Empirical Perspectives: An Introduction to a Special Issue," *Communications* 35 (2010): 223-24; Mia Lovheim, Andre Jansson, Susanna Paasonen, and Johanna Sumiala, "Social Media: Implications for Everyday Life, Politics and Human Agency," *Approaching Religion* 3, no. 2 (2013): 26-27. Of course, the ubiquity and saturation of media devices and digital technologies are not uniform, though this discourse, similar to the framework of "networks," is popular among journalists and media scholars. However, it is undeniable that digital technologies have had some form of impact across North America, even if access and use are diverse. For a more complex view that includes the internet, diaspora, race, and the digital divide, see Anna Everett, *Digital Diaspora: A Race of Cyberspace* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009).

[7] See Marie Gillespie, *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and Myria Georgiou, *Diaspora, Identity and the Media: Diasporic Transnationalism and Mediated Spatialities* (Cresskill: Hampton Press, Inc., 2006)

a space for strategic resistance by an individual towards dominant forces.[8] Following the discourses of authors above in asking how is that "such a technology and medium [such as television] has found its way so profoundly and intimately into the fabric of our daily lives" and the implications of this, Silverstone argues that our understandings of the world are not limited to immediate experiences, but also through the constructed "ordinariness" of the everyday that is consistently "conditioned by our consumption of information, ideas, and values that television and other media provide."[9] As popular culture, it is within (mass) media that aspects of the ordinary and everyday emerge and, according to Silverstone, it is within the everyday that the tensions between domination and resistance occur for audiences, though compared to de Certeau, Silverstone seems to consider the overarching structures of power and their dominance when exploring the potentials of resistance.

Building off the works of de Certeau and Silverstone, Myria Georgiou positions everyday life as:

> the context for social relations and network construction; everyday life is where habits and routines get established, where individuals and groups become involved in struggles for control of cultural production and consumption, and where identities take their shape in interaction with human (like members of a community) and nonhuman (like media and communication technologies) cultural actors.[10]

For Georgiou, the context of the everyday is a meeting ground between the private and the public, work and leisure, and the individual and community. In this chapter, the everyday, then, becomes an ambiguous site of decisions, education, and confrontation, where identities, cultures, and politics are neither completely resistive nor dominated, but negotiated with varying effectiveness within various power structures (such as governments, global diasporic

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[8] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
[9] Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1994): 2; 168.
[10] Georgiou, *Diaspora, Identity and the Media*, 25.

communities, or local community organizations). Following the lines of Stuart Hall's concept of identity as being in constant flux, both a state of *becoming* and *being*, the everyday is the stage and context in which this process of identity negotiation occurs, where the individual and their history come into contact with the various (mediated) forces that will help shape their current and future state.[11] While this applies to everyone in society on a broad scale, Georgiou argues this formulation of everyday life as a position of contestation resonates especially in thinking about diasporic groups because the struggles over cultural production and interactions with difference are magnified as the everyday is often framed through the experiences of territorial uprooting and resettlement; thus, as being minorities in a host country, everyday interactions for diaspora additionally include dealing with difference between various homelands and host countries, dominant ethnic groups, and other members of the diaspora around the globe. These interactions have only intensified through the development of digital technologies that allow for evolved possibilities in communicating across national borders through networks.[12]

With the growth of digital media, the call for the everyday in scholarship has taken a new dimension. Digital media have increasingly allowed many users, including diasporic groups, to not only consume media from around the globe, but also more easily produce and spread content in a variety of ways. With language such as "produsage," and "convergence culture"—and often positioned against "old media"—several scholars and popular press view digital media as new tools that blur the barriers between producer, publisher, and creator/user; no longer a one-way and mass-mediated broadcast system, users now have the growing ability through "new media" to speak back, participate in the production of media, and pluralize discourses on multiple

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[11] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222-237.
[12] For an overview of existing literature and discussion of diasporas and digital networks, see chapter 2.

platforms and formats, ultimately challenging dominant structures of "old" media and their hegemonic representations.[13] Yet, there is much debate over what is exactly "new" in "new media," and if it is actually the tool of resistance it is often hyped up to be. As Mattelart notes, new media technologies also have the ability to reproduce existing socio-economic inequalities; likewise, Granham and Fuchs both argue that while shifts have occurred in the media industries to react to digital media, these changes sometimes reinforce existing power structures of the dominant groups.[14]

Still, it is difficult to completely dismiss the material ways digital media and its networked and interactive nature have altered our lives and its temporal elements, including in the realm of producing potential opposition to dominant structures such as the media industries. As Andre Jansson notes,

> today, when the media also enable an increased level of participation and expression, when audiences are turned into participants and content producers, more time and energy can be spent on those interests which one finds most important, whether we are speaking of politics, sports, art or something else. As mentioned above these mediated activities may also occur as we go about our everyday lives in general – in the lacunae of life, while waiting or in transit – and not merely in front of the TV screen or newspaper, as used to be the case.[15]

For many, including Jansson, this increased level of participation, expression, and free time is often seen in the realm of politics, and it is frequently the resistive potentials of digital media to connect and mobilize large groups under overarching (albeit sometimes fuzzy) goals within

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[13] Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008); Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2008).

[14] A. Mattelart, "An Archaeology of the Global Era: Constructing a Belief," *Media Culture and Society* 28, no. 2 (2010): 591-612; N. Garnham, "The Political Economy of Communication Revisited," in *The Handbook of Political Economy of Communications I*, eds. J. Wasko et. al. (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); C. Fuchs, *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age* (London: Routledge, 2011).

[15] Mia Lovheim et al., "Social Media: Implications for Everyday Life, Politics and Human Agency," 32.

various public spheres that serve as the more worthy object of study within the field of media studies.

As Daren Brabham contends, scholars of social media seem to be overwhelmingly attracted to research on "the most visible, newsworthy highlights of the social media sphere in order to make a point, and so much of the expert commentary on social media follows all that glitters."[16] Pointing to the protests of Arab Spring and Ferguson, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, and the more trivial matters of high-profile social media blunders by companies and celebrities, Brabham notes scholarship on social media "has so far tended to focus on the edge cases, the exception to the norm." According to Brabham, this overemphasis on the "most visible" events that make up a very small percentage of social media use is producing misleading discourses about how social media is being employed by the vast majority of the world. This is not to skewer current scholarship or downplay the impact of these events, but rather consider "the fact that people use social media to share photos of their children and their meals more often than they join in on political charged hashtag trends [which] should be reflected in the way scholars write about social media"; to counter this, scholars need to study "normal, everyday topics."[17] Similar to Brabham, Tim Highfield argues the coverage of key political events have often been at the expense of the exploration and consideration of "normal" and everyday uses of social media, making it difficult to see how online and offline lives bleed into each other beyond the temporal boundaries of major political events such as campaigns, elections, and riots.[18] As he elaborates:

> We might engage in a wide range of [political] issues, but these are not necessarily constant concerns, and they coexist on social media with baby photos, music videos, comments on who just died in *Game of Thrones* and updates from nights out. That is not to say that social media are primarily made up of photos of cats and coffee, of friends and

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[16] Daren C. Brabham, "Studying Normal, Everyday Social Media," *Social Media + Society* (2015): 1.
[17] Ibid., 1.
[18] Tim Highfield, *Social Media and Everyday Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

> brunch; it is more that political discussions may be fleeting but recurring for many people, part of more extensive activity shared online.[19]

For Highfield, the mundane uses of social media are not separated or disconnected from the political—which he defines as topics in the realm of elections, politicians, governments, protests, and the everyday discourses surrounding them—but are indeed intertwined through norms established by the everyday.

While Brabham's comment on the majority of scholarship being "exceptions to the norm" highlights the obscuration of the larger contexts in which social media operate in both the everyday and the event, his argument also imply a binary between the political and the everyday, as if definitions of what is considered "normal" are not socially constructed and highly politicalized. In doing so, there seems to be a sense of stripping the agency and politics of the everyday, an assumption that a user's everyday lives and media use, including their posting of their children and meals, have no political meaning or consequence. This theorizing implies a universal user that ignores the diversity of digital media users; although it may not be "political charged hashtags," the everyday and mundane, as explored above, consistently contain representations, decision processes, and interactions—however minute or seemingly frivolous—that create and/or reinforce our identities and inform our ideologies, politics, and actions. For some located in the lower positions of society, just using social media or digital media in any manner can be subversive or even potentially radical.[20] More so than Brabham, Highfield seems to emphasize the politics of the everyday and the roles social media as a technology play in mediating these politics in our daily lives; according to Highfield, if the personal is political and

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[19] Ibid., 3.

[20] As Everett illustrates, for some African Americans and African diasporas, the use of the internet disrupts notions of blackness being on the wrong side of the digital divide and the cultural baggage of backwardness that accompanies these notions. See Everett, *Digital Diaspora: A Race of Cyberspace*.

digital media blurs the line between the personal and public, social media becomes a major contact zone where expressions of politics from multiple sources become entangled on a daily basis. Thus, even the most seemingly routine and even boring online activities can be linked to political ideologies of nation, race, and gender, even if it is fleeting, unstable, and informal.

While Highfield is mostly focused highlighting the politics of the everyday, his definition of "politics" in his work is ultimately concerned with events such as elections, political speeches, and civic duties. But of course, everyday politics is reflective of much more than direct interaction with the functions of the government and state; as Silverstone notes, "culture is fundamentally political. And politics are cultural."[21] In this chapter, I wish to consider political actions beyond, but not separated from, government-related activities and extend this relationship of everyday digital media and politics to the contexts of diasporas and cultural production. With the rise of digital media technologies and its growing capability to give users the ability to easily create and share media, it has disrupted notions of what could be considered diasporic media; while it does not erase dominant structures in the Vietnamese diasporic media industries (as it will be seen in this chapter), digital media has increased the potential for interactions between and within individuals and diasporic groups, leading to negotiations over hegemonic definitions of culture. As mentioned above, the everyday and its circulating digital cultural objects can possibly resonate stronger as a site of contestation with diasporas, especially those that exist within a liminal space between the motherland and adopted homeland (such as the Vietnamese in North America). In this case, questions over everyday cultural activities are highly related to the construction of being "normal" and possibly showcase both a "good" citizen in their adopted homeland and a "good" warden of the culture of the motherland; as Lowe argues

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[21] Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life*, 121.

within a U.S. context, "culture is what shapes and maintains who and what citizenry is."[22] Seemingly mundane pictures of children or food, then, should be considered both political and cultural (e.g. a child graduating with honors from school or food illustrating the acceptance of both local tastes in their homeland and motherland).

But these everyday cultural politics can be diffuse and abstract. Much like Highfield's conceptualization of the everyday presence of politics in social media feeds as wide ranging and transient, Georgiou has shown in her study of Greek and Cypriot diaspora that there are some who see their Cypriotness as "completely irrelevant" to their experiences, and those who "defended their diasporic identity as a point of reference that they could not imagine themselves without," with many who fall in between this binary of identification.[23] Like politics, the evocations of diasporic identities and their transference to online spaces may be a small blip or a central cornerstone, with both existing within a larger and extensive set of online activity. Of course, while the theoretical framework of the everyday can push us to reconsider how we see different dimensions of diasporic media, to follow the unevenness of the expansive everyday across the multiplicity of individual media users would be an impossible task, which is why this chapter does not aim to replace the experience of the distinctive event or its examination with a sole focus on the everyday. As Brabham notes, the everyday and major markers of history are parallel and coexisting objects, for "the study of culture and history should consider the normal and the everyday experiences of populations alongside timelines of important battles and economic milestones"[24] It is in the intertwined nature of the everyday and the event that both elements are able to begin to illuminate itself and the other, where the everyday politics and

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[22] See Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 2,
[23] Georgiou, *Diaspora, Identity and the Media: Diasporic Transnationalism and Mediated Spatialities, 20.*
[24] Brabham, "Studying Normal, Everyday Social Media," 1.

mediated identities become grounded, articulated, and positioned as extraordinary through occasion and cultural celebration.

There are multiple types of events, but events are not the same; some moments in time are undeniably more crucial than others. It is the unexpected, the special occasion, the crisis that most likely register as memories rather than our daily events, often leading us to major focal points of documentation, research, and exploration. It is through the ordinary, normal, and everyday that an event becomes recognized as an event, has specific meanings, and functions in certain ways; the reason why birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays register differently and mean different things is partly because they are *not* ordinary days, but at the same time, *why* and *how* they are celebrated or received may also partly be based on beliefs and experiences learned through the everyday. While the event can exist on its own, we can better understand an event if we see its meaning and values as being codetermined by its complex relationship to constellations of everyday activities and ideologies that help structure how events come into existence and unravel over time.

This relationship becomes especially crystalized for analysis when events are organized and planned. Although they may contain them, the events in the chapter are not random occurrences or accidents as a whole, but rather as organized annual events centered on the Vietnamese culture, they represent an intentional and deliberate creation of cultural representation on a local scale. Publicized as "special" events or occasions, a once-a-year celebration and showcase of Vietnamese culture that is not rendered invisible within the everyday, these cultural shows become distinct entities, constructed under the perception of being a temporally bounded and planned expression of an "authentic" Vietnamese Culture that expands beyond the ordinary, catering to both Vietnamese diasporic audiences and the general

public in Vancouver. Thus, these cultural events become critical sites where diasporic cultures are literally being staged and articulated for consumption and circulation, and in these processes, reveal underlying and competing visions of "authentic" and "modern" identities, cultures, and politics of the Vietnamese diaspora, Vietnam, and Canada on a public stage.[25] Yet, while the planned event may be temporally and physically bounded, it is also an ambiguous site informed by the everyday that extends simultaneously in multiple directions of time and space. Like Hall's theorization of identities, these organized events are both a state of *being* and *becoming*, where organizers, performers, and various conditions negotiate and (re)inscribe their ideological hierarchies of what it meant, means, and could mean to be Vietnamese in Vancouver. The diasporic event becomes a site of self-representation and digital production, where potential is created to counter the marginal positions and mainstream representations (as explored in Chapter 1) that make up the everyday for Vietnamese Vancouverites. The rest of this chapter will explore both the diasporic event and the constellations of the everyday mechanics—which include everyday lives and (digital) media use, personal histories, and local community dynamics—that shaped how community leaders construct Vietnamese cultures for the event stage, and how those staged cultures represent larger ideals and goals of the community that become reinserted into the everyday for future circulation and interactions.[26]

Being Vietnamese Canadian in Everyday Life and Media

[25] As Lieu notes, while these events are often labeled as trivial or frivolous, as cultural practices they contain and represent many struggles over cultural power. See Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

[26] Following Aguilar-San Juan, I recognize the limits of a leader-centric approach. However, as leaders and "movers and shakers" within the community, they often are in positions that have a direct impact on the local community, as well as various forms of capital and agency, which help to reduce the power difference between researcher and subject. See Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009): 124.

Claire: Establishing New Frontiers through Community

The idea of organizing a cultural show during Tết had been floated around by the Vietnamese Student Club (VSC) for years, but it was not until Claire took the head leadership position and surrounded herself with people of whose abilities she was confident that the idea was taken seriously. While there are conflicting histories of this specific VSC, the general timeline is the club was established in the mid-1990s, although there is debate if this was an official club with the university. Consisting of mostly international students from Vietnam, the small club acted more like a social group, organizing informal meetings and gatherings for homesick students.[27] The group dispersed by 2000, but was revived in an official manner as a registered student club during the late-2000s; like its previous predecessor, it was comprised mainly of students from Vietnam and performed the same functions as a social group. According to Claire, after most of the founders of the club graduated, the club perished again after a few years due to a lack of structure and planning, specifically establishing a line of succession for future leaders and executives to continue the club.

The club was revived again in the early-2010s, this time by a mixture of international and Canadian-born Vietnamese students. As explored in the first chapter, it was during this time that younger 1.5 (those who came to Canada as young children) and 2nd generation Vietnamese Canadians born in the 1990s were entering universities at higher levels than previous groups; by the early 2000s, marijuana Grow-Ops, gang activity, and general "nammer" lifestyles had

[27] While I find the term "international Vietnamese" student can be confusing and problematic—it centers Canada/the West and can erase complex migration histories and identities (some "international Vietnamese" identify as Vietnamese Canadian and when does one stop being "international" if they decide to stay in Canada?)—it is term often used in interviews to refer to the recent wave of immigration from Vietnam consisting of high school and college-aged students.

declined, and although they still remain as a feature in daily lives, their impact had softened on the Vancouver Vietnamese community to allow for contexts that encouraged greater access to post-secondary education. Nevertheless, the residue of the crime-ridden nammer stereotype still resonated with this wave of university-bound Vietnamese Canadians, which helped shift the goals of VSC to include aspects of leadership development, public outreach, and cultural education to address the fissures present in the larger Vietnamese population in Metro Vancouver. Thus, while the club still currently functions as a social gathering space for international Vietnamese students—"a home away from home," as Claire describes it—the club with its more diverse executive board and membership also became a space for attempts at both showcasing Vietnamese culture to a larger audience and actively cultivating a Vietnamese community in Vancouver.

As Nazli Kibria illustrates in her study on 2nd generation Chinese and Korean Americans, it is often during their college years—which are often marked by self-discovery and identity exploration—that they develop an Asian American collective identity.[28] As she argues, the act of "'becoming Asian American' offers a means to fill the identity gaps left by their own weakening ties to the ethnic communities and cultures of their immigrant ancestors."[29] In a parallel manner, for some 2nd generation Vietnamese Canadians in Vancouver like Claire and Rachel, university and the VSC were one of the first spaces for a local Vietnamese community and culture to exist and be defined outside of their homes.[30] However, the history of the club and the reasons for joining are very much reflective of its local contexts, as the definition of

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[28] Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 102-117.
[29] Ibid., 198.
[30] As explored in the introduction of this dissertation, the lack of a cohesive "Asian Canadian" identity has led to an emphasis on identities based on ethno-national lines within Canada.

community and culture within VSC exists on very uneven terrain. The VSC's current leader Claire, who is in her early 20s and finishing her undergraduate degree, was mainly raised and still maintains residence with her parents in Coquitlam, a mostly suburban city within Metro Vancouver about 15 kilometers (9 miles) east of Vancouver. While occasionally showing flashes of awkward goofiness around her friends, Claire is generally calm, focused, and organized as a leader. As she describes in Chapter 1, her paternal grandfather served in the South Vietnamese army and had relatively strong ties with the U.S. government as a high-ranking official. After the U.S.-withdrawal in 1975, Vietnam's new communist government blacklisted her father's family, which meant that even though he received one of the highest scores in aptitude tests as a high school student, his family name prevented any access to higher education or opportunities, basically forcing him to leave Vietnam in the late-1970s. While obviously not a supporter of the current Vietnamese government, her father's relationship to the United States was also complicated as he did not necessarily see the U.S. as an ally after leaving him behind. As she recounts,

> He didn't want to go to the States…[because] when the U.S. basically told him he was going to the States [at a refugee camp], he didn't take too well being told where to go [light laugh]. And I think he liked Canada better, at that point too. Because I guess the U.S. is very involved with the war in Vietnam, right, and he just wanted to go to Canada.

Although she is not positive, she believes her father's experiences in being blacklisted and denied opportunities based on his skills and hard work, along with the family's military background, greatly shaped how he carried himself in Vancouver. Rejecting any notion of "fast cash" through drugs or crime or reliance on government welfare, Claire depicts her father as being very regimented and principled (with a hint of stubbornness).

Besides imprinting some of these traits to his only child, his views on "fast cash" and welfare eventually drove a wedge between his family and other Vietnamese in Vancouver.

While Claire remembers speaking Vietnamese and attending community events like Tết celebrations as a small child, her family eventually stopped most interactions with other Vietnamese after the age of five. Later on in her life when she asked her father the reasons for this disconnection, he explained there were several disagreements with other Vietnamese based on ideas surrounding welfare and the community's growing association with crime, which he saw as representative of poor work ethics among both parents and children. Additionally, there was increasing gossip and criticism of her parents' philosophy on how to raise a Vietnamese child in Canada. From her parents' point of view, integrating into Canadian culture was crucial for Claire's future; this meant a focus on English and her education within the Canadian system, and over time, this led to her being unable to speak Vietnamese fluently (although she is able to mostly understand it). This loss apparently was seen by some as neglectful in relation to her Vietnamese culture and heritage. As Claire explains,

> My parents aren't connected to the community. They [the community] basically shut them out because [my parents] weren't speaking to me in Vietnamese at home.
> […]
> My parents wanted me to be proficient in English before I was proficient in Vietnamese, because I was born and raised here [in Canada].

This shift away from interacting with other Vietnamese also coincided with a physical move. Although starting in Burnaby, a neighboring city to Vancouver, her parents eventually moved out further east to Coquitlam due to housing costs, where Claire spent most of her childhood.

Throughout most of her education in middle and high school in Coquitlam, Claire was often the only Vietnamese Canadian in her classes, and it was not until high school that she had more interactions with other Asians, specifically Chinese and Korean Canadians. She describes her circle of friends as increasingly diverse as she moved into high school, but "mostly Caucasian" and not many Vietnamese kids. While she picked up an interest in volunteering and

community service through school clubs, her physical location in Coquitlam kept engagement with any sense of a Vietnamese community out of reach; perhaps the only time there was interaction was grocery shopping at Asian/Vietnamese markets with her family in Vancouver, but those were limited experiences. As she details, with "Vietnamese culture" mostly confined to her home and being ethnically different within the contexts of the peer pressures of high school, being Vietnamese Canadian was a conflicting process during this time:

> I only knew what my parents told me and nothing beyond that. And when I was out, I had this, especially in high school, not so much now, but when I was in high school, I kind of—I wouldn't say I hated myself—but I was almost ashamed I wasn't Caucasian.

And she admits that what her parents told her in terms of Vietnamese culture was sometimes limited; for instance, she jokingly questions her father's level of "Vietnamese-ness" because he does not prefer to eat rice daily and would rather have French fries. Claire's social landscape growing up lacked what Kibria describes as a sense of "community embeddedness," or the active practice of educating young 2nd generation diasporic populations through the transmission of ethnic or homeland cultures within and outside the home. As Kibria notes, it is within forms of community embeddedness that ethnic consciousness, pride, and community relationships are developed and nourished.[31]

As Claire acknowledges, without a system of ethnic affirmation at home and lacking a proximity to Vietnamese culture on an everyday level, she was not particularly curious about her Vietnamese background or heritage going into university, going so far as to state that she had "no culture" at that point in her life. As she elaborates:

> I said it more in the fact that I had a very large disconnect between Vietnamese culture and what I was doing and where I was. And what I was aware of too. There's a lot of things about Vietnamese culture, just like traditions, like even how to address my grandparents, other people, even address myself when I talk, I had no idea. No clue. For the longest time until I got to university, I would assume, for whatever reason, I would

[31] Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American*, 46.

> call myself *con* [child], my mom would call my dad *anh* [older male/husband], and my dad would call my mom *em* [younger person/wife]. And that was it. So one time I heard my dad refer himself as *em* and I was so confused, I had no idea what was going on [laughs].[32]

Because of these feelings towards Vietnamese culture and the community, her involvement with the VSC, as she describes it, was more "by chance" than active choice. It was actually her general interest in volunteering and joining student clubs that led her to attend the annual university club day where all student organization have booths to recruit members. As she was walking though the various clubs, she realized there were several clubs focused on ethnic groups and went searching for a Vietnamese club just to check it out, without necessarily intending to join the club; however, she was unable to find the booth and went on through her first year without any involvement in VSC and did not give it much thought. It was actually a random encounter that initially brought her into the club. As she recounts, while moving on campus for her 2nd year, she met the then-president of the VSC after he inquired about her grocery bags that were from a local Vietnamese market. Living in the same dorm, they quickly became friends and it was only through that friendship that she began to attend VSC meetings and gatherings on a regular basis. As she made more friends within the VSC, it was then that she began to have a sense of a local Vietnamese community, albeit one limited to the university campus; with encouragement from the current leadership board, she ran for the president position and won in her 3rd and 4th year with broad goals of nurturing this sense of community and providing an open atmosphere for the VSC's members, illustrating a focus on connections and relationships to

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[32] In the Vietnamese language, pronouns are determined through the relationships between people and depend on aspects such as age, gender, and/or familial relations. In a relationship or marriage, *anh* [husband] and *em* [wife] can be seen as terms of endearment. However, *em* is not always gendered as feminine and can refer to anybody who is younger or of lower rank, such as a younger brother, sister, cousin, friend, etc.

create and maintain a community. Under her leadership, Claire defined the club's core principles as "leadership, culture, and comradery."

These principals were a response to what she saw was missing in Vancouver and the club. Despite being a leader of the VSC and experiencing a feeling of community in this space, her viewpoint of the current local Vietnamese community within the larger Vancouver area does remain somewhat unenthusiastic and distant:

> I guess because I'm not attached to them very personally, because I grew up not knowing the Vietnamese community. So just with my experience now, it's just there, but it's like getting older and the young generation is just apathetic.

This continuing ambivalence towards anything Vietnamese, the local community—"it's just there"—and her reasons for joining the VSC are also reflected in her social media practices. Although an avid user of social media, including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and the internet in general, when I asked her if she felt there were moments where she expressed herself as Vietnamese online, she responded:

> I don't think I have, other than club stuff. I feel my Facebook is very engulfed in a lot Vietnamese things because of [VSC and the United Association of Vietnamese Student Clubs], but when I think of it, I haven't really posted anything about being Vietnamese. Or even Tết celebration. I haven't really thought of it, it hasn't just happened. I guess it's not…I don't know! [Laughs]. It just hasn't come up.

Even beyond representations of Vietnamese culture, in terms of content production, such as everyday status updates and original posts on Facebook, Claire is not particularly productive even though she is on the platform on a daily basis. For her, Facebook acts more as gateway to online entertainment media (e.g. links to YouTube, BuzzFeed, etc.) and for networking to establish and maintain relationships that lead to communication through private messaging services (e.g. Facebook Messenger, email, mobile texting etc.). An overview of her profile indicates more activity from her friends posting content on her wall, and as she stated, anything

close to being Vietnamese is mostly related to club activities, such as promoting the next social event or pictures from past events. If she does create content on Facebook, it is through likes, reactions, and responses to posts on her wall, emphasizing the networking aspect and not necessarily crafting an online persona through Facebook through direct construction of her profile and timeline. On Instagram, where she is much more active in creating content for her profile, her philosophy is posting "nice pictures" that represent the more "adventurous" aspects of her life, such as landscapes, travel, food, and anything photogenic or aesthetically pleasing, but she also does not consider this to be particularly related to being Vietnamese. A surface analysis of her account shows this to be true and reveals more of a "Kinfolk Magazine" aesthetic that is widely popular on Instagram: think bird's eye view shots of carefully positioned "hipster" objects like latte art on backgrounds of rustic wood, clean lines with muted colors, or Pacific-Northwest outdoors scenery—or as Tim Murphy describes, the "Martha Stewart Living of the Portland Set" aesthetic (which is very fitting for Vancouver).[33] As she mentions, the only Instagram post she would consider mildly "Vietnamese" relates to one image of her posing with members of United Association of Vietnamese Student Clubs (UAVSC), a North American collective of Vietnamese cultural clubs (further discussed below), in business attire against a white tiled wall, which on the surface does not exactly code as "Vietnamese."

When I asked how she would define Vietnamese culture or a Vietnamese identity to determine her rubric for considering if she was "Vietnamese" online, she replied with a long and meandering response:

> Family, traditional aspects, family values, I don't know. I'm hesitant to put a big defining factor to that, but I will say for me, Vietnamese culture is like, there's the

[33] Tim Murphy, "Better Homes and Hipsters: Kinfolk Magazine, the Martha Stewart Living of the Portland Set," *New York Times* 23, April 2014. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/27/fashion/kinfolk-magazine-the-martha-stewart-living-of-the-portland-set.html.

> stereotypes and there's the, I don't know, family first, take care of your grandparents kind of thing.
> [...]
> There's like foods and music and dance and all those defining aspects of Vietnamese culture, let's say like the áo dài, and the dances, and the different kinds songs. Like Vietnamese songs sound really sad, at least [small laugh] the ones my parents listen to, which is probably biased because they only listen to the old music anyways.

After a few minutes of shifting topics and pauses, she laughed and concluded:

> Yeah, I'm bad at this [laughs]. I don't know. I guess when I think about it, it's just a big…there's so many elements that bind together what I see as Vietnamese culture. I mean, things that are unique to Vietnam. Or just like traditions or ideas about how they see things. The thing about ideas, and why I'm hesitant to put that in the big category is because ideas can change…
> [...]
> So I don't even know anymore. I don't know, when I think about here, it's hard to define. When I think about it in terms of the US, it seems more tangible, I guess. They do a lot of celebrations on Vietnamese culture, and I'm still trying, as someone who didn't grow up in it, I'm still trying to figure out what that is.

To be clear, my purpose here with Claire's or any of my participants' comments is not to appraise one's cultural barometer as some kind of authority figure to make a judgment of whether someone is being a "good" or "bad" Vietnamese person—the questions asked here are broad and difficult with no "right" answer. Rather, I see these responses and everyday media use as illustrative of how being Vietnamese Canadian plays out in their daily life and provides frameworks that set up their actions and decisions during events (further discussed below). In terms of what is important to Claire, it seems community building through networking and maintaining relationships between Vietnamese people takes precedence over any abstract cultural unity or the processes of defining it. We can see this with Claire's preference of social media engagement through the employment of "likes" and reactions to other club members for reaffirming connections rather than creating posts that actively employ elements of what she deems are part of "Vietnamese culture."

Likewise, when she is more active in creating content, her only "Vietnamese" Instagram post being a club picture again reiterates the importance of showcasing relationships over the use of a more visual representation of "traditional" Vietnamese culture. While there are cultural elements that register as Vietnamese in her everyday life (such as language), she is very uncertain about the exact role they take in the everyday as she struggles to sometimes understand or pin these specifics down as she is less versed in these cultural aspects; this is not to say that culture as she defines it plays no role in her life, but for Claire, what are more important are the relationships themselves that support a feeling of community and comradery through social interaction. Thus, the act of defining cultural aspects of her Vietnamese identity does not necessarily act as a main goal in her personal creation of a community, which is showcased in her responses above and her belief that she is not very Vietnamese online, partially because of the lack of "Vietnamese culture" within her media use and profiles. The reason for this, as she notes above, is that Vietnamese culture is less "tangible" in Vancouver (especially compared to the United States) because she does not see it being expressed in a local context, which is a result of her personal history of being removed from the community and having "no culture."

Rachel: Creating Identity through Vietnamese Culture

In several ways, Rachel, a university student and executive of the VSC who served alongside Claire this past year, shares a similar personal history. Rachel also grew up on the outskirts of the Vancouver area and the Vietnamese community. Her parents, who are Chinese Vietnamese and descendants of the Teochew (Triều Châu) people in Southeast China, came to Canada as boat people in the late 1970s as young teenagers and had no direct relationship to any government in Vietnam before or after the war. Bounded as Teochew people in Vietnam, her

parents' close-knit village planned their escape as a group with the goal to stay together as much as possible; with Canada taking high numbers of groups, especially those with children, Rachel's parents and their immediate families were sponsored by local churches and able to resettle in close proximity to each other in Abbotsford, a mostly rural city adjacent to the Metro Vancouver area and about an hour's drive east of downtown Vancouver. According to Rachel, because they were part of the relatively younger 1.5 generation being in their early teens, her parents adjusted to Canada much better than her other relatives and family friends who came to Canada as young adults. While they did struggle in school initially, her parents' ages allowed them to be able to go through middle and high school in Canada, eventually earning university degrees. This ability to adjust was also aided by the fact that the sponsoring churches supported her family beyond the one year requirement, which allowed her parents to finish schooling and avoid the more common situation for refugees where children and teenagers would leave school to work to help supplement family income.

With this base, Rachel's parents had similar philosophies to Claire's parents, where they stressed education and did not want their four Canadian-born children in English as a Second Language programs. Being 1.5 generation themselves and leaving Vietnam at a young age, Rachel's parents, specifically her father, were much more reluctant to give their kids roots in Vietnam and preferred for them to identify as Canadian. Like Claire, Rachel was only one of the few Vietnamese Canadians at school and faced similar demographics in her classrooms, which was mostly White until her middle school years. There, she began to have more interactions with the large Indo-Canadian population in Abbotsford. Growing up, she had a mostly White Canadian circle of friends, but became more diverse to include Indo-Canadians and people with immigrant backgrounds.

Despite emphasizing the Canadian aspects of her identity, Rachel's mom was often torn on the issue of identifying as solely Canadian and was more likely to encourage her children to explore their Vietnamese heritage (which due to language and their migration history, is more relatable than their Chinese aspects). While physically isolated from the larger Vietnamese populations in Metro Vancouver, the resettlement of a lot of her parents' village in Abbotsford created a much more active community compared to Claire's experiences in Coquitlam. The population was significant enough in Abbotsford that there were annual Tết celebrations and a local Vietnamese/Asian store was eventually opened to meet the demands of the community. Additionally, whereas Claire is an only child, Rachel's three sisters and extended family, along with local family and friends, produced a dynamic that kept Vietnamese culture a regular and discernable, if sometimes familially obligated, feature in her life with events that featured Vietnamese elements like food, music, and language. Compared to Claire, these contexts produced a much greater sense of "community embeddedness" for Rachel, making her a bit more conscious of her Vietnamese Canadian identity.

Still, as Rachel states, these Vietnamese events and spaces were not daily occurrences and required one to actively seek them out (like Tết celebrations). Likewise, since most of these events and spaces were attached to the family, they often did not register as more representative of a larger Vietnamese community or culture. While she never felt ashamed of being Vietnamese Canadian, it was still an ambivalent position that produced questions and struggles over what it means to be Vietnamese and how to define its cultural elements (which were further compounded by her family's Chinese history). Nevertheless, she feels the exposure she received from her family and community was enough to keep her interest in learning more about her identity and cultural roots.

After high school, she moved to the city of Vancouver to live with her sister and attend university, though she regularly goes back home in Abbotsford. For Rachel, her experiences in Vancouver and the university were completely new in terms of demographics; for the first time, she was surrounded by a large population of Asians and Asian Canadians who resembled her and shared similar life experiences, as well as having the opportunity to interact with a larger Vietnamese community. Bright, optimistic, and always friendly, Rachel had an immediate desire to join VSC her first year at university. As she cheerily remembers,

> Right away, I saw the [Vietnamese Student Club] and signed up right away, not even asking them any questions. I was like 'Hey, people like me!' and I signed up. There was like an automatic cultural connection there and it was pretty good.

While Claire seemed more attracted to the social aspect of networking with other Vietnamese people to form a community, Rachel also had a more cultural dimension in the reason why she interacts with other people in the VSC. After her first year, Rachel ran for an executive position and won; as she views it, the main purpose of the club is to "grow and share Vietnamese culture" within the "amazing experience of cultural discovery." As she explains what she enjoys about the VSC,

> I find more people that are willing to be patient with me as I…I guess try to reach deeper roots than…my Vietnamese identity and things like that. But it's also exposing myself to people that are in the same gray zone as me, where they're trying to identify but they're mostly raised in a Western context and all these things.

Thus, in addition to showing more interest in learning about the cultural specificities of being Vietnamese, Rachel also desires a comfortable space where conversations about struggling to find and define oneself as a 2nd generation Vietnamese Canadian can occur without judgment.

