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AUTHENTICATING NGƯỜI MỸ GỐC VIỆT: VIETNAMESE AMERICANS AND  
THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY<sup>1</sup>

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Jennifer Huỳnh Thị Anh Morrison

June 2010

Advisor: Dr. Darrin Hicks, Ph.D.

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Title: AUTHENTICATING NGƯỜI MỸ GỐC VIỆT: VIETNAMESE AMERICANS  
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Advisor: Dr. Darrin Hicks, Ph.D.  
Degree Date: June 2010

#### ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a critical investigation of the politics of identity among the U.S. diasporic Vietnamese community, in particular, the discourse of authenticity that has been prevalent in the community and its (in)adequacy as a means of displacing racialization and othering as a minoritized community. Using a critical phenomenological approach, the study consisted of interviews with 14 Vietnamese subjects currently living in the U.S. whose family heritage(s) are traceable, in part or in whole, to Vietnam and/or who are racially marked as bearers of Vietnamese culture. A thematic analysis of the interviewees' personal stories uncovered three ideological challenges to authenticating Vietnamese identity: (1) an admission to a lack in historical knowledge of Vietnam, (2) have challenged the governance of Vietnamese-ness through an American/Vietnamese dichotomy of identity, and (3) the development of a "old yet new" identity as a potential alternative articulation of identity for younger generations of Vietnamese Americans. An examination of the implications of such thematics for displacing racialization of the community shows both the understandable logic that gave rise to practices of cultural authentication as a survival strategy and at the same time the inadequacy of such practices for bridging the existing disconnect between the identity signifiers "Vietnamese" and "American" and for the continued constitution of Vietnamese subjects as "other," as possessing a foreign and non-American identity.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: A Historical Overview: Vietnam Through Colonial Times .....	12
Chapter Two: Problematizing Authenticity .....	22
Performing Authenticity .....	25
Effects of History on Authenticity.....	35
Chapter Three: A Critical-Phenomenological Investigation.....	42
A Critical Approach.....	42
Phenomenology .....	43
A Critical-Phenomenological Approach.....	46
Methodological Considerations .....	53
Chapter Four: In Search of Identities: The Struggle for Authentic Vietnamese-ness .....	57
What does history have to do with it?.....	59
Dichotomy of an American/Vietnamese identity .....	65
Culminating an “Old yet New” identity .....	68
Chapter Five: Conclusion .....	77
Postscript.....	90
Endnotes.....	93
References.....	95

## Introduction

Sometimes I go to a Vietnamese restaurant in San Francisco's Tenderloin District. I sit and stare at two wooden clocks hanging on the wall. The left one is carved in the shape of a florid S: the map of Vietnam. The one on the right is hewn in the shape of a deformed tooth: the map of America. Tick, tock, tick, tock. They run at different times. Tick, tock, tick, tock. I was born a Vietnamese. Tick, tock, tick, tock. I am reborn an American. Tick, tock, tick, tock. I am of one soul. Tick, tock, tick, tock. Two hearts. (Lam, 2005, p.98)

This dissertation utilizes my personal life stories, the lived experiences of fourteen U.S. Vietnamese, and the 2007-2008 Little Saigon conflict in San Jose, California, as entry points to a diverse and multivocalic investigation of diasporic Vietnamese identity struggles in the United States. Shadowing Andrew Lam's (2005) curious observations of the signifiers "Vietnamese" and "American," when visiting a Vietnamese restaurant in the U.S., I find that my own exploration of the meanings signified by the term "Vietnamese" both within and outside the community discourse revealed the complexities of identifying as a Vietnamese in the U.S. In this dissertation, heeding the caveat given by Martin, Flores, and Nakayama (1988) in *Ethical Issues in Intercultural Communication*, I have chosen to embrace a position of "speaking with and to" (Alcoff, 1991/1992, p. 23 as cited in Martin, Flores, and Nakayama, 1998) rather than speaking *for* the subjects that I have invited to participate in this study. This ethic of speaking (and representation), while no guarantee, allows for a more dialogic approach to understanding the experiences and perspectives of subjects coming from multiple positionalities and their interpretations of those experiences brought on by their ethnic

marking. Hence, I begin this dissertation with a discussion of the effects of the Vietnam War on Vietnamese-ness in order to set the political context in which to engage Vietnamese identity in the United States.