This desire both for conversation about and a showcasing of Vietnamese culture also translates to digital spaces. Although she uses the same platforms as Claire, Rachel is much more active in curating an online identity through social media that includes a Vietnamese

dimension. However, as somebody in the "gray zone" of being 2nd generation Vietnamese Canadian, the Vietnamese aspects are not overwhelmingly dominant and are interspersed within posts about selfies with friends, food adventures, artwork, and vacations. Still, being Vietnamese is an important and noticeable element of her profiles. As she elaborates,

> Mostly I use these [social media like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat] as outlets [to show] the more transparent side of my life so I'm not just this label of this person. I don't know, it's just a way to share my story and growth. And I hope it opens up paths with other people to have deeper conversations and stories. So I share a lot about my family, my friends, new people I meet, definitely a lot about my culture and my identity. So things I do in the club [VSC] and how that affects me.
> […]
> I like just talking about…if I do anything remotely cultural, I just like to showcase it. Like 'look at me, I'm being Vietnamese right now!' [Laughs]. So with Tết, it gave me a good outlet for that. It let me showcase our community and talk about that, what we do.

When asked the similar questions of how she would define Vietnamese culture and what it means to be "Vietnamese right now," Rachel was much more willing to give a concrete answer than Claire and listed elements of family values, food, language, holidays, music/singing, outfits, and myths and stories. Linking all of these elements was Rachel's use of the words "traditional" and "roots." For Rachel, understanding the origins and "traditional" uses of these cultural elements is critical to providing a deeper understanding of her "roots." Thus, in addition to uploading pictures and links that represent this wide range of Vietnamese culture, Rachel also spends time writing captions and descriptions that give further information to both showcase and encourage further conversations on Vietnamese culture; for instance, she will often label something as Vietnamese, state its Vietnamese name (e.g. a food dish), and provide a description in English on topics like the object's origin or how it was originally used in Vietnam. While in many ways she is also concerned about networking like Claire, Rachel is more likely to engage with cultural objects as a topic of discussion or commodity to both define and display what she

views as Vietnamese culture and use that as an anchor to initiate social interactions for cultivating a distinct local Vietnamese community, both online and within the VSC.

Organizing in "the worst" Vietnamese Community in North America

Although they had general ideas about Vancouver's Vietnamese population coming into university, it was not until Claire and Rachel started their leadership positions in the club that various nuances emerged that shaped their experiences within the everyday and the event. The most glaring issue for both was the lack of unity and activity with the so-called local community, something they constantly struggle with as these divisions also ripple into their organization. When asked about her general thoughts on the Metro Vancouver Vietnamese community as a club leader, Rachel points to the history of the VSC as illustrative of the current climate of the local community:

> I don't think it's very active. Even being part of my club, it has been so on and off, the [Vietnamese Student Club]. I know it started off really strong and then it started dying out because as students that came here who are Vietnamese didn't know about it or they just don't want to be a part of it, and I don't know where that mentality is coming from. Because for me, right away when I saw it, I expected a tightknit community, I expected a lot more welcoming and activity. And I believe because the demographic is small, but also because we don't have enough people that want to initiate, right?

One reason often proposed for the club's instability is the size of community, both within and outside the university, which makes it difficult to organize and rally support for the club. Already working with a small market on campus—and facing stiff competition from more dominant Asian cultural groups for non-Vietnamese members (e.g. Chinese, Japanese, and the "cool" Korean clubs)—the VSC's reputation as a fairly young club with a history of "on and off" years does not help the club's pitch to new and current members, which can be seen in Rachel's disappointed expectations even as a leader within the organization.

Although specific statistics are unavailable from the university—Vietnamese and Vietnamese Canadians are either clumped together as "Southeast Asians" or "Other"—it is estimated that there are about 600 Vietnamese students on campus, including both Canadian-born and international students.[34] Relative to comparable Vietnamese university clubs in the United States and Eastern Canada, the VSC in 2016 was small, with about 45 students who paid membership dues. However, at any given time, usually only 15 students or less were actually active within the club through attending and helping out with various events, and they would shuffle throughout the year with very little consistency. In other words, while there would be a regular attendance of about 15 students for every event, a large portion of them would be different people from event to event, which made it hard to form a well-defined group.[35] What is most surprising for Rachel is the lack of "spark" within members, especially because she believes having such a small group would encourage or even necessitate a stronger sense of cohesion based on being part of the Vietnamese diaspora, although she is unsure if this lack of initiative is the reason or a byproduct of the small club size.

On a larger level, Claire concurs with this general notion of the local Vietnamese community and its impact on the club—as mentioned above, she views the community, especially its youth, as very apathetic. According to Claire, it is not just the size of the community, but it is also having these numbers in a large and urban space like Metro Vancouver that makes the community feel more scattered and disjointed. Although with a sizable population of roughly 30,000—which is comparable to Montreal's population and would place

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[34] For privacy reasons, I will not cite the specific source but this estimate results from the university's annual enrollment report, along with estimates from participants. Here, international students include Vietnamese diaspora from around the world, including the United States.

[35] For comparison purposes, similar universities along the Western Coast of North America—some with even smaller population numbers than Vancouver—would have 30 to 70 students just to organize their cultural events, with even more members attending events.

in the top six for U.S. cities—there is no central gathering location that many would consider Vietnamese, with the population dispersing from East Vancouver since the late 1980s to neighboring suburban cities due to rising real estate costs, exemplified by Claire's and Rachel's backgrounds. Even the small *Little Saigon* area established in 2014 on Kingsway in East Vancouver was not formed under a strong consensus; as mentioned in Chapter 1, while many of my interviewees recognize its existence, they are indifferent towards it and do not regularly visit the space, especially if they live farther away. Thus, while the statistics point to a sizable population, the realities of this specific urban space create pockets of Vietnamese people that do not often interact with each other.

Already separated by physical distance within the city, there are also sharp cultural gaps that divide community members based on their history of migration. As explored in Chapter 1 and in contrast to the United States, Canada maintained diplomatic ties with Vietnam after the end of the war in 1975 which allowed for continuity for various forms of migration from Vietnam for the past 40 years. In the context of Metro Vancouver, this created a vast diversity within the area's Vietnamese population, such as those who came from the early waves of refugees in the late 1970s, those who identity more as "economic refugees" from the mid-1980s to early 1990s, 1.5 and 2nd generation Vietnamese Canadians, and the influx of more recent 1st generation Vietnamese migrants who come to Vancouver to study, work, and (sometimes) establish long-term residency and citizenship. Adding to this complexity is a regional diversity that includes Vietnamese from all over Vietnam (e.g. North, Central, and South); while the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States and Eastern Canada is dominated by South Vietnamese (at least in terms of discourse and cultural visibility), Vancouver's population is much more

varied due to this extended history of migration, with no group having a significant cultural dominance.[36]

Without a strong 1.5 or 2nd generation base to establish a club at the university and already struggling with low memberships, VSC has always been open to a wide variety of different Vietnamese and Vietnamese Canadian identities, which in 2016 was roughly split between Canadian-born and international students, a significant contrast to similar clubs around North America which currently consist of mostly 2nd generation Vietnamese North Americans with parents who are from Southern Vietnam. In the contexts of most other VSC-like organizations, when discussions about the differences between 1st and 2nd generation Vietnamese diasporas occur, they are mostly focused on young North American-born Vietnamese learning to communicate with their older parents, where age can be positioned as a sensible component that rationalizes differences. In Vancouver, however, this discussion of generational difference *also* includes the cultural gaps that exist among international and Canadian-born students due to this variety of temporal periods of migration *within* the same age group. This absence of age differences as a factor in the VSC seems to further highlight variations between students because these confrontations with difference are experienced through bodies that are almost, but not quite, the same. Thus, although VSC members may be the same age, look the same, and take the same classes, having interactions on and offline will tend to abruptly signify differences and contrasts through a cultural uncanny valley. As Claire notes, this diversity contributes to the difficulty of establishing both a local community and an active club:

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[36] Of course, the openness was not free of all restrictions, as there were limitations on immigrating to Canada. However, having formalized relationship between the governments produced more opportunities for a diversity of immigrants, as opposed to the United States which focused more on reuniting families already in the U.S. after 1975. Likewise as argued in Chapter 1, with many of the more "elite" political refugees settling in the United States and Eastern Canada, this produced stronger infrastructures that attracted more Southern Vietnamese and their families and led to more vocal and organized communities, especially when compared to Vancouver.

> Vancouver is a very international city, we have a lot of international students here from Vietnam, it's just mixed. Like there's not a solid belief in something or any cohesive factor binding everybody.

When I ask if the "mixed" group ever produced problems, Claire points to a recent Phở Night event where 2nd generation and international students "naturally" separated where a line could have been drawn to clearly demarcate between the two groups:

> I don't think there is so much of a clash but a divide. Yeah, like, even in the Phở Night you can see, you know [laughs]. Yeah, it's something we always work and try to integrate people together, but ultimately it's not just being Vietnamese but different experiences.

According to Claire, then, being Vietnamese in Vancouver is not enough to encourage an everyday sense of camaraderie within this "mixed" group, especially when there is little in common ground in experiences beyond an immaterial belief of being Vietnamese, which is itself constantly in flux and changing. Through encounters in various spaces, differences in histories, cultures, and "politics" hinder or even prevent connections and certain actions (politics in a Vietnamese North American diaspora will be further explored in chapter 5).

Linh: BOBAs, or the New Wave of Vietnamese Students

From the other side as an international student, Linh, a current member of the Southeast Asian Cultural Club (SACC) and a former VSC executive that helped resuscitate the group in the early 2010s, agrees that a disconnect exists between members in the VSC. One key point of difference is when she remembers being jokingly called a BOBA (Brought Over By Airplane) by Vietnamese Canadians—although she questions at times how much of it was a joke. An updated version of a FOB (Fresh Off the Boat), BOBAs invoke images of a newly arrived immigrant, but BOBAs also have different class connotations that reflect Vietnam's (and in general Asia's) growing role as an economic force in a globalizing world. In terms of economic numbers,

current Vietnamese BOBAs do not match the wealth and financial capital of immigrants from Hong Kong that came to Vancouver in the late 1980s or the current waves of Mainland Chinese, but they are on parallel trajectories and have various levels of access to what Aihwa Ong calls "flexible citizenship" in an era of transnationalism.[37] While technically the vast majority of Vietnamese "FOBs," "boat people," and refugees from Vietnam came to North America via airplanes, FOBs in Vancouver still carry the image of a desperate refugee on a collapsed boat that is unable to return to their homeland; BOBAs, however, push toward a more global individual that is highly mobile though advanced technologies of transportation, communication, and economics, which is further underscored in this context of an university setting. Whereas the FOB struggles with English and adapting to a new country, the BOBAs in the VSC are fluent in both Vietnamese and English and possess both the cultural and economic capital to communicate, navigate, and travel between multiple continents. BOBAs then become a term that destabilizes relationships between Canadian-born and international students because the cultural hierarchy that existed between FOBs and 2nd generation Vietnamese Canadians no longer exists in such clear cut terms. While FOBs are linked to a sense of backwardness and an unrefined non-citizen when compared to the 2nd generation, Vietnamese BOBAs are simultaneously representations of both the Third World and a new class of cosmopolitan citizens. In some cases, they may be seen as the superior in terms of cultural capital and global mobility.

This aura of cosmopolitanism and global movement can be seen in Linh's personal history. Born in Eastern Europe where her parents were part of government international labour exchange programs during the early 1990s, her family eventually moved back to Vietnam where

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[37] Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

she was raised for most of her childhood.[38] In the late-2000s, her family immigrated to Canada under the skilled worker program in the field of business, which, according to Linh, was advised to her parents as being an "easy" way to leave Vietnam. The family first settled in New Brunswick, a Maritime province in Eastern Canada where Linh completed high school. Although she skirts the line between 1st and 1.5 generation immigrant, Linh identifies closer to a 1st generation immigrant, as being a Vietnamese citizen and having access to improved communication networks have allowed her to revisit Vietnam in multiple manners. This was aided by her local experiences in Canada. Even with a local Vietnamese population of about 200 people in her new hometown in New Brunswick, Linh felt that Vietnamese community was extremely tightknit and very active, allowing her to keep a sense of being Vietnamese. Still, she also felt the Canadian community was very welcoming and integrated well with a diverse circle of friends. After being accepted into a university in Vancouver, her family resettled on the West Coast in the early 2010s.

Now a graduate of the university and a working professional in her early 20s, she remembers conversations with 2nd generation students in the VSC often started and ended on the topic of weather, as she felt Canadians often could not fully understand the nuances of the current daily lives of Vietnamese people in Vietnam since many of them had only limited experiences with the country. However, with a steady diet of diverse media from Canada, Vietnam, and the United States, along with her experiences in Canada, she is mostly able to converse about "Canadian" and "Western" topics. With this clear recognition of difference and being labeled as BOBA, Linh found it difficult to fully connect with most Canadian-born Vietnamese in the VSC because conversations were either too shallow or one-sided. These

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[38] For more information on these labour exchange programs, see *Review of Vietnamese Migration Abroad* (Hanoi: Consular Department-Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Viet Nam, 2012).

differences then felt so fundamental that they were too hard to overcome through casual interactions with people she only saw a few times a year. Recalling Claire's comments, it ultimately came down to different experiences and Linh felt connecting with other international students who could speak to both elements of being Vietnamese and Canadian within the contexts of being a recent 1st generation international student was more a beneficial and fulfilling social interaction.

This cosmopolitanism also means an ability to represent herself online using a much wider range of media and cultural objects. In terms of philosophy, Rachel and Linh are pretty similar in how they view the roles of social media, which is to reflect their identity and start conversations both on and offline. Linh is very active on social media in constructing an online persona and touches upon an extensive assortment of digital objects like food, travel, Vancouver's natural landscapes, and family pictures to build her profiles on Facebook and Instagram. In terms of content, however, Linh's profile does invoke elements of Vietnamese culture more often than Rachel's in several ways. Linh points to "language, values, and the traditions" as central elements of Vietnamese culture, although she admits the abstractness of "values"—such as respect for elders and family values—makes it difficult to communicate online. With language and traditions being the more concrete aspects that are able to be represented online, this means a heavy showcasing of Linh wearing an áo dài, making and eating traditional Vietnamese foods, traveling in Vietnam, and celebrating Tết, along with pictures and videos from her involvement with SACC. Describing her profiles as "very Vietnamese," Linh often frames these images with the Vietnamese language because she maintains several connections with people in Vietnam:

> I feel proud when I am able to speak it to other people who speak Vietnamese. I think I do express that in my social media, I use the language to put captions in my photos. Like

> if something needs to be both in Vietnamese and English, I will put it in there. I'm proud and I show it off. And I feel proud when other people express themselves as Vietnamese.

In addition to illustrating some aspects of "flexible citizenship" in her ability to communicate and travel over networks that span Canada and Vietnam, Linh's comments also show a confidence and pride in her expressions of Vietnamese culture, as well as the cultural elements and experiences she needs with other people to connect beyond just being part of the Vietnamese diaspora.

If the everyday is highly mediated and networked, Linh's expressions online—along with other similar international students—do affect how others view Vietnamese culture, with one result being the continuations of the division seen in offline social events like the Phở Night. Although Rachel does not directly mention Linh—they do follow each other on social networks—when I ask how she feels when she see other people being "Vietnamese" online, she responds:

> I guess I feel less 'Vietnamese-y' [small laugh] when people are fluent in the language and are writing all Vietnamese and, ah, I wished I could go with that and respond quickly. And I'm there reading it, perhaps only getting the gist of it so I don't really know if my response is appropriate or correct. I feel a lot less Vietnamese-y when I see the language on my social media from my friends so I can't interact with it fully.
> […]
> And when they have pictures of it in Vietnam, when they visit family and they talk about their background, like Hanoi or Saigon. And I guess that makes me feel distant because I only been there once and when I did go, it was very limited because I had to do whatever my parents wanted.

While Rachel does consider herself as someone who enthusiastically expresses herself as Vietnamese (Canadian) online, her online interactions (or lack thereof) with people like Linh do make her less confident in her identity as she is unable to fully comprehend Vietnamese or know intimately the country through direct contact. These limitations further increase distance, but also plant seeds of fear and shame of not belonging or being Vietnamese enough through the

possession of certain forms of cultural knowledge, especially in relation to this new wave of international students. While leaders like Rachel and Claire push for a more "inviting" atmosphere, it is often fuzzy on what desires different groups within the club actually want and how these specifics relate to the cultural component of the club, and as we will see below, within the Tết cultural show. As these comments illustrate, the makeup of the VSC and Vancouver's Vietnamese population produces encounters of differences in both on and offline spaces that impact daily experiences, where social circles and (non)interactions are highly shaped based on one's history. While the sites and specifics of these encounters of differences are often random and uneven, they remain a constant in everyday life that helps to hinder a sense of a local and singular Vietnamese community, especially for those within the VSC.

Sarah: Finding Community through Alternative Spaces

While the VSC deals with that particular source of difference, organizations outside of the university system can have different dynamics throughout Metro Vancouver since their membership and reach are not strictly bounded by the university. However, this does not mean that these organizations do not deal with the similar themes, issues, and division that the VSC faces. The Southeast Asian Cultural Club (SACC), an organization that performed at both events, is a local club that according to its website "seeks to encourage young people in particular to become involved in the preservation and promotion of various forms of Southeast Asian culture" within local Southeast Asian Canadian communities and the wider public through dance, music, and art. The club was established in the late 2000s by a Vietnamese Canadian actor, a Vietnamese dance choreographer from Vietnam, and Sarah, a Vietnamese Canadian working professional in her mid-30s. Although they are listed as a Southeast Asian organization

and occasionally perform dances from Thailand and Cambodia, the group consists mostly of Vietnamese members; in terms of performances, it is Vietnamese dances, music, and poetry that takes up the majority of stage time across all of their events. As a non-profit group, the organization is made up of solely volunteers who attend weekly rehearsals at a local community center for most of the year. While the group is supposedly aimed towards the local youth, it has struggled to attract younger volunteers and performers due to its intensive rehearsal commitment and, according to Sarah, the general idea that traditional cultural dances are not exactly appealing to youths. Resultantly, Sarah and Linh are the youngest of the group. The rest of the performers within the mostly female group are all over the age of 45, with many in their late 50s and early 60s.

Self-described as independent and assertive, it would seem as one of the founding member of SACC that Sarah would have an engaged history with the local Vietnamese community. However, when I ask about her views on the local community, she states she avoided the Vietnamese community in her past and continues to mostly do so; as she elaborates, she finds the community "sexist," "disrespectful," "unsupportive," "selfish," and "unsafe," especially in East Vancouver near Chinatown and Little Saigon. Born in Vietnam, Sarah, now in her mid-30s, immigrated to Canada with her family as a pre-teen in the early 1990s, just at the end of the wave of "economic refugees." Like many refugees during this period with her family having no association with any government during the war, she views the move as more of a way to escape economic hardships rather than political oppression. As a pre-teen and a 1.5 generation immigrant, she did struggle with her first years in Vancouver where she often was "craving for a Vietnamese friend," but it was difficult as the school she attended was mostly Indo-Canadians. Up to high school, she describes herself as belonging to the "outcasts" where

she faced a lot of peer pressure and bullying as she fell into the FOB category discussed above. It was also during this time that Vietnamese gangs and drug rings were also gaining increased visibility in the mainstream, which brought upon the "nammer" lifestyle and its violent masculinity; because of this, she remembers her childhood as being "sheltered" because her parents were weary of the Vietnamese community beyond their house, which instilled a strong belief within her of the community being unsafe, especially for women. Even today, she states that she rarely visits any Vietnamese spaces—which she defines as Little Saigon or Vietnamese restaurants/grocery stores—and only goes if she is forced by friends or family. When her family did have contact with other Vietnamese Vancouverites, those relationships also soured Sarah's opinion of the local community. In the early 2000s, her older sister and mother joined a precursor to SACC, but the group disbanded due to conflicts over the handling of money and overall control of the group. For Sarah, this represented a "me, me, me first" mentality that led to the mistreatment of her sister and mother and split her mother's local Vietnamese social group into competing factions built on gossip.

While her local Vietnamese community in Vancouver was in disarray, her views on the country of Vietnam were also skewing towards the negative. Growing up, her parents, specifically her mother, would tell her stories about their lives in Vietnam and as Sarah elaborates,

> when I hear about my mom talk about her time in Vietnam, it was hardships and not a lot of things. So I don't see the point of getting to know my culture when it is all negative, even now too.

Showing more anger towards the entire situation rather than any specific government, nation, or political system, Sarah's mother painted a bleak and bitter picture of Vietnam as a country that dissuaded Sarah from really investing any interest as a teenager and adult. Presently, this

negativity is also compounded by her daily media uses. As a self-described private person, Sarah prefers face-to-face communication and is not active on any major social media platform due to the fact that she does not like to "share every little thing that I do." Media use, then, is mostly limited to basic internet browsing and emails, with most of that activity work-related—though an occasional "stupid cat video" is not out of the question on YouTube. To keep in touch with friends and family, she uses text-based services like mobile text or WhatsApp, but as she makes clear, these services are mostly for arranging in-person meetings for both her personal and SACC activities, which she highly prefers over online communication. Television, however, does play a role in her everyday media consumption. In her limited free time, she views television as background noise as she cooks or eats, watching programs such as *Jeopardy* or entertainment/fashion news on *E! Network*. As she currently lives with her parents, she also spends time daily with them after work watching satellite television, where they have a subscription to an international channel that features news programs from Vietnam. As she recounts her daily experiences, she is very dismissive of these programs, stating that they are "stupid news, [and] not worth [her] time." What she sees in these programs are either a focus on negative things, such as death, accidents, infrastructure failures, and human suffering, or "minute items not worthy of news," such as frivolous stories on random animals or pop culture. Seeing no value of Vietnamese culture anywhere—including both Canada and Vietnam itself—Sarah harshly concludes that "it's not that I don't want to embrace my culture, it's just that I don't see what it has that I can truly embrace at all." Although she admits to having an identity struggle early on, she has definitely embraced the "Western" culture within her everyday life.

It is easy to understand why someone like Linh would join SACC. In addition to reminding her of the positive community experiences she had in New Brunswick and Vietnam,

the club also allows her to maintain and even learn more about her Vietnamese heritage and culture. Although the club does not have any young 1st generation immigrants, Linh is still able to relate to the older group members who do have roots and connections to Vietnam (even if only through memory and the imaginary). By being in the club, Linh shows a strong commitment to maintaining aspects of Vietnamese culture that she mentioned above. In many ways, her online and offline activities feed off of each other to fill in gaps, where SACC provide opportunities for her to create media content that she can proudly circulate online to reaffirm her Vietnamese identity, as well as a sense of being able to participate in an offline physical Vietnamese community and culture that she sees represented in digital posts from friends who live in Vietnam.

Sarah, on the other hand, is a bit more complicated, if not confusing on the surface because of her ambivalence and even contradictory positions. While she remarks she is very proud to wear an áo dài (traditional Vietnamese dress) and perform on a stage as a representative of Vietnamese culture at public events, she also reaffirms not wanting to be associated with the community:

> I think I'm ashamed of my culture too, when I go to a Vietnamese restaurant and I don't speak Vietnamese, I speak English. Although I can communicate with them in Vietnamese, I prefer not to. I just don't want to let them know I am Vietnamese and I don't know why. Which is kind of odd. I don't know if I am ashamed, I don't want to be associated with…I don't know.

As she admits, her position as both a founder of SACC and someone who consistently disavows her Vietnamese identity and culture in its entirety is an odd one, something she cannot fully express in clear terms. As she explains, it was her overall love of dancing that got her involved with SACC. She was initially interested in the group that preceded SACC after seeing her sister and mother dance, but the group disbanded before she decided to join. As her love of dance

grew, she fulfilled her passion by reaching out to other various forms of dance. When a few former group members—the "good ones" as Sarah notes—expressed interest in rebuilding the group, they reached out to Sarah's sister. However, after the experiences with the previous group, Sarah's sister declined, but did indicate that Sarah might be interested. Although Sarah's opinion of the Vietnamese community was still one of suspicion and distrust, she also realized that while she could access other types of dance around the city, SACC would be the only local group that offered a space for her to learn about the dances from Southeast Asia, which she found interesting because it was so "different" in terms of movement and style. Agreeing to join only if the group members acted as equals, Sarah became one of the founding members.

Over time, however, she began to bond with the other women in the club because she saw them as focused and committed individuals:

> [The] majority of our dancers cannot dance but they are dedicated to learning and now they dance well but it is months of continuous learning. The same concept apply to everything in life. We have to commit and practise often to do better.

She is clear to further note that this bond to a community of committed women is what continues to keep her engaged with the group, more so than any desire to be educated about Vietnamese culture specifically because she could find other avenues to practice dance. In a parallel manner to Claire, what is important for Sarah are physical relationships where people, specifically women, invest in a connection rather than a discussion over the specific representations of culture. As someone who claims she does not express herself as Vietnamese on a daily basis in any realm, Sarah makes a clear distinction between when she is performing with cultural objects and the normal, everyday "Western" lifestyle in which she exists within the majority of her life. In doing so, she labels the dances and use of the áo dài as "different" and abnormal, something

that she does not necessarily feel needs to be circulated, which is reflected in her non-use of social media. However, while she is much more willing to defer the cultural aspects to other people within the organization or just brush it off as something she is uninterested in, she is much more willing to discuss the importance of the group's work ethic and teamwork, and the roles they play in creating an organization and community of women that creates a sense of belonging for Sarah. In terms of everyday media, she is more likely to use digital networks to organize and setup meetings for her organization rather than circulate or present public representations of Vietnamese culture. As she states, there is a strong gendered aspect of this community within SACC that is crucially different from everyday Vietnamese culture:

> I don't want to work with the Vietnamese community. I don't want to work with Asians. I don't like their way of thinking that women are not equal, women are subordinate. And even in my church [during the 1990s] I felt the difference in gender too. And that's why I didn't want to be involved with the Vietnamese, Asian community. Well, I know I'm involved in the Vietnamese community now, but it is mostly women. And we have the same goal. But if there was inequality in the group, I would leave because I don't believe in that.

In many ways, SACC becomes an alternative site of being Vietnamese for Sarah, something that she feels does not exist in her everyday life; this emphasis on values of commitment, goals, and mutual respect within relationships is what she sees is missing from Vietnamese culture in general—which she defined above as "sexist," "selfish" and "unsupportive"—and she finds these values located within SACC. In a similar vein to Claire's construction of community, Sarah's everyday media and comments suggests she is less interested in the cultural aspects of the club, and is more attracted to the feeling and structure of community. It is her desire for personal contacts and face-to-face interactions that provide the main reasons for her continued involvement with SACC, and the group does this well enough that she is willing to commit to aspects of Vietnamese culture she does not particularly care about. Thus, while dance may have

initiated contact, it is the process of establishing a community that keeps her going within the group.

Phuc: The Fireball from Surrey

To further contextualize Sarah's comments, her negative feelings towards the larger Vietnamese community in Metro Vancouver are not necessarily unique. While stated in different manners, Claire and Rachel express similar sentiments and these negative feelings are also what encouraged Phuc to establish the Surrey-based Vietnamese Culture Club (VCC) in 2006. As explored more in detail in Chapter 1, Phuc's history is similar to Rachel's parents, in that Phuc is Chinese Vietnamese and came to Vancouver as a young teenager in the late 1970s. Sponsored by a group of private individuals, she was also supported beyond the 1-year limit, allowing her to complete her secondary education and obtain multiple degrees at the university level. Now in her mid-50s, Phuc is a working professional and often conducts business operations with various ministries within the provincial government of British Columbia. Self-described as "aggressive" and a "fireball," Phuc is a fast talker and outspoken individual. Comparing the local community to those in the United States and Canada, Phuc believes Vancouver is "the worst" Vietnamese community in North America due to its reputation of being involved with crime, gangs, and drugs, as well as an overdependence on the welfare state. Like Sarah, Phuc as a young adult was also personally involved with a "non-profit" organization with "financial discrepancies" that left a sour taste in how she saw the local community. After volunteering to do some bookkeeping work for the organization, Phuc accidently discovered the group also operated as a money laundering site for the expanding marijuana grow-op network within the Vancouver Vietnamese community.

As the fallout occurred with that group and Phuc moved up the ranks within her workplace, she felt the "un-united" community needed to provide a support system aimed towards the younger generation to address what she saw were issues that were present in many refugee families, including having no role models due to parents working multiple jobs or the lack of initiative seen in many when they turned to crime or welfare for a quick payday. Rather than avoiding the community, Phuc, with the help of friends and "a lot of food," recruited a small group of Vietnamese and Vietnamese Canadian high schoolers with the vision of creating a program that would encourage her "kids" to stay away from crime by providing leadership, volunteering, and cultural learning opportunities. With an overarching goal of "retaining and promoting Vietnamese culture" through the involvement of its members with various types of community activities and events, the VCC started more as an informal weekly gathering space for Vietnamese youth, and over time evolved into a more structured program that addressed specific goals. As she explains:

> That's a group we need…to make it [the community] stronger, you know, to promote our community. Later on, I started to spend more time with you guys, you know the kids of your age [teenagers] at this time, so I started thinking okay, let's do New Year's, let's run all these programs, English classes, Vietnamese classes, right. And then we started to promote ourselves. And we started pageant shows, talent shows, just so we can start to collect people right? Everyone one of you guys have a talent.

Seeing talent (or at least the possibility of it) in every individual, Phuc wanted to harness this talent into what she felt were productive activities that provided youth empowerment and lessons about discipline, respect, and teamwork. While learning about Vietnamese culture was a central point, Phuc also allowed her members to incorporate their own interests as long as she felt it could help them in the future; for instance, some members became interesting in coding and Phuc encouraged them to help design and maintain the group's website. As mentioned above, the VCC's goals also began to include showcasing their skills to a broader audience. Thus, there

was then a growing focus within the club on the more performative aspects of Vietnamese culture that revolved around fashion, dance, and talent shows with the intent to promote the "beauty" of Vietnamese culture on a public scale that Phuc felt was often missing in dominant discourses about the Vietnamese community in the Metro Vancouver area. As Phuc elaborates, it is through these activities and events that the VCC hopes to make "positive changes" to the community, as well as build "collaborations with other ethno-cultural organizations, broad based community, and government agencies" for future opportunities on both an organizational and individual level. As the group grew in popularity among the local youth, it began to accept non-Vietnamese members to fulfill a larger "multicultural" goal of educating others about Vietnamese culture.

As she admits, Phuc is not particularly media savvy, but her constant interaction with youth has often forced her to adapt. With its growing popularity among her members, Phuc began using Facebook in the late 2000s mainly to communicate with the VCC's members as she found they were more likely to read and respond to messages via Facebook, especially when compared to email, which is Phuc's preferred method of communication. Over time and with the help of her youths, Phuc began to use Facebook in a more personal and complex manner and is still learning the various functions as she goes. While she does not post as often as the younger participants in this chapter, her posts initially included a heavy focus on promoting and documenting the VCC's activities. However, as she has increased her understanding of Facebook and employed it for more personal uses, she has also interspersed posts with videos about Vietnamese culture, such as other group performances that may inspire the VCC, food recipes, and new stories about Vietnamese and Vietnamese Canadians. Another key element, second only to her focus on the VCC, are posts about her family, which include photos of family

vacations, weddings, grandchildren, and most noticeably, updates on her sons' educational accomplishments. Parallel to the VCC's history, Phuc over the last few years increasingly views Facebook as a way to communicate with the "Western world" to showcase the positives of both her personal life and larger Vietnamese culture, and sees this goal as a major aspect that guides her social media use.

Although these complex details of individuals and organizations illustrate a broad spectrum of histories, ideologies, and media uses of everyday life, the event is a space that forces their coexistence that help to determine the underlying decisions and frameworks that shape these events and the occurrences within them. For the remainder of this chapter, I will explore how these elements of everyday life take form during the event and their roles in representing the possibilities of being Vietnamese in Vancouver.

Staging Diasporic Events

Hosted at their university in early February, the *2016 Tết Cultural Show* was the first ever cultural program carried out by the VSC and their 5-person executive board, which consisted of both Canadian-born and 1st generation international Vietnamese students. Aimed more towards the university's student population, the weekend evening event took place in a relatively small theatre space, roughly 1,800 square feet with a maximum capacity of about 100 guests. Although listed as a theatre, the space is basically a flat and open oval room with a ceiling-mounted projector in the center of the room and a projection screen on one end, which is bracketed with doors on the side that lead to a small backstage area behind the screen. Since there is no elevated or clearly defined stage or seating area, the organizers informally measured about 15 feet from the screen and manually set up 90 chairs in rows, with an aisle down the

middle. Hand-made decorations were placed on the walls on both sides of the screen, which included large cutouts of hoa mai (yellow apricot flowers) and ancient Vietnamese coins (red circles with square holes), as well as balloons, streamers, and ribbons. To the left of the stage was a clear mobile lectern and a chair that casually held the laptop that was connected to the projector and supplied the music and media for the presentations and performances; at the beginning of the event, a slide show of Vietnamese flowers and natural scenery played in the background. Across the stage and on the other end of the room was a makeshift buffet featuring a mishmash of borrowed slow-cookers filled with bò kho (Vietnamese beef stew), bread, xôi (sticky rice), bánh giò (Vietnamese pyramid rice dumplings), chè thái (mixed fruits in coconut milk), and an assortment of teas and drinks. It was a sold-out show, with tickets priced at $7 CAD and capped at 75 tickets, with the remaining seats for performers.

Opening the show was Rachel, who in English acknowledged the show's major supporters and performers, outlined the program, and summed up the goal of the program: "We hope that by the end of this event you will have learned lots about the Vietnamese Lunar New Year and had a taste of Vietnam!" She then gave a brief history and explanation of the Tết holiday in English, and between each point began alternating with Thuy, another VSC executive, who translated the explanations into Vietnamese. The introduction emphasized the importance of respecting ancestors and spending the New Year with "beloved family members," as well as elaborating on the decorations by explaining that red and yellow will bring good fortune, how the yellow flowers seen on the wall are commonly seen in Southern Vietnam while peach blossoms seen in the slide show are more common in Northern Vietnam, and the central activity of eating during Tết by previewing the food that would be served during intermission.

The program was then passed over to Claire, who introduced two Vietnamese North American organizations—both based in the United States—focused on developing "leadership skills" among Vietnamese American and Canadian youths across North America. The first organization was the Vietnamese Cultural Society, a Texas-based organization that recently established a local branch and was bringing its Youth Development Leadership Camp to Vancouver for the first time (this will be further explored in Chapter 5). The second organization was the United Association of Vietnamese Student Clubs (UAVSC), a collective that connects and networks university Vietnamese Student Clubs across the United States and, within the last few years, Canada, with Western Canada being the newest established region (and Claire serving as the region's representative). Both organizations provided 5-minute promotional videos featuring themes of empowerment, youthful activity, team building exercises, and inspirational imagery of leadership through motivational speeches and chants, all framed under energetic Western pop music and rapid editing. Developed under the more established communities within the United States, both groups promote the visibility of economic success and "professionalization" within the Vietnamese diaspora in order to position its members as role models; for example, UAVSC stresses members wearing business attire in its promotional material. As the videos concluded, Claire noted that with these "inspiring experiences" and leadership skills came life-long friendships and community.