Beginning in the 1950's, the United States' fear of a communist takeover of South East Asia escalated into a full-blown war when the U.S. deployed troops into South Vietnam in 1965. The end of the war brought forth a unified Vietnamese government for the nation of Vietnam while sustaining the division between the northern and southern Vietnamese people. I could take a U.S. perspective and discuss the democratic and heroic acts of the U.S. soldiers who participated in the Vietnam War however, I believe that a brief introduction to the years of colonial resistance by the Vietnamese more illuminating before I venture into the discussion of the current Vietnamese American discourse. From a post-colonial standpoint, the numerous colonial periods in Vietnam demonstrated years of resistance by, both, the North and South Vietnamese people. Being an independent and self-govern nation was the prime call to action for the Vietnamese. No longer would the Vietnamese allow themselves to be understood as barbarians and their country as under-developed. China was the first conqueror of Vietnam, which is still identifiable in present day Vietnamese customs, dress, and language. Additionally, many present day Vietnamese legends (i.e., The Trung Sisters) communicate the grassroots efforts of villagers who lost their lives while fighting against Chinese imperialism. After years of colonial rule by the Chinese, the Vietnamese found themselves faced with an influx of domination by the French, Japanese, and Americans. Due to the repeated demonstrations of superiority from outside nations, much of the Vietnamese landscape and culture changed. Of course, with this change came new forms



of resistance. For example, Ho Chi Minh fought for an independent, pro-communism, Vietnam. At the time, the French dispersed missionaries throughout the country in hopes of spreading Christianity while staging an educational system that educated only supporters of the French colonial regime. Minh's communist ideals resisted the classism that developed from the educational and religious divides as an effect of the French colonial efforts to modernize Vietnam. Even today, there are many Vietnamese Americans, living in the U.S., as a form of resistance to the current communist regime in Vietnam. Over one million Vietnamese currently live within the borders of the U.S. as a direct effect of the Vietnam War and Southern Vietnamese resistance to the Northern Vietnamese communist government.

The United States' participation in the war created a surge of discourse, primarily staged and maintained by the U.S. media, which began transmitting representations of Vietnamese (through television shows, movies, radio, and printed texts, among others) nationally and globally (Berg, 1990; Bonds, 1979; Horberg, Anhrenberb, & Noyce, 2003; Karnow, 1983; Keylin & Boiangiu, 1979; Milchan, Kline, Ho, & Stone, 1993). Within the U.S. Vietnamese community books, films, and community organizations (such as Bui, 1999; Dolgin & Franco, 2002; Hoang, 2007; Huong, 1988; Lam, 2005; Pham, 2008) communicate Vietnam as a place of contestation and the United States as a refuge, a place where the community can establish a political anti-communist identity in retaliation to the current Vietnam regime. When referring to the Vietnamese government, Hardy (2004) discusses the "internal transnationalism" within Vietnam, which has an influence on the various identifications within the Vietnamese diaspora. The internal transnationalism that Hardy (2004) speaks to deals with the divide between the

Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (North Vietnam) and the Republic of Việt Nam (South Vietnam). He argues, “The existence of a large Vietnamese diaspora stems from a conflict between visions of the Vietnamese nation” (Hardy, 2004, p. 218). With a better understanding of the divide between communist versus anti-communist ideologies within Vietnam, Hardy believes researchers will gain a better understanding of the various diasporic identities of the Vietnamese people. Thus, depending on whether a Vietnamese individual lived in North or South Vietnam and believed in that region’s communist or anti-communist ideologies, an individual’s reasons for leaving Vietnam and how she or he left Vietnam (i.e., by boat, through marriage, Orderly Departure Program) would vary. For example, from the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 to the mid-1980s many Vietnamese fled to the United States to escape the communist take over. However, because of the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) many Vietnamese were able to immigrate to the U.S. without persecution by the Vietnamese government (McKelvey, 2002). For many of the immigrants who left Vietnam through the ODP, leaving their homeland was not influenced directly by the Vietnam War but by the current anti-communist governmental choices of the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam<sup>2</sup> and the United States.

The various media and governmental discourses juxtaposed the creation of an American pro-democracy/anti-communist representation against the communist Vietnamese regime of North Vietnam and the Viet Cong. Such American representations created a communist/anticommunist dichotomy, which many United States Vietnamese refugees found solace in due to the communist take over of Saigon, the former capitol of South Vietnam (Collet, 2000; Ong & Meyer, 2004). The Vietnamese diaspora living in

the U.S.<sup>3</sup> found support and agreement in the American pro-democracy and anti-communist discourse allowing for the creation of a political space in which the diaspora may continue the battle against communism in Vietnam (Collet, 2000; Ong & Meyer, 2004). One such example revolves around the Little Saigon debate in San Jose, California. What began as an attempt to mark out the Vietnamese community in San Jose spurred into an intense debate revolving around the naming of the business district.