Already behind schedule, Rachel resumed the head emcee position and introduced the first act, a magic act from the university's Magician's Club. After a 10-minute set, Rachel introduced the first *cultural* act, a "Vietnamese fan dance" performed by the VCC. With a racially diverse group—which included Vietnamese, Latin American, and White Canadians—and combining both "traditional and modern movements," the dance featured 7 high school-aged

female dancers in white áo dài with fluorescent pink hand fans, accompanied by "Con Bướm Xuân" ("Spring Butterfly"), a 2013 techno-infused "V-pop" (Vietnamese Pop Music) love song by Vietnamese artist Hồ Quang Hiếu. The dance concluded with a break dance number by a high school-aged male in a blue áo dài, though due to the lack of division between the stage and audience, the number also included him accidently spinning into the first row of chairs where he eventually recovered to end the performance.

Next was SACC performing their áo tứ thân (traditional four panel Vietnamese dress) dance with nón quai thao (traditional Northern flat palm hat). As Rachel explained in introducing the group:

> The movements here are borrowed from folk dances seen at festivals in the Red River basin of Northern Vietnam. The 4-part dress and the accompanying traditional hat made of palm leaves were typically worn by Northern Vietnamese women. Originally from peasantry, these garments are nowadays made more colourful and worn at ceremonies and celebratory events.

The dance was accompanied by a recording of the song "Em Đi Xem Hội Trăng Rằm" ("On the Way to the Full-Moon Festival") by Như Quỳnh, a prominent figure and icon in the Vietnamese diasporic music scene. The song is from *Paris by Night (PBN)*, an extremely popular variety show that has been produced by the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States since 1983. Although relatively contemporary and considered "non-traditional" by the dancers, the song features traditional Vietnamese instruments (albeit with a modern arrangement with a synth and drum backing).[39] The dance consisted of five female members of SACC, including Linh and Sarah.

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[39] For more an overview of both *Paris by Night* and Như Quỳnh's career within the Vietnamese diasporic music industry, see Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese,* 79-103.

After SACC completed their dance, the show took an intermission break and had the audience make their way to the buffet located in the back. After about 45 minutes of serving food, eating, and intermingling—which was initially allotted 30 minutes—the show resumed with another magic act. VCC took the stage again with the same dancers, although with a costume change. The dancers were now wearing more Western-inspired skater dresses (a short dress with a fitted waist and a flared skirt) and performed a "Vietnamese Cha Cha" dance to "Ai Sẽ Là Em" ("Who will you be?"), a 1990s *PBN* song by Vietnamese American popstar Nguyễn Hưng, which contains upbeat tempos and Latin American/Miami Sound Machine influences.[40] The next two performances were singing acts with live instrumentation by current members and alumni of the Vietnamese Student Club, all who are international Vietnamese students. The first song was an acoustic cover of "Nhớ về Hà Nội" ("Memories of Hanoi") by Vietnamese songwriter Hoàng Hiệp, and sung by a Hanoi native. Originally recorded in the late 1980s, "Nhớ về Hà Nội" was the official song of the Hanoi TV channel and is still an unofficial nostalgic love letter to the city and its residents. The next song was a cover of "Chiều Nay Không Có Mưa Bay" ("Tonight There Will be No Rain"), a contemporary (and catchy) ballad by 2010 Vietnam Idol winner Trung Quân and quite popular among the international Vietnamese students.

The final section of the program began with another magic set by the Magician's Club. The program then transitioned to the áo dài fashion show. The fashion show consisted of two portions. The first portion was organized by the Vietnamese Student Club and featured seven female university students, one who is Chinese Canadian with the rest Vietnamese or Vietnamese Canadian. They were wearing áo dài from the three different regions of Vietnam:

[40] For a more detailed look at the influence of Latin American music in Vietnamese music, see Adelaida Reyes, *Songs of the Caged, Songs of the Free* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999): 141

Northern, Central, and Southern. As each model simply walked across the stage, Rachel would read a short script that briefly explored the history of each region's áo dài, starting from the North to the South:

> This áo dài on display here is specific to the Northern Vietnamese city of Ha Noi. Black silky pants are commonly paired with a white form-fitting silk tunic over top. The open neckline signifies a more modern take on the áo dài.
>
> The áo dài Hue is the traditional dress of Vietnam. Most Hue women have at least one "áo dài" of violet colour, a specific characteristic for this ancient capital. The áo dài Hue on display is decorated in the fashion of past royalty in Vietnam, influenced by Chinese fashion and style.
>
> As the áo dài moved into the South, the style began to shift and change. You can now see modern styles without the traditional neck collar, they may have a shorter hem (like the one on display) or designed to become more comfortable. This red and gold colour scheme is typical attire for Vietnamese weddings, tea ceremonies and Tet celebrations.

The second portion was planned by VCC. In lieu of having a narrator like the first portion, this fashion show was set to the 2015 *PBN 114* song "Tôi Là Người Việt Nam" ("I am Vietnamese") by Vietnamese American artist Ánh Minh. While the title is in Vietnamese, the ballad is mostly in English and about Minh, who grew up in the United States, (re)discovering her roots as she travels back to the "beauty" of her homeland. Again using a racially diverse group and also including males, this portion was more modeled after a traditional fashion show and had more performative aspects, such as models in áo dài pausing for poses, hair flips, spinning for dramatic effects, and using various props like flowers, fans, and umbrellas. For the last performance of the night—and an hour over the planned time limit—SACC returned to the stage for a "traditional Vietnamese Bamboo dance," an interactive portion of the show, the Bamboo dance had SACC members hold bamboo sticks on the floor and tap them together on a beat, with audience participants jumping over and between the sticks. The show concluded with the VSC executive board shouting "Chúc Mừng Năm Mới" ("Happy New Year") and pictures being taken in front of the decorations and with the performers.

Six months later, the Vietnamese Culture Festival took place in East Vancouver during the summer of 2016. In its second year as an annual event, the festival was organized by various leaders of the metro-Vancouver Vietnamese community, including Linh and Sarah of SACC, Phuc of VCC, and about 15 other community leaders. Funded mainly through a federal government grant for multicultural events, the festival also received various forms of support from local Vietnamese restaurants, religious organizations, businesses, and individuals from local school districts and community organizations. An outside weekend event from 12pm to 5pm, the festival took place on a roughly 300 foot stretch of city street off of Broadway, a major east-west thoroughfare. Free and open to the public, the festival was a relatively well-attended event, with constant foot-traffic and attendees throughout the five-hour event. More spread out compared to the VSC event, the festival contained several concurrent components.

At one end of the street was a large stage, which featured performances from SACC, VCC, and other volunteer performers; a neighboring community center served as a space for performers to change and prepare. About 100 chairs were set up in front of the stage, while nearby grassy areas, sidewalks, and curbs also provided informal seating once most of the chairs were occupied. From 1pm to 4pm, various emcees introduced the performers and gave brief descriptions about their performances in both Vietnamese and English, which were supplied by the performers. In addition to performing the same dances and acts described above in VSC *Tết Cultural Show*, VCC added a traditional wedding procession, which had one line of male performers in áo dài, representing the Groom's family and friends, carry gifts within lacquer boxes covered in red cloth. The gifts were then exchanged with a line of female performers, with the revelation of the bride and groom in extremely exquisite (and expensive) wedding-specific áo dài acting as the concluding sequence. SACC's additional performances included a

"hat dance" with nón lá (traditional conical shaped hat) and some members singing various Vietnamese folk songs, such as "Người ơi, Người ở đừng về"/ "My Beloved, Don't Go Home [Don't Leave Me]," accompanied by an accordion and flute. Other acts by members of the Vietnamese community included additional singers, a young gymnast, and a saxophone cover of George Michael's "Careless Whisper." In between acts, the emcees engaged the crowd with banter (in both English and Vietnamese), raffle drawings, prize giveaways (e.g. bags of rice, gift certificates to a local fried chicken fast food chain, etc. that had been donated), and trivia questions about Vietnam, ranging from "What is an áo dài?" to "What agricultural product has Vietnam been the world's largest exporter for the past decade?" (Answer: cashews). The final act of the program featured a self-described "Vietnamese Kung Fu Monk." Although originally allocated 10 minutes with a promise to Phuc that he would just do "basic kung fu moves," the act extended to almost 25 minutes and included using swords to cut vegetables on his chest, swinging buckets of nails from his eyelids, hammering nails into boards with his forehead, and having an audience member attempt to drill into his stomach using a power drill (with the emcee forced to hold the microphone to the drill to prove it was actually working). Fortunately, he survived without any injury and the staged portion of the event concluded with a general thank you to the audience and the Festival's sponsors.

During the programing on the stage, event attendees could would walk along the rest of the street, which was lined with 17 small tents serving as booths for activities, food, and organizations. Five booths sold food, ranging from spring rolls to Vietnamese desserts, while four were focused on selling crafts and clothes, including jewelry and áo dài from local businesses. One booth was specifically dedicated to exploring ancient Vietnamese culture, which featured photographs of the ruins of the imperial city of Huế (central Vietnam) and Đông

Sơn drums from the 1st millennium and had a Vietnamese community member serving as a guide. There was also a kid's games area, with activities such as face painting, balloon animals, and carnival-style games. Next to the children's activities was a tent sponsored by a local company that imports children's books from Vietnam; in addition to holding "storytime" in Vietnamese, the tent also sold Vietnamese-language books, including fables, historical tales, and biographies of famous historical figures from Vietnam, as well as Western fairy tales that have been translated into Vietnamese. There was also a tent run by the Vancouver Public library, which was promoting both children's books and the VPL's various classes, such as English and computer literacy classes, as well as other various local non-profits advertising social programs aimed towards Vietnamese and Asian groups, including English language classes, housing programs, and family and youth services. Lastly, the Vancouver Police Department also had a booth, handing out stickers to children and recruiting potential enrollees for British Columbia's police academy.

Locating Vietnamese Culture Elsewhere: Cultures of Hybridity, Vagueness, "or Whatever"

It is interesting to note that while both of these events took months to plan and were positioned as "cultural events" meant to educate both the local Vietnamese community and a larger audience, there were not many discussions during event planning meetings that were focused specifically on determining what Vietnamese culture *is* and how to present it. There are multiple levels and reasons of why this occurred, which include just basic everyday limitations, the specific contexts of these organizing groups, and the beliefs and goals of individual leaders. Due to their beliefs about the inactive and fragmented nature of the Vietnamese community, most of the meetings were more about recruiting people to both assist and attend the events, as the

leaders were more concerned with the logistics and ability to produce a show that had to last 2 to 3 hours or fill 17 booths, rather than the specific content. As a result, both events, while successful in many ways, were not exactly organized in the most efficient manner, with many details being left to the last minute. This contributed to the sometimes random, uncontrollable, and questionable elements within these events, ranging from performers crashing into chairs to the fear that a Vietnamese monk would be killed on stage (which would create another negative representation for a community already struggling to present itself in positive ways).

For the majority of Vietnamese cultural events organized by university clubs across North America, they usually have members perform the core of the program, which can involve dances, skits, and musical performances. At comparable schools along the West Coast, VSC-like groups would have 30 to 100 members participate in a show with months of rehearsal and budgets ranging from $5,000 USD ($6,000 CAD) up to $30,000 USD ($36,000 CAD). In Vancouver, however, the production team of the VSC show was mostly their 5-member board (and myself in a limited capacity) with a budget of $700 CAD ($560 USD); the only time remotely close to a rehearsal was when the board looked at the staging area at a previous meeting and the few hours before the actual show.

Without a substantial source of labor and support from their members, they were forced to outsource much of the "culture" to outside sources and groups. Adding to the difficulties of organizing the *2016 Tết Cultural Show* was that this was the first time the VCC had ever put on a show of this magnitude. However, this was not Claire's first time processing what a celebration of Vietnamese culture could be; as stated above, when asked about the local Vietnamese culture, she says it is hard to define because it is less "tangible" in Vancouver, pointing to the United States and Eastern Canada as sites where this is easier to grasp. This belief translated to the

event when in preparation for it, Claire advised her executive team to "creep" on Facebook to look at Tết shows around North America, specifically VSCs in Eastern Canada. Through her mediated experiences with UAVSC, the larger network of North American VSCs, Claire was obviously aware that cultural shows had been produced by other VSC-like clubs around North America. As such, her order to "creep" specifically VSCs in Eastern Canada illustrates that although she is open to specific details, Claire does want a similar system to already existing structures seen elsewhere. It then was Rachel that found the picture from an Eastern Canadian university group that inspired the hand-made flower and coin decorations that surrounded the stage.

Perhaps what encouraged Claire to look towards the East was her own experiences with local cultural shows in Vancouver, which mostly derived from her memories of attending events as a child. While Claire wanted a show with a variety that would attract and entertain a wide range of audiences, specifically younger people her age—she felt the cultural shows she attended as a child were "traditional for the older groups and to a lot of the younger people that may feel dry"—Claire did insist that the show be at least "60% cultural" to at least qualify the title of the *Tết Cultural Show*, which was purposely left short initially by Claire to "be vague." However, the details of the "60% cultural" were never really addressed because as the date of the event was fast approaching, there was a growing fear that the show would not last the planned two-hour program time because Claire and the VSC were unsure of who to contact due to their limited local network. As detailed above, Claire and Rachel grew up isolated from the local community while the other executives were international students who had only been in Vancouver for a few years, with nobody really interacting with the local community outside of the university on an everyday basis. A few weeks out from their event, SACC was the only cultural act they had

been able to secure and that was only because Linh had been a former VSC member and executive. When I ask Claire about her thoughts on the process of picking performers, she remarks through laughter and sighs:

> Honestly we went with anybody who was able to perform. There's not that much knowledge of who could perform and there were actually a few people who were able to make it. Otherwise, I wasn't going to be too picky [laughs] about performers, I was just hoping to have performers who were going to be okay.

With only a few weeks remaining, the stress of not having enough material to produce a show eventually caused the VSC to expand on random "non-Vietnamese" performances they were able to secure—hence the three acts of magic—in order to compensate for their lack of cultural elements.

It was only through a literal "friend of a friend of a friend" connection that a week before the show, the VSC got into contact with Phuc's VCC, which Claire had never heard of before this connection. With no time to discuss any details, Claire was just happy to have a performance group that could help fulfill the requirements of time and the vaguely defined element of culture. In looking at this loose process of selecting "culture" for a cultural show, this highlights two key themes for Claire and the VSC. First, as reflected through her everyday media practices, Claire is not particularly interested in concretely defining Vietnamese culture; in her acceptance of performances, there is no real consideration of the details or the potential aspects of what and how culture will be represented on stage. For her, the focus is on producing an event that will bring people together and create feelings and networks on which community can be established—culture are just the small details that will fall into place. Second, is the theme of looking outside of one's group and Vancouver for inspiration due to the perception of Vancouver's fragmented local community. On one hand, Claire does not really care about the specific content of the performers, but on the other hand, she is also forced to select anyone that

applies due to her club size and the scarcity of local performances related to Vietnamese culture. In other words, she is often forced to look elsewhere for Vietnamese culture beyond her own group. As this process illustrates, Claire's decisions are guided in various ways by her everyday media habits, her perceptions of diasporic communities, and the local contexts.

In a similar manner, while the VCC localizes Vietnamese culture through performances, Phuc is very open in stating that the VCC also looks outside of their group and Vancouver to determine and manage their own definitions of Vietnamese culture. Recalling Claire's comment that Vietnamese culture is less "tangible" in Vancouver, Phuc feels "here in Surrey you can't find any information [on Vietnamese culture] that you wanted because there is nothing there," and as explored above, the idea of "Vietnamese" in this area is tainted with a negative reputation. When I ask her about her process of obtaining information for her club, she explains:

> There's so much in our culture, we never learn, you can only read it. But when you read it on the website, right, you kind of have to really choose which one is real and which one is not.
> *How do you choose?*
> Oh, I know when I read them. I read enough books, I've read every Vietnamese book in the library. In Vancouver, in Surrey, every Vietnamese book they have I've read it all…So you kind of know.

In several ways, Phuc is very casual with her formations of Vietnamese culture that she presents through VCC at both VSC's event and the Cultural Festival, though she is very clear during the more hybrid performances that these acts are a mix of "traditional and modern" elements. However, at some other points, she is a bit looser in being transparent. During the Vietnamese Cultural Festival, she was asked by Sarah to provide a summary for the emcee that explained the meaning of a Vietnamese song she used during an act. Although she is fluent in Vietnamese, Phuc struggled translating the intricacies of the song's lyrics into English in a manner that would make sense and later admitted to me that she made up something minutes before the

performance, which is reflective of both Phuc's informal approach and the fact that the show was only roughly finalized a day before the Festival event.

While she states she is well-read on the topic of Vietnamese culture (I believe with a bit of hyperbole), Phuc is also fine with admitting that she "does not know Vietnamese culture as well as [she] should" because of her hybrid position as a Chinese-Vietnamese refugee raised in Canada. But within this recognition of hybridity, as well as her work with 2nd generation Vietnamese Canadians, Phuc feels confident in allowing for a remix of the definition of Vietnamese culture. She defends this by arguing through her research of Vietnamese culture (along with her global travels), she finds no definitive definition of Vietnamese culture:

> Like the Vietnamese in Vietnam are different right? The Vietnamese in Hong Kong will do something different, the Vietnamese in Shanghai will do something different. The Vietnamese in Hawaii is totally different.

At one point when researching aspects of Vietnamese weddings for the Festival's performance (as well as her son's upcoming wedding), she contacted the local Vietnamese Consulate to make sense of multiple sources she found online that were inconsistent with each other. Their general response of "I don't know" reaffirmed Phuc's belief that is it fine to have localized and reconstructed versions of culture, especially when supposedly the most authoritative source in the area (the consulate) has "no clue about their own culture." This idea of diversity and hybridity among the homeland and diaspora can be seen in her choices of music from both Vietnam *and* the Vietnamese diaspora, the infusion of styles like hip hop and salsa into her routines, and her use of racially diverse performers.[41] According to her, this philosophy stems

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[41] As Reyes argues, Latin American music has a long history in Vietnam and reflects the influence of colonial powers. Additionally as Cheryl Stock documents, with the cultural opening of Vietnam's borders in the 1980s, the idea of the purity of "Vietnamese dance" has never been questioned more. See Reyes, *Songs of the Caged, Songs of the Free* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); Cheryl Stock, "Doi Moi and the Crisis in Vietnamese Dance," in *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam*, eds Lisa Drummond and Mandy Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2003).

from her idea that this version of Vietnamese culture is more attractive to the local youth community and cannot be any worse than the current representations she sees in the Metro Vancouver area. As she views it, these performances—and the processes that lead up to them such as the reconstruction of Vietnamese culture through on and offline sources—are the result of picking the best of both Vietnam and Canada/Western culture to produce a new localized Vietnamese Canadian subject that can be presented and recirculated as representative of the local community.

As the case of Phuc and VCC illustrate, there are some forms of agency at the local level occurring, even if there is an initial reliance from outside sources. As Lieu persuasively argues in her work on Vietnamese American pageants and variety shows like *Paris by Night*, the global popularity of these events and media are representative of the hegemonic power of a class of cultural elites within the diaspora over ideologies of politics, gender, assimilation, and diasporic identities.[42] Beyond this chapter, everyone I spoke to for this project mentions *Paris by Night* as being located somewhere in the foundation of identities; likewise, music from *PBN* is used by both SACC and VCC to perform at both events, and it is undeniable that certain portions of each event (e.g. the áo dài fashion shows) do visually resemble *PBN*. However, while Lieu also argues there is not a complete dominance of *PBN* and points to the results of a global internet survey she conducted to demonstrate critiques and resistance, her broad reading of the text and data from around the globe loses a sense of locality because of an underlying assumption of a singular diaspora. For example, although she mentions the location of her survey respondents, there is little discussion of how their local contexts would shape their responses. This is not to

[42] Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*. For an Australian context, see Stuart Cunningham and Tina Nguyen, "Popular Media of the Vietnamese Diaspora," in *Floating Lives: The Media and Asian Diasporas*, eds Stuart Cunningham and John Sinclair (St. Lucia, Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 2000).

deny that there are larger threads of influence that Lieu rightfully highlights. However, in focusing on a specific local level, we can begin to extend Lieu's analysis to see more nuanced ways in which an "outside" source like *PBN* operate at both sites of the everyday and the event when it is translated to different contexts.

For both VCC and SACC, while they use the music of *PBN*, the dances take inspiration from other sources. For SACC, one of their founding members is a Vietnamese dance choreographer who has been professionally trained in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. As Sarah explains, although their dance choreographer takes the lead role in crafting the dance—which as mentioned is rooted in folk dances seen in North Vietnam—it is also a democratic process where members do have say in certain parts of the dance, including music. Sarah and Linh do not consume *PBN* on a regular basis, and while they have seen parts of the show, they would not consider themselves active consumers of the product, as it is more of something their parents watch. For them, the song selection of the *PBN* hit "Em Đi Xem Hội Trăng Rằm" was more about the tempo, sound, "feeling," and "mood" that it produced in relation to the dance; in fact, Linh did not even know the song was from *PBN* until I asked about it. Thus, the final dance produced by SACC is certainly influenced by *PBN* in terms of music, but it is ultimately a different performance, a hybrid that draws from Vietnam, Canada, and the United States and emerged from another hybrid Vietnamese American product. According to Lieu, *PBN* in a Vietnamese American context positions political exiles within the Vietnamese diaspora as *the* source of authentic Vietnamese culture; it constructs this positioning through nostalgia and an anticommunist stance.[43] But in the case of Vancouver, Linh, who is part of the more recent wave of migration from communist Vietnam, is a featured dancer, which challenges *PBN*'s positioning

[43] Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese, 90.*

of the exile as the most authentic. Within the event, Linh is both recognized as being from Vietnam and performing a cultural dance rooted in a historical tradition that is noted by the hosts. Afterwards, she also posted videos and pictures of her dancing with SACC, and as someone who posts a lot about Vietnamese culture, this dance and the *PBN* song further reaffirm her transnational links to the country of Vietnam, rather than a state of exile within the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States. In this specific event and the everyday media that emerges from it, media from *PBN* produce different registers of meaning through local contexts.

Like Linh and Sarah, Claire also has an ambivalent relationship to *PBN*. For her and with most Vietnamese things, she just knew that her "mom would watch Paris by Night and they spoke Vietnamese and it was a thing." It is important to note that while the VSC show sometimes registered as an event similar to the structure of *PBN*, this was not Claire's active choice and more of a contextual constraint due to the VSC's reliance on another organization to bring the cultural aspects; for her, it was about filling time within a program and as long as the act was something loosely related to "culture," she was fine with it. But even for things she had more control over, she also located these elements outside of Vancouver's local community. If we look closer at when she is directly involved in the show in terms of stage presence, we see her everyday ideologies of being Vietnamese reflected. As argued above, Claire is more interested in developing relationships that foster feelings of community, rather than any specific definition of Vietnamese Culture. Thus, in the *Tết Cultural Show*, she only speaks to promote the two North American leadership organizations where people can cultivate these types of relationships and feelings. In addition to reaffirming her focus on community connections, it also showcases her constant use of non-local sites as references for what a Vietnamese community *could* be in Vancouver, which reiterates her belief that the versions that exist locally are insufficient.

According to Claire, to alleviate the issues of the local community, one must connect and learn from an outside source.

Off-stage, Claire's indifference toward specific cultural objects is also illustrated in her disengagement when the VSC was in charge of the áo dài fashion show. The fashion show was a last minute addition, but for mainly practical reasons; as Phuc explains in the context of her club, fashion shows are easy because they require little to no rehearsal and can be easily stretched out for time, which was exactly the thought process behind VSC's late addition. However, Rachel also felt it would be a nice act that could be educational and inform people about the different variations of the áo dài, which she felt most people do not know about. When I ask about the information that was presented by Rachel, Claire states she "glanced" at the script but left most of the responsibility to Rachel. As Rachel elaborates,

> It was [Thuy (another VSC executive)] and I, who mostly did the research for it. A lot of it was knowledge from [Thuy's] mom, who taught her these things growing up. I would check up on these sites and check with her and see if she agreed. If she disagreed, we would ask a third Vietnamese person [laughs]. Generally if that person agreed, that was good enough, we can just say it, or whatever. That's why we were sometimes vague [laughs].

In a similar manner to Phuc, Rachel's method of producing a vague "or whatever" representation of culture is reflective of her everyday experiences. While she is happy to search for her "traditional roots," there remains a lot of gray area in which she does not want to reproduce "wrong" definitions of culture. Thus, she plays it culturally safe by remaining vague and sourcing expertise in people from Vietnam. In being broad "or whatever," there are possibilities for her to showcase how cultural objects are negotiated or evolve over time, as Rachel also began to see the difficulty of determining an authentic or traditional definition of Vietnamese culture. After asking multiple international Vietnamese students about information about the áo dài, she states:

> I didn't realize a lot of my [international] Vietnamese friends don't have any idea why they do a lot of the things they do, like their families just do it. And the couple of people…like [Thuy] has so much traditional knowledge, where she knows the origins of things and the reasons why Vietnamese people do these Vietnamese things. And so I find that I would view her as a more traditional Vietnamese person than I would someone who is an international Vietnamese student for how many years who does the Vietnamese things but doesn't know why they do these things.

In recalling her comments when she feels less "Vietnamese-y" when interacting with international students or people more knowledgeable about certain aspects of Vietnamese culture, her experiences in planning the event did provide some disruption of her idea of international students being the most authentic source of Vietnamese culture, relieving some of her anxieties of being in a cultural gray zone. However, there still remain hierarchies of cultural capital and methods of obtaining cultural knowledge. For Rachel, Thuy, as an international student, is still (re)produced as a source of having "traditional" knowledge which Rachel lacks. Although she can point to other international students that share her lack of specific knowledge of Vietnamese culture, this uneven understanding of culture within the club is still recognized by Rachel as being an issue that creates difference rather than creating unity under a broad scope of culture. Like her everyday media practices, Rachel hopes to use the event to educate and feature her culture, but it also reveals the various relationships and power dynamics that impact how knowledge is produced and presented locally.

Gender and the Beauty of Vietnamese Culture

As Lieu argues, the áo dài has become a permanent cultural fixture in the representation of both Vietnamese and the Vietnamese diaspora. Although designed for both men and women, the popularity of beauty pageants and cultural shows within the diaspora since the late 1970s has associated the áo dài mostly with women; according to Lieu, then, these events are key sites

where expressions of class, nation, and ethnicity are placed across gendered bodies to police gender roles, appearances, and the borders of an authentic Vietnamese culture.[44] Due to this fact, as well as cultural maintenance being often coded as a feminine task and activity, it is not a coincidence that the majority of the organizers of these events, as well as all of this chapter's participants, are women. However, similar to my argument above, while Lieu nicely highlights the larger flows of Vietnamese American popular media and offers persuasive feminist critiques of the use of bodies within these texts, her broad approach can elide the local negotiations and contestations that occur in the everyday and the event. In other words, the presence of female leaders or áo dài in these Vancouver events does not necessarily insert itself cleanly into these critiques.

While the decision to add the fashion show was mainly due to a fear that they would not have enough content (as well as its ability to be flexible in terms of time), it was also a topic of conversation among the VSC executive board, with many of them mocking the idea or questioning the usefulness of it as a cultural performance. Claire, who has interacted with "pageant girls" in the Vietnamese diaspora, recounts an experience that gives her opinion of the overall idea:

> They were talking about how somebody wanted the girls to come in at three in the morning to do their hair and makeup to look good for the show, and I'm like why, it's three in the morning. Why? [Laughs]. Why would you do this? I guess I don't identify with them.

As she later clarifies when I ask her about this comment, she responds by looking at her past media consumption in high school and seeing the dangers of establishing any standard of beauty:

> I don't know, because with the magazines and everything, and the media, you never see a lot of Asians. You're like "oh, how to be pretty: blonde hair and blue eyes." I was like yeah, that's not me. So I started to feel ashamed of myself.

[44] Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 59-63.

Although she no longer feels this way about herself since leaving high school, based on these experiences, she is not particularly supportive of an áo dài fashion show, even if it creates representations of "pretty" Vietnamese women that counter the lack of Asian representation in the media. However, as mentioned above, the choice to accept the fashion show was both due to the lack of other options and to complete the overall goal of producing a successful cultural event, which at this point was just to have a full program regardless of the actual content. Yet, regardless of her personal feelings and critiques of these gendered notions of Vietnamese cultural shows, Claire potentially accepts and reproduces these notions of gender without much critical thought, which is a result of her continued focus on community over the specificity of cultural objects.

While Rachel was more enthusiastic about the idea of an áo dài fashion show, she also expressed concern during a meeting about finding volunteers to wear them because she (correctly) assumed that the áo dài they had access to would be small sizes, which both the assumption and the limited sizes reflect a general ideal of Vietnamese women, especially ones who wear traditional áo dài, as being naturally petite. There was an initial idea of having random volunteers from the audience wear them for photo opportunities, but the board felt they did not want to risk embarrassing anyone who was unable to fit into one; as this conversation occurred, Rachel expressed interest in being a model for the show, but also then admitted with a laugh she felt she could not have fit into one.

Even with the recognition all of these issues, the áo dài fashion show remained a viable option for the VSC mainly because it was easy it deploy, which reflects more of a practical decision than a solely active choice about defining Vietnamese culture. But there were some local adjustments in relation to culture. Rachel saw the áo dài fashion show as more than just a

typical fashion show where music would be played as models walked a stage. As explored above and similar to her everyday social media use, Rachel also saw this time as an educational tool to reveal a larger picture of Vietnamese culture, even if she was vague about some of the details. Thus, the act of having a woman narrating information—along with the ambivalence of other executives—illustrates some control and agency over the process of crafting the meanings which an áo dài and female body can connote. Additionally, as the presentation noted the three major regions of Vietnam, Rachel also felt it was reflective of VSC's demographics, showcasing not just Southern Vietnamese cultural objects, but a wide range that recognizes other parts of Vietnam. Of course, these adjustments do not remove the act of spectacle of placing women as representative of the nation on a public stage, but Rachel's actions, which are informed by her everyday media practices, helped to shape a localized version of an áo dài fashion show that tried to shift away some of the attention on solely women's bodies to positioning the actual áo dài as a cultural commodity that contained meaning through the information being narrated.

More problematic, however, is Phuc and VCC's portion of the fashion show, which seems to follow more in line with the pageantries and variety shows that Lieu critiques. As Phuc explains how she uses her young female members:

> All girls are young. So it is more eye-catching. It's good…mainly because of the beauty, right? They are all young, they all have nice…you know you don't have to do much to it. As long as you give them a nice dress and they look eloquent.

In our larger interview, Phuc consistently uses variations of the word "beauty" and "eloquent" as the image she is trying to achieve in order to promote Vietnamese culture on a larger scale. That theme is further reinforced with the lyrics of the accompanying song, "Tôi Là Người Việt Nam" ("I am Vietnamese") which include the following chorus:

> Vietnam your beauty lies within
> Sweetest dreams of whispering winds

> I hear your voice inside of me
> Telling me who I am, who I am
> Vietnam your beauty resonates

With Phuc's use of the female body as spectacle for public consumption, it is also important to note the contexts in which this promotion occurs. As Phuc reiterates in her interviews, the larger image of Vietnamese Vancouverites is something she considers ugly: drugs, crime, and gangs. As she explains:

> Our group, we're basically promoting our culture—the good side of our culture, right? We have a beautiful culture we want to share with other communities in Canada, we want to share with the world. We just want to promote us, right? We're not the greatest, but we have a beautiful culture. Some of it is nice. And we're proud to have what we are.

For Phuc, the emphasis on beauty provides way to have both Vietnamese and the larger Canadian population revaluate an entire community with over 40 years of a complicated history that has mostly been negative when it comes to a mainstream narrative. As she argues, this (re)focus on beauty is a way to erase these negative images and replace them with more positive experiences of being Vietnamese that can possibly create a better community. Through the "beauty" of her culture, her goal is to slowly erode the images of a backwards and crime-ridden refugee population, one that has been reborn with youth, class, and elegance.

Even though Phuc specifically localizes the reasoning for her use of "beauty" within the contexts of Vancouver, in this case it still is parallel to Lieu's analysis of Vietnamese American beauty pageants being employed to "modernize" the refugee within the Western world.[45] Through Phuc's selective participation in both notions of Vietnamese and Canadian/Western Culture, she continues the restriction of definitions surrounding the female body seen in Lieu's beauty pageants, which construct women more like a commodity for exchange rather than a human with agency and active participation in society—these are just interchangeable "girls"

[45] Ibid., 75.

that need to be dressed up in a certain manner to be "eye-catching." Like her fluid definition of Vietnamese culture, "beauty" is often in flux and undefinable for Phuc, but there is a suggestion that it leans towards Western notions of beauty that work towards assimilating Vietnamese bodies into Canadian society. Under the guise of the "cultural," Phuc and the VCC are able to use female bodies in this manner that partially shields them from critique; as a "cultural" show, they are doing important work in educating, promoting, and maintaining culture as part of a larger multicultural initiative. This often downplays that the "good side of Vietnamese culture" may refer to woman's body than an abstract concept. In many ways, her ideologies about the use of the female body counteracts any attempts by the VSC to shift a focus away from just using the female body as a prop. This shows the problem with looking elsewhere for culture—it replicates outside hegemonic notions of culture and power, but with limited choices, these notions are uncritically transferred into local contexts.

It is Sarah, however, that most complicates how gender can play out in these specific situations. For Lieu, áo dài and gender performances in cultural events like pageants and *PBN* often act as reinforcing appropriate "Vietnamese" gender norms and codes of femininity, "which value devotion to family over the self."[46] But with Sarah's specific contexts, her participation in cultural events are not necessarily representative of this. Because of the negative reputation of the Vietnamese community and her mother and sister's bad experiences with the predecessor of SACC, Sarah's parents forbid her from joining SACC. As Sarah recalls in a conversation with Linh:

> Sarah: Now that my life is more stable, my parents have just accepted it, that I'm always around the community. Otherwise, I have to hide a lot of times, I tell my parents I'm going out when I'm actually practicing [with SACC].
> [Laughter]
> Linh: That's sad.

[46] Ibid., 71.

> Sarah: Another member had to do that too, she had to lie to her mom because her mom didn't want her to be involved.

As this implies, her participation in SACC and engagement with aspects of the community and culture go against these supposedly appropriate codes of femininity, as they illustrates a devotion to her personal desires over those of her family. In the context of Vancouver, some see cultural performances within the community as abnormal, a form of leadership that can disrupt notions of the proper place of Vietnamese women often seen in local contexts. Recalling her comments of the local community as sexist, Sarah sees her participation in SACC as a way to counter ideas of the demure and polite Vietnamese woman; through the club's performances, she can present on stage physical manifestations of Vietnamese women with agency, those who actively choose to devote time, work, and effort in performance. For her and other members of SACC, there is a sense of empowerment and even resistance.

It is also interesting to note Sarah's views of the VCC in relation to SACC. As Sarah jokingly states, VCC is "way more attractive" than SACC because of VCC's youthful appearance, but after some thought, she offers a more nuanced response: "We are attractive, but in a non-seductive way [laughs]." As she continues:

> We spend more time on our movement, when she [Phuc] spends more time on making the girls look pretty. We don't focus our looks. Well I don't care about our looks, we spend more time on the routine. The culture, we brought the culture more than the looks. Whereas they [VCC] brought the looks more than the culture.

For Sarah, her comments fit into the everyday narratives that Sarah constructs for herself. Sarah's involvement in SACC is not just to be a part of beauty pageants where women are silent and told what to do and what to say. Avoiding a focus on "looks," Sarah, who rarely uses social media, again reiterates the importance of work and the "time on the routine" as what drives her involvement with SACC, and not the potential for producing attractive or seductive cultural

objects meant to circulate around the community. However, as someone not particularly interested in the details of culture, she employs culture here to separate herself and SACC from the VCC. In doing so, she rejects "beauty" in the ways VCC employs the concept as something inherent in Vietnamese culture.