Many in the Vietnamese community have looked down upon Madison Nguyen, the only Vietnamese American council member in San Jose, because of her lack of support for the name “Little Saigon.” As Joshua Molina (2007) states:

The issue has been caught up in a larger political debate that dates back more than three decades. When the communists took over Saigon in 1975, they literally wiped Saigon off the map and renamed it after the father of Vietnamese communism, Ho Chi Minh. (p. 1B)

The symbolism behind the label, Little Saigon, communicates not only the resistance to the communist regime in Vietnam but that of the experiences of those who fled Vietnam after the fall of Saigon. The Vietnamese community in California once embraced Madison Nguyen because she is the first Vietnamese American elected as a council member in Northern California. However, the members of the community are now questioning Nguyen’s politics and her own Vietnamese-ness because of her stance on the current issue. For Nguyen, she believes the name should be representative of both the culturally diverse businesses and the Vietnamese American community in hopes of not excluding other cultural groups (i.e., Chinese, Mexican, and Asian Indian, among others who live in the surrounding areas) from visiting the area.

When unpacking this event from a broader context, it appears that the San Jose Vietnamese community evokes an identity based on the communist take over in Vietnam, which in turn provokes a separation between American and Vietnamese. By choosing to name the business district Little Saigon rather than New Saigon or Vietnamese American Business District, the community in affect draws a sharp divide between being Vietnamese and being American, which communicates the primary loyalty of Vietnamese to their homeland (South Vietnam) and the Republic of South Việt Nam. The name Little Saigon feeds the racial divide already present in the United States to the extent that the Vietnamese community is buying into and perpetuating the prevailing racial hierarchies already present in the U.S.

When speaking of racial hierarchies, I am referring to the discursive nature in which particular racial groups are pinned against one another in order to establish a power differential. The U.S. has a long history of generating differences between cultural groups but no other is more evident than the historic conflict between Black and whites in the United States. The Civil Rights movement in particular was what ripped open the normalized racial politics prevailing in the U.S. through such blatant institutional policies as, the Jim Crow Laws that served to marginalize Black Americans up to that point. Although the Civil Rights movement has since dismantled official racist policy outlawing discrimination and segregation of Blacks and whites, there is a still debate as to who is accepted and acknowledged as a “true” American, a native to the country and thus entitled to American citizenship.

Much of the current Vietnamese discourse created within the U.S. diaporic Vietnamese communities, still communicates distaste for the current communist regime

in Vietnam and an alliance with the U.S. anti-communist ideology. Such political attitude has a direct connection to the many unconscious and hidden U.S. racialized frameworks that promote privilege for those who have access to them by virtue of their “possession” of a native identity. The United States has reworked the discourse to embrace Vietnamese as a part of the American way of life, but the divide between being Vietnamese and American is still apparent. The United States still identifies Vietnamese as refugees and political cohorts against communist but the struggle for recognition and demand to be recognized as co-equal citizens is still an ongoing struggle for many of the first and second generation Vietnamese living in the U.S. (Thai, 2002; Valverde, 2001). Madison Nguyen was one of the first Vietnamese Americans to voice for an inclusion of a Vietnamese American identity; however, the rejection to include an American appeal to the Vietnamese business area suggests that diasporic Vietnamese are still separating themselves from their American counterparts. The continual separation of Vietnamese and American allows for the uniqueness of the Vietnamese community, their history, struggles and their political (anti-communist) agenda with Vietnam to stand out in relation to other diasporic groups.

As Inda (2000) states, “race is an effect of discourse” and suggests that race “draws our attention to how discourse organizes our encounter[s] with the world” (p. 88). Recognition of this embodiment through an individual’s performative citation of ruling beliefs and ideas constitutes racialized ideological constructions of what it means to be part of and to belong to a particular culture. Taking from Barthes’ notion of ideology, the expected embodiment and performance of an “authentic” identity is a myth, which some take as common knowledge because of its normalcy (Storey, 2006). In this sense, racial

frameworks act to produce and sustain particular authentications of an identity. Hence, the continual reproduction of a Vietnamese anti-communist space within the United States sustains the divide between Vietnamese and American.