Across all of these cases to negotiate the use of the female body, we can see a variety of ways of how these leaders construct the role of women in cultural shows, and their larger implications in society. For Claire and Rachel, there is some hesitation, but local constraints in organizing have somewhat forced them to accept a fashion show. Although there are attempts to localize the fashion show to fit their own ideologies of how it can best communicate their versions of Vietnamese culture, the lingering residue of fashion shows from other diasporas still carry connotations of women that they just accept as part of completing their larger goal of producing their first cultural event. Phuc, however, is more willing to employ the entire notion of a fashion show to replace local images of the Vietnamese with more refined versions that draw from the United States and the West. In doing so, she creates a bleak vision of women in Vietnamese diasporic cultures, where their physical bodies are reduced to objects. Sarah, however, sees her performances as empowering, as it allows her to challenge her family's and the community's perception of women, where they can express versions of Vietnamese culture and dance without relying solely on sexual appeal or seduction. Through this rejection, she makes a clear separation between the "looks" of women and Vietnamese culture, pointing to a more complex and active site of female activity.

Conclusion: Defining Vietnamese Canadian Futures

In this rejection of employing "beauty" in such a fashion, Sarah is reflecting her own everyday thoughts on the role of Vietnamese women within the diaspora. As she continues her discussion of her relationship with the local community, she states

> I am very Western thinking. If you haven't noticed, I'm a feminist, a very strong feminist. And I'm very strong and independent, and I speak my thoughts. And those are not the characteristics of the Vietnamese…
> […]
> I've always been independent. So I just do things by myself. That's why my parents always pushed me to be Vietnamese because I am so independent at a young age, because I don't really share things with them because I know they don't approve. So that's why they always push me to be Vietnamese and more open to think about the family first instead of yourself.

Paradoxically, it is Sarah's involvement with SACC that make her less Vietnamese, though I argue she is constructing her own hybrid version of a Vietnamese Canadian. As argued above, SACC provides Sarah with an alternative space where the values she sees missing within the local Vietnamese community are produced through the relationships she forms with other Vietnamese women within the club. Although her statements make a clear binary between Vietnam and the West (with orientalist tones), SACC shows Sarah that it is possible to obtain values such as feminism within Vietnamese (Canadian) spaces. In Sarah's contexts, the club's public activities and performances then represent a form of Vietnamese Canadian subjectivity, a hybrid of both "Vietnamese culture" and "Western thinking." But through the process of constructing such subjectivities, they also represent future goals that are envisioned for oneself and the larger community. For Sarah, it is a community that respects women and accepts them in roles of power, something she wishes would be expressed in everyday life.

Of course, with the everyday being mediated, the event does not stop at the event. Just as everyday media practices builds up to the event, the event can be digitized and reinserted back into the everyday to become part of the larger circulation of cultural objects and discourses about

what it means to Vietnamese in Vancouver and what it *could* mean in the future. In exploring what people reinsert into the everyday, we can see the mediated visions of the futures that are primed to shape the next event.

As her only stage role, Claire's focus on networking with and promoting larger Vietnamese North American Leadership organizations stresses the need for Vancouverites to obtain leadership skills, preferably from more visibly successful communities around North America. As she reflects on the cultural event, she mentions it in relationship to other clubs: "long term, it was a big step for us, because there's a lot of universities that hold cultural shows and we never held one before." After the event, her everyday media practices remained the same: promoting the North American Leadership organizations and creating networks and connections with people in these organizations through Likes. In doing so, she continues to position these communities as a gauge of where Vancouver currently is as a community and will most likely look outward to make sense of the local. While the Vietnamese in Vancouver has a future through notions of leadership, for Claire, it is highly linked to outside sources.

For Linh, the initial effects of posting pictures and videos of SACC's performances on her social media will continue to reinforce her common use of Vietnamese culture to illustrate her pride in being Vietnamese, especially to those in Vietnam and Canada. Additionally, it also reaffirms her position as someone knowledgeable and engaged with Vietnamese culture. On a broader scale, Linh also wishes to bring the pride back in being Vietnamese in Vancouver, especially within the youth population. As she states:

> It's not like I'm judging them, but I understand that they may not be proud to be Vietnamese and I understand there's really bad association here, like there's lots of things Vietnamese have done that we aren't proud of, and I know some don't want any association with that. I just wish that they can see we are unlimited.

Although she did not grow up in the context Vancouver, as a former VSC executive and current SACC member, she understands how the local community has been represented through "bad association[s]" with gangs and drugs. Through SACC and her overall excitement and pride in showcasing several aspects of culture, she hopes her everyday actions and its accumulation on the Vietnamese Cultural Festival stage becomes a site where Vietnamese and Vietnamese Canadians can explore their cultural heritage beyond the limited representations that have plagued the local community.

Phuc has similar goals, but through different means. While she did share a post created by someone else featuring photographs of the Vietnamese Cultural Festival, the only Facebook post Phuc constructed about the festival *herself* was a link to a YouTube video of a portion of the show that featured two Vietnamese Canadian police officers talking to the crowd. Above the video is her comment: "It's great to have The Vancouver Police Department be part of our Community event !!" As this illustrates, Phuc's vision of the future is one of upward mobility and assimilation through service to governmental institutions. As a direct counter to what she see as "the worst" Vietnamese community in North America, her only constructed digital object is one featuring Vietnamese Canadians succeeding in a "respectable" career that is circulated not just within the local community, but also to her transnational network of Vietnamese diasporas. Through this circulation, Phuc can showcase Vancouver's evolution and begin to construct alternative views of class and culture. Of course, this is an active choice that she also see as a function of the VCC; through their performances at various events, these are places "where you meet all the government officials and the high class people, where maybe some of the girls end up with a job, right?" As her comment directly states, there are strong connections between "high class" and government officials. In doing so, she positions herself and her club as a source

of "good refugees" that can be directly employed to serve Canada's nation-building project (these concepts will be further explored in Chapter 5).[47] As a result, her visions of the future easily lends itself to neoliberal discourses, where the focus is placed on an individual's or community's inherent work ethic, rather than the larger structures of power that frame the refugee experience in British Columbia.

Phuc is not the only one to buy into larger governmental systems. For Rachel, her posts about the *Tết Cultural Show* continued her theme of using social media as a place for conversation and education, but also one that inserts Vietnamese culture in the Canadian mosaic of multiculturalism. When I ask about how Canadian culture appears in her everyday media, Rachel (like most people) has a harder time describing Canadian culture beyond maple syrup and hockey. As our conversation moves on to the media produced from the Tết event, she circles back to the question of being Canadian through her Vietnamese Canadian media. As she explains her Instagram post about the event:

> Even when I was doing my very specifically Tết post, at the end I just felt this weird need to wish everyone a "happy new year" in different languages. [Laughs]. So if you read it, I just listed it. So maybe that is more Canadian-esque. So I just, even though this is a Vietnamese thing, I just wanted to include everybody.
> […]
> So I guess a lot of it is trying to include a lot of different cultures and trying to be like, 'oh welcome to my culture, you can be part of it too!'

In line with her concept of the role of the VSC, she also views the future of Vietnamese Canadians to be one of open acceptance, a community that emphasizes a celebration of multiple cultures. As she continues,

> Well, I guess for Canadians, at least, we're known for being very multicultural, we're not that melting pot. And that's why Canadian culture is very ambiguous, because there are so many aspects of culture that all come in and it's not like we were a founding country

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[47] See Yen Le Espiritu, "Thirty Years AfterWARd: The Endings That are Not Over," *Amerasia Journal* 31, no. 2 (2005): xii-xxiii. This topic will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

> that was like, "we're bringing this in, this is who we are!" It's kind of like "yes, everybody come in!"

In a very simplistic view of Canadian multiculturalism, Rachel uncritically reaffirms Canada's international reputation as a progressive and multicultural state (with a slight dig at the United States), working under the assumption that Canada's immigration and cultural policy has always been "yes, everybody come in!"[48] Yet, it can also be seen that through her everyday media use after the event, Claire inserts Vietnamese culture as inherently part of Canadian culture. In doing so, there is the creation of space where culture and identity can be negotiated, hybrid, but ultimately accepted on its own terms. While utopian in nature, Rachel's vision of the future of the Vietnamese community is one of continued celebration, yet openness and engagement to others.

As this chapter illustrates, there are multiple goals and futures that are being imagined for the local Vietnamese community by some of its leaders, both through the processes of everyday life and the translation of these processes to a staged event. In exploring the complex and interwoven states of the everyday and the event, I argued for the need to contextualize our studies of diasporic communities with a consideration of the everyday, which reveal further nuance of how we can understand local diasporic cultures. By examining the everyday, its mediated properties, and the event, this chapter has shown that everyday digital media has made the idea of local community more fragile, yet more possible at the same time. Already fragmented and being pulled in multiple directions, the events described here reflect the everyday of the Vietnamese communities within Vancouver—a sometimes haphazardly

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[48] For critiques on how Canadian multiculturalism constructs and maintains differences between specific Canadian citizens and minority groups, see Himani Bannerji, The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender (Toronto: Canadian Scholars', 2000); Eva Mackey, The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Sunera Thobani, Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

organized, sometimes random, and sometimes a murky terrain of competing cultures and a goals. In looking elsewhere for Vietnamese community and culture, the organizations of Vancouver showcase their struggles within the local to develop their own identities, as well as the ability to communicate with each other. For instance, although there was a lot of overlap between the VSC *Tết Cultural Show* and the Vietnamese Cultural Festival, the VSC planned a social event during the same time as the Festival, eliminating an opportunity for cross-organizational planning and engagement. Yet for all of the stumbles and errors, there exists potential for future community building as the events continued in 2017. While there may be multiple visions of the journey ahead, one thing certain in the future of this community is the continued need for community work and development.

Chapter 4

Cooking while Diasporic: Reconceptualizing Vietnamese Authenticity On and Offline

Introduction

It seems that on September 6th, 2016 most Vietnamese diasporas around the world were "hangry" across various social media platforms, sharing simultaneous feelings of outrage, anger, and longing for a bowl of mom's phở. It had only been a week since I left Vancouver after a summer of collecting data for this chapter, which included hours of me and Vancouverites eating, cooking, and talking about Vietnamese (Canadian) foodways and their intersections with our families, cultures, and histories. With our experiences and discussions still fresh, it was no surprise that almost every message sent to me that day included a link and some variation of the question: "Have you seen this?!?" The link preview in my Facebook messenger had a thumbnail image of a white man with a backwards baseball cap and the following text: PSA: This is How You Should be Eating Pho.[1] Released (and removed two days later) by *Bon Appétit Magazine*, the video features Tyler Akin—the person in the thumbnail image and chef and owner of *stock.* restaurant in Philadelphia—discussing his thoughts on how to eat pho, a Vietnamese noodle soup. With a text overlay proclaiming "Pho is the New Ramen," Akin briefly differentiates between pho and ramen and illustrates key eating practices that, in his opinion, produce the optimal experience of eating pho, which include adding extra limes, jalapenos and freshly torn Thai basil. The most important practice, emphasized three times in the two-minute video, is not to put hoisin or sriracha sauce directly into the broth as it muddles the flavor of the soup; according to Akin, these sauces should be placed in a small dish on the side where the eater can

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[1] This chapter's use of the Vietnamese names of dishes will be dependent on the text employed in the source materials. For instance, *Bon Appétit* uses "pho," while other blogs may use "phở."

dip the noodles and toppings. The video concludes with Akin demonstrating "the twirl," a move where he spins his chopsticks to collect noodles for easier eating, and stating, "That's my approach, it's not the only way. The beauty of pho is that you can do it however you want, but if you're going to put hoisin and sriracha in your soup, please taste your broth first and please don't do it in front of the chef."

The outcry was large and swift. While the wave of anger and confusion was not limited to Vietnamese communities, it was naturally the Vietnamese diasporas in North America that were most vocal and active online. Twitter, Facebook, "foodie" blogs, and various websites ranging from *The Huffington Post* to *Cosmopolitan* produced posts and comment sections with pho-based puns criticizing hipster "Food-Bro" Akin and *Bon Appétit*'s "pho-pas." There were also several accusations of cultural appropriation, gentrifying pho, whitesplaining, and #columbusing, or the process of how cultural products of minority groups are "discovered" by and only exist through the white, western gaze.[2] Although the critiques of Akin and the video (further discussed below) approach the situation though several perspectives, underlying many of the responses to the video were people's conceptualizations of authentic Vietnamese food and culinary practices. As Dakota Kim observes in her overview of the responses to the aftermath of Akin's hoisin/sriracha proclamation, "the fact that this throwdown of the authoritarian gauntlet came from a non-Vietnamese-American chef…didn't bode well for him as an authority of authenticity," with Kim citing one commenter's response to the video that "when Asian food becomes hipster, all authenticity is lost"; in a similar vein, numerous comments sarcastically admonished themselves and their parents for eating pho in an inauthentic, and resultantly

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[2] Khanh Ho, "This Food-Bro is Gentrifying Vietnamese Pho," *Huffington Post*, September 08, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/khanh-ho/bon-appetit-and-tyler-aki_b_11914924.html; Anderson, "The Aftermath of Bon Appetit's Video 'Pho-pas,'" YOMYOMF.com, September 09, 2016, https://www.yomyomf.com/the-aftermath-of-bon-apetits-video-pho-pas/.

"wrong" manner.[3] Akin's *stock.* restaurant also took a hit on Yelp, dropping down from a respectable four-star to a three-star rating with a flood of negative reviews from self-described "real" Vietnamese that questioned the authenticity of the restaurant and its soups based on the video alone—it was only through the assistance of Yelp in removing these ghost reviews that the restaurant was able to jump up to its current 3.9 rating.[4] After two days of receiving complaints and an attempt to re-title the video, *Bon Appétit* removed the video completely and offered a soft apology and a vague promise to do better in the future.[5]

As these responses illustrate, the Vietnamese diaspora tend to take their food seriously and we can see this across a wide variety of expressions of diasporic cultures. For example, food is a central theme in works of Vietnamese diasporic literature, such as Vietnamese American Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* and Vietnamese Canadian Kim Thúy's *Mãn*.[6] At the local level, food is always guaranteed to make an appearance at events and meetings organized by Vietnamese cultural and leadership clubs in Vancouver. Among my participants, even for those who say they do not actively express their "Vietnamese-ness" in any space have at least a few Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat posts featuring Vietnamese food. While cuisine and its growing networks of mediated representations are receiving more attention and visibility in popular culture and scholarship, it seems Asian and Asian North American bodies and flavors have had and continue to have prominent roles in mainstream culinary discourses and spaces.

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[3] Dakota Kim, "Why You Should Care about the Bon Appetit Pho Uproar," *Paste*, September 13, 2016, https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2016/09/are-the-writers-of-food.html.

[4] Ryan General, "Ignorant White Guy Tries To Tell Asians How To 'Properly' Eat Pho — Gets it All Wrong," Next Shark, September 7, 2016, http://nextshark.com/tyler-akin-pho-stock-video/.

[5] This promise would be short lived, as in October 2016, Bon Appétit would be again widely criticized for their interpretation of Halo-Halo, a Filipino dessert dish, which included the non-traditional ingredients of candied popcorn and gummi bears. See "About that Pho Video," *BonAppétit*.com, September 10, 2016, http://www.bonappetit.com/story/how-you-should-eating-pho.

[6] Monique T.D. Truong, *The Book of Salt: A Novel* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2004); Kim Thúy, *Mãn* (Montreal: Random House Canada, 2014).

Asian diasporic experiences are inherently intertwined with food cultures, ranging from the historical and economic foundation of Asian labor within food systems in North America to how contemporary Asian North Americans have become active creators and setters of food trends though digital means.[7] Ranging from delivery boys, cookbooks, take-out joints, blogs, celebrity chefs, Yelp reviewers, foodie culture, and beyond, Asians in North America have had long and strong associations with food in its very broadest sense, an often ambiguous relationship that includes conflicting feelings of comfort and discomfort, community and Other, and pleasure and disgust. Despite these contradictory feelings, food within diasporic groups—specifically food from the one's "motherland"—retains a central role in diasporic identities across generations because as Susan Kalcik argues, "the earliest-formed layers of culture, such as foodways, are the last to erode."[8] In other words, as one participant joked during an informal conversation, "my Vietnamese may be shit, but I can always read a menu!"

Due this almost intrinsic yet complex affiliation between Asian (North American) identities and food cultures, writers and academics have become increasingly interested in interrogating the roles in which food play in the communities and histories of Asian diasporas.[9] However, there has been limited works on studying how mediated food cultures both emerge from and become translated into material ingredients, physical labor, and concrete spaces (and vice versa). Although works on cookbooks and online food blogs are critical in understanding

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[7] For a brief historical overview of Asian Americans in the U.S. food scene, see Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV, and Anita Mannur, "An Alimentary Introduction," in *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader*, eds Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV, and Anita Mannur (New York: NYU Press, 2013). 3-6.
[8] Susan Kalcik, "Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity," in *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*, eds Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 39.
[9] See Lucy M. Long ed, *Culinary Tourism* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky, 2004); Wenying Xu, *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV, and Anita Mannur (New York: NYU Press, 2013); and Krishnendu Ray and Tulasi Srinivas, eds, *Curried Cultures: Globalization, Food, and South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

how discourses about food, recipes, and their related functions of constructing "authentic" identities and nation-states are packaged at the textual level and inserted into global networks,[10] the variable acts of sourcing and preparing meals found on the pages of books and websites within specific local environments create discursive spaces where the boundaries of cultural authenticity and categories can be reaffirmed or redrawn.

This chapter uses Vietnamese cuisine as an object of study to continue exploring the interplay between online and offline spaces and how Vietnamese diasporic identities are localized in relation to definitions of authenticity and categories of Vietnamese cuisine. Moving between YouTube tutorials, local restaurant dining spaces, Yelp reviews, and the act of cooking, this chapter foregrounds the cultural processes of how various people classify and categorize "authentic" Vietnamese food. Instead of just providing a taxonomy of specific criteria or ingredients that constitutes what "real" Vietnamese food is as a cuisine, this chapter explores the larger cultural operations of categorizing cuisine as authentically Vietnamese and their implications in constructing identities and relationships with other Vietnamese diasporas, cultures, and spaces. In doing so, I argue we need to consider how local contexts and histories can produce different meanings and everyday politics and identities when Vietnamese food is categorized through specific frameworks of the authentic. By exploring the numerous ways people define and classify Vietnamese food and its related properties, we can move beyond the ingredients of a dish and push towards a better understanding of how various sites of identities are crafted in relation and through food in the everyday. As this chapter illustrates, a discussion of taste or the act of plating can reveal class and national hierarchies, and groupings of difference

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[10] See Arjun Appadurai, "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30, no. 1 (1988): 3-24 and Lori Lopez, "Asian American Food Blogging as Racial Branding: Rewriting the Search for Authenticity," in *Global Asian American Popular Cultures*, eds. Shilpa Dave, Lelani Nishime, Tasha Oren (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 151-164.

and inclusion that are rooted through local experiences. Overall, the chapter shows the wide range of cultural investment in labeling something as authentic (or inauthentic) in terms of Vietnamese cuisine, as these processes of classification can both expand and limit larger notions of Vietnamese cultures and identities.

For this chapter, I draw from two sources of data. The first and primary source of data will be observations and interviews from two "creation exercise" groups. Building on the audience work of Martin F. Manalansan IV and S. Elizabeth Bird, which employ constructed focus group-style methods to obtain and analyze audience receptions of media (further discussed below), this chapter has two groups select, watch, and respond to YouTube cooking tutorials on the Vietnamese dish bánh xèo, a turmeric-infused savory crepe.[11] In addition to verbally responding to these videos, I also had the groups react through the act of cooking bánh xèo using these videos, with interviews about their experiences and thought-processes during and after the cooking process. My secondary source of information are interviews with two owners of Vietnamese restaurants in Vancouver, Amelie Nguyen of *Anh + Chi* and Patrick Do of *House Special*, who wish to reimagine and challenge the notion of the stereotypically "authentic" Vietnamese restaurant through their food, restaurant space, and online presence.[12] In both of these cases, we can explore the cultural meanings and politics of categorizing Vietnamese cuisine while cuisine and its various properties are being consumed in both materialized and digitalized forms. The next section provides a theoretical overview of situating "authenticity" as a cultural process that involves much more than a focus on the food, and should include broader

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[11] See Martin F. Manalansan IV, "Cooking up the Senses: A Critical Embodied Approach to the Study of Food and Asian American Television Audience," in *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, eds Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu and Mimi Thi Nguyen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 179-193 and Chapter 4 in S. Elizabeth Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World* (New York: Routledge 2003).

[12] In contrast to participant names used in this chapter, I will be using the real names of the restaurants and owners. I want to thank them for their time and giving me permission to use their real identities.

contexts, power dynamics, and relationships. The chapter then sets up the methodology behind the creation exercises and analyzes the cultural implications of how Vancouverites localize global flows of digital food. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of how local restaurant owners challenge and destabilize notions of the authentic through the acceptance of difference under a single cuisine. In doing so, they push for pluralizing cultural categories of Vietnamese cuisine in order to innovate local forms of Vietnamese culture.

PSA: How You Should Think about Authenticity

Authenticity is a tricky, sometimes highly problematic concept. In the realm of academia, it has historically been used as an essentialized object that needed to be found, documented, and owned, often by Western researchers within "savage" Native tribes. Over time, most scholars have recognized the socially constructed nature of authenticity, where cultural practices labeled as "traditional" are often subject to change and mutate over time and space. This understanding of the authentic has led many to reject the notion of authenticity, with Regina Bendix even advocating "laying to rest the uses of authenticity within scholarship…[in order] to undermine the social and political power of discourses on authenticity."[13] While academia may recognize the fallacy of the concept, the employment of discourses and frameworks of authenticity remain constant within society, especially in relation to ethnic identity and food.[14] The power,

[13] Regina Bendix, *Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 226-7.

[14] For instance, Nazli Kibria notes the importance of "authentic ethnicity" among several 2nd generation Asian Americans, while Nancy Yan highlights its use in Chinese resturants. See Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second Generation Chinese and Koran American Identities* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 92-100, and Nancy Yan, "Un-defining Authenticity in Chinese Restaurants and Cuisine," in *Time for Food: Everyday Food and Changing Meal Habits in a Global Perspective*, ed Patricia Lysaght (Abo, Finland: Abo Akademi University Press, 2012).

limitations, and ever-present nature of the label of authenticity can be seen in the responses to the *Bon Appétit* video.

Although the word "authentic" is never used within the video, the video's use of a "public service announcement" format had many reading Akin positioning himself as having a sense of authority and knowledge on authentic pho. This can be seen in the negative reviews on Yelp which often had reviewers invoked the concept of authenticity, either in relation to being a "real" Vietnamese or the labeling of Akin, the soup, and his eating procedures as inauthentic—as "real" Vietnamese people who love of putting hoisin and sriracha directly into their soup, why is a white guy telling them they are wrong, or worse, inauthentic? Tri Vo of *Mic.com* sought to set the record straight, writing the article "The right way to eat pho—from someone who's actually Vietnamese."[15]

As these examples illustrate, discourses of authenticity produce a very narrow and singular version of what Vietnamese food is, as well as a limited scope of how to eat it in the "right way." Just as it is easy to critique Akin's actions as a literal representation of bell hook's notion of "eating the Other," a closer examination of both the video and the responses to it reveal the fallacies and contradictions of enacting discourse of authenticity in the criticism of *Bon Appétit*.[16] It surprises many whom shared the video with me that after a deeper analysis, I would argue the video, and specifically Tyler Akin's comments and actions, are not as bad as others have described (this discrepancy may be due to the video being removed, leaving Akin's reputation in the hands of internet folklore and rumors).[17] Of those who have watched the video,

[15] Tri Vo, "The right way to eat pho—from someone who's actually Vietnamese," *Mic.com*, September 14, 2016, https://mic.com/articles/153858/the-right-way-to-eat-pho-from-someone-who-s-actually-vietnamese.
[16] bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Boston: South End Press, 1992.
[17] The video can be accessed through mirror sites, but requires some extensive internet searching skills.

most of the critiques stem from *how* the video was constructed in post-production rather than the actions of Akin himself, a difference often not stated or recognized. For instance, Akin never states pho is the new ramen (it was a text insert), there are b-roll shots of soups other than pho when Akin's voiceover is speaking about pho, and Akin makes it clear this is not the only way to eat pho, opposite to the video's PSA title.

While I do not deny that the "twist" move is cringeworthy and there are justified and valid critiques of the video—Andrea Nguyen of the popular cooking blog *VietWorldKitchen.com* and Dakota Kim of *Paste Magazine* both provide nuanced responses[18]—there are elements in the video, such as the hoisin/sriracha rule, that have been expressed in other mediated representations of pho. In 2014, Vietnamese American YouTuber Richie Le's R&B/hip-hop "The Pho Song" (featuring AJ Rafael) had an entire verse on how one should put hoisin and sriracha on the side.[19] The YouTube channels of food-focused *Munchies* and *Zagat* released "How to Eat Pho" videos—albeit featuring Vietnamese American chefs—that shared similar tips to Akin's and were both released months before the *Bon Appétit* video.[20] David Chang, one of the most prominent Asian American chefs (and could easily be classified as a hipster bro), compared pho to ramen in his food magazine, *Lucky Peach*.[21] While I recognize the key power differences of having Vietnamese American, Asian American, and White voices and bodies

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[18] Andrea Nguyen, "Why a Pho Video Boiled Over into Controversy for Bon Appetit," *Viet World Kitchen*, September 8, 2016, http://www.vietworldkitchen.com/blog/2016/09/bon-appetit-how-to-properly-eat-pho.html and Kim, "Why You Should Care about the Bon Appetit Pho Uproar."
[19] Richie Le, "The Pho Song," YouTube video, 4:53, posted [December 16, 2014], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0rWLeBDG7s.
[20] See Munchies, "How to Eat Pho," YouTube Video, 4:10, posted [April 28, 2015], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C92m3c7BczM and ZAGAT, "How to Eat Pho, a Vietnamese Noodle Soup – Stop Eating It Wrong, Episode 28," YouTube video, 5:05, posted [June 1, 2016], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4a3yxpTIh3s.
[21] It should be noted, however, is that this was in the context of a 144 page issue devoted to pho, which also included articles from Vietnamese Americans. David Chang, "The Future of Pho," *Lucky Peach Issue 19*, May 2016, http://luckypeach.com/the-future-of-pho/.

deliver the same message about Vietnamese food, it has to be noted that these examples point to the relational and contradictory nature of discourses of authenticity. Although "real" Vietnamese point to their use of hoisin and sriracha to invalidate Akin, their lack of responses or selective use of the question of authenticity in regards to Richie Le, David Chang, and others illustrates the uneven application of frameworks of the authentic, such as when our views of food are not always so singular and narrow—Who is the "wrong" or "right" Vietnamese in the case of Richie Le? Sometimes the "right way" to eat pho does not matter.

In a more general sense, reducing any dish to its "authentic" state is a difficult process. Discussing the concept of authenticity in relationship to pho with Patrick Do, co-owner of Vancouver's *House Special*, Do is skeptical of the uses of "authentic" in the kitchen. As he explains with the regionality of pho,

> in Hanoi it's all about, what, the clear broth. A little bit of ginger in there, and really bright notes. The more flavor you get out of a clear broth, the better the soup is, right? And in Saigon or Ho Chi Minh, what it is all about is flavor, flavor, flavor…doesn't matter if it is super cloudy, doesn't matter if it is dark….between those two, you argue about what is authentic, you're going to get two different answers! So it's very hard to, I think, to get hung up on or caught up on the idea of what is authentic because it's just like a moving target that you'll never be able to catch. Yeah, I think it is a bit of a fool's errand to try to propose something as too classically authentic. And I think, you know, the way we eat in Vietnam and the way we eat in Canada is so different anyways…yeah I don't know, I try not to get caught up on that anyways.

As Do response illustrates, geographies play critical roles in impacting how we taste food, as "authentic" dishes pick up new ingredients and flavors as they tumble from city to city. Yet if there is difficulty in pinning down the color of a soup within a nation, for those in the diaspora, geographies may have a larger impact as taste buds will have different points of reference across multiple borders, homelands, and cultures when it comes to a supposedly simple bowl of pho—for Do, a 2nd generation Vietnamese Canadian who has family across North America, the authentic flavor of pho is spread across multiple cities in Vietnam, Canada, and the United

States. As this whole dissertation has shown, to say something is authentic in terms of the global flow of food is to possibly erode the details of the local and essentialize complex groups and migration patterns. In many ways, authenticity is a flawed, even harmful concept that seems to have little utility. If an authentic dish of food cannot exist in reality and discourses of authenticity can be easily dismantled, why does it matter and do we need talk about it?

While I agree with Bendix's argument of the limitations of using authenticity in scholarship and the possible removal of some uses of the term—especially with its past in (post)colonial ethnographies—her complete dismissal obscures its continual existence as a discourse and the potential in what can be revealed in exploring how the concept operates. In moving away from its traditional definition and use, several scholars have proposed how we can employ the concept of the authentic. As Nancy Yan theorizes in her discussion of Chinese restaurants in the United States, "rather than expunging authenticity as a superfluous aspect of cultural expression, I suggest that a more valuable way to understand authenticity is to acknowledge and embrace its existence and use, and to examine how it is being used."[22] Similarly, in moving away from its common uses, authenticity, according to Lori Lopez, should be thought of as a subjective quality "that is socially constructed and relational, rather than an inherent quality of food, people, spaces, or media."[23] Vanina Leschziner's research on the cultural discourses of chefs argues a chef's authenticity to a specific cuisine or personal culinary identity is tied to more than just food; as she explains,

> Chefs are naturally quite concerned about how their styles will be classified, and develop their own understandings and narratives to control and manage their classification projects. To understand how chefs do so, one must look first at the building blocks of cuisine—ingredients and techniques—and the factors that go into restaurant ratings and

[22] Nancy Yan, "Un-defining Authenticity in Chinese Restaurants and Cuisine," 87.
[23] Lopez, "Asian American Food Blogging as Racial Branding," 155.

> reviews, because it is in light of these matters that chefs reflectively shape their understandings of culinary styles.[24]

Thus, for Leschziner, authenticity is a process of categorizing and classifying cuisines and operates beyond the kitchen to include wider social and cultural contexts.

Following these works, I use the concept of "authenticity" in this chapter as an active cultural process of categorizing cuisines by various agents (in this context diners, chefs, foodies, etc.) that exists within larger structures of power and frameworks of comprehension. In exploring the concept of the authentic in this manner, we can begin to use it to explore how specific cultures reproduce and negotiate culinary categories and the boundaries that are established by themselves, their localities, and circuits of media. As an active and political process, I argue the construction of the authentic is heavily linked to the negotiation over cultural power, or who has the ability to define Vietnamese cuisine and its cultural attributes within and beyond the kitchen. Thus, this chapter is not concerned with producing the most authentic recipe of bánh xèo or defining how a "real" Vietnamese restaurant should look or prepare food. Rather, throughout this chapter, I use the term authentic in a critical manner, not as a representation of an essentialized Truth, but as a discourse to construct and organize truths, people, cultures, and frameworks of interpretation. In this context, I am interested in how the parameters and categories of authentic Vietnamese foods are constructed through various discourses and their implications in understanding what we eat and where we eat, and how that relates to larger notions of identity and culture.

Decoding and Encoding the Authentic Vietnamese Bánh Xèo

[24] Vanina Leschziner, *At the Chef's Table* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2015), 51.

In devising this study, I take inspiration from the audience work of Martin F. Manalansan IV and S. Elizabeth Bird. In "Cooking up the Senses: A Critical Embodied Approach to the Study of Food and Asian American Television Audiences," Manalansan organizes focus groups to respond to episodes of Ming Tsai's cooking show, *East Meets West*. During the process of watching the show, participants are encouraged to comment and afterwards are interviewed with a series of open-ended questions, which explored the specific relationships between identity and food.[25] In exploring various methods to capture responses to representations of Native Americans, Bird employs a "creation exercise," where small groups were given a task to create a TV show featuring Native Americans. While there was no media to view and decode, Bird argues the study of audiences needs to extend beyond the arena of immediate reception; through the process of a creation exercise, Bird sheds light on the different dynamics of how individuals created meanings through mediated objects, such as participants explaining and modeling their shows and characters based on past experiences with media. As food is able to be consumed both on our screens and on our plates, and the creation of food is a basic requirement to survive, it makes sense to extend Manalansan's focus group methodology to include Bird's creation exercise to explore the full range of responding to cooking tutorials. By adding to Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model, where participants decode YouTube videos and are then allowed to (re)encode and ground ideologies of authenticity through a physical meal, we can simultaneously explore multiple layers of taste—taste in a Bordieusian sense that emerges from our tongue as discourses that define our position in society and relation to others, and the taste that emerges from the flavors that interact with our tongue as we consume our food.

[25] Malanansan, "Cooking up the Senses," 185.

For this project, I recruited two groups comprised of people who have expressed a heavy everyday interest in food, watch YouTube food tutorials regularly, and have used tutorials to cook dishes (not limited to Vietnamese cuisine). As the process included minimal direction and to encourage discussion and comfortability, I recruited people who already knew each other. As a group, they were told to use YouTube to search for bánh xèo on a communal television and select videos to watch. Commenting and discussion were encouraged throughout the process. Afterwards, we would formulate a shopping list of ingredients and visit a local Asian market. We would then cook bánh xèo, though the exact details and procedures of how to cook were up to the group, with the videos being accessible at all times. In general, preparation included making a thin batter, cutting meat for the filling (typically shrimp and/or pork), washing vegetables to wrap the crepes, and making a dipping sauce. For the cooking, a person would cook the filling in a pan, add some batter and cover with a lid, and fold over the crepe once it was cooked. The meeting concluded with a meal and a group interview that included both open-ended questions and specific questions that arose from the process.

The first group consisted of three women who knew each other through their participation in a local Vietnamese cultural group focused on traditional dance performances (the Southeast Asian Cultural Club discussed in Chapter 3). Linh, who is in her mid-20s, came to Vancouver from Vietnam as high school student in the early 2000s. Amy is in her mid-30s and also came to Vancouver in the early 2000s, though she often splits her time between Canada and Vietnam. Both are considered to be part of the "newer" wave of Vietnamese diaspora and are linked (at least in perception) to a higher class of migrants consisting of skilled workers, entrepreneurs, and university students. Sarah, who is in her early 30s, migrated to Vancouver at the age of nine during the early 1990s and is considered to be part of the very end of the

(economic) refugee movement. All three are working professionals. Linh and Sarah are both single and live with their parents, while Amy is married to a non-Vietnamese Canadian and mother of two children. Amy and Linh describe themselves as Vietnamese, while Sarah identifies more as Canadian. The second group consisted of two people, Jake and Amanda. Jake, who is in his early 20s, was born in the metro Vancouver area and identifies as Vietnamese Canadian. According to Jake, his parents belonged to the economic refugee wave during the late 1980s. Amanda is in her mid-20s and identifies as Chinese Filipino Canadian. Born in Vancouver, her parents migrated to the city during the early 1990s as part of the larger wave of skilled workers from Asia encouraged by provincial immigration policies after Expo 86. Both are in postgraduate school, single, and live with their parents. All participants have eaten a version of bánh xèo before (Amanda's case will be elaborated below). Amy and Amanda have never made bánh xèo before, while the rest of the participants have assisted in making it with friends and family members, but never by themselves.