Regardless of where questions of identity arise, whether in the homeland or abroad, notions of authenticity invariably accompany the politics of difference between Vietnamese and American. The interrogation of authenticity is possible because the discourse, by which Vietnamese create a political space for themselves to combat communism within the United States, allows them to disconnect from their “American” counterparts. Subsequently, an examination of the effects of U.S. discourse on Vietnamese identity exposes authentic markers of Vietnamese-ness. From the consumption of such discourses, Vietnamese then perform their identities according to the ascriptions set forth by the very discourse the diaspora supports and re-creates. My sense is that in the particular case of Vietnamese Americans, invocations of authenticity constitute not an ultimately unifying or empowering dynamic, but one that creates their own exclusionary dynamic, of who or what is authentic and who or what is inauthentic, and that ultimately has the unwitting effect of continuing to reinforce racial, ethnic, gender, and class hierarchies.

The United States Census is a clear example of how the U.S. government herds groups of culturally diverse individuals into particular categories, which then create, monitors, and sustains a racialized framework of identity for each. What complicates this cultural round up is that those subjected to such categorization are led to believe they chose such placements for themselves. The assumption that individuals have the power to choose their racial identity hides the fact that the government arbitrarily constructs

these racialized categories, which are subject to government control and regulation (Leeman, 2004). In other words, such systems of racial classification confine members of a particular category (i.e., racial group) to specific normative roles that are deemed authentic for that cultural group. The problem with this scenario is an individual's agency is at stake when confining her or him to a particular set of regulations by which to authenticate their identity. The ability/inability to perform an authentic Vietnamese identity, because of the rigid rules set forth in society, dismantles the possibility for an acceptance of an avowed Vietnamese identity.

The implications in accepting such seemingly innocent markings of identities are the recreation and reproduction of certain modes of identifications as normative. If I, as a Vietnamese white woman, perform what is deemed an inauthentic representation of my Vietnamese American identity, as dictated by the political sediment and unquestioned norms in the Vietnamese community, I could be placed low on the hierarchy of community power or I may just be rejected and ostracized all together (Valverde, 2001). On the other hand, identifying with pre-assigned ideologically sustained categories has the potential of perpetuating an acceptance of identity as pure, true, and uncontaminated. This double jeopardy constitutes the dual edge sword of identity politics particularly evident in the convoluted geopolitical history of Vietnam. In effect, when we acknowledge and accept our identities as unaffected by politics, we find ourselves supporting the racialized frameworks that forced us into the racialized identities in the first place. Therefore, within this dissertation I argue Vietnamese Americans belief in an authentic Vietnamese identity is, in effect, a historically (re)created notion of ethnic belonging that unwittingly maintains particular racial hierarchies in the United States. In

the chapters that follow, I dismantle this argument in order to expose any alternative marginalized identities present within the United States Vietnamese community.

### *Dissertation Outline*

In Chapter One: A Historical Overview: Vietnam Through Colonial Times, I discuss the multiple histories that shape what we know today as Vietnam and the United States Vietnamese diaspora. Specifically, I trace the implications of the many colonial powers that have assumed control over Vietnam for the patterns of dispersal and settlement of Vietnamese in the U.S. My goal in this historical account is to attempt to uncover the often contested/hidden and historically situated implications of possessing a Vietnamese identity within and outside the borders of Vietnam.

In Chapter Two: Problematizing Authenticity, I problematize the notion of authenticity as a marker of identity. I define and discuss the debates centered within the concepts of authenticity and identity. Moreover, I discuss how a critique of authenticity helps to expose and call into question U.S. racialized frameworks, which ideologically serve to maintain a divide between American and Vietnamese identities.

In Chapter Three: A Critical Phenomenological Investigation, I explain how my research benefits from a critical phenomenological approach. I include an extended discussion of the critical and the phenomenological approaches. I address the guidelines and procedures utilized to collect and analyze my interviews and the standards of collection as set forth by the University of Denver Internal Review Board.

In Chapter Four: In Search of Identities: The Struggle for Authentic Vietnamese-ness, I critically examine the ways in which Vietnamese Americans seek to authenticate



their Vietnamese-ness and understand why the United States Vietnamese community deems acceptable and warrants forms of authentication of Vietnamese identity. In discussing the interview results, I use the theoretical frameworks discussed in chapter two to interrogate how authentications of United States Vietnamese identity expose racialized frameworks set forth to bring about difference between cultures.

In Chapter Five: Conclusion, I discuss the implications of my research on Vietnamese American identity within the intercultural communication field and Vietnamese literature. I also address any theoretical and/or methodological limitations that should be addressed in future research focusing on Vietnamese identity.

## Chapter One: A Historical Overview: Vietnam Through Colonial Times

A knowledge of history is essential for an understanding of the context of contemporary thought and action. And, as many insightful foreigners have observed, Vietnam is a place where history is not an abstraction but a living, breathing entity. (Ashwill & Diep, 2005, p. 27)

For many centuries, Vietnamese have always cherished the legend of the creation of the Vietnamese people. The legend is that the descendants of the Vietnamese are the offspring of the union between a dragon and a fairy (Jamieson, 1993; Vien, 1993). As the legend goes, the Vietnamese people came from a bag of one hundred eggs born from *Âu Cơ*, a fairy who had married a dragon, *Lạc Long Quân*<sup>4</sup>. The legend states that the two were separated after their marriage, which led *Âu Cơ* and fifty of their children to the mountains where they built a new nation that was to be home to the ancestors of the Vietnamese people. As Thuy (2008) recounts:

Lac Long Quan told Au Co, 'I am from the Dragon line. I like to dwell on the Coast. You are from the Fairy line, you like to be on highlands. Therefore, we can no longer live together. It is better that we separate now. You take fifty children to the highlands, and I will take fifty children down the coast.' (¶ 7)

The division between the highlands and the sea separated the descendants of the Vietnamese but they are still linked by the common knowledge that they are the descendants of dragons and fairies. The custom of Vietnam has been to remember such myths to help sustain a historically “valid” and uncontested Vietnamese identity in Vietnam. Nevertheless, since the first telling of this legend, the Vietnamese landscape

has fallen victim to four folds of colonization by China, Japan, France and the United States.

For over one thousand years, Vietnam suffered under colonial rule by China. Many Chinese historians often referred to the Vietnamese as uncivilized, barbarians, and animals, which fueled China's ambition to expand its empire to the south in order to help bring modernity to the Vietnamese people and their economy. During this time, many of China's cultural traditions were imposed upon the Vietnamese people by Triệu Đà, also known as Zhao Tuo, a Chinese general who took control over Nam Việt<sup>5</sup>, which translates to "Vietnamese south of China." Nam Việt was a Chinese govern space that reached from Southern China to what is now know as Northern Vietnam during the Nhà Triệu Dynasty (Ashwill & Diep, 2005). Since China gave him governance over the territory, Triệu Đà forced the Au Lac people<sup>6</sup> to establish relations with China in hopes of bringing peace to the feuding Chinese and Au Lac cultures. The name for the land and the people also changed from Au Lac to Nam Việt. Such a reference immediately transformed the formerly un-constricted borders of Vietnam into a mere territorial extension of China (i.e., Nam meaning "south" of China). Additionally, the Chinese introduced Confucianism to the Vietnamese, which many Vietnamese accepted "as a guiding philosophy of personal and social life" (Ashwill & Diep, 2005, p. 30).

During periods of colonization, the Vietnamese immortalize many revolutions and revolutionists. Two such examples are the legend of The Lake of the Restored Sword<sup>7</sup> and the Trung sisters. The legend of The Lake of the Restored Sword in Hanoi, recounts the valor of Vietnamese revolutionaries as they forced out the Chinese. The story of the Trung sisters illustrates the Vietnamese resentment and anger towards China during

Chinese colonial rule. The resentment by many of the Vietnamese villagers sprang out of the allowance of Chinese people into the Au Lac region and cooperation with the Chinese government by the Lac Lords, a group of ruling, aristocratic Vietnamese men, during Vietnam's colonization. For example, when the Chinese began their expansion to the south the Lac Lords gave the Chinese free reign over their kingdom. Once the Lac Lords allowed this foreign power to take control over the Vietnamese people and lands, the Chinese began building roads and waterways in order to create and sustain a lucrative flow of rice as a commodity.

Over time, the Chinese began expanding their rule even further into the Au Lac kingdom so that Chinese generals, like Triệu Đà, would have land in which to farm and govern. Because of the desire to expand, not only their territory but their hold on natural resources (i.e., rice), and their desire to civilize the barbarians a rift was created not only between the Chinese and Vietnamese but also between the aristocracy and all those opposed to it, such as the Trung sisters (Pelley, 2002). As Jamieson (1993) states, "They [the Trung Sisters] became immortalized in song and story and today are still held up as exemplars of traditional Vietnamese values" (p. 8).