These two groups provide an interesting contrast that mirrors some aspects of the Vietnamese community in Vancouver. With the first group, we have people from the later stages of migration who have a relatively active relationship with Vietnam due to the fact that they have lived there for a significant portion of their lives and maintain personal and professional connections. These group members also share a common interest in traditional Vietnamese dance and engage with parts of the local Vietnamese community, although their attraction to other sites of Vietnamese culture vary, especially with Sarah. Comparatively, the second group has Jake, a second-generation Vietnamese Canadian. Born and raised in metro Vancouver, he has a more minority-based experience, which include interacting with other dominant and visible Asian Canadian groups (such as Chinese Canadians) and views Vietnamese culture through a

more Vietnamese Canadian diasporic lens. In pairing him with Amanda, who is not Vietnamese, we can see different shades of how authenticity is performed across cultural lines.

While I recognize this is not a "true" ethnographic encounter (if that is ever theoretically possible) and more of a constructed scenario rather than a thick description of everyday life, by focusing on those who have previously used YouTube to cook, the chapter is meant to provide more of a complimentary viewpoint of an act of everyday cooking and eating. By situating people within different scenarios, we can begin to unravel the complex ways in which authenticity is organized and employed while consuming food, both in mediated and material forms. What follows is not an exact transcription or temporal outline of events, but rather overlapping themes and criteria that played a function in determining what videos would be watched or discarded, how things were cooked, and ultimately what made something authentically Vietnamese in a diasporic context and the cultural implications of this categorization of a cuisine.

Language

Group 1 started with the search term "banh xeo recipe" and glanced over the top five videos. After some discussion about how to select the videos—including comments of how often they watched certain YouTubers—they picked the video titled "Banh Xeo (Savory Sizzling Crepes)" by user EatNowCryLater, who later introduces herself as Sav. We started the video and seven seconds in, Amy says a prompt and stern "No!" and Linh laughs. They decide to move on to the next video. When I inquired about this chain of events, I first asked about how they decided which video to watch, they replied:

> Amy: And then we look at which video has more views.
>
> Linh: And which video has a nice looking preview [small laugh].

Amy: Yeah, then we look at the person who made the video, if they can pronounce the name correctly.

Linh: Yeah [laughs].

Here we can briefly see the role in how the interface and logics of YouTube viewership play out, where the thumbnail preview image and the number of views play both an important role in how the video is ranked (pointing to the discussion of algorithms in chapter 2) and a key factor in getting people to click on the video. However, for Amy and Linh, what instantly made them lose confidence in Sav's ability to cook bánh xèo—regardless of image preview or number of views—was her apparently inability to pronounce "bánh xèo," which Sav said as "banh chiao." Unknown to the group, Sav is actually pronouncing the Cambodian version of the dish, a difference she makes clear 10 seconds later when she actually says "bánh xèo" in Vietnamese. While Sav actually shows some depth in her knowledge of the cross-cultural dish, it is her setup that proves her inauthenticity for Amy and Linh when her video title "Banh Xeo (Savory Sizzling Crepes)" does not match the first verbal invocation of the dish. While I do not know how the video's recognition of the dish's transnational movement would have impacted Amy or Linh's reaction to the recipe, their initial response to stop the video shows borders are already being drawn around Vietnamese cuisine, which in this case is indirectly demarcating lines between Vietnamese and Cambodian foods and culture. In doing so, bánh xèo is categorized solely as Vietnamese.

As I followed up, I asked if the use of the Vietnamese language was a requirement. For them, it was no; as highly educated members of the diaspora—Amy even calls herself a global citizen—the use of English did not bother them. However, for Amy and Linh the line of authenticity was drawn at the basic understanding of how to pronounce the name of the dish, which points to at least a minimum language requirement and reveals that they consider language

a somewhat important aspect in their overall hierarchy of what it means to be an authentically Vietnamese beyond food. Sarah had a more neutral response, as it did not bother her as much as the other group members and this may correlate with her relationship with the Vietnamese language. Sarah, who has lived in Vancouver the longest and is relatively fluent in Vietnamese, often dislikes speaking Vietnamese and prefers English. While the mispronunciation was noticed, it didn't register as strongly to close communication between her and the video. Instead, her parameters of authenticity for bánh xèo, and thus larger constructions of Vietnamese culture, laid within other factors. The overall responses to language suggest the importance of employing Vietnamese language within the everyday is related to migration histories and migrant generation. As first generation migrants, Linh and Amy have more emphasis on language as a defining factor of being Vietnamese, while Sarah is largely indifferent at times because she does not use it often in her everyday life (which was explored in Chapter 3).

For Group 2, language played a similar role, but had different dimensions. As Amanda does not speak Vietnamese, it was obvious that she preferred videos and titles in English. Jake also preferred English, as his ability to speak and read were, in his own words from a previous interview, "not up to par to where it should be." However, while it seems Jake would be open to a diversity of language skills and accents as someone who struggles with Vietnamese, he was clear to point out accents of English-speaking tutorials that differed from Vietnamese or North American accents. After searching "banh xeo recipe," Amanda selected "Banh Xeo, Crispy Vietnamese Pancakes" by user Thuy Diem Pham due to it being in the top five, its preview picture, and having "quality" production. After Jake noted the "Food Network quality" in an impressed tone, he second reaction was in response to Thuy Diem Pham's voice when she started speaking, asking where her accent was from. After I replied she sounded British, Amanda was

noting how the image was colorful and the steps were clearly shown. However, Jake showed a disinterest in the video. After Pham comments about how bánh xèo is a popular dish in "Ho Chi Minh City," Jake immediately responded with "She called it Ho Chi Minh City—of course she's British!" It was soon after that the video was stopped. Another similar occurrence was when "Banh Xeo with Ba Ngoai (Traditional Vietnamese Pancake)" by Forking Delicious was played. As the video had Forking Delicious cook with her grandmother (ba ngoai translates to maternal grandmother), Amanda found the video "cute," but Jake only noticed Forking Delicious' Australian accent.

For both of these videos, Jake did not really explore or discuss the video's tutorial over the actual cooking of bánh xèo, which further illustrates how discussions of categories of authenticity spill over into other realms of culture. Although it was not a complete crossing of his classification of authenticity, once Jake heard different accents that he did not register as being part of the "normal" Vietnamese diaspora (e.g. North American), it seemed to create a space where he could instantly question the qualifications of person to cook "real" Vietnamese food. As a Canadian, this reaction to British and Australian accents may have several levels of interpretation. With British Columbia a former part of the British colonial system (and as someone who grew up in Canada), Jake may be unwilling to cede any cultural power to the British or its colonial sister, Australia, in defining what it means to part of the Vietnamese diaspora. As this dissertation illustrates, the Vietnamese in Vancouver are constantly being defined through other sites of diasporas (specifically Vietnamese Americans). But in a larger Canadian sense, several scholars have noted this construction of identity from the outside is true for most of Canadian identities, which in British Columbia partly results from the lingering

effects of British imperialism.[26] In this case, Jake as a Vietnamese Canadian is partly reacting to the compounded impact of being defined by other diasporas *and* the British, which encourages him to resist by rejecting the video altogether. Additionally, Pham's use of "Ho Chi Minh City" pushed her over the line of authenticity by failing to communicate a nuanced but basic understanding of Vietnam and its cultural history. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City to honor the late revolutionary leader of the communist North Vietnam. However, while it may be listed as Ho Chi Minh City in official documents and titles, very little people in Vietnam actually call it by that, preferring Saigon.[27] While language was not the final aspect that placed Pham outside of Jake' schema of the authentic, her accent produced shaky credentials from the start for Jake, leading to a downplaying of her actual cooking abilities which were never discussed.

Ingredients

It is interesting to note for Group 1, there was not much debate over what specific ingredients constituted a bánh xèo. In having a previous relationship with each other and their connections through a Vietnamese cultural club, Sarah assumed "because we eat the dish often that we know what is in the ingredients and what is inside." This resulted in a general consensus of what ingredients to use, leading to Group 1 to be more focused on cooking methods, rather than using the videos to determine what exact ingredients to put into the dish. However,

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[26] Serra Tinic points to the "legacy of British colonial rule" as being seeped in Canadian-produced variety shows. Elana Levine also notes how Canadian identity is seemingly produced through its relationship with other powers, including the British. See Serra Tinic, *On Location: Canada's Television Industry in a Global Market* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 124 and Elana Levine, "Crossing the Border: Studying Canadian Television Production," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, eds Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2009), 156.

[27] There may also be political overtones associated with using one name over the other, but in this specific context, Jake does not identify as being active in the political discussions between North and South Vietnamese.

ingredients did matter in different ways for the actual shopping and cooking. In asking why they brought certain brands at the market, they responded:

> Amy: This is how I go shopping for the ingredients, Vietnamese food is getting more popular now …I will read which one is from Vietnam. If I can't find any one from Vietnam, I pick any one from Thailand. If I can't find anything from Thailand, and I desperately need it, I *may* pick something from China, otherwise I may not make that dish that day.
>
> Linh: I agree…For the brand that we got…it's a popular brand, Vĩnh Thuận, it's one of most popular ones. I think my family uses that one too.
>
> Sarah: I would not [look]. I just try it out and if it doesn't work I'll try something else.

Similar to Sarah, Linh relies on past physical experiences with the dish to do the heavy lifting in deciding what to put in the bánh xèo. While studies of recipes and cookbooks can explore how national cuisines become imagined and legitimatized, it is up the amateur chef to interpret, localize, and ground the digital recipe. In this case, Linh points to her family as site of authenticating ingredients and brands.

Perhaps most interesting is Amy's explanation above. As her response illustrates, her sourcing of ingredients for Vietnamese dishes depends on hierarchical relationships between national cuisines. For her, Thai and Vietnamese cuisines have parallel tastes palates, such as the use of fish sauce.[28] As she elaborated,

> Amy: I think Thai cuisine and Viet cuisine is pretty close. It's just a little bit different in…
>
> Linh: Seasoning.
>
> Amy: It's more, yeah, seasoning. More of sugar or less of sugar, more of spice. But Viet cuisine and Chinese cuisine are actually different…

With authenticity drawn on national borders, Amy (with some agreement with Linh) draws a clear line between Vietnam and Chinese cuisines. Much like language can stop a YouTube

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[28] It should also be noted that many of the most popular Vietnamese fish sauce brands are produced in Thailand.

video, the use of Chinese products may result in a Vietnamese dish not even being produced due to the products' inability to reproduce an authentic Vietnamese taste.

Although it is extremely difficult to empirically prove which nations have more similar cuisines in relation to each other—raising again to the problematic assumption that a national cuisine can be reduced to one singular dish or flavor—we can perhaps point to larger global and historical relations between Vietnam and China that reflect why Amy would wish to clearly distinguish the two. As briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, it was the mistrust between the two countries that lead to the initial mass exodus of Sino-Vietnamese in 1978. As both growing economic powers in Asia, there also has been increasing competition between the two countries. Additionally within Vancouver, Chinese and Chinese Canadian cultures dominate in terms of visibility. In making this distinction, Amy is not only demarking Vietnamese flavors, but also spaces of existence within a city most would consider Chinese.

Of the three, Sarah seems the least interested in how to source her ingredients; this may be due to her lack of experience cooking Vietnamese food, as she prefers cooking Western foods as it is easier to make after a long day at work (this will be explored below). Nevertheless, her comment implies flavor does matter, though not the specific brand or its origins. As someone who has little connection to Vietnam as a nation-state, she is less inclined to debate differences between Vietnam and other countries in Asia. Although she was not interested in the specifics of the ingredients based on national origins, Sarah still had the criteria for ingredients—for her, key ingredients needed to be visualized on the video's preview for her to pick it. For bánh xèo, Sarah was adamant that the video preview "has to have vegetables in there, if it's just the bánh xèo by itself, it's not complete, it has to have nước mắm [fish sauce] and rau [lettuce and herbs]." To Sarah, presenting these ingredients showed knowledge on how to correctly eat bánh xèo, which

meant the producers of videos had more authority over Vietnamese food. As Sarah explains, part of what makes bánh xèo authentic is the social act of eating it as a communal group where all of the side accessories (lettuce, herbs, etc.) are placed in the center of the table. As explored in Chapter 3, this is parallel to her notions of community, where the specifics and roots of cultural elements are not her main emphasis, but rather it is the feeling of community that draws her to Vietnamese culture. In this case, while there are mentions of specific ingredients, it is their function in producing the social act of eating as a group that makes a dish "complete."

In opposition to Group 1, Jake and Amanda were more active in determining what ingredients to use through the YouTube videos, although in different ways. Reflecting on his previous uses of YouTube, Jake explains:

> Jake: Since I live with my grandmother and my mom as well, I usually consult them first in terms of making stuff. But when I was doing YouTube searches, basically the ingredients were similar to how my grandmother makes it, the only difference I saw was the portions and how they cooked it…but mostly the ingredients are the same. So when I was showing them to my grandma, she was like, "Yeah, that's how you do it!"
>
> […]
>
> Tony: So it's like a confirmation?
>
> Jake: Yeah, it's like a confirmation.

Similar to Linh, Jake also grounds the digital videos by using his family to triangulate flavors, ingredients, and cooking methods. Nevertheless, hierarchies of authenticity still apply, with Grandma being the final voice. As Jake explained:

> Yeah, it's like a confirmation, but here is how I [Grandma] do it. Here's how you *should* do it, like this is the right way [small laugh]. It's like there's some sort of competition, okay this video is good but Grandma does it right, she does it the right way.

In placing authenticity with Grandma, Jake localizes his interpretation of global digital flows of Vietnamese cuisine. But in doing so, he also in some ways temporalizes Vietnamese food as

only existing in its authentic form within certain older generations. By locating flavor with his grandmother, there is potential here situate Vietnamese food as nostalgic and *only* rooted in the past. As will be discussed below, this may make it harder for others to innovate or expand the category of Vietnamese cuisine.

Due to her lack of experience with cooking bánh xèo, Amanda relied mostly on YouTube to confirm and triangulate her ingredients. As she detailed:

> Because of what you said, you used the word confirmation, looking up more than one recipe…I think that's part of my process of looking up recipes via YouTube videos, looking up the same recipe done by different YouTubers to confirm what are the classic elements of the bánh xèo and what are the modifications.

From these videos, she described some of her most important "classic elements": a crisp crust (made through the use of either beer or coconut soda in the batter) and a strong coconut flavor. As she elaborated on how her final list of ingredients materialized,

> I usually notice that I hardly stay 100 percent faithful to a video , what I end up doing is sort of a mix of things I've seen, though I will refer to one as my main one, like one that had a really good set of instructions and was really clear. Though she [the YouTuber] didn't use coconut cream and I really want to use coconut cream so I'm going to end up doing that.

Unlike the other participants—who are all part of the Vietnamese diasporas—Amanda was initially much more open to mixing and matching videos and was perhaps comparatively not limited to such strict frameworks of authenticity in relation to Vietnamese cuisine. Rather than focusing on one source, she ended up watching and commenting on the most videos, picking up details across several of them while Jake often seem disengaged. Thus, while most of the Vietnamese diasporic participants relied on history and experiences, which could possibly narrow categories of Vietnamese cuisine, Amanda was more free of these historical links and open to watch more videos and try new things in relation to Vietnamese cuisine.

On method that she especially felt was needed was the use of beer or coconut soda in the batter for a crisp crust. Initially, Jake was skeptical of the practice, as his Grandmother never used carbonated beverages in her batter. But as Amanda begin pointing out multiple videos that did so (with proper accents), Jake agreed to try it out. Amanda was also resolute in having a strong coconut flavor. When I questioned her about where she got this flavor, she stated that she pulled from her local, material experiences with bánh xèo in Vancouver and based her flavor profile off of a dish from *House Special*, which had a strong coconut flavor.

As these examples illustrate, the flavors of YouTube cooking tutorials never emerge from the screen as whole entity as viewers are able to ignore, mashup, triangulate, and materially localize ingredients and flavors from the physical spaces and their memories and experiences. While authenticity played a role in constructing certain boundaries around certain aspects and ingredients of Vietnamese cuisine, it also begins to create spaces where definitions could be challenged or reaffirmed in terms of nation, history, and local experiences.

Preparation and Cooking

To the surprise of all of the participants, after we returned from the market and began cooking, no group revisited the videos for details. As Amanda recounts as we reflected on the session,

> I think definitely before we weren't following a video to the tee, that wasn't, we just kind of did it. I thought maybe we would watch the video again and kind of think about all of the steps. But we just kind of did it [small laughs].

While there were some (friendly) negotiations on the topic of adding coconut soda to the batter, once cooking began, Amanda ceded to Jake on the actual cooking process. As she explains,

> I learned that it was interesting because this was the first time I made this and all of the knowledge I had was from the videos. But [Jake] had his own history and experience with the recipe.

While I do believe gender does play a role in this context, Amanda's response hints at perceptions of cultural legitimacy being the larger factor in letting Jake take the lead in cooking, pointing to his experiences with his grandmother as something that makes this dish more than just food. While she mentioned before the cooking process that she felt comfortable cooking just based on the videos, she initially relied on watching Jake.

Sarah and Linh also noted how once the cooking process started, there was little discussion about the videos:

> Sarah: We looked at the video, but we never referred back. Actually you know, it wasn't that hard. Once you know the batter, you just basically put everything in.
>
> Linh: Basically it's about the batter, how to get it right, and then how to make it.

When I asked in the past when they have used YouTube if they ever referred back, Linh replied:

> Linh: No, for me I do everything by feeling, even at home…There's no recipe.
>
> Amy: It's a thing about Vietnamese cooking, a little bit of this, a little bit of that, how do you know? I don't know [laughs]!
>
> Sarah: Yeah that's right [laughs]!

As it can be seen in both groups, a lot of improvisation occurred during the cooking process. So while they did favor watching and discussing particular videos that they deemed more authentic in different ways (and do so often in their everyday lives), none of them actually followed any of the videos step-by-step, which showcases a textual reading of these videos may not encompass how recipes and digital food objects travel between on- and offline spaces.

Once cooking started, more were concerned with the physical forms of food. As quoted above, Sarah's comment of "actually you know, it wasn't that hard," showed an expression a small surprise. When I asked if any of them would cook this dish again, Sarah replied:

> I may make this, but I may have to have someone else and maybe cut the portion down, umm, less. So then it'll be quick. Because I'm not going to spend two hours, because two hours including the cooking and cleaning, then the shopping, that's three or four hours. I don't mind baking for four hours, but I do mind cooking for four hours. Let's just say that…For this [cooking] you actually have to be physically there for the process.

As this comment suggests, Sarah's statement and surprise that "it wasn't that hard" implied a preexisting idea of what cooking Vietnamese cooking is: difficult. However, looking closer, it seems that she's not referring to the actual cooking process—which she would later label as "easy"—but rather the time commitment it takes to produce an authentic bánh xèo. In addition to the prepping, cooking, and cleaning, she also referenced shopping, which is shaped by Vancouver's physical space. While YouTube tutorials and recipes can easily list ingredients, there is a time aspect of actually procuring them. In the context of Vancouver, Asian markets are generally geared towards the larger Chinese population. While there is some overlap—and reflecting Amy's earlier comment about Chinese and Vietnamese cuisines—the larger Asian Markets (like T&T (Chinese) or H-Mart (Korean)) do not always carry food products commonly used in Vietnamese cuisine. Although there are smaller Asian Markets that cater to more of a Southeast Asian consumer across the metro Vancouver area, they are relatively "out of the way" for Sarah.

When Sarah brings up the concept of difficulty, all members of the group see the labor necessary to produce Vietnamese food as multifaceted. As they discuss:

> Linh: But that's the reason why I want to show, like I want my friends to try to make it, to know how much goes into making this. A lot of work, a lot of different ingredients, spices to make it taste like that.

[…]

Sarah: My girlfriends, who are Vietnamese, prefer to do white food because it is so much easier.

Amy: And most of my Canadian [friends], born or raised, love Vietnamese food but they wouldn't try to make it. It's too much work. Actually, it discourages to try to make it, because that's why I don't make a lot of Vietnamese food at home. For one, it's just me eating it…the other [non-Vietnamese family] just tasting it and sometimes liking it, sometimes not. For the kids, it's just strange, just strange for them. And for me to ask them to make something so complicated, they're just going to walk away.

The clearest binary is Sarah's comparison of "white food" as easy, and Vietnamese food as being difficult. However, this is not necessarily an insult to "white food"—in a previous interview, Sarah stated she prefers to cook foods like pastas and Italian foods. In this context, it is actually a determent for her to even attempt to cook Vietnamese food, a feeling Amy shares. In doing so, both give Vietnamese food some exotic flair that places it outside of normal or easy. For Amy, her construction of Vietnamese cuisine adds to the building amount of labour she must do as a mother and the complex negotiations she must do with raising mixed-raced children in a diasporic context. However, this construction also sets up that when they cook Vietnamese food, it has a special register to the meal because it is so labour-intensive.

Linh also sees the cultural value in demonstrating and showcasing the labor involved in producing Vietnamese food, but not necessarily as a hindrance. While Vietnamese food can come out of a Vietnamese restaurant with speed and cheaply, it also obscures the hours of labour and preparation that go into any dish. If food is often linked to the body and nation, it would be in the interest these bodies and nations to elevate how their food is presented and imagined. Here, there is cultural capital in expressing Vietnamese food preparation as difficult because it also presents Vietnamese cuisine and culture as complex and intricate, connoting definitions of class that often are not applied to Vietnamese cuisine. As part of the newer transnational

migrants that come from higher classes than those of refugees, Linh has an interest in pushing Vietnamese food past notions of being cheap and simple street food. For her, the labour of Vietnamese food is linked with class and its expression on a public scale.

Redefining Vietnamese Cuisine through Eating Out: The Physical Properties of Cuisine

> [My husband] was like, "it's authentic Vietnamese, I read about it on Yelp." I was like it is not authentic. Okay, you can tell first and foremost by the name cause it don't got a number in it. Second of all you can tell by the bathroom. If it was legit, the bathroom would double as a supply closet. When I pee, I need to see 10 gallons of bleach, an ATM machine, and a grandmother with glaucoma napping in the corner. And the wait staff here is too nice; we need to leave this place deaf and emotionally abused!
>
> -Ali Wong, *Baby Cobra*[29]

When I ask Amelie Nguyen, the co-owner of *Anh + Chi* restaurant in Vancouver, if her restaurant ever struggles to deal with stereotypes of Vietnamese restaurants—such as those mentioned above in comedian Ali Wong's standup—she replies with an exhausted, almost resentful, "All the time!" Amelie comes from a long line of restaurant owners. Her grandmother ran a popular café in Saigon throughout and after the Vietnam War, in which it served as a central hub and meeting space for local artists and the community. In the early 1980s, her parents left Vietnam as boat people. Born in a refugee camp, Amelie and her family eventually resettled in Vancouver when she was a toddler. Missing the sense of community they had in Saigon, they opened a pop-up phở shop in 1983, which was then shut down because her family did not know about food licenses and permits. Eventually, they were able acquire a legal space on Main Street under the restaurant's initial name, Phở Hoang, which is recognized as the first official and longest operating phở restaurant in Vancouver. As Amelie describes it, in terms of overall food, it was a typical Vietnamese restaurant considering it was the first.

[29] Ali Wong, *Baby Cobra*, Netflix, dir. Jay Karas, May 5, 2016.

After over 30 years of operating as Phở Hoang, Amelie's father passed away in 2014, leaving the business to her mother. Although Amelie and her brother grew up in the restaurant as children, they were not particularly interested in taking over the business or engaging with the local Vietnamese community. While she did second-handedly interact with the community through her parents and understands some of its dynamics, she notes "But again I didn't really…I assimilated pretty well. I didn't do Vietnamese things." For Amelie, who went to college in the United States and spent significant time living abroad, she saw her future as being focused on a career in heath management when her father passed away. With her mother struggling to keep the business running, Amelie and her brother returned to Vancouver to take over the business and decided to revamp the restaurant space.

For this process, Amelie took a few months to travel around Vietnam in search of influences and began importing materials to be used in the restaurant. After the emotional process of renovating Phở Hoang, which included removing the foundation her father placed himself, the restaurant opened under the new name of *Anh + Chi* [Brother and Sister] in 2016. Bringing in tiles, dishes, and lanterns directly from Vietnam, *Anh + Chi* may be the most "Vietnamese" restaurant based on their materials and décor alone, as the bulk of it originated from Vietnam. Named one of most beautiful and photogenic restaurants in Vancouver and Canada, *Anh + Chi*'s decor is commonly described as sleek, modern, and clean.[30] The restaurant features minimalistic lighting, intricate tile work, vintage wall paper, warm wood furniture, and bold and contrasting colors. While slick with its use of clean lines, Amelie explains "the space is modern, but if you really take the time to ask for the story…[you can] see the details of it and the

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[30] Alice Chen, "10 Most Beautiful Vancouver Restaurants," *Daily Hive*, November 15, 2016, http://dailyhive.com/vancouver/most-beautiful-restaurants-vancouver-2016; Alexandra Gill and Marie-Claude Lortie, "Dining in Style," *Canada's 100 Best*, n.d., http://canadas100best.com/restaurant-design/.

traditional pieces in there." In describing the ideas behind her and her brother's redesigning of the space, Amelie states

> part of [the space] is respecting, recognizing, and showing certain aspects that we remember as kids, what our parents experienced during their time growing up in Vietnam, and what we've seen during our travels back.

An example of framework can be seen in their use of antique lanterns from Vietnam around the restaurant space, which was inspired by their father's lantern collection and one of the few things he was able to take when leaving Vietnam.

While the aesthetics of the space are definitely personal, there were also underlying politics in redesigning the space in this specific manner. As Amelie admits, one of her missions with this restaurant is to disrupt this link between "cheapness" and Vietnamese food:

> I'm trying to break the stigma of Vietnamese food having to be cheap and a hole in the wall. I think it is charming and I go around and find hole in the walls all the time, but it doesn't all have to be holes in the wall.

As her response suggests, Amelie follows Leschziner's recognition of food or cuisine as existing beyond the ingredients on a dish; in the context of today's food scene, the classification of a restaurant serving "Vietnamese cuisine" has larger connotations related to not only what it can serve, but what it can look like. For example, in press coverage of *Anh + Chi*'s opening, articles would always bring comparison to how different *Anh + Chi* looked compared to other "traditional" and "no-frills" Vietnamese restaurants.[31] In interweaving several threads of history within a modern space, the restaurant is able to respond to classed notions of Vietnamese restaurants. Within *Anh + Chi*, Vietnam, in both of its past forms (through Amelie's parents' experiences) and current forms (through her own journey), can be represented as modern, sleek,

[31] See Chen, "10 Most Beautiful Vancouver Restaurants."

and photogenic, which challenges common perceptions of where Vietnamese cuisine can be served and eaten, as well as larger imaginations of Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora.

Yet, while the space is a hybrid of the modern and the traditional, the food is clearly labeled as "authentic" in their signage, menus, website, and across their social media platforms (e.g. #authenticvietnamese is commonly used on Instagram). As Amelie explains the restaurant's food philosophy, "we wanted straight-forward Vietnamese food…Some traditions are meant to be kept and for food, I wanted to keep that." Thus, while the presentation of food may be described as more "upscale," her menu and pricing do not deviate far from "traditional" or typical Vietnamese (North American) restaurants, and is focused on common noodle soups, rice dishes, and spring rolls seen in most other Vietnamese restaurants. As she notes, perhaps the largest difference (besides plating and service) is in how the restaurant sources organic, higher quality, and local ingredients, which does raise her overall prices; however, Amelie is clear to assert that their food is still authentic, accessible, and affordable for the local community. In labeling her food unapologetically authentic, *Anh + Chi* creates a physical space that challenges notions of the "hole-in-the-wall" Vietnamese joint. As more and more people Instagram the space and food, *Anh + Chi*'s juxtaposing yet blending of a sleek and modern space with traditional and authentic Vietnamese cuisine begins to destabilize stereotypical views of Vietnamese restaurants and their resulting connotations of class and backwardness that form the humor in Ali Wong's comedy.

What is important here to note is how she does not wish to replace all "hole in the wall" Vietnamese restaurants with upscale versions, but argues for a multiplicity of different classifications of Vietnamese cuisines, ranging from holes in the walls, her own restaurant, and restaurants like *House Special* (discussed below). Pointing to the diversity of experiences in

everyday life, she feels a restaurant like hers can be seen as a place where you can have a "traditional" Vietnamese Sunday family meal, but also where you can experience feelings of being at a special occasion with a craft cocktail or fancy date and still consume authentic and familiar flavors. For Amelie, there are certain politics at play in how she constructs authentic Vietnamese cuisine to include clean and modern spaces. It cannot be ignored that she is running a business and economics plays a role here; there are of course underlying economic reasons of why she would invest in this specific construction of authenticity for profit. Yet, if the restaurant is also sourcing more local, sustainable, and higher quality ingredients, she also needs a category of Vietnamese cuisine that allows her to charge more to match the pricing of her ingredients. But this argument extends beyond simple economics and is related to larger structures of power: why can "New Canadian/American," Japanese, and Chinese restaurants in Vancouver be able to operate within a wide range of pricing, while Vietnamese restaurants like *Anh + Chi* can never charge more than $10 CAD for a bowl of phở?[32]

These current frameworks of interpretation of Vietnamese cuisine also bother Patrick Do, co-owner of *House Special* located in Yaletown, a neighborhood in downtown Vancouver. Along with his mother and sister, Patrick opened *House Special*, a "gastronomical venture" that serves "modern Vietnamese" in 2016.[33] As Patrick describes the restaurant, while they pay respect to "authentic flavors and techniques," they also want to incorporate "progressive twists" and "international flavors." Employing a relatively small menu, some items include banh xeo tacos, sous-vide Shaken Beef (Bò Lúc Lắc), and steak with pho reduction sauce, which range in

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[32] For a broader discussion of how ethnic cuisines are subject to different rules, see Chapter 3 in Leschziner, *At the Chef's Table* and the works in note 9.

[33] Craig Takeuchi, "Yaletown's House Special Helps Advance Vancouver's Vietnamese Culinary Scene," *The Straight*, May 27, 2016, http://www.straight.com/food/706901/yaletowns-house-special-helps-advance-vancouvers-vietnamese-culinary-scene.

price from $11 to $30 CAD. Additionally, they offer "classic" dishes like rice and noodles, but with local and higher-level quality ingredients. Their space is modern with clean lines and crisp colors and fits in the cosmopolitan and stylish Yaletown neighborhood, but as Patrick admits, due to budgetary restrictions, this is more of a result from the previous owner of the space. Perhaps the most significant décor decision is a back wall that features family photos from the their entire time in Vancouver.

Similar to Amelie, Patrick's parents came to Canada in the early 1980s as boat people. After initially picking apples for a few years, his family started a baking operation and soon shifted into the restaurant business, where they first opened a small chain of standard Vietnamese restaurants across Metro Vancouver in the late 1980s. Born in Vancouver, Patrick also was not planning to go into the restaurant business—he has a background in media production and spent a few years working in Los Angles. However after a trip to Vietnam a few years ago, he was inspired to rejoin the family business in Vancouver. As he recounts his trip, it was his experiences with "new" food in Vietnam that pushed him to create *House Special* with his mother and sister. Discussing both Vietnamese cuisine and culture, he recalls

> so I think it's one of those things, like if you are allowed to evolve in Vietnam, why is it not allow to evolve outside of Vietnam? Why do we have to stay in this echo chamber or bubble where everyone does the same thing?

In looking at the Vietnamese food scene in Vancouver, he saw the same concept over and over again, and wanted to challenge local definitions of "traditional" and "authentic" Vietnamese cuisine. Thus, *House Special* came into being and uses the term "modern Vietnamese" to describe itself. While not fully "upscale," the restaurant does attempt to push and advance the boundaries of Vietnamese cuisine.

For Patrick, this means a rejection of the concept of "authenticity"—the word is rarely used in the restaurant's website or social media accounts. As noted above in the beginning of this chapter, Patrick feels authenticity is nearly impossible to achieve; as he elaborates

> So it's very hard to, I think, to get hung up on or caught up on the idea of what is authentic because it's just like a moving target that you'll never be able to catch. Yeah, I think it is a bit of a fool's errand to try to propose something as too classically authentic. And I think, you know, the way we eat in Vietnam and the way we eat in Canada is so different anyways…yeah I don't know, I try not to get caught up on that anyways

While there are certainly connotations of class and culture in which he wishes to disrupt—"is it like a 100 sheet menu, dirty looking location, and nobody speaks English in the thing, is that authentic?"—Patrick's aversion to authenticity also reflects his own position as a Vietnamese Canadian. Seeing "authentic" sometimes used as code for "better," Patrick argues the term creates hierarchies not just between restaurants, but people, which he does not like as a 2nd-generation Vietnamese Canadian who has struggled with his diasporic identity. As he notes above, he does deny the influence of Canada on his personal identity as an individual and restaurant owner. As he discusses *House Special* in relation to his upbringing,

> if you really want to cut hairs, we're a…Canadian Vietnamese because that's my upbringing. I grew up in Canada. The way I ate was strictly Canadian and then I also ate Vietnamese food every day.

Thus, while he looks to Vietnam as a space of inspiration, he does not center it as a site of authenticity in terms of ingredients, but is more attracted to the idea that Vietnamese food, and relatedly culture, has been allowed to grow in new directions (this is further discussed below). In applying this idea to his restaurant, he is not only making a statement about Vietnamese cuisine, but also pushing back towards the idea that culture in the Vietnamese diaspora has to be so static. For Patrick, the restaurant and his vision of the future of Vietnamese cuisine in Vancouver is about accepting difference through the removal of authenticity.

While Patrick notes a desire to escape the echo chamber of the North American Vietnamese food scene, he also understands the difficulty of enacting this theoretical approach in reality and digital spaces. As it has been argued throughout this chapter, when it comes to Vietnamese cuisine, it is not just about the food. For both *House Special* and *Anh + Chi*, this also includes their physical location within the city, along with how their restaurant is presented in online spaces. While there has been some pushback from customers, Patrick feels Yaletown—a swanky downtown neighborhood that attracts young working professionals—is a perfect fit for *House Special* because the restaurant's modern take on Vietnamese cuisine matches the overall aesthetic and feel of the area. *Anh + Chi*, however, has had a harder time with people accepting their version of Vietnamese cuisine partly due to their location. As Phở Hoang, the restaurant existed in a mostly working class area. However, over the last 20 years, the Main Street area in East Vancouver has been shifting to an arts district that features independent retail shops, quirky eateries, and a growing selection of eclectic businesses; as such, it has a growing reputation as a hipster neighborhood. Due to its location and physical appearance, most people come into *Anh + Chi* with the perception of it being a "hipster" restaurant.