As the story goes two sisters, Trung Nhi and Trung Trach, revolted with a small army against the Chinese occupiers (Ashwill & Diep, 2005; Jamieson, 1993; Vien, 1993). The sisters were successful and Trung Trach was given the title Queen because of her and her sister's successful efforts in forcing out the Chinese. A few years later, the Chinese regained control over the Vietnamese people. As a result, the sisters chose death over surrender and drowned themselves in a local river.

From the mid-eighteen hundreds to the mid-nineteen hundreds, the French colonization of Vietnam resulted in a rewriting of Vietnamese histories as well as a restructuring of the institutional framework of the culture. As Pelley (2002) states, “During the French colonial period, histories of Vietnam were issued from the three principal arenas: The Nguyen court, the occupation forces, and Vietnamese who basically accepted the colonial mission” (p. 19). These new histories created a discourse, which represented the Vietnamese people as having a primitive and savage outlook. For the French, the Vietnamese were an uncivilized people whose customs proved this opinion. For example, Huard’s research on the teeth blackening custom in Vietnam proved to signify the Vietnamese as a primitive ethnic group (Huard, 1953; Pelley, 1998; 2002). Additionally, the French saw the lack of effective political leadership in Vietnam as a sign of inferiority. In order to train the Vietnamese to become more sophisticated, the French reconstructed the educational system in order to gain allegiance from a few elite Vietnamese (Ashwill & Diep, 2005). As Ashwill & Diep (2005) argue, “The main purpose of education was to create a tiny elite of Vietnamese who could assist in the administration of their own country as a French colony” (p. 34). Such historical and institutional marginalization and oppression brought about change in another piece of Vietnamese culture, their language. The Vietnamese language is said to have originated from a mixture of Cambodian and Thai languages (Ashwill & Diep, 2005; Jamieson, 1993; Pelley, 2002). However, the Chinese reconstruction of the Vietnamese language created a new vocabulary that is nearly seventy percent similar to that of the Chinese vocabulary (Ashwill & Diep, 2005). To this day, many Vietnamese words sound similar and have the same meaning to words spoken in Mandarin and Cantonese. In their efforts

to civilize the Vietnamese, the French reconstructed the Vietnamese language a second time.

In place of Chinese characters, the French rewrote the language within a Latin alphabet framework while keeping a majority of the Vietnamese vocabulary intact. This construct provoked many Vietnamese to emphasize the importance of knowing the Vietnamese language, as many Vietnamese relate their national identity to Vietnamese language acquisition (Ashwill & Diep, 2005; Jamieson, 1993; Pelley, 2002). The French insisted upon this language change in order to civilize the Vietnamese nation.

Unfortunately, for the French, restructuring the Vietnamese language was not enough in order to bring the Vietnamese savages closer to France's bourgeois culture. Ashwill and Diep explain:

Each occupying power regarded Vietnamese as inferior to its own language. Like the Chinese, the French language dominated Vietnamese schools, the university, the government, business, and foreign relations. (Ashwill & Diep, 2005, p. 35)

The French also saw fit to place a linguistic hierarchy by teaching French over Vietnamese in schools. I believe the change in institutional language signified that the Vietnamese language, although brought to a more civilized status by the French, was still unfit to lead the country out of savagery.

It was not until the 1930s when Germany's army invaded France that the Vietnamese saw their opportunity to revolt against the French. Such Vietnamese as Phan Bội Châu<sup>8</sup>, Phan Chu Trinh<sup>9</sup>, and Hồ Chí Minh<sup>10</sup> all contributed to the many revolutions against the French (Ashwill & Diep, 2005; Jamieson, 1993; Pelley, 2002). For a brief time the Japanese occupation of Vietnam advanced Vietnamese revolutionary efforts and

forced the French out of North Vietnam. During the 1940s, Japan expanded their regime to include most of Indochina. Once the war was over Japan retreated from Vietnam, which allowed the Viet Minh to seize control of the Vietnamese government and declare Vietnam's independence in 1945. After Vietnam's independence, the current government changed the country's name to Democratic Republic of Việt Nam. Soon after, France re-established control over South Vietnam after British forces pushed out the Japanese, thus leading to the joint French and United States occupation Republic of Việt Nam in an effort to prevent the spread of communism from the north.