A brief scan of Yelp reviews will commonly describe the restaurant as having a "hipster vibe," and though this is not always used negatively, there are several review where the concept of "hipster" is related to the (slightly) higher price points and the "inauthentic" Vietnamese food. In this context, the term "hipster" can imply an economic rip-off and/or a place where flavors of ethnicity are unnecessarily "elevated," commodified and used to charge higher prices. As mentioned in the introduction with the discussion on Akin and "Pho-Gate," the

perception of hipsters within ethnic foods create issues, as "when Asian food becomes hipster, all authenticity is lost."[34]

These reviews also illustrate the larger cultural processes of classifying categories of cuisine. Through this process of labeling a certain restaurant as a specific category, customers and Yelp reviewers are constructing interpretative frameworks based on past experiences. Similar to genre conventions, these classifications prime the customer's expectations in terms of taste and experience. With *Anh + Chi* (and most "ethnic" restaurants that attempt to push the boundaries of cuisines), their food, décor, service, and neighborhood may cause a disconnect between a customer's interpretative framework and their experiences with the space and food. Because Vietnamese cuisine is often defined so narrowly, any change in any of the cultural components of Vietnamese cuisine may cause confusion and instigate accusations of inauthenticity based on a variety of factors, including location and the overall "vibe."

Similarly, despite minor pushback, a constant fear of Patrick with his family's restaurants is people—specifically Vietnamese people—coming into the restaurant and walking out thinking he is "bastardizing" Vietnamese cuisine through his attempts at innovating Vietnamese food by incorporating "progressive twists." In her exploration of how cuisines are classified and categorized, Leschziner notes that the concept of innovation is a key determinant in assessing where the borders of certain cuisine are drawn, as innovation is often positioned against the traditional. While "small" amounts of innovation can occur in all cuisines that do not drastically change its classification, as an abstract term, the threshold of acceptable innovation is not applied equally across different types of cuisine.[35]

[34] Dakota Kim, "Why You Should Care about the Bon Appetit Pho Uproar."
[35] Leschziner, *At the Chef's Table*, 57-58.

As the Yelp reviews above suggest, the threshold of innovation or change within Vietnamese cuisine is fairly low; from ingredients, décor, or pricing, any perception of change outside the typical Vietnamese joint often results in accusations of inauthenticity, or the classification of something outside the boundaries of Vietnamese cuisine. These forms of "culinary conservativism," according to Peter Scholliers and Anneke Geyzen, go beyond food are frequently linked to complex histories.[36] For many in the Vietnamese diaspora, this is somewhat obvious as why there is a conservative streak when it comes to Vietnamese food; as a diaspora of mostly exiles and refugees, it makes sense that these groups would be nostalgic about their food, as it is one of the few key sites of culture they can still possess. In many ways, this classification of cuisine mirrors the fact that much of the Vietnamese culture in the diaspora is processed through a pre-1975 view of Vietnam, where many desire and hope for their homeland, but only the 1975 version. As Patrick describes it, Vietnamese cuisine in Vancouver is "trapped in amber."

Within this context, Amelie understands why some people may reject her restaurant. As she discusses the criticism of the restaurant not being Vietnamese enough, she is sympathetic towards those in the Vietnamese community that feel the restaurant is not aimed towards them. As she explains about people feeling resentment about being left out,

> it's rightfully so, because they almost feel are we not good enough? Is Vietnamese food not good enough that you have to fuse it now? So I think they're defensive of what's wrong with the way I cook it at home? Why are you changing it? And they're scared they are going to lose their culture.

While Amelie wishes to redefine what Vietnamese cuisine can mean in all of its forms (food, décor, service, etc.), she also recognizes there are generational and classed dimension to this

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[36] Peter Scholliers and Anneke Geyzen, "Upgrading the Local: Belgian Cuisine in Global Waves," *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 10, no. 2 (2010): 52-54.

redefinition. In employing modern aesthetics and fancy craft cocktails, the new environment may not be comfortable for former customers of Phở Hoang and could be read as a rejection of the past and the "old ways" of many within the Vietnamese diaspora. However, in addition to her constant employment of the discourses of the "authentic" and "traditional" when it comes to the food (and her complete avoidance of "fusion"), she also hopes her family's personal story can help ameliorate some of the anxieties expressed above. For Amelie, *Anh + Chi* is not a representation of a loss of culture, but rather a space that moves forward through honoring and celebrating the past. However, as Amelie notes, this is a delicate balancing act that she still does not fully understand, but is constantly in her mind as she runs her restaurant.

Conclusion: Cultivating New Connections through Cuisines

As this illustrates, the process of defining Vietnamese cuisine and all of its components are always in flux, where everyday experiences, including media, may shift one's perceptions of categories of cuisine. While Jake is often rigid in his views of Vietnamese food, the increased circulation of digital food also has the potential to force him to experience a wide variety of difference that may not occur in his physical environment. After watching several YouTube cooking videos by Vietnamese and Vietnamese diaspora and our discussion, Jake began to recognize his own limits of how he understood Vietnamese cuisine. As he explained:

> Jake: I guess what surprised me most would probably be how the videos did it in different ways that I'm not used to. When I was watching the video, like throwing in beer or coconut soda, I wouldn't see it being made at home, so I guess in some ways my perspectives of Vietnamese food can be narrow, narrow-minded. Some aspects. But in the end, it is still delicious, it still taste like bánh xèo. That's cool.
>
> Amanda: See that's something I might not know…is that how bánh xèo tastes [light laugh]?

Jake: In the end, this *is* how it should be taste, it's just done different. I guess what we call authentic Vietnamese food, it's fairly subjective rather than objective right? Because every family probably makes their bánh xèo different.

Taking in account that this is a constructed research event (where Jake understands he is being studied), I still argue that through being exposed to the videos and their various constructed versions of Vietnamese cuisine, Jake's interaction with the multiple way in how to prepare a dish left an opening for accepting different versions of bánh xèo as authentically Vietnamese. We can see this in his acceptance of Amanda's inclusion of coconut soda that food is subjective and open to interpretation by the diverse tastes of individuals and families.

Of course, Jake' comments illustrate the dual nature and limits of discourses of authenticity, as he reduced the taste of bánh xèo to a singular essence. However, his comments also showcase the complexity of how discourses of authenticity in digital forms get translated into material spaces. Due to search algorithms and various other factors, both groups received generally the same search results, and there was much overlap in terms of what was watched. Yet, looking at the final product, they produced different versions of bánh xèo; perhaps the biggest difference was that Group 1 used only water for their batter while Group 2 used coconut milk and coconut soda. As Group 2 remarks on the videos:

Amanda: Yeah, they were definitely helpful…they gave me a general idea, maybe a bit more than general, and from there we just did it.

Jake: And in the end with videos, you're never going to get everything right with a video….it's great tip advice.

While it may be suggested that as specific videos and YouTubers rise to the top in search hits and possibly homogenize specific national flavors, it does not seem to operate that way once we leave online spaces—family, friends, physical infrastructures, and our own cooking habits all

impact these digital recipes before they hits our tongues.[37] As explored in Chapter 2, while algorithms may initially organize the manner in which we engage with digital media, these texts are also consumed within larger frameworks and environments, making the impact of algorithms more fuzzy and uneven.

Potentially more political is being open to creating new categories of tastes and techniques under the concept of Vietnamese cuisine that potentially provides more spaces for inclusion. For example, when I asked Jake if there was any sense of shame using YouTube to learn Vietnamese food (implying his lack of knowledge represents inauthenticity), he replied:

> I think before, maybe. But since my grandmother goes on YouTube as well to go to, like, Vietnamese dishes she's never made, it feels more comfortable that my parents, my grandparents also utilize YouTube to make food. It makes that sort of connection, in terms of communication a lot easier. It becomes more relatable.

In this context, Jake is expanding his ideas of what can be classified as authentic cuisine; recognizing that his parents and grandparents, who were born in Vietnam, employ the same techniques as him, a 2nd-generation Vietnamese Canadian, to produce Vietnamese food, it creates a sense of inclusion that breaks down barriers between generations and diasporas.

In a similar manner, Patrick points to Vietnamese street food bánh tráng nướng ("Vietnamese pizza") and nem chua rán (Vietnamese corn dogs) he first encountered while browsing YouTube as examples of Vietnam cuisine that is innovating and adapting to contemporary flavors. He also notes how *House Special*'s growing online presence has allowed them to connect with chefs in Vietnam, leading him to ask, "if they [chefs in Vietnam] take inspiration from us, does that make us more authentic?" While a rhetorical question, it does

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[37] Of course the fear of homogenization due to globalism has often been filtered through food, with terms such as McDonaldization or Coca-Cola culture. However, several academic works have shown the processes of globalization are much more complex and can include the localization of global entities. See Justin I. Watson and Melissa I. Caldwell, eds, *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating: A Reader* (Malden: Routledge, 2005).

reveal the ways in which broader conceptualizations of Vietnamese cuisine can possibly create new connections across national borders. As the examples of Jake, *Anh + Chi*, and *House Special* illustrate, there is potential for diasporic assertions of belonging to an umbrella category of Vietnamese cuisine that manages to break down borders between diasporic communities and those from the motherland through an recognition that a "cuisine" can encompass various histories and definitions of Vietnamese food. Through this process of categorization, food can operate as a mode of inclusion that showcases transnational links and increase the interplay between Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic cultures to produce new definitions of Vietnamese food that both recognizes and accepts local and national differences. However as the occasional Yelp review illustrates, authenticity as a process of categorizing Vietnamese cuisine is a contradictory and dual-wielding process that can also cut as it fuses.

Chapter 5
Vancouver Never Plays Itself: Vietnamese Canadian Culture through Vietnamese American Frameworks

Introduction

The 2016 promotional video for the annual Youth Development Leadership Camp (YDLC), operated by the Houston, Texas-based Vietnamese Cultural Society (VCS), opens with a melody of soft strings over visuals of a calm body of water.[1] As the video continues, text appears on the screen telling the viewer that the summer camp this year "opens with a new chapter, with greater expectations, with more leaders, with more passion." It implores the viewer to "continue your journey with us, for the first time ever in Vancouver, Canada." As the text of "Vancouver, Canada" appears on the screen, the music crescendos and the tempo increases as the video fades into a shot of the Canadian flag waving in the wind against the backdrop of rippling water and the lush greenery of North Vancouver's forests. Incorporating footage from previous camps that includes physical activity and team-building exercises, the video continues to outline the potential journey at this year's YDLC in Vancouver, a four-day event that will be filled with inspiration, passion, and collaboration, all with the goal to create a vibrant (diasporic) Vietnamese community in North America.

Of course as a planned event, the journey to the 2016 YDLC extends beyond one summer weekend. This chapter analyzes the YDLC and its organizers as both an event and a process to further explore how interactions and relationships among diasporic groups travel between on- and offline spaces. While the previous chapters have mostly explored how digital objects from other diasporas tumble through networks and become translated or reproduced in Vancouver,

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[1] All names of programs, clubs, and people have been changed, unless noted otherwise.

this chapter also considers the implications when diasporic groups that have ties across digital networks cross physical borders to engage with each other in person. As a transnational collaboration between the VCS in the United States, the VCS-Vancouver branch, and various other branches around North America, the YDLC represents the convergence of multiple Vietnamese North American diasporas in both mediated spaces and face-to-face interactions, ranging from Google Chats, Facebook chats, email chains, living room meetings, and the Vancouver campsite. As the camp in its various formats circulated through these specific contexts, its cultural and symbolic meanings and representations were in constant flux and subject to debate.

In exploring the planning of the camp and the camp experience itself, this chapter details the relationships and power dynamics that emerged between members of the VCS and the VCS-Vancouver branch and how various visions and goals of the camp were negotiated as the camp and its cultural meanings were imported into Vancouver. As outlined in Chapter 2, the theories of digital technologies and networks often stress the opportunities afforded by these technologies to decenter power structures and flows of culture, allowing for everyday users to surpass various barriers of time and space to connect to others, critique power structures, and potentially circulate and interact with a wider diversity of digital objects. Through mediated encounters, many members of VCS-Vancouver perceived specific cultural and ideological differences from their more influential Vietnamese American counterparts, which are rooted in the local histories and narratives of the Vietnamese community in Vancouver. In order to localize the camp, VCS-Vancouver requested during the planning process to modify some of the camp's long-running structure and programing, namely the addition of more "progressive" topics and the removal of the "political" South Vietnamese flag.

However, these requests by VCS-Vancouver were denied and I argue the processes of their dismissal by the VCS illustrate how some Vietnamese American organizations continue to dominate the discourses and images that surround Vietnamese diasporic cultures. While I do not deny that the connections established through digital networks played a central role in bringing the U.S.-based YDLC to Vancouver and shaped its planning process, I argue the campsite and its planning also demonstrate how dominant nodes of cultural power can still exist across different diasporas in a digital age, allowing for the (re)establishment of certain voices and leaders within the diaspora to continue controlling and shaping definitions of diasporic culture across transnational borders. Through VCS-Vancouver's interactions with VCS and their eventual failure to insert themselves and their community into the structure of the camp, the YDLC serves as a transnational example of Nhi T. Lieu's argument of how "the reproduction of class privilege has enabled elite voices to emerge as cultural gatekeepers of the Vietnamese diaspora."[2] In this context, diasporic groups from the more established U.S. diasporas—and Eastern Canada to a certain extent—are able to define a hierarchy of what is properly "Vietnamese" in Vancouver and, in this process, ignore the diversity of Vietnamese diasporas across North America. In doing so, I argue that while the YDLC potentially provides a site for community building and transnational connection, it ultimately represents a lost opportunity for the Vietnamese in Vancouver to express themselves and their community in their own terms on both a local and transnational level.

This chapter draws from several sources of data. First, to craft a brief overview of the VCS, VCS-Vancouver, and their overall mission, I look at their websites and the official camp guidebook distributed to every camper that provides background history and approved

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[2] Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 2.

documents describing the camp. Additionally, I conducted interviews with Vancouver-based camp leaders, staff, and attendees before and after the YDLC to discuss their roles and experiences in planning and/or attending the camp. I also draw from my own ethnographic observations as a hybrid staff member and camper. As a staff member, I attended VCS-Vancouver meetings that focused on the planning of the camp, as well as assisted with logistical tasks directly before and after the camp. Similar to my role in organizations in Chapter 3, I took a mostly background and supporting role within these meetings to minimize my impact on discussions, decisions, or debates, usually deferring to the organization's leaders. During the actual camp, I was an active participant and immersed myself in the full camp experience by partaking in the camp's activities, workshops, and games. In being a hybrid staff/camper—in addition to being a Vietnamese American living in Vancouver—I was able to see and experience various perspectives of the YDLC, as well as the cultural negotiations, power struggles, and discussions that accompanied its journey into and through Vancouver.

To clarify my position in this project, as a Native Texan, I was somewhat aware of the YDLC, VCS, and their branch in the Dallas/Ft. Worth (DFW) area before joining the VCS-Vancouver team. As a young teenager in the early 2000s, I attended a dinner hosted by the DFW branch with my older sister. The dinner was focused on providing community networking and advice on how to succeed in college for high school seniors like my sister. To be perfectly transparent, I was there for the free food and had no interest in their programing or the YDLC; beyond that dinner, there was no involvement with the VCS in Texas until I joined the team in Vancouver. Relatedly, I will also note that this chapter is purposely one-sided, in that I mainly draw from Vancouver-based sources; mostly missing from this chapter are voices on the other side of the border, the Houston-based VCS. The reasons for this are both practical and

theoretical. From a practical standpoint, I was simply physically and financially unable to conduct research in Houston, Texas while living in Vancouver, Canada, though it remains a site for future research. More importantly, however, is that I wanted this overall project and chapter to be from a Vancouver point-of-view as much as possible in order to more accurately describe the experiences of Vietnamese Canadians living in Vancouver. From a theoretical standpoint, in addition to centering Vancouver voices, this also means limiting myself only to the engagements experienced by the VCS-Vancouver members. Thus, when the Vancouver chapter is left in the dark during the planning process or provided no information, I am also excluded from details that would most likely provide a better understanding of specific decisions. While this chapter then may not get the "full" story of the YDLC from both sides of the border, the gaps here represent not just the unknown, but also sites of exclusion for those in Vancouver that point to larger power dynamics and relationships among diasporas; it is within these gaps that Vancouverites derive their perceptions, beliefs, and ideologies toward other diasporas and each other.

Going to Camp: Experiencing the YDLC

Houston, Texas is currently home to the largest population of Vietnamese Americans outside of California, numbering around 110,000.[3] The first Vietnamese Americans in Texas were mainly fishermen and shrimpers who found Houston (and nearby New Orleans) conveniently located near the Gulf of Mexico, as well as having humid weather similar to their homeland. Starting in the 1990s, the Vietnamese community in Houston grew substantially as many Vietnamese

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[3] This number refers to the Metro Houston area, which includes Houston, Sugar Land, and Baytown, Texas.

American decided to leave their first homes in San Jose and Orange County, California. Facing rising living and real estate costs that were coupled with a struggling economy, many (former) Californians flocked to Texas due to its low cost of living and cheap housing.[4] With this migration shift also came the economic, social, and cultural capital held by these Vietnamese Americans, with many of these migrants coming from or having ties to the early post-1975 waves of political refugees that mostly consisted of an elite class of high-ranking military officials and/or highly educated people. Thus, while a relatively "young" urban hub for Vietnamese Americans in terms of age, Houston's diasporic identity and history stretches beyond the 1990s and is very similar to California's. Although I do not wish to argue that Southern California and Houston are exactly the same, we can see the heavy Californian influence by the many businesses, cultural centers, and media outlets that thrived in California's Little Saigons establishing and investing in the Houston area, often carrying with them certain cultural and political connotations and meanings (this will be further discussed below).

During this same time, according to their website and camp guidebook, the Vietnamese Cultural Society was established in the early 1990s in Houston as a non-profit organization under the mission to promote excellence in "education, leadership, and skills development through culture and science." Their key objectives involve preserving and developing Vietnamese heritage and culture, promoting the networking of Vietnamese American professionals, and encouraging civic participation and responsibility among Vietnamese Americans. To further reach these goals, they created the annual Youth Development Leadership Camp in the late 1990s, which "started with one idea that young adults of Vietnamese descent from across

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[4] My-Thuan Tran, "Flocking from SoCal to Houston," *LosAngelesTimes.com*, 21 Dec 2007, http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-houston21dec21-story.html.

America will get together to learn about leadership skills and cultural awareness, to develop future leaders of Viet communities overseas and to create lifetime friendship." Although the YDLC remains a singular, annual event, what started as a relatively small program for a select number of youths within the state of Texas has grown immensely in size and scope over the years, with VCS opening branches in California, Minnesota, and Washington, D.C. to host the camp. Although labeled as a "youth" camp, the YDLC uses the term loosely and follows the U.N. definition of youth as anyone under the age of 35, but only allows campers over the age of 18; as such, the camp markets itself as a space for young adult working professionals to network within the context of the general idea of a summer camp. Along with the growth of branches and attendees, the camp's programing evolved over the years to include a wide variety of activities. As their website describes the four day camp,

> The [Youth Development Leadership Camp] program includes many activities such as workshops and forums focused on leadership skills development, team building, and Vietnamese culture and history. The program also provides opportunities for campers to exchange and share ideas on how to improve community and to get people involved. There will be fun games, team challenges and many outdoor activities to accentuate the importance of teamwork as well as the uniqueness of Vietnamese cultural heritage and history.

In the mid-2000s, VCS went international by establishing a Toronto, Canada chapter, which then hosted the YDLC in 2009. Established in 2014, Vancouver is the newest VCS chapter; as some VCS-Vancouver members note, in tracing where and when VCS chapters open or the YDLC takes place, we can see a loose ranking of community strength, and with Vancouver being a recent addition, there are implications of how some see the Vietnamese Vancouver community in the larger VCS system. Nevertheless, Vancouver was selected to host the YDLC in 2016. With a

registration fee of $200 USD (which does not cover transportation costs to and from Vancouver), the camp brought in over 200 campers from around North America.[5]

As many VCS-Vancouver members note, the camp has been an established entity for almost 20 years, and as a result of this, it is a fairly rigid system and runs on a strict timeline and schedule. Thus while the descriptions below are from my experiences at the Vancouver camp, the general outline of camp is similar across the years. Two key elements of the camp are teamwork and team competition. On the first day of camp, after registration and general icebreakers and welcome activities, campers are organized in teams. Team names are decided by the YDLC and change themes every year; according to the camp guidebook, the 2016 team names were based on "values and characters" that are considered "invaluable" within Vietnamese culture. Some team names included Dũng Cảm (courage), Hy Sinh (sacrifice), Quật Cường (resilience), Tự Do (freedom), cấp tiến (progressive), and dân chủ (democracy)—which is my assigned team. The team names are never fully explained as concepts or exactly how they relate to Vietnamese culture. The guidebook does contain definitions and accompanying historical figures and tales that exemplified these terms; however, since none of the people I interviewed (including camp leaders, staff, and counselors) actually read the definitions or knew who wrote them, I will omit a full analysis here.[6]

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[5] While all media, documents, and advertisements label the camp as taking place in Vancouver, the camp actually took place on an island about 10 kilometers north of Metro Vancouver.

[6] For a small example, democracy is defined as "a way of life" and a "political system in which governmental powers are derived from the consent of citizens and vested in different and separate branches of government through regular elections." The description also discusses Phan Chu Trinh, a Vietnamese revolutionary from the late 1800s that argued for democratization during French colonialization. One key thing to note is that there is no discussion or examples across all the team names that are related to the American occupation of Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

For the majority of the rest of the camp, attendees will spend most of their time with their teams, which are guided by a camp counselor, who, by rule, are YDLC alumni. Teams would elect daily leaders and create cheers that showcase their team spirit and name. Throughout the next three days, as part of a larger team competition, each team would be scored at both planned and random times as they proceed through the camp schedule. For example, teams would be graded on how well they did during an activity or based on the level of loudness, energy level, and creativity of their cheers. Additionally, if a camper is not with their team during certain times, this was a signal that the camper was not a "team player" or the daily leader did not have full control over their team. In any case, points would be added or taken from the overall team score and at the end of the weekend, one team would win the grand prize.

With the team competition underscoring the entire event, the camp also consists of several activities and workshops. After a day of mostly team bonding, the second day begins with the official Camp Opening Ceremony. The ceremony involves playing the national anthem of Canada, the United States, and the (former) Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), as all three flags are raised in front of a large wooden gateway structure. As a camp tradition, the structure was built the previous day and features a new design every year; for Vancouver, after the gateway frame was built, the name of the camp was constructed with yellow pieces of wood, with three horizontal red stripes across the name, modeled after the South Vietnamese flag. The ceremony then has Lauren, the head leader of VCS-Vancouver (further discussed below), give an opening statement welcoming all the campers to Vancouver. It is emphasized several times that this is the first time the YDLC is taking place here, with Lauren noting the camp being specifically "geared towards Vancouver." After an acknowledgment to numerous donors and

sponsors, the YDLC has all campers pose in front the gateway structure and flags, where a large group photo is taken.

After the opening ceremony, all campers and staff are required to attend the keynote speech. The speaker selected this year is Catherine, a Vietnamese American lawyer in her late 20s, who is currently employed at a large investment banking corporation in the United States. As her bio states, she is also the grand-daughter of a high ranking South Vietnamese military officer. Catherine opens her keynote by speaking in Vietnamese about her family's escape from Vietnam on April 30th, 1975; as she continues, it is in the honor of the men and women of the Navy ship that saved her family that she served as a Judge Advocate General (JAG) with the U.S. Navy for almost five years after law school. Her speech transitions to larger themes of leadership and hard work, with an emphasis on using leadership skills in ethical ways. Afterwards, the camp then shifts to various activities, which include "small games" that involve physical activity and team sports, as well as planned meals and singing songs around a campfire that are interspersed throughout the weekend. Between these smaller events, there are concurrent smaller workshops that campers can choose from. These include topics such as: Career Aspirations Panel, 21st Century Leadership, Goal Setting, Team Dynamics and You, and Cultural Identity: Who am I? There is also a camp-wide required workshop/interactive lecture that focuses on Vietnamese music.

For the larger team competition, there are three major team building exercises, where a team's performance heavily impacts their final team score. First, is a Team Project Presentation, which combines two teams to present on a topic, which in 2016 was environmentalism. This was mostly a direct response to the current environmental disaster in Vietnam when Formosa, a Taiwanese-owned steel mill, disposed of its waste by polluting over 200 kilometers of the

Vietnamese coastline, killing millions of fish and devastating local economies and food supplies.[7] Informally, it was also seen as being somewhat reflective of Vancouver, which has a reputation for being an extremely environmentally friendly green city (but this was never directly stated, and was seen by Vancouverites more as a coincidence than an active decision).[8] The other two exercises, which will be discussed in detail below, are the Team Skit and the Big Game. Like the Team Project Presentation, the Team Skit pairs two teams and gives them a scenario in which they must create a performance based on the prompt. The "Big Game," as the guidebook describes, is a collection of "competitive and exciting team-game activities" that is very loosely based on an ancient Vietnamese legend. Taking roughly four hours, each team must overcome a variety of physical and mental challenges and will be graded based on "the effectiveness of your performance, your enthusiasm and how well you work together as a team." Afterwards, the final day is dedicated to the closing ceremony, where the flags are taken down and the overall winner of the YDLC is announced. With the major competition over, there is some free time for team reflections, as well as the exchange of personal and professional contacts, such as emails, business information, Facebook friend requests, and Snapchat user names. As mentioned by many campers past and present, it is a great way "to get a bunch of new Facebook friends"; for example, after friending everyone, my team formed a Facebook chat group, which we still (occasionally) use.

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[7] See John Boudreau, Diep Pham, and Mai Ngoc Chau, "Vietnam says Taiwan's Formosa Caused Millions of Fish Deaths," *Bloomberg.com* 20 Jun 2016, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-06-30/toxic-discharge-from-taiwan-s-formosa-caused-vietnam-fish-deaths.

[8] See Jeff Lee, "How Green is Vancouver Now?" *VancouverSun.com* 21 Feb 2014, http://www.vancouversun.com/technology/green+Vancouver/9537550/story.html.

From Texas to Canada: Bringing the YDLC to Vancouver

It is unanimously agreed upon by the VCS-Vancouver team that the local branch and the 2016 YDLC would not exist in Vancouver if it was not for their leader, Lauren. Lauren's parents came to Canada in the early 1990s, just at the end of the wave of "economic refugees." After a short stop in Calgary, her parents resettled in Vancouver where she was born, eventually moving to Surrey, a suburban city east of Vancouver, where she spent most of her childhood. Describing her parents as more supportive than the average Vancouver Vietnamese parents, Lauren points to this support as critical in developing her work ethnic and why she succeeded in school; as she recalls, a key moment in her life was when her father told her that through the move to Canada, "your lifetime and every lifetime after will be better because of it." Lauren attributes her intense work ethic and dedication to seeing the sacrifices of her parents, which continues to act as a driving agent every day in her personal and professional life.

After high school, she attended a local university to specialize in business. While in business school, this personal drive led her to emphasize and develop notions of leadership and professionalism, especially within the local Vietnamese diasporic community. Like many Metro Vancouverites, she describes the current Vietnamese community as fragmented and full of nammers, gangs, drugs, and people who "don't understand their culture or heritage." She points to the major businesses that make up Vancouver's Little Saigon—restaurants, DVD stores, and grocery stores—as limited representations of the community and not necessarily positive. Described by others as very "gung ho," Lauren hopes to rebuild this image of the community through "education, community, leadership, and culture," in that order; as she believes, "when you are successful, you are proud to be Vietnamese," or in other words, when one's economics are in order, the cultural part will take care of itself and happen naturally. As part of this plan,

she helped to revitalize the university's Vietnamese Student Club (discussed in Chapter 3) in the late 2000s and shifted some of its focus as a social club into something more leadership and volunteer-based. As a leader in the student club and searching for various opportunities for herself and the club, she encountered an online advertisement for the YDLC, which was taking place that year in Toronto, and applied for a scholarship which she won.

For Lauren, attending YDLC was a life-changing event. As she describes it, for the first time in her life she felt it was "great to be surrounded by people I wanted to be," which included a "great network of young people" who were or were aspiring to be successful in the realms of education, business, and other fields like medicine or the law. As the only person at the camp from British Columbia, many of the senior leaders of the VCS and YDLC saw her as someone with a spark that could lead to larger things in Vancouver. As a result of this, she easily found mentors and enjoyed both being mentored and the contexts that allowed her to be mentored by someone "successful." In this specific space, she saw everything she wanted in a community, which often was exactly what Vancouver lacked, including the people she "wanted to be" and be around. Her vision of a Vietnamese diasporic community was further cemented when she received an internship in Houston with the VCS, where she was further mentored by the society's founding members and established leaders. Through this internship, she saw in Texas more Vietnamese Americans going to university, as well as a general celebration of the community's successes, like an annual ceremony that recognizes the numerous local Vietnamese American high school valedictorians and salutatorians—something unheard of in Vancouver, but common in Texas and California.

By the end of her year-long internship, Lauren had a clear goal: bring the YDLC to Vancouver. To accomplish this goal, her plan was to recruit a team of Vancouverites to establish

a local VCS chapter, have the team attend the YDLC as campers, take a year to further train the local staff, and then "just do the damn thing" in Vancouver. One difficultly was finding local people to serve with her as executives of VCS-Vancouver; as implied above, she generally did not see many Vietnamese Vancouverites as VCS material. To solve this issue, she turned to the business and employment-oriented social networking site, LinkedIn. As she sheepishly admits with a laugh, she just plugged in popular Vietnamese names, such as Nguyen, Tran, or Pham, and began to "stalk" people by looking at their education, employment, and service and volunteering records. When I ask about why she used LinkedIn specifically, she states sites like Facebook did not always give the information she was looking for, which was information that would tell her if people would fit into her ideals of "education, community, leadership, and culture" that were key for her definition of a successful community. Although she does not directly mention this, her use of LinkedIn also implies she would recruit a specific type of person that would be more business-minded or fit a model of success that is highly dependent on economic or social capital. As such, the original board consisted of a young group of university-educated working professionals—such as Lisa from Chapter 2—in areas such as finance, business, software development, engineering, medicine, and other STEM fields. However, the team also included a few university students who had more interests in the social sciences and humanities, including Samantha and Myra, also from Chapter 2.

Following Lauren's plan, the majority of the newly-formed VCS-Vancouver team attended the 2015 YDLC, which took place in Texas and was hosted by the VCS Dallas/Ft. Worth branch. Reviews of the overall camp experience were mixed. Some of the Vancouver team felt the camp activities were "too young" for people their age (early to mid-20s). Lisa, who had been attending "leadership events" since she was 16, was "lukewarm" about the entire camp

program and did not learn anything new because she believed as an adult she had already formed her thoughts in terms of being a leader and her philosophy towards leadership. Likewise, Chloe did not prefer the "rah-rah sporty" aspects of the camp, which reminded her more of a teen summer camp experience "geared towards a younger audience" than a space for working professionals; as Myra remembers, being an introvert, she was ready to go home by the first day.

Even though these reactions did not match Lauren's first experience at YDLC, the Vancouver team did see the potential of the camp, even for those who did not have the best experiences. While all of the Vancouver team are highly educated and in white-collar careers, their perceptions of the local Vietnamese community in Vancouver are still mostly linked to the usual connotations of nammers, gangs, and marijuana grow-ops. Similar to most of the participants in this project, the general consensus of the local community is a negative one among the Vancouver team. However, like Lauren, the YDLC for many of the team members was the first time they had ever experienced a united Vietnamese community with demographics that showcased high education levels and various forms of success on such a large scale; as Lisa remembers, "the only benefit I got from it was that I was able to see Vietnamese people be so successful and enthusiastic in coming together."

Hoping to reproduce these feelings of community for Vancouver and riding the momentum of the "after-camp high" (to use Lauren's words), the group convened after the DFW YDLC to discuss their plans for adapting it for the contexts of Vancouver. As Chloe recalls of the meetings after the camp, there was a lot of excitement and buzz because as a group, "we had an idea of what [the YDLC] would bring to Vancouver. Yeah, we had a lot of ideas that aligned with each other." Overall, the team had a united vision for the YDLC and its goals towards impacting the local community, which including having at least 40 of the 200 campers be from

the Metro Vancouver area. However, some of these goals were derived based on the perceived differences they experienced at the camp as Vietnamese Vancouverites. For the Vancouver team, the YDLC experience heavily shaped how VCS-Vancouver saw the Vietnamese American diaspora: a united and successful group—that often conflated VCS, Houston, and California—but one that was also conservative and centered on values of anti-communism (further discussed below). Vice versa, this definition of Vietnamese American diaspora also defined Vancouver's community through the negative, by what it was not. These points of contrast were further emphasized and continued beyond the duration of the camp by the mediated forms of culture that were circulated through the digital connections of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat that resulted from the camp. From a Vancouver perspective, it would be at these sites of differences that the planning process of the camp and how campers would experience the YDLC would be guided, revealing ruptures and power hierarchies between Vietnamese North American diasporas.

Importing American Ideals in Canada: Defining Success and Progress

One key difference between the United States and Vancouver that VCS-Vancouver was hoping to emulate is the projection of Vietnamese (diasporic) success through education and professional careers. However, they also recognized it would be an uphill battle to promote the camp in Vancouver using the concept of education and success. Sue, a VCS-Vancouver executive, said that she saw that the ways in which the camps operated in the United States would not work as smoothly in Vancouver:

> I feel that in the States, people come to the group [VCS] to ask to attend. While in Vancouver, we really had to push. Like after pushing, it was still tough to get the

> numbers we wanted. And we felt like, maybe there was an education different…an education level difference between the two populations. I feel a lot of people here came here for economic reasons, not political like the States. Which means they [the U.S. Vietnamese] come from a higher education. And that's why it's easier to see the benefits of the camp and the association. Here, we had to do a lot of explanation and people are still hesitant.

For Sue, the local Vietnamese community is much more diverse than that of the U.S., making the idea of valuing education, "leadership skills," or "success" among parents and potential campers not a guarantee or a concept fully understood, which was something they hoped the camp could change through being inspired or expanding the imaginative possibilities of what a (Vietnamese) person could become. However, they often struggled to recruit just on the basis of being a leadership camp that focused on growing the community. This difficulty in recruiting people also stemmed from the fact that the VCS-Vancouver branch was fairly new and did not have much of any type of reputation, good or bad. As most were fresh out of university, the Vancouver team had only limited engagement with the local Vietnamese communities outside of their student clubs, making it challenging to navigate the metro area and build trust with different parts of the Vietnamese population. Already fragmented, there was no core group or space to meet "the community," as groups often were isolated from each other and kept to their specific interests.

To alleviate this difficulty, the team tapped into their personal networks, focusing on friends and family that would be interested in the camp; sometimes this was more of a way to reach a number goal or have a buddy at camp rather than reaching out to people who would potentially benefit the most from the YDLC. After these sources were exhausted, the Vancouver team began to target university students, especially those in business school and leadership positions of student clubs. Seeing similar shades of their past selves in these people, the team believed they could reproduce their feelings of inspiration for people in similar positions when

they went to camp for the first time. In the last few months before the camp, Lauren and other VCS-Vancouver members were making personal calls to parents in attempts to explain the camp and the potential benefits of seeing such a successful group of Vietnamese people for their children.

Although the local team did not reach their number goal of having 40 Vancouverites attend the YDLC—they hit the low 30s—they were much more successful in terms of exposing local people to different examples of success that had some impact. Nelson, a 2nd year business student who was directly recruited by Lauren, notes how he was taken aback by the level of success he encountered:

> It was really my first exposure, because I've never really met that many Vietnamese work professionals and seeing them and where they are, it really opened my eyes to see that Vietnamese people really can be leaders in their communities, especially I went to the career workshops and I saw people working at Texas Instruments and NASA, and that's incredible, right? I'm not that quite sure if there are that many Vietnamese Canadians to look up to? But seeing the young professionals, that was really assuring.

Likewise, Alicia, an executive of her university Vietnamese Student Club, recalls that:

> I feel that, in terms of myself, being surrounded by the Viet community I'm with, I see a lot more entrepreneurs than lawyers. And my immediate family, they're not high ranking people, like salespeople or accountants, so that was like, 'ohhhh, there's something beyond that.' Like there is nobody to look up to, right?

It is interesting to note how the phrase of having someone to "look up to" appears in both Nelson's and Alicia's reflections in their encounters with successful Vietnamese American. Although we can point to their desire for role models and their age as young university students as reasons for this specific language—where the young look up to older people—there are also implications of structural hierarchies between Vietnamese Canadians and Vietnamese Americans, where the imagery of Vietnamese Americans as physically and socially higher than those in Vancouver are created through these interactions.

In bringing the YDLC to Vancouver, VCS also brought the concept of the successful Vietnamese American, which registers as a model minority discourse, a concept that is American in origin. Within the context of refugees, the model minority also carries a different, yet complex tenor, where Vietnamese Americans who fit the mold of the model minority are also viewed as "good refugees" who have assimilated successfully in the United States.[9] It is through the benevolence of the United States and its' system of democracy and capitalism that saves and allows for the subsequent success of the "good refugee." As Mimi Thi Nguyen argues, it is this "gift of freedom" that the United States grants on refugee subjects that creates a debt to liberal empire, one that is paid through the refugee's support of the state and its logics of imperialism.[10] Thus, the sheen of success acquired by the "good refugee" often obscures why they are refugees in the first place, namely the U.S. occupation of Southeast Asia; instead, the discourses of success and the model minority are fed back into the liberal empire to further absolve past occupations and justify new wars. We can see this in the selection of Catherine as keynote speaker and the valuing of her and her grandfather's military service.[11]

Yet while we could offer this critique to VCS-Vancouver and campers like Alicia or Nelson for their privileging of certain types of Vietnamese American success with hopes to reproduce the model within Vancouver, Vinh Nguyen argues that due to significant differences between the U.S. and Canada, "texts, narratives, and subjects from other parts of the Vietnamese diaspora may not fit neatly into some of the theoretical and interpretive frameworks that have

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[9] Yen Le Espiritu, "Thirty Years AfterWARd: The Endings That are Not Over," *Amerasia Journal* 31, no. 2 (2005): xii-xxiii.

[10] Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

[11] While the keynote speaker is a very nice person, when I informally asked her after her talk about her work in the JAG program, she revealed that most of her work involved "taking care of issues" caused by (drunk) Navy sailors across the Pacific Rim. An example of this included paying relatively large amounts of money for broken windows in the Philippines to ensure the local police were not contacted, as well as numerous cases involving sexual assault.

been put forward by American scholars to date."[12] For instance, while Canada was not a completely innocent bystander during the Vietnam War—as mentioned in previous chapters, Canada provided resources and military materials that drove the global war machine during the Cold War era—Canada is also not an uncontested military superpower like the United States. Thus, for Vinh Nguyen, the "gift of freedom" offered by Canada is not the same gift (and debt) that structures Mimi Thi Nguyen's argument above. Here, Vinh Nguyen is clear that he is not "advocating a position of Canadian moral superiority or global benevolence," but rather calling for ways to

> complicate Asian North American critiques of success and of figures like that of the model minority, and in doing so push for a more nuanced consideration of the complexity and heterogeneity of Asian North American subjectivities, particularly those borne out of the violence of empire.[13]

For Vinh Nguyen, narratives of success within diasporic groups can be seen as ways to heal fissures within refugee subjectivities created by being displaced. Thus, while there is a desire for "success" from the VCS-Vancouver team that is often defined in economic terms, it should be noted that these narratives are also seen by the team as sites where community building can begin that possibly addresses local issues such as poverty, gang violence, lack of education, and intergenerational conflicts stemming from a scarcity of communication and community. Like Vinh Nguyen, I argue this promotion or desire for success is much more complicated than simply inserting oneself into a model minority or "good refugee" framework, as where in this context there also emerges a desire beyond the neoliberal individual and towards a community of healing through the ability to craft their own identities. For example, Nelson highlights how success can

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[12] Vinh Nguyen, "Refugee Gratitude: Narrating Success and Intersubjectivity in Kim Thuy's *Ru*," *Canadian Literature* 219 (Winter 2013): n.p.

[13] Ibid., n.p.

help you become a leader within the community, a possibility that was not in the realm of his imagination because he was rarely exposed to these concepts; as Alicia states, "there is something beyond" in terms of what she could achieve. This desire also acknowledges the local Vancouver community as falling outside the commonly celebrated and circulated images of a productive and "good" Vietnamese refugee. In doing so, it calls attention to the local specificities of Vancouver and disrupts the notion of a singular Vietnamese diaspora to shed light on the material struggles that some Vietnamese face in their adopted homelands. The potential, then, is the creation or strengthening of post-refugee subjectivities and expressions based on relationships and sociality between Vietnamese Vancouverites, connections or narratives that were never fully established in the past. Through relationships based on common experiences, histories, struggles, and ultimately success—however defined—paths of inspirations and goals are revealed that lead to potentially a stronger sense of identities and community within the local group and in relationship to other diasporic groups around the world. As Nelson elaborates on the camp and seeing this group of successful Vietnamese people, he notes that "[he has] a stronger sense of who [he is], and what my people have been through and what they headed towards."

I believe it is important to note here that in the context of a culturally specific camp, these presentations of success are not meant for a mainstream Canadian or U.S. audience, but rather within a diasporic group. As Vinh Nguyen argues, it is necessary to establish a

> critical space for the expression of various forms of immigrant success and for feelings of gratitude to those peoples, institutions, and nations that have in one way or another provided the opportunity for such successes to materialize without being necessarily or automatically regarded as fodder for ideology or ideological maneuverings.[14]

[14] Ibid., n.p.

As such, the desire to succeed in Canada in this context is not always clearly or automatically linked to the further strengthening of the nation-state, but rather is expressed in a community made up of refugees and their children that has a limited history of "success." In other words, it is through "success" that the community is able to imagine and write their own narratives and histories while acknowledging larger flows and interactions. This is difficult to simply critique when the community in question has often been limited in or denied this ability to determine their own stories; is it possible, then, to celebrate or desire success in the fields of law, medicine, or science as Vietnamese refugees without judgement, especially when it comes from highly educated academics?

Yet, this does not mean a call for the uncritical valorization of specific forms of success. As Rob Ho argues, the model minority discourse has spilled into Canada through mediated circulations of popular culture from the U.S., which has reproduce similar outcomes for Asian Canadians.[15] In this vein, Gordon Pon argues the discourse imports well into the Canadian multicultural context as it "serves to reinforce the liberal belief that Canada and its institutions such as schools are accommodating, fair, and accessible to all those who work hard enough."[16] Overall, success for Asian (Canadians) is attributed to "cultural" factors, such as hard work, self-reliance, and an emphasis on education. With this in mind, the representations at the YDLC are not always contained with the camp and there still is application of neoliberal logics of the "American Dream" in Canada, where "hard work" is the main attribute of success while structural and systematic barriers in Canada are not thoroughly interrogated or even considered.

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[15] Rob Ho, "Do all Asians look Alike?: Asian Canadians as Model Minorities," *Studies on Asia* 4, no. 2 (October 2014): 101.

[16] Gordon Pon, "Importing the Asian Model Minority Discourse into Canada: Implications for Social Work and Education," *Canadian Social Work Review* 17, no. 2 (2000): 286.

For instance, after the YDLC, Nelson has been more active in sharing Vietnamese refugee success stories on Facebook, which tap into the multiple dimensions of the "good refugee" and model minority across a diverse field of interpretive networks that include audiences outside of the diaspora. In many ways, Canada is still constructed as the global leader in humanitarian rescue and refuge, a liberal, non-racist multicultural utopia that downplays the various complexities and histories of settler colonialism, racialized labour and immigration practices, and xenophobia. It is Canada and the West that *allows* for such success by refugees, placing blame and the root of issues elsewhere. As such, the desire for success within refugee communities is filled with tensions and contradictions. While many of the Vancouver team and camp attendees have goals to help their community and use success as a cornerstone to their approach, they are also labeling some sectors as inherently negative by implying a lack of hard work or initiative are the only reasons for issues involving drugs, gang violence, and poverty, creating and cementing class differences. While slippery and complex, narratives of success across transnational borders reveal the necessity to consider both the heterogeneous nature and specificity of diaspora and how concepts are altered as they cross national borders.

In the grand scheme of differences, "success" was easy because it was a difference that the VCS-Vancouver team *wanted* to be imported into Vancouver, even if it was initially difficult to translate and communicate to a local community in terms of recruiting campers. Yet as an abstract concept, success was relatively easy to manipulate and control. However, the local team was wearier of other aspects of the camp that would require some change in the YDLC structure, which was met with resistance from the VCS. One point of contention is the belief that the programming of the camp—and members of the U.S.-based VCS—were too "conservative." This belief emerged through multiple manners. For Samantha, her first encounters with

Vietnamese Americans at YDLC were soured by their constant use of the word "retarded" and "bitch," which she found backwards and reflective of America's general sense of being intolerant and disrespectful. Likewise, many other VCS-Vancouver members found through the new Facebook connections they established after camp that they disagreed with a lot of the posts from Vietnamese Americans, which included homophobia, sexism, and racism.

Seeing a space to address and discuss these issues—which they also saw within their own local community (though not as much)—the VCS-Vancouver team proposed workshops and activities on various topics they found would be important in today's society, including LGBTQ rights, sexism within Vietnamese culture, and mental health. For example, they proposed a skit prompt that would require campers to make a play around a Vietnamese person coming out to their parents. Additionally, while they did buy into, if indirectly, a standard definition of success that emphasized more toward the STEM fields, they also recognized the diversity within the local community and proposed a workshop on "Non-Traditional Careers," which would include a discussion on jobs involving social work, teaching, art, writing, and acting/theater work.

It was during this time that VCS-Vancouver would learn about the rigidness of the YDLC system, as well as the power held by the core team from VCS-Houston. It is not surprising that as a long-running program, the core team from Houston—as well as a supporting staff that has spent years in the program—would be hesitant to make major changes to core values or ideologies. According to Joseph Reimer in his study of Jewish cultural summer camp programs, "camps have tradition-bound cultures that make introducing change difficult. Staff and campers enjoy knowing what to anticipate and resist disruptions to what they view as 'how we have

always done things here.'"[17] When I ask Lisa about how they decide on workshops and topics, she responds:

> [Laughs]. Well I mean…technically I should be very well versed because I am in a head position, as you may put it. Like to be frank, I don't think that the home team—aka Vancouver—gets a lot of say whatsoever.
> *What say do you have?*
> We don't. To be frank. Cause…it's a fundamental flaw in the system, in the sense that [YDLC] has existed for, I don't know, 20 something years. And it runs every years and the numbers work out so that there isn't any financial turmoil, but it is a cookie-cutter planned event.

Although the proposals did not amount to major structural change, as a new group without any long-term connection to any sense of tradition or the ways "we have always done things here," VCS-Vancouver was mostly unaware of how difficult it would be to make changes or even to decide the program as the local host; their proposals were all rejected via Google Chat, with no clear feedback other than it did not fit the theme of the YDLC. While the topics rotate every year, they are not drastic changes; as Lisa's statement implies, the VCS simply relies on almost 20 years of tradition in order to *avoid* substantially changing their materials because as a "cookie cutter event," the camp is already decided no matter the context. When I ask Chloe about this experience, she sighs and states,

> Older people hold a lot of power, and they veto a lot of things, which makes it difficult. Because the [VCS] in Vancouver is so progressive, and they want to see changes for the better. Well, it's happening but it's been very, very slowly. It's been a challenge.

Although there is never a clear reason given of why these proposals were rejected by the VCS in Houston, besides the short note on not fitting the theme, Chloe (and other VCS-Vancouver members) automatically assumes it is because the Vancouver team is much more "progressive," which is partly based on their personal and mediated experiences with Vietnamese Americans.

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[17] Joseph Reimer, "Providing Optimal Jewish Experiences: The Case of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin," *Journal of Jewish Education* 78, no. 2 (2012): 131.

In doing so, they construct a clear line between the characteristics of Vietnamese Americans and Canadians and paint the Vietnamese American community as "older," aging, and stagnant in their ways, including their ideologies toward issues like LGBTQ rights and support for the arts. In a somewhat contradictory manner, while Vietnamese Americans are more "successful" than Vancouver, at least Vancouver (and to a certain extent, Canada) can construct itself more as young and "progressive." Nevertheless, while digital networks have allowed for at least the chance to challenge a dominant group, VCS-Vancouver's inability to have any say or input in a camp that is framed around ideals of Vietnamese culture demonstrates the hegemonic cultural power of the VCS and how a Vietnamese American diaspora can maintain the ability to control discussions and narratives of a larger diaspora through reproduced class structures that extend beyond the digital.

The Cultural Work of Anticommunism and Anti-Anticommunism

While the rejections of the proposals were a minor step back, the most controversial action by VCS-Vancouver was a request to remove the South Vietnamese flag from the opening ceremony as well as the downplaying of any "political" anticommunist ideology in the camp's programing. Like their other attempts to change the YDLC, this request was eventually denied, but the process of the denial and the request itself highlights a key, yet complex distinction between Vancouver and Vietnamese Americans and how the VCS-Vancouver team envisioned their identity as a community. Broadly speaking, Thuy Vo Dang defines Vietnamese American anticommunism "as an opposition to the current Vietnam government specifically and to

communist political ideology in general."[18] With the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the mass exodus of political refugees, anticommunist sentiments became ingrained within these elite classes and can be seen as a tactic by displaced individuals and groups to create spaces, maintain cultural boundaries, and reclaim power that are lost through trauma, war, and exile. As elite groups (in terms of social, political, and cultural capital), these embedded values of anticommunist become an overarching ideology of the Vietnamese diaspora as a whole, since these groups of older, first-generation Vietnamese refugees would eventually form and control the infrastructures of the most established nodes of power within the diaspora, which include sites of cultural production that circulate news, music, and other forms of media.[19] Still, the practices and effects of anticommunism within the Vietnamese diaspora are wide and ranging, and since there are no specific guidelines that determine how anticommunism is applied, its impact and meanings are always in flux. In some extreme cases, anticommunism may be what Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde defines as "staunch" anticommunism, referring to people "who actively and aggressively push an agenda centered on nationalist loyalties to the former South Viet Nam," and by rejecting a reunified Viet Nam, hope to recover their lost homeland through military force.[20] Organized under this notion of anti-communism, various groups and movements have been established since the 1980s with the goal to take back Vietnam by force, and as Valverde argues, some have also been involved in acts of terrorism and assassinations within the diaspora, including the murder of Vietnamese American journalists that were deemed to be communist spies. Over the years, there have been shifts to address the problem of the communist

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[18] Thuy Vo Dang, "The Cultural Work of Anticommunism in the San Diego Vietnamese American Community," *Amerasia* 31, no. 2 (2005): 66.
[19] See Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde, *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011): 12.
[20] Ibid., 12.

government through grassroots distribution of ideologies centered on democracy in Vietnam, as well as appealing to governments for policy interventions based on human rights. [21]

A more commonly applied and documented characteristic of anticommunism—although not necessarily separate from "staunch" anticommunism—may mean a strict rejection within the diaspora of any symbols or ideologies associated with the current Vietnamese state, including symbols such as the current national flag (a yellow star on a red background as known as the flag of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam or communist Vietnam) and images of national heroes like Hồ Chí Minh. This form of anticommunism has fueled boycotts, protests, and the occasional destruction of property and acts of violence toward individuals and groups. Perhaps the largest case is the Hi-Tek incident, where the owner of the Truong Hi-Tek TV and VCR store in Orange County displayed a picture of Hồ Chí Minh and the communist Vietnamese flag, eventually escalating in a protest that involved thousands of people in 1999. More recently, a 2009 art exhibit featuring artist Chau Huynh and her use of both the South Vietnamese and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam flags in an installation drew the ire of the local community in Southern California, which protested the exhibit.[22]

Through this rejection of certain objects and their circulation, there is also the fervent adoption of symbols and ideologies that are meant to act as counters, creating a strict binary between communism and anticommunism. One key symbol is the South Vietnamese flag, also known as the Vietnamese "Freedom and Heritage Flag, and in some informal cases, the "yellow 3-stripes" flag. As the informal name implies, the South Vietnamese flag has three horizontal

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[21] For a brief history and overview of the anticommunist movement in the United States, see ibid., 12-14. Additionally, see the (controversial) documentary *Terror in Little Saigon*, directed by Richard Rowley (Boston: Frontline and ProPublica, 2015).

[22] For an extended analysis of these events, see Chapters 4 and 5 in Valverde, *Transnationalizing Viet Nam*.

red stripes across a yellow background. Beyond politics, the South Vietnamese flag has the burden of representing for many diasporic Vietnamese a lost homeland and a nation that no longer exists. The fact that the flag has come to represent both a symbolic homeland for the diaspora and anticommunism illustrates the increasingly intertwined nature of the two. As Lieu argues in her work on Vietnamese American popular culture, anticommunism, in its various forms, is deeply ingrained within the cultural and political fabric of the Vietnamese American diaspora, where "some Vietnamese Americans have chosen to enforce a compulsory identity that associates the community with that ideology."[23] This binary of communism and anticommunism is such seemingly natural aspect of the Vietnamese diaspora that the word "politics" for many Vietnamese in North America often refers to this binary and not anything related to local or national politics of Canada or the United States. For all of my interviews, when I simply ask about politics without any context other than the Vietnamese community, the answer would always be related to anticommunism.

Yet, while anticommunism is heavily linked to the word "politics," Dang argues "Vietnamese American anticommunism is much more nuanced and complicated and has taken on many different cultural meanings for overseas Vietnamese communities."[24] Seeing the impact of anticommunism expand beyond the borders of the political and into the realms of the educational and the cultural, Dang importantly positions anticommunism as a lynchpin that holds Vietnamese American communities at multiple points. In doing so, Dang locates anticommunism within a framework of cultural discourse that "allows us to move beyond the easy binary of pro- versus anti-communists to explore the complexities and contradictions within

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[23] Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 130.
[24] Dang, "The Cultural Work of Anticommunism," 65.

the deployment of this term as a catchall phrase for community building."[25] As Dang elaborates, Vietnamese American anticommunism is not limited to boycotts, protests, or demonstrations, but also underlies social and cultural events and meanings. For Lieu's study of its role in popular media of the Vietnamese diaspora, the emphasis of "anticommunist rhetoric also consolidates and strengthens Vietnamese exilic identities, defining for them what is properly 'Vietnamese'" in a cultural sense.[26] In this case, this means locating imaginations and histories of an authentic and real Vietnam and its culture in the pre-1975 space of South Vietnam or as under the domain of the "free" anticommunist diaspora rather than the communist state. Cultural production, education, and heritage maintenance in the diaspora, then, are often policed to stay within the borders defined by the anticommunist elite. Any sense of crossing these borders would often result in accusations of being "pro-communist," which could have severe social, economic, and political implications such as having businesses boycotted or being socially blacklisted. Simply, a person would be labeled as a traitor or a spy, and ultimately a "bad" member of the Vietnamese diaspora.

Anticommunism as cultural work also applies to the symbols that represent both lost homeland and culture. Pointing to the example of the South Vietnamese or the Vietnamese "Freedom and Heritage" flag which often is seen at anticommunist rallies and demonstrations, Dang highlights that the flag "suggests that the political quest for freedom is coupled with a drive to sustain Vietnamese heritage and culture in diaspora."[27] In other words, the flag, and thus anticommunism, becomes a shorthand for South Vietnamese (American) culture, history, and memory work, in addition to representing political structures and meanings. As one of the key

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[25] Ibid., 66-67.
[26] Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 91.
[27] Dang, "The Cultural Work of Anticommunism," 74-75.

sites of identity and community construction, it is partly through the South Vietnamese flag, as Dang argues, that many Vietnamese Americans actively craft a space for themselves in the United States in both symbolic and physical ways. As many scholars note, including Dang, anticommunism also allows for the adoption of an uncritical assessment of the role of the U.S. in the Vietnam War, where communists are solely to blame for the loss of a democratic and free South Vietnam. As brave soldiers in the battle against evil communists, Vietnamese Americans can easily be aligned with notions of the U.S. nation-state that justifies America's involvement in Vietnam, as well as crafting a deserving new model minority (recalling our discussion of the "good refugee" and the "gift of freedom" above).

As I note above, the migration of Vietnamese Americans from Southern California to Houston, Texas—along with the growth of communication technologies, networks, and the popularity of diasporic media—has helped carry similar notions of anticommunism to the VCS; as Lauren notes, the bylaws of VCS "has verbiage that wants to make Vietnam better" and includes the requirement that the South Vietnamese anthem and flag be displayed during the opening ceremony. We can also see how anticommunism is strongly embedded within the YDLC's structure and programing. A key aspect to remember is the team competition, where scores were given for team work and other attributes; as a leadership camp, the majority of participants want to win the competition, which structurally requires and, to a certain extent, forces the camper to perform certain actions related to anticommunism. For instance, the YDLC requires team cheers that feature the team name. In the case of our team, we had a group of Vietnamese North Americans running around shouting about democracy, which in a not so subtle manner, has overt connotations in this context.

Slightly more subtle was the use of a historical tale to frame the Big Game, which was the final, 4-hour team competition that included physical and mental tasks. Before the Big Game began, our team counselors gave us a document with the tale of the Legendary Than Kim Qui and the Magic Cross-Bow. The document told the story of King An Duong Vuong and the fortress of Co Loa, which was built to keep out invaders from the North. After struggling to build the fortress, a spirit in the form of a golden turtle, also known as Than Kim Qui, helped to get "rid of the evils" that were disrupting the construction of the fortress. Afterwards, the golden turtle gave the King his toe nail, and with it, the king built a magic cross-bow where one arrow would turn into thousands of arrows to strike the enemy. With the magical cross-bow, the King was able to routinely defeat the enemies from the north, led by General Trieu Da. After a peace-treaty, the General offered his son to be married to the King's daughter, with the plan that the son would steal the cross-bow. After the cross-bow is stolen, the King retreats to the South. As the prompt ends, it tells the camper: "We are about to spend the next few hours to learn some of the infamous conflicts and their heroes. Roll up your sleeves. You are about to fight for our country… You are expanding our territories."

In my experience, the story was not really integral to the actual activities within the Big Game. For instance, one activity had us balance buckets of water on our head to fill another bucket, while another had a teammate guide blindfolded teammates through a maze. In talking with other campers, there was no clear link between the activities and the narrative, and most were concerned with just completing the tasks rather than making literary connections. So while I do not see this as effective, I would argue that we still see an attempt to integrate aspects of anticommunism within the program. First, is the continued reliance on ancient, pre-1975 history that avoids discussing Vietnam in contemporary terms. More complex are the certain uses of

language. What is never clearly explained by our counselor or the camp is that the North in the story refers to China; without this explanation, there are some implied notions of fighting a communist North Vietnam, which is further aided by the also unexplained and militaristic statements of fighting "for our country" and "expanding our territories."

Perhaps more effective was the Team Skit activity, which combines two teams to produce, rehearse, and perform a 10-minute skit related to Vietnamese diasporic culture with only about two hours of prep time. However, a "prompt" is given to each group and as part of the larger competition, the teams are *required* to follow the prompt fairly closely, as well as incorporate two songs. If the teams did not follow these instructions, points would be taken off of their final score. Although I do not have an exact copy of the prompt's text—they were taken away after 15 minutes as part of the activity—I have a fairly close version from my notes:

> A Vietnamese American man is celebrating his 60th birthday with his family, but since he suffers from Alzheimer's disease, he is unable to remember his family members and various details of his life. After his family leaves, his grandson stays behind to spend time with his grandfather. In an attempt to help his grandfather remember his past, the grandson recounts his grandfather's life story. Originally from Huế, a city in Central Vietnam, the grandfather served in the South Vietnamese military and served bravely. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, he escaped Vietnam by boat, where he encountered raiding pirates and faced much hardship at a refugee camp. Eventually, he came to the United States and after much hard work and dedication, he received a PhD in political science from Cal-Berkeley. He eventually became a tenured professor at a University of California school. After the grandson finishes telling the grandfather's life story, the grandfather miraculously remembers details of his past and family.

As one can clearly note, the "prompt" is not so much a prompt, but rather a very specific plotline that has several ideological threads (and yes, it was this long). Breaking up into groups, we had some campers flesh out specific dialogue and create a specific plot and stage direction, some campers wrote original lyrics to a song, and the rest created props using cardboard boxes and butcher paper. As I describe in my notes, the skit was eventually performed as this:

> As the oldest member of both teams, I was selected to be the grandfather (albeit without a Huế accent as I cannot do that). The scene starts with me and my family to the side, with the family singing "Happy Birthday" in Vietnamese (Song 1). I am eating potato chips and not understanding what is going on. I keep saying "huh?" and repeatedly asking my grandson if he wants to have a chip to show that I cannot remember things. After the song finishes, the family leaves offstage, while my grandson stays behind. A doctor comes to check on me and provide exposition by telling the grandson of my worsening condition and disease. After the doctor leaves, the grandson pleads with me to remember things, and asks, "Don't you remember?" This triggers a "memory," which has a person run across stage with a banner that states "the year 1975"; the center stage is now my imagination/memory. [Nelson], a Vancouverite, is playing a younger version of me—he was selected because we have similar glasses and hopefully the audience gets that. The second song begins. Because we are not using any music, the songwriter picked "I'll Make A Man Out of You" from *Mulan* because everyone knows the tune and it had themes of facing hardships and working hard. She changed some lyrics to make it more Vietnamese, including adding the word "Vietnam" to the chorus. They wrote the adapted lyrics on an iPad, which would be sung by a small choir made up of the various teammates. As the song continues, Nelson appears in battle, wearing a military-style hat and holding a cardboard gun. There is a small gun fight between South and North Vietnam, with only the use of the South Vietnamese flag (that was the decision of the prop people) and people dying. After the battle, [Nelson]/the younger grandfather escapes on a boat. The boat is cutout from a large and flatten cardboard box. In the background, there are two long sheets of butcher paper with waves drawn, which are being held and swayed to simulate moving waves. In the boat, [Nelson] and other actors are struggling and moving around to show a rough ride. As [Nelson] gets off the boat, we have a sign that says "United States," and he is handed a suitcase, a book, a degree, all out of cardboard. He then walks across the stage and as the song ends, another actor reaches out to shake [Nelson]'s hand and loudly states "Welcome to America!" The audience applauds. The scene then shifts over to me and the grandson. He asks again, "Don't you remember?" I say "huh" and I ask if he wants a potato chip. He cries and hugs me. But then, in Vietnamese, I say, "I remember…I remember." And scene. And people aww and clap. We won the competition.

As can be seen in both the prompt and the final performance, the narrative is celebratory of South Vietnam and its people, and actually stages a scene where my character kills communists under the South Vietnamese flag (which is the only result since we had no non-Vietnamese team members). While it does mention Vietnam, it still only exists on stage as right on the edge of 1975; afterwards, it takes place within the democratic space of the United States. Success in the form of education and hard work is also upfront; the use of the University of California-Berkeley, which was specifically named, is almost comical in order to show the ability of

Vietnamese refugees to move socially and culturally upward. In several ways, it is very much a standard refugee narrative that we see in mainstream media: a soldier who fought against communism, suffered immense hardships, yet through hard work is *given* the opportunity to succeed in the United States (and just happens to obtain a PhD from one of the best schools in the nation). If anything, it shows how many Vietnamese Americans imagine the ideal Vietnamese refugee. What makes this particularly more effective in promoting certain ideals—in addition to requiring their use—is the integration of the cultural work of anticommunism and the "good refugee" into a task that required active participation and production of a cultural object; I admit that even though I had issues with the general premise and prompt, I enjoyed helping to produce the performance. This may be because as a Vietnamese American, these are discourses I am very familiar with, and even though I can see how they are problematic, I am not immune to at least relating to them in a certain way.

However, it is things like the Big Game and the Team Skit that the local VCS-Vancouver wanted to remove from the camp because they felt they were not reflective of their experiences or beliefs toward anticommunism. As Karin Aguilar-San Juan notes in her study of Little Saigons in Orange County and Boston, anticommunism may not be evenly applied or evolve in uniform ways. As she writes, "in time-warped spaces like these [such as Orange County, California], certain 'dominant' Vietnamese American memories fester, like the seething hatred of Ho Chi Minh," but as we move across time and space, there is more than just one "anticommunist note."[28] While it is undeniable that anticommunism has played a significant role in shaping Vietnamese diasporic cultures in North America, it is often implied that this works through a presence or active acceptance of anticommunism in some manner. However, in the

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[28] Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009): 68.

context of Vancouver and specifically the VCS-Vancouver team, I argue that anticommunism's role in shaping the local community is done through *rejecting* the politics and cultural work of anticommunism, a position I label as "anti-anticommunism."

I define anti-anticommunism as the opposition to the placement and use of anticommunism and its associated symbols as core features of community building within the Vietnamese diaspora. For the anti-anticommunist, anticommunism as a cultural feature is seen as stagnant, located in the past, and creating more division among people, which makes it difficult for a diverse community like Vancouver to achieve some sense of unity as a Vietnamese community. Anticommunism, in the eyes of VCS-Vancouver, also reflects the narratives of Vietnamese American experiences and histories more than the stories they feel that make up Vancouver's Vietnamese population; as such, it represents the continued dominance of Vietnamese Americans in defining and constricting Vietnamese diasporic culture and community building, which obscures the specific issues and topics Vancouverites hope to address or discuss. In being anti-anticommunist, VCS-Vancouver hopes to highlight its own complexity and produce a more open cultural framework that allows them to coexist with other Vietnamese diasporas. In using this term, I further disrupt the strict binary of pro-communism and anticommunism, as Vancouver's position cannot be fully explained by the simple binary. Although there is a rejection of anticommunism, this does not necessarily mean an uncritical acceptance or support for the Vietnamese communist government, as there may be ambivalence, neutrality, or sometimes even critical feelings toward Vietnam as a nation-state. For the most part, the issue is not a debate over governmental policy, but one concerning the cultural implications of locating anticommunism cultural work as central in community building, as it would exclude people and communities like those in Vancouver.

What makes defining and discussing terms like anticommunism and anti-anticommunism difficult in this context is that most people are not sure exactly what those terms mean. This is why I feel "pro-communist" does not fully describe their aversion to anticommunism, because in many cases they cannot fully articulate what communism or anticommunism are in any manner (politically, culturally, or economically), but rather point to their consequences or outcomes. When I ask Lauren about her feeling towards politics, she recognizes that VCS-Houston is "political" but ultimately she does not "have a political stance." As she elaborates,

> partly because I don't know the story of it. I don't understand it. I don't know the stories of people. And you can get the sense from our group, it's so messy that we're going to stay away from it because we don't know the full story.

Unable to clearly define politics or anticommunism, Lauren is only able to see it as "messy." This comment of not knowing "the story" behind anticommunism is common among all of my interviews. When I ask Crystal, a camp attendee, about her thoughts on the opening ceremony, she responds,

> They had that flag thing up, so there's definitely that…I don't know how to say it. [Pause]. They put up that stripe flag, right? So these people have a particular view of politics that I don't know about [laughs]. It's not that I don't care, it's just that people don't talk about it.

When I ask about her history with "that stripe flag," she answers,

> I feel like it is socially taboo to talk about it! I don't know anything about it, just that there are two flags and we can't talk about it. Like my dad says, 'just go where the wind blows.' He's like, 'if you see a bunch of people in that area support that flag, just go along with them!' [Laughs].

This unfamiliarity with the flag stems from the migration history of Vancouver's Vietnamese community that is explored in Chapter 1. Briefly, Vancouver did not receive many of the political refugees that made up the initial elite class that would settle in California or Eastern Canada (and eventually Houston, Texas), so while anticommunism certainly exists and

occasionally appears (as seen in the establishment of Vancouver's Little Saigon), the presence of anticommunism within a community infrastructure is not as strong in Vancouver. Additionally, since the population consists of mostly "economic refugees," many Vietnamese Vancouverites had no ties to any government during the war and came from all parts of the country; for many of my participants who were born in the 1990s, their parents were also too young to be heavily involved in the Vietnam War, so there is limited loyalty to any side in Vietnam. And finally, with a recent influx of Vietnamese nationals, the community is even more diverse and fragmented, without any central node or group that can dominate with a specific ideology like anticommunism. For instance as explored in Chapter 3, the local Vietnamese Student Clubs are mostly split between international and Canadian-born students, which means no flags are used to avoid any sense of conflict. As such, there does not seem to be much direct discourse on the flag, but in the context of Vancouver, it is mostly discussed in the ways it is not discussed.

In fact, some of the first direct experiences with anticommunism and the South Vietnamese flag for the VCS-Vancouver team was through their first visit to the YDLC and the mediated relationships that emerged through that encounter. As Chloe recalls her first experience with the Facebook practice of replacing one's profile picture with a black square and the date "April 30th, 1975" to commemorate the fall of Saigon, she notes

> After I started attending [the YDLC], I made a lot of Facebook friends and it [April 30th/Fall of Saigon] started showing up and I didn't know what it meant.
> *The black profile picture?*
> Yeah, I didn't know it was a thing. Because you just change your profile picture to black.

As she elaborates, she soon learned different aspects of anticommunism, which included negative statements about North Vietnamese people. As she remembers, "it was a turn-off. These are what happens in the States. Like having these Facebook friends was very eye-opening

to be introduced to that."[29] In addition to reinforcing her feelings of how much more progressive Vancouver is compared to the U.S., she also cites personal reasons why the flag and anticommunism is so divisive for her. As she explains:

> Because I don't want to be associated with the flag because my mom is from the North. And my dad is from the South. My uncle was in the war and in the reeducation camp for 7 or 8 years. So even though my family was involved in the war, we just don't want anything to do with it.

Thus, for Chloe, the South Vietnamese flag does not register as a united (imaginary) homeland, but one that symbolizes war, division, and a reminder of the fissures within her own family. She found the anticommunism throughout the camp disruptive; as part of the Big Game planning committee (though with little input), she found the tale painted the "North" as some type of "Mythical Harry Potter evil," which "makes you think that we're freeing Vietnam. What does that mean? You're instilling young campers about freeing Vietnam from the evils! I don't know. That bugs me a little." Additionally, as a former Vietnamese Student Club executive, she knew by using the South Vietnamese flag, it was alienating half of all the members of the student clubs. As she believes, many people in Vancouver regard the flag only as a divisive object, and if they saw it in any camp advertisements or photos, they would not even consider attending the camp.

It is because of these reasons above that the majority of the Vancouver staff wanted to bring the flag down: if their goal was to impact the local community, they felt that they could not accomplish this goal with the South Vietnamese flag. As with the workshop proposals, because VCS-Vancouver did not have a long history with the flag—both on a personal and an

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[29] It is important here to also notice how anticommunism is often described as representative of all of Vietnamese Americans, where there is little distinction between different diasporas within the U.S. (in some way reproducing the homogenization they often critique).

organizational level—they were able to easily discard the concept. Even before the request to remove the flag, VCS-Vancouver was weary of using the flag in any capacity. Already a young and new group, using the flag within the community would pigeon-hole them as a political and anticommunist group, and while they were not even sure what that meant exactly, they knew it would limit them as a group moving forward. An example of this anti-anticommunism is in the promotional video that opened this chapter. While previous YDLC videos have extensively featured the flag, Myra, who edited the video, was adamant that no images of the flag would be in the video; as she recalls, she found it difficult because she was mainly using footage of past camps and was limited to very short clips to avoid the flag, yet still make a legible video. Understanding that this video would be transnationally circulated, Myra wanted to express the VCS-Vancouver as *not* an anticommunist organization by withholding imagery of the flag and crafting a group identity through the lack of circulation of this specific symbol.