Additional institutional changes reinforced the already dominant ideology, which stipulated that Vietnam was a country that needed modernization and protection. For example, the United States shared military strategies with the South Vietnamese government to modernize their armies. The United States' efforts proved effective until both the Soviet Union, which helped fund the North Vietnamese army, and the U.S., which supported South Vietnam, withdrew their subsequent armies and support for South Vietnam allowing the northern Vietnamese armies to advance on the south. The takeover of South Vietnam led to the unification of Vietnam, as one state and one nation, which in turn warranted a new national moniker, the Social Republic of Việt Nam<sup>11</sup>.

In the 1950s, the Geneva Accords promised Vietnam there would be elections to determine a national government for a united Vietnam however only France and the North Vietnamese government signed the document. The United States and the Republic of Việt Nam refused to abide by the agreement, knowing that the election would result in an easy victory for Ho Chi Minh. The result was the Second Indochina War also known as the Vietnam War. In the fall of 1963, Ngô Đình Diem, the first president of South

Vietnam, was overthrown and killed in a coup launched by his own generals. In the following days, the security situation in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate putting the communists within reach of victory. However, to prevent the collapse of the Saigon government United States President Lyndon Johnson approved regular intensive bombing of North Vietnam and the dispatch of United States combat troops into South Vietnam. The United States intervention caused severe problems for the communists on the battlefield and compelled the Soviet Union to send regular units from the North Vietnamese army into the southern regions (Buttinger, 1967b, 1972; Smith, 1968).

While researching Vietnamese history I uncovered that although most discourse refers to the division between the north and south originating around the time of the Vietnam War, the division between the two states has been present since the eleventh century, during the time of Chinese occupation. After Triệu Đà's rule over the Vietnamese people, a southern expansion of the Chinese nation began. This southern expansion (nam tiến) resulted in a divide between the north and the south leading to a division between the Vietnamese lords who gained ownership over specific areas of land within the north and south. Simply put, the civil war between North and South Vietnam began in the eleventh century and ended after the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War, which many in Vietnam refer to as the American War.

Needless to say, the history of the Vietnamese homeland has experienced many years of colonial manipulation. Nevertheless, the journey of the Vietnamese does not end with the unification of Vietnam. To complicate matters more, I found that many Vietnamese who fled Vietnam, before and after the south's unification with the north, have had to face additional challenges. In 2000, the United States Census (Barnes &



Bennett, 2002) reported that about one million Vietnamese currently live in the United States, of which eight hundred and twenty thousand are foreign born (Malone, Baluja, Costanzo, & Davis, 2003). In addition, vast Vietnamese communities, based mostly in California and Texas (U.S. Census, 2002), have been created because of the major flow of Vietnamese individuals into the country after the Vietnam War. With large enclaves of Vietnamese increasing since the end of the war, some within the academic field have discussed the changes taking place when discussing modes of identification among Vietnamese Americans.

In her article, *Negotiating Multiple Identities in a Queer Vietnamese Support Group*, Masequesmay's (2003) discusses how the intersections of race, ethnicity, and sexuality affect queer Vietnamese multiple identifications. Her research takes a closer look at queering Vietnamese identity by considering that identifications can have multiple forms. From these multiple forms of Vietnamese identity a blurring occurs as to who has the right to bear the identification, Vietnamese.

From a mediated communication perspective, Cunningham and Nguyen (2003) examine how the immigration of the Vietnamese culture creates a new form of Vietnamese representation within the realm of music and entertainment. When examining the various Vietnamese music videos, they found most of the music videos produced by diasporic Vietnamese encompassed a hybridity between their Vietnamese culture and the culture they currently live in (i.e., Australia, Canada, and the United States, among others). The authors' explanation of how Vietnamese music artists and various Vietnamese entertainment companies, located within the United States, model

their Vietnamese music and music videos after the globalized music market exemplifies the hybridity of identity. Cunningham and Nguyen (2003) explain:

Whereas the official culture of the diaspora continues to remain strongly anti-communist and anti-homeland government, growing numbers of particularly the young are forging 'hyphenated' ('Asian-American', 'Asian-Australian') identities which owe less to the past and more to a globalizing present. (p. 132)

Cunningham and Nguyen (2003) suggest over time, the societal conceptualization of Vietnamese, or in this case, what it presently deemed as “authentic” representation of Vietnamese music, has changed, as spurred by the effects of globalization and the phenomenon of diasporic migrations. As mentioned earlier, from the end of the Vietnam War to the mid-1980s, many Vietnamese fled to the United States through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) (McKelvey, 2002). I believe the Vietnam War and the governmental choices of the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam influenced many of the immigrants, who left Vietnam through the ODP, to pursue refuge in the United States. A closer examination could reveal the creation of the ODP would not have occurred if the Vietnam War had not happen and/or if the United States succeeded in their support of South Vietnam.