Of course, this was not enough for the VCS-Vancouver team and they proposed an official request to the VCS in Houston to remove the flag from the YDLC. In addition to citing the specific demographics of Vancouver and how the flag would be detrimental in recruiting, VCS-Vancouver also expressed concern over the complications that could arise with the involvement of international students, which made up a large number of the Vietnamese community (and included some of the Vancouver staff). The request was bounced around for a month, but it was not until a few months before the camp during a staff meeting that the issue was addressed and the request was denied. As Ly, a VCS-Vancouver member and an international student, recalls,

> we were told “It’s our tradition, it is the norm, we’ve been doing this for 19 years and people know us, they know us in Vietnam. [One of the board of directors] is a major supporter and she’s been back to Vietnam many times. It’s fine! It’s fine!”

Similar to the workshop proposals, tradition was again used as reason not to change. When Lisa and other members tried to make their case again, further emphasizing how many people hope to have careers in Vietnam and cannot risk having a photo taken in front of a South Vietnamese flag, an hour of debate ensued with most of the VCS Houston leadership quickly dismissing their concerns as trivial and making things "overcomplicated." As Lisa remembers,

> it was simple—okay well maybe it's not simple—but one of the changes that we wanted to have for our own moral and values and so we could sleep well at night was that can we please strip the [South Vietnamese] flag. And that was the first time…it was a blow to our ego because a) the conversation wasn't even entertained and at the end of the day, we were told, "too bad, too sad." And that was kind of the underlying tone moving forward.

It is interesting in the complex ways in how Lisa related her desire to remove the flag as a moral issue, in this context referring to the safety of Vietnamese Vancouverites in Vietnam, which is both a critical jab towards the Vietnamese government and the Vietnamese Americans. On one hand, she assumes the Vietnamese communist government will retaliate against and label people as traitors, and on the other, she paints the VCS as allowing or promoting this type of oppression.

Eventually, there was a slight comprise: team counselors would tell their team that the picture in front of the flag and the wooden gateway structure would be optional, and they could leave before the picture was taken. This offer was accepted because at least VCS-Vancouver members and Vancouver campers could have some input in what images could be circulated and produced. However, for some this was not considered a major victory. As Chloe and Ly complained, now because campers were just walking out in front of the entire camp, people could clearly label who did not want their picture taken, which meant they could be labeled as pro-communist. Additionally, afterwards through my interviews, I found a lot of the counselors did not make this announcement and many campers did not know this was an option. Nevertheless, at this point, the conversation had reached a point of exhaustion, but as Lisa notes

above, it basically determined the rest of their relationship up to the camp date, where VCS-Vancouver would have little overall input.

From the YDLC's perspective, we can see various aspects of the camp as ways in which anticommunist ideologies are applied to craft a specific Vietnamese diasporic culture. In emphasizing certain forms of anticommunism, the YDLC is legitimizing certain definitions of what is properly "Vietnamese," and in the process, is ignoring other visions of Vietnamese culture that exist outside the of the South Vietnamese flag and anticommunism. For camp attendees from Vancouver, there were plenty of spaces where they felt uncomfortable or out of place—which was correctly predicted by the VCS-Vancouver team. As Alicia recalls her experience,

> I think it was a nice experience, except for the ceremony part. I guess for me, it was really controversial with the whole entire flag, because…well at least with my Vietnamese [student club], we're really, we try to stray away from political issues as much as possible. So me being there, I felt kind of uncomfortable, especially when they took the picture in front of the whole entire flag, so I had to excuse myself.

As with many people in this chapter, the circulation of the South Vietnamese flag caused a major concern because many did not want to be defined by anticommunism. Meaning again was constructed through the lack of a digital object, in this case a digital photo that would be uploaded on Facebook and used in online videos distributed through YouTube for both local and global consumption. Alicia was concerned here because of her local position, where she dealt with several international members, and she did not want others to make assumptions about her "political" views. When I ask Nelson, who played a younger version of me, about our skit, he replies,

> I thought that was interesting. There is a very…when they raise the South Vietnamese flag, I didn't expect it to be political, you know…Yeah, that was something that surprised

> me a bit, you know, even though I am South Vietnamese, you know, I'm not quite sure how I feel about that.

It is important to note that my original question here was "What did you think about the skit?" Eventually describing the skit and its prompt, as "very, very, pro-South," Nelson immediately talks about the South Vietnamese flag and the politics of anticommunism—though he does not directly use the term "anticommunism." As the entire prompt was not relatable to Nelson—he comes from a family of farm workers who had no direct connections to the war—he states he just "went with the flow," but felt awkward participating in a recreation of a Vietnamese battle under the South Vietnamese flag, something he feels is very "American." Similar to other Vancouverites, his limited exposure to a culture of anticommunism altered his literacy of the meaning of the flag and what it represents. As he admits, after the camp he was curious and did some research. As he states,

> I did some research to see how powerful that yellow flag is, especially in the States. I was really surprised colleges and students, they were rallying for that flag to represent them. But I feel that…yeah, ultimately it's not like…it's kind of like holding on to the past.
> […]
> To me, it just seems a bit strange because the rest of the world has the Vietnamese flag, the real flag, the one with the yellow star in the middle, right? I don't have anything against it, I understand why the South Vietnamese flag is held on to, but we being in the future, it's not really a sustainable thing to do.

As his statement illustrates, anti-anticommunism is a complex feeling towards anticommunism and Vietnam, and sometime is ambiguous and conflicting. The flag and anticommunism is fuzzy for many, a site of understanding and confusion, but also part of their history and larger social network. Even if they do not understand it or accept it, they recognize the power of anticommunism—both Chloe and Nelson (as well as many other interviewees) always make it clear they have ties to South Vietnam before critiquing the South Vietnamese flag, a way to

bolster their credibility to make a statement against anticommunism without being inserted into the pro-communist camp. As this illustrates, anticommunism is obviously a dominant force throughout the diaspora, but it operates in different ways across local spaces, especially those that have histories that are different than those where these discourses emerge. The failure in the case between VCS and VCS-Vancouver is ultimately because neither side could understand how their histories produced completely different readings of the same object. Nevertheless, as the more established organization and creator of the YDLC program, it was mostly VCS-Houston whose' vision took place in Vancouver.

Conclusion: Vancouver Never Plays Itself

In September of 2015, Tony Zhou of *Every Frame a Painting*, a YouTube channel that provides video analysis of films, released a video entitled "Vancouver Never Plays Itself."[30] In this video, Zhou, who grew up in Vancouver, laments how Vancouver as "Hollywood North" stands in as cities around the world, but rarely plays itself or even Canada. Drawing from Hollywood films and television, Zhou showcases the countless U.S. cities Vancouver has played as a stand-in city: Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, Philadelphia, New York City, Boston, and even Vancouver…Washington. For many around the globe, Vancouver is both familiar, yet invisible, seemingly American, but not. For instance, five months after Zhou's video was posted, then U.S. presidential hopeful Marco Rubio would release his campaign advertisement "Morning Again in America" steeped in the imagery of "real" America, but which opened with a shot of

[30] Tony Zhou, "Vancouver Never Plays Itself," *YouTube.com*, 9:05, posted [September 13, 2015], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojm74VGsZBU.

downtown Vancouver, Canada.[31] While sometimes amusing, Zhou ponders what does it mean for a city to play everywhere else, but rarely itself?

This question has been on the mind for many Vancouverites for the last few decades. In her analysis of the development of film and television production in Vancouver during the 1990s, Serra Tinic explores the ways local production infrastructures are stretched between regional desires and larger national and global forces (such as national cultural mandates and perceptions of audiences' preferences). With Hollywood and other Canadian broadcasting powers often taking the lead in deciding how and what Vancouver produces in terms of media, Tinic posits a similar question to Zhou's about Vancouver's identity through physical place: "Does the growth of the space of Hollywood North somehow preclude the possibility of telling stories about the *place* of Vancouver?"[32] For Zhou, Vancouver lacks an identity as it is a constantly changing chameleon, reduced to being a generic backlot where anonymous buildings play vague spaces. Similarly, Tinic argues Vancouver's position as a global city stand-in erases Vancouver as a "lived community," where local stories are ignored.[33] In many ways, Zhou's video and Tinic's arguments about the general uncertainty of Vancouver's identity echoes the experiences of many of the local Vancouverites involved with the YDLC.

When I asked camp goers and staff about Lauren's comment during the opening ceremonies about how this camp was "geared towards Vancouver," most did not notice anything specific. Sue, who (besides Lauren) is the most positive toward the YDLC, notes that some of the workshops that allowed Q&As created some time where local Vancouverites could ask

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[31] "Vancouver featured in Marco Rubio campaign ad," *CBC.ca*, February 16, 2016, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/marco-rubio-campaign-ad-vancouver-1.3449589.
[32] Serra Tinic, *On Location: Canada's Television Industry in a Global Market* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 38., emphasis in original.
[33] Ibid., 31.

questions, but none of workshops, as listed above, were directly created for Vancouver. As a result of the overall program, Nelson's response as a camper is simply "I don't know, I didn't even feel it was very Vancouver." Concurring, Alicia states, "I don't think the whole entire thing was so much really Vancouver specific, maybe the scenery was Vancouver specific," while Crystal notes,

> I didn't really feel that there was an emphasis on the local people. I felt like the Americans were in the spotlight, at least for me, that's what I felt like.
> *How so?*
> I felt it was like me learning their slang, learning their culture, more than learning from us Canadians.

It is interesting to note here that both Alicia and Crystal in two separate interviews respond to the question of the camp being "geared towards Vancouver" using production terms similar to Zhou's video. In their language, they construct a similar argument as Zhou where Vancouver acts only as background scenery while the spotlight is focused on someone else. Chloe, in voicing her frustration with the entire process, argues this makes Vancouver interchangeable in the larger YDLC system, where "they come to this city just because it's another cool city. Vancouver has nothing to do with it. It could be Calgary, yay we're in Calgary!" This is very similar to how Tinic explains Hollywood's relationship to Vancouver. As Tinic argues, "American producers are primarily interested in Vancouver as a space in which to invest capital in order to garner greater profit rather than a place about which to tell stories."[34] Thus, as long as the accumulation of capital occurs, there is no incentive to focus on the "place" of Vancouver. In the case of the YDLC, capital exists in the form of cultural capital, where the VCS can advertise an international event—"for the first time ever!"—in another "cool city" to attract more campers. Because the majority of the campers (and money) would be from the United States,

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[34] Ibid., 37.

there is no incentive in terms of capital to center on topics that may make U.S. campers or staff unhappy. Similar to media production in Vancouver, the perceived "mainstream" audience dictated the camp's subject matter and provided further justification to erase Vancouver.

For Lisa, the implications of Vancouver acting only as a backdrop space severely undercuts what she envisions as the entire purpose of the camp. As she states before the camp,

> despite the fact that it takes place around the continent and runs in different cities, it lacks creativity, it lacks the autonomy to adapt to the city in which it takes place. And I think it will run fine in that it has a plan from start to finish, but in terms of how it will penetrate the community, I don't know…
> […]
> If anything, Vancouver is just a shell and it could be held in nowhere Minnesota and have the same outcome, in a sense that Vancouver will not be transformed in the way we want it to be.

Thus, while perhaps occasionally a key feature of a scene or photo, Vancouver is never centered as the star of the show; even Nelson, who in literal terms was center staged, was playing a Vietnamese American on two levels: the person the in prompt and as a younger version of me. And when the scene ends, the production of the YDLC and Vietnamese American culture will move on and be featured elsewhere, while Vancouver remains the same background character.

In not localizing the camp, Lisa and Chloe feel the Vietnamese in Vancouver are not recognized by other diasporas as a distinct community, always existing in relation to the United States and never on their own. This recognition of a lack of a concrete identity is not necessarily a new concept when it comes to defining any version of Canadian culture. As Elana Levine argues, the uncertainty of Canadian identity "may be largely due to the fact that Canadianness is most often defined in the negative, by what it is not," which in many cases, as illustrated

throughout this chapter, is the United States.[35] As Serra Tinic notes in her overview of Canadian national public broadcasting systems and their histories,

> the central objective of broadcasting policy was to guarantee a space for the production and circulation of culturally specific stories that would allow Canadians to imagine themselves as a national community living within different circumstances than those of their more dominant southern neighbor.[36]

While this concerns different sectors of cultural production, Tinic's statement perfectly describes what many Vietnamese Vancouverites involved in the planning of YDLC envisioned as a central goal of the camp. While emphasizing common threads of culture that exist among diasporas, they also wanted to showcase their specific stories, communities, and definitions of Vietnamese cultures and identities to both themselves and other diasporas around North America, and have the more dominant Vietnamese diaspora in the U.S. (and Eastern Canada) respect them by just listening to and centering their needs, desires, and visions of the future, if only for a short weekend. After the rejection of their workshop proposals and the requests regarding the South Vietnamese flag, another critical moment that devastated the Vancouver team was the selection of the keynote speaker. Lisa and others had demanded that Lauren and the VCS at least feature someone from British Columbia with the hopes of having a B.C. perspective heard (with a Canadian being an acceptable alternate choice). As described above, the eventual speaker, Catherine, is a Vietnamese American with a common narrative analogous to those of the dominant discourse of the refugee experience in the United States. Similar to other decisions, the Vancouver team was rarely updated on the selection process, with Lisa unsure if their idea

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[35] Elana Levine, "Crossing the Border: Studying Canadian Television Production," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, eds Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2009), 156. Also see Serra Tinic, *On Location*.

[36] Serra Tinic, "Borders of Production Research: A Response to Elana Levine," in Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell (eds.), *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2009): 167.

was ever seriously considered. At the very worst, then, the year-long processes of determining the camp's programing and the fact that the YDLC and its mostly U.S.-based committees denied VCS-Vancouver's overall vision in multiple ways represents a critical failure. In looking at the end product, there is the continued monopolization of cultural definitions of Vietnamese culture that is controlled by the U.S.-based VCS.

This is not to say that the YDLC, as both a specific event and a larger institution, is a complete failure. Although out of the realm of this chapter, we can point to alumni testimonies or a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods that indicate the camp's "success" or impact in various other manners. On a local Vancouver level, for instance, some campers did express coming away from the camp with new leadership skills, as well as the common experience of being inspired by seeing a united community and "successful" representations of Vietnamese North Americans.

Still, I would argue these are limited successes if we consider the larger possibilities that many local VCS-Vancouver members had in mind. As Reimer argues in his discussion of Jewish summer camp programs, successful camps only exist if there is a clear "vision" from the leaders of the camp in their goals, priorities, and core purpose. Elaborating on the concept of vision, Reimer points to developing a vision that clearly expresses core values and goals, but that also incorporates dynamic flexibilities that allow these values and goals to be communicated and realized over the long term.[37] Critical to this realization, according to Reimer, is the presence of a supporting staff that shares this vision.[38] In the case of YDLC, I do not believe from a

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[37] Joseph Reimer, "Vision, Leadership, and Change: The Case of Ramah Summer Camps," *Journal of Jewish Education* 76, no. 3 (2010): 268-69.

[38] Joseph Reimer, "Providing Optimal Jewish Experiences," 130.

Vancouver standpoint that there was a shared vision among the U.S. leaders and the local camp staff. This resulted from the inflexible hegemonic structure and programming of the YDLC that placed Vietnamese American ideologies and culture first, which essentially erased differences between diasporic groups and thus ignored the voices and concerns of the local Vancouver group. Recalling her comments on the alignment of ideas among the Vancouver team, Chloe, in her reflections on staff meetings before the camp that dismissed their requests, notes how the Vancouver team

> thought it was very upsetting, because we had a vision. We thought it could unite the fragmented community here in Vancouver…[but] it doesn't matter what this city is or focusing on what our needs are.
> […]
> I don't even know why we're going forward with this, because our original idea wasn't *this*. After that meeting, I was on the fence if I wanted to continue. It's not something I'm passionate about it.

In revisiting the promotional video created by Myra that opened this chapter—which was produced before these meetings—the hope for the ability to create a community through collaboration and with passion and inspiration were ultimately met with disappointment. Chloe's feelings toward the camp and how it was planned was not unusual. For the most part, most of the local VCS-Vancouver members participated in the camp because it was too late to leave; by the time they were completely shut out of programming decisions and all hope of change had been exhausted, it was only a few months before the actual camp and most begrudgingly decided to just finish their commitment. Even Sue, who is most likely to defend the camp, makes an argument similar to Lisa's on the rigidness of the camp from a local perspective:

> the main committee has a lot of control over what the local people can do and cannot. And we like to change that. Like local people and young people, there are certain ideas and topics we like to discuss but because…I guess there is already an agenda with the

> [VCS] and why it got created and who created in the first place, so in terms of the topics and some of things that have always been done, it's static. Stagnant. It's not adapting to time and the needs of the campers. That's unfortunate and I hope it changes.

At the very best, then, the YDLC from many Vancouverites' point-of-view was a lost opportunity for establishing a place where they could represent themselves in their own terms and build a community image that could be circulated on both a local and transnational level.

However, while both Zhou and Tinic lament the erasure of Vancouver, they also offer signs of hope. Zhou concludes his video with clips from local independent films, such as Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* (1994), that use Vancouver *as* Vancouver; although these independent films are not widely circulated, Zhou sees local film production as potential sites where Vancouver can assert itself and its identities, even if they are in the process of developing. As Tinic notes, the production of this local content is ironically made possible (or at least more efficient) by the media infrastructures developed as a result from Vancouver's relationship with Hollywood and central-Canadian broadcasting powers, the same ones that erase Vancouver as a place.[39] In terms of content, there are also benefits in operating on the peripherals of North American media production because in operating outside the sight of the more powerful Toronto branch, CBC Vancouver is "somewhat free" to go beyond the limits of a nationally-mandated definition of "Canadian culture," and develop local and regionally-focused media for British Columbia (of course within the confines of a budget established by Toronto).[40]

Thus, if there are positives that emerge through failure in the context of the YDLC, it is that this camp crystalized what Vancouverites want in their community through what was defined through the negative. For people like Lisa, Myra, Samantha, and Nelson, it highlighted

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[39] Ibid., 57.

[40] Tinic, *On Location*, 64.

or further concentrated the essential elements that make up their vision of the goals and futures of the Vietnamese community in Vancouver, invigorating not just a sense of exploring and crafting Vietnamese diasporic cultures, but ones that are localized and rooted in Vancouver, Canada. For Lisa, this means a continued effort in developing a local youth mentorship program that pairs Vietnamese Vancouverites who understand the dynamics of the local community with Vietnamese Canadians under the age of 18. After attending camp, Nelson noted a change in how he sees the local community: "after seeing the American Vietnamese, they're very, very proud. Which is a huge difference from here. And I thought it should be something more important to me because there are so few of us." It is this feeling of community and pride produced by the camp that inspired Nelson to volunteer at the Vancouver Vietnamese Cultural Festival discussed in Chapter 3. During this festival, he took a selfie in an áo dài [Vietnamese traditional dress], made it his Facebook profile picture (the first time he has ever selected a "Vietnamese photo"), and tagged his location to Vancouver and the annual cultural festival. While this is not an example of something that is distinctively Vietnamese and Vancouver and I do not wish to overstate a profile picture, Nelson's actions indicate a greater awareness of a local community that can possibly develop over time. If anything, it at least shows that Nelson is more confident in circulating not just Vietnamese culture, but something that is geo-tagged in Vancouver, giving his circulated cultural objects a localized geographical anchor that gives his objects a local dimension.

Perhaps more dynamic are Myra and Samantha, who note their past experiences with the camp reinvigorated their interest in Vietnamese culture in ways that are featured through our discussion of digital networks in Chapter 2, where they have the potential to interact with the greatest range of Vietnamese cultural objects. In the Fall of 2016, they both enrolled in a digital

media history class aimed towards Asian Canadian migration where they made films about their parents' journey to Vancouver, as well as the local political climate within the Vietnamese community. In these media projects, they anchor Vancouver as a *place*; in Myra's video on her father's history in the city, she revisits the first house he stayed in on the first day he arrived in Vancouver. As he tells his story via voice-over, there is footage of Myra riding the SkyTrain (Vancouver's public rail transportation system) throughout the city, blending together her father's narrative as a Vietnamese Vancouverite and the physical city. Additionally, for their various projects, they also have been reaching out to community members for interviews and to explore new topics and stories.

In all of these cases, they can more concretely see and gear their work and expressions towards building a local community on their own terms, one that they feel is reflective of their specific dreams, experiences, cultures, and identities. However, I hesitate to push this argument as far as Tinic and Zhou do in their contexts. After the conclusion of the YDLC in Vancouver, the majority of the VCS-Vancouver branch did not renew their positions and I am unsure if the YDLC was able to establish any long-term infrastructure to build upon after such a short weekend (the camp moved back to Texas for 2017). Still, although developing local Vietnamese diasporic identities will not be an easy task and much work and searching still needs to be done, perhaps these cases suggests that the Vietnamese in Vancouver are just ready to play themselves.

Conclusion

The expansion of global networks and digital technologies have allowed for new forms of connections, communication, and media production. With these technologies, people are able to more easily consume, produce, and circulate digital cultural objects across these networks. Yet, while these networks, connections, and circulations are global in nature, they are also grounded in the everyday and local. It is within these numerous, mundane, and active interactions and processes that we create and negotiate our cultural identities in relation to the global, yet within local spaces. Throughout this dissertation, I have illustrated how in foregrounding the histories and contexts of the local and the everyday, we can begin to explore the complex and diverse formations of diasporic identities around the globe. By investigating how Vietnamese Vancouverites negotiate with and circulate digital cultural objects within everyday media, this dissertation explored how these daily interactions and active processes formed the ideologies, identities, and subjectivities that guided individuals, organizations, and cultural events around the city. Through this exploration, I have highlighted key sites of differences that shape the local community within Vancouver and their everyday interactions with other Vietnamese diasporas and Vietnam. It is through the analysis of these multiple and complex interactions that revealed local experiences, narratives, and desires that were obscured by more dominant and documented diasporic groups. Overall, I wanted this dissertation to geographically decenter the ways in which knowledge about the Vietnamese diaspora is constructed and shift towards a view that highlights and recognizes multiple populations across North America for a more diverse understanding of a community I identify with.

While this study is an in-depth look at the Vietnamese community in Vancouver, there are several limitation in the project and many questions and areas still need additional research.

As it can be seen throughout the dissertation, the majority of my participants are college-educated. The is due to my emphasis on leaders of the community and cultural organizations, which tend to be of a certain class or have access to economic mobility. I believe as leaders, their actions and beliefs have larger implications within the local community, and in the process of being a leader, they are more likely to express these beliefs through something tangible like social media. Additionally, because they have more experience with academia, they are more receptive to and understanding of academic investigations. However, while I highlight power differences and hierarchies across different diasporic groups, we should also consider how "cultural elites" also exist within local contexts, even for a community like Vancouver that is not labeled as "strong." While I did interact with many members of the community that fell into demographics outside of the college-educated—including former gang members and low income people—I never committed to researching most of these people because I believe these populations deserve someone with more expertise and experience dealing with specific issues of social inequality within urban spaces. For example, the Downtown Eastside, one of the poorest Postal codes in Canada, has a number of Vietnamese people that engage with media in the everyday at local libraries, community centers, and prepaid "burner" smartphones. In my experiences, Vietnamese digital cultural objects were commonly circulated, such as mp3s from *Paris by Night* and news articles about the current state of Vietnam. While fascinating and most certainly worthy of research, a lot of these community members, as mentioned above, fell into categories of "vulnerable populations" in terms of research that would require specific theoretical frameworks and applied experiences in working with certain groups that I simply do not possess. Even with these expertise, it would require a lot of work to produce and conduct an ethical project. Beyond the demographics of the Downtown Eastside, there still needs more engagement

with different classes within the community, including blue-collar workers that migrated to Canada during the mid- and late 1980s, as well as younger populations that do not attend university. Although these groups often do not engage with the larger community in ways documented in this work, it does raise questions of what roles do the digital play in constructing Vietnamese culture for these particular groups in Vancouver (if at all).

Relatedly, there could be more range in terms of age within this project to include more middle-aged and older participants. As a project focused on social media, I did skew a bit younger because they are more likely to employ social media within the everyday. However, although older adults may not be as literate in digital technologies, they still use them in potentially interesting ways, perhaps further complicating our discussion of "digital diasporas" in chapter 2. Throughout the Metro area are computer classes aimed towards older Vietnamese Vancouverites that are ripe for exploration, though it should be noted that access may be difficult. In my attempts to sit in and/or interview instructors of city library programs, I was either denied or directed towards a very complicated process of obtaining permission from the city. Still, if one is able to access these spaces, they may be fruitful in exploring how older members of diasporas are adapting to digital cultures. Likewise, there are often everyday literacy classes within the home as children informally teach their parents or grandparents (such as James' relationship with his grandmother regarding YouTube videos), but this may require extended time investments with specific families to observe these actions within the everyday.

Vietnamese Canadian mass media is also ripe for study. In terms of mass media, Vancouver has a weekly Vietnamese-language radio program, as well as a few local ethnic Vietnamese-language newspapers. In my process of "following the media," I collected data where my participants were going in terms of media use and for the most part, no one actively

listened to the radio show or read the newspaper on a daily basis. For them, these forms of media usually existed as background noise—either something their grandparents listed to in their room early in the morning, or something they grabbed for their parents as they walked out of an Asian grocery store. As this indicates, there is a large overlap with mass media and age demographics that are not featured in this work.

Another gap in this dissertation is the topic of religion. Although unevenly practiced across Metro Vancouver and especially among the younger population, I would still argue that religion plays an important role in the local Vietnamese community, as churches and temples are common sites of community gathering. In some cases, this would be the only time and space people would interact with the local Vietnamese population in person. This gap is due to personal reasons; I was raised in a "mixed" family in terms of religion, where my mother is a relapsed Catholic and my father is a "cafeteria" Buddhist (who loosely picks and chooses how to be a Buddhist and changes the combination every day). Thus, I am not well versed in religious practices and their roles in everyday life, even at the very basic level, let alone at the theological level. While I did attend several religious events at churches and temples and had several conversations with participants on the topic of religion, I did not believe I could fully grasp religion in a critical manner for this dissertation. Historically, churches made up the majority of private refugee sponsorships in British Columbia, with many refugees and their children maintaining various levels of contact with churches, ranging from being current members to sending an occasional email updating their current status. In one conversation with a Vietnamese youth pastor, he suggested I look into church archives and libraries, especially those at local Catholic monasteries, which often have large collections of letters from refugees asking to be sponsored or thanking them for their support. While this advice came towards the end of

my stay in Vancouver and is outside the bounds of this project's research interests, these archives could be useful for further exploration into refugee experiences in Vancouver and Canada in general. Additionally, members from various churches—Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese—also played large roles in addressing the gang violence and drug use that was common in the community during the 1980s and 1990s, another site for possible study and intervention in the history of the Vietnamese in Vancouver.

Lastly, I would have also liked to further explore "race relations" between Vietnamese Vancouverites and other minority groups, especially Chinese Canadians. For this project, I focused on people who self-identified as Vietnamese or Vietnamese Canadians to contain this project and the data-collection process. As noted for some, this also included Sino-Vietnamese, or ethnically Chinese Vietnamese (as well as mixed race people who are Chinese and Vietnamese). I briefly mentioned in chapter 1 that some Chinese Vietnamese from the early waves of the boat people decided to incorporate themselves into the already established Chinese Canadian community due to cultural and economic reasons, while others became "Vietnamese" and passed down that identity to their children. However, this is a murky situation that produced a lot of conflicting stories and reports, both within my participants and primary and secondary sources. For instance, I had a few participants who did not even know they were ethnically Chinese until they asked their parents about questions I had raised in our interviews. Similarly, in my encounters with self-identified Chinese Canadians whose parents were boat people, there are some that expressed confusion and even mild resentment when their parents became part of the Chinese Canadian community, because they did not learn or understand that this happened until later in life and felt lies were being told. Due to my work being mostly grounded in ethnographic methods and interviews, I found it difficult obtain evidence in the field for even a

basic history that could describe the relationships between Chinese Vietnamese and Vietnamese because there was so much fuzziness and confusion among participants.

Beyond Chinese Canadians, many of my participants also had intertwined relationships with the large Indo-Canadian population in Metro Vancouver, as well as various pockets of Korean, Japanese, and Filipino Canadian communities. Yet, to fully explore these relationships would require more people who are versed in these communities, including language skills; this would be especially necessary to document histories of Chinese Vietnamese boat people who have forgotten Vietnamese and only speak Chinese languages like Cantonese or Teochew. As somebody who started fieldwork with limited contacts within the Vietnamese community, I did not have the time or resources to fully immerse myself in all of these communities in addition to the already complex Vietnamese community. However, I believe these relationships need to be further interrogated to reach even deeper understandings of how local contexts produce specific diasporas and reveal how hierarchies of global, national, and local ethnic politics and identities across diasporas provide sites of cultural competition or community. In doing so, this does not only challenge assumptions about the Vietnamese diaspora, but also highlight the connections and tensions that emerge across multiple diasporas, borders, and sites of power.

Perhaps it is fitting that as I complete this dissertation in 2017, the current Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, posted on Facebook a new "Heritage Minute" video featuring the story of Judy Trinh as one of Vietnam's boat people.[41] While I do not follow Justin Trudeau on Facebook, his post managed to get to my Newsfeed via Lisa and Nelson, who had shared the post. The one-minute video shows a recreation of Trinh's refugee narrative, where as a child she

[41] Judy Trinh, "The New Heritage Minute tells my Story as one of Vietnam's boat people," *The Star*, June 18, 2017, https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/06/18/refugees-helping-refugees-a-true-canadian-story.html.

had to leave home because "the Communist were going to take [her] father." Escaping on boat, Trinh and her family had to jump into the ocean after their boat sank. Eventually getting to a refugee camp, Trinh notes how her father, a former professor, struggled to find a country that would sponsor them since "nobody wanted us." Luckily, the next shot featured a Canadian official stamping a paper and welcoming the family to their new home in Montreal, Canada. As the family rejoiced, a child's voice stated "Canada choose us."

Almost a year after my fieldwork had ended, this video has shown how things have eerily remained the same as when I first arrived in Vancouver, as if history was repeating itself. The same refugee narratives were being displayed to mainstream Canadian audiences. Actually, it is the same narrative—in Chapter 1, I cited a 2015 article by Trinh that explored the same family story.[42] The video also reflected several of the themes I explored in this dissertation, such as anticommunism, cultural elites, and the cultural dominance of the Vietnamese diaspora in Eastern Canada. In many ways, the fact that this video was being shared by Trudeau and certain Vancouverites perfectly illustrates the contemporary state of the Vietnamese diaspora in Canada that opened and was discussed throughout this dissertation.

On the same day Lisa and Nelson shared Trudeau's post, Myra (Lisa's sister) and Samantha sent me the same link in a group chat. We had a conversation about the video, where I expressed a sense of déjà vu, they agreed it did not represent Vancouver, and we branched into a debate about how refugee narratives and the model minority operate in Canada and the United States (including what it means for Lisa to share the video). During this conversation, one of us

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[42] Judy Trinh, "Vietnamese boat people of more than 3 decades ago now thriving, proud Canadians," *CBC.ca*, last modified Sep 11, 2015, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/vietnamese-boat-people-of-more-than-3-decades-ago-now-thriving-proud-canadians-1.3223505.

also shared the newly released video, "100 Years of Beauty: Vietnam (Isabelle)."[43] As part of a larger YouTube series organized by nationality, the video traces the changing definitions of "beauty" over the last 100 years in Vietnam. Using Isabelle Du—Miss Vietnam USA 2017—as a model, the video styles Du's hair and makeup to replicate the most popular makeup and hair trends of each decade as the video progresses from 1910 to the present.

As we randomly shifted over to discussing this video, one particular production choice we all noticed was that from the 1950s to the 1970s, the screen was split to represent North and South Vietnam. Especially questionable was for the North in the 1970s, the fashion choice and accessory presented was a military-style hat and an automatic rifle—"Viet Cong Chic" as I described it. As we were discussing the implications of this split screen and fashion choice, with Samantha comparing it to the Korean version through screenshots, Lisa actually joined the conversation, though not directly in our group chat. She had watched the video over Myra's shoulder and now wanted to offer her opinion on the use of military accessories via Myra's chat: it is offensive!

While this was occurring, Samantha changed the topic back to the Heritage Minute video as she recounts an event that just happened: She was watching TV with her parents while messaging the group and the Heritage Minute video appeared as a commercial. As this happened, she looked up to her parents to see how they would respond. Her parents looked at the screen and began to watch the video. Her mom stopped halfway through and returned to playing games on her iPad. Her father watched the entire segment and just returned to his newspaper afterwards. Life moved on. Meh. Very anticlimactic according to Samantha, adding

[43] 100 YOB, "100 Years of Beauty: Vietnam (Isabelle)," YouTube Video, 1:54, posted [June 20, 2017], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffoJYtbxCeE.

a LOL. We have now switched over to debating the casting of Jackie Chan as a Vietnamese person.

I conclude by documenting this rambling narrative because it showcases both the dynamic, yet difficult nature of studying digital diasporic cultures and everyday media. Although the details above are adding up, I argue that all of these elements come together to produce a vivid, yet complicated picture of everyday life that reveals so much about how we construct identities and relationships in a digitally networked environment. While messy, random, and sometimes mundane, it is these small details that can tell us more about how meanings are created through mediated interactions. For example, a textual analysis of the Heritage Minute may not get the full experience and understanding of how a cultural object circulates through everyday media in local spaces and impacts diasporic lives; in addition to considering who produced the video, who shared the media, and our discussions, we also have to consider the larger cultural flows and context of the local and everyday surroundings in which this circulation exists. As we unravel the various threads and interactions, there are multiple points of discourses where we are crafting opinions and beliefs about ourselves, each other, other diasporas around the globe, Vietnam, Canada, and the United States. These conversations also take place across several sites: Facebook Messenger, my couch in Wisconsin, living rooms in Vancouver, mobile phones, and laptops. And of course these interactions do not operate in a cultural vacuum or a confined space. Digitally, they exist alongside gifs, emojis, screenshots, YouTube videos, iPad games, and LOLs that compete for our attention. Physically, they also include Lisa hovering over Myra's shoulder and Samantha's event with her parents. Then there is the interplay between the digital and the physical, where interactions with Lisa and

Samantha's parents started in the physical, but were eventually translated into the digital. And of course, we all bring our own histories of experiences and migration to the equation.

While a full analysis exists outside of this conclusion, I also want to conclude by noting that this complex set of interactions, discourses, and locations also occurred between members of Vietnamese diasporas that have not shown up in past academic works and in sites that are not particularly seen as "Vietnamese." So to return to Lisa's original question that helped open this dissertation, I did not know Vancouver was *this* "shitty" before I got there. But as the conversation above and this dissertation illustrate, I hope we can see the intense richness that can emerge from engaging a diaspora that exist on the peripherals and the various ways this engagement can help further understand the complexity of diasporic cultures within the digital everyday.

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