Several researchers and scholars have conducted a historical analysis of literature produced after the departure of the French and American colonizers within Vietnam (Bradley, 2004; Goscha, 2004; Ninh, 2002; Pelley, 2002). In Christopher's (2003) postcolonial examination of Vietnamese literature entitled, *Vietnamese and Vietnamese American Literature in a Postcolonial Context*, he discusses the differentiation between the varieties of Vietnamese perspectives among Vietnamese writers. “The dynamics of the relationship between the *việt kiều* community and the home country are both in flux

and central to literary production on both sides of the ocean” (Christopher, 2003, p. 210). Christopher hints at the divide between the two types of writers, those within the homeland (Vietnam) and outside of it (việt kiều<sup>12</sup>). This divide points to the notion of an authentic Vietnamese identity, which may be determined within a spectrum of authentication. This spectrum allows Vietnamese to avowal or be interpellated by a variety of Vietnamese identifications (i.e., Baby Lift Vietnamese, việt kiều, ODP, Vietnamese, and Vietnamese American, among others) in order to classify each identity into a racialized hierarchy of Vietnamese-ness. A singular diasporic identity should not govern Vietnamese identification outside of Vietnam. Thus, I pose the following questions as a road map for this dissertation; how do Vietnamese identify in the United States? Is there a singular Vietnamese identity used as a template for authentication? How does this authentic Vietnamese identity maintain racialized hierarchies within and outside the United States diasporic Vietnamese communities? Do such racialized hierarchies maintain and perpetuate racial frameworks in the U.S.?

## Chapter Two: Problematizing Authenticity

No one knows how old are the ideas of purity and impurity in any non-literate culture: to members they must seem timeless and unchanging. But there is every reason to believe that they are sensitive to change. (Douglas, 1984, p. 4)

In any discourse of authenticity, the connection between “purity” and cultural mixing cannot be denied. As Douglas (1984) suggests, in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, purity is a marker for acceptance and social order in primitive cultures. Through an extension of the concept, I believe the notion of purity is useful when interrogating markers of authenticity in relation to identity research. A classification and preservation of purity occurs. Unwittingly, this maintains the classification and preservation of purity through the protection of social order within a particular culture and context. Furthermore, “any given system of classification must give rise to anomalies, and any given culture must confront events which seem to defy its assumptions” (Douglas, 1984, p. 40). With a change in context, whether it is a division within a culture (i.e., North and South Vietnam), a change in cultural values and customs, or a movement to a new land (i.e., Vietnamese refugee and immigrants move to the U.S.), notions of purity are always present. However, what happens when a mixing occurs between two cultures? Will these cultural “anomalies” be disregarded or will structures be set in place to eliminate such anomalies? In the case of many Vietnamese, living within the U.S. creates much disparity in how to define and perform Vietnamese-ness,

which generates the markers of authentication to help sustain a level of cultural purity and homogeneity.

In her article, Valverde (2004) asserts that U.S. Vietnamese communities believe that knowledge of the Vietnamese language, history of Vietnam, and of the traditions constitute a pure Vietnamese identity. However, she notes that using such schemes of authenticity as markers of identity become problematic when ethnic communities migrate from place to place. Chan and Dorias (1998) argue, “The biggest division in the Vietnamese-Canadian community is not racial or economic, but generational. Older people regard Canada as a refuge; the young regard it as *a new home*” (p. 303). This difference in identification is a direct result of the immigration that occurred during and after the Vietnam War. For many of the older *việt kiều*, migrating to Canada was a necessity for their families’ survival during and after the war. On the other hand, many of the children within the *việt kiều* community have little or no recollection of why their families left the homeland. To them, Canada is home and has always been home.

These differing identification standpoints complicate the notion of purity when pinned against cultural mixing. The younger generations do not think of their current geographical location as an addition to their identity but see it “as,” and always part of, their identity. For them, location is directly related to identity. They are Canadian Vietnamese. The same is true in the U.S. Many Vietnamese communities flourish and continue to be culture-bearers. Valverde (2001) explains that many in the U.S. Vietnamese community urge the use of the Vietnamese language and adherence to traditions carried over from the homeland. However, there are those (Valverde, 2001) who question whether such cultural knowledges should serve as the only grounds for

classifying Vietnamese-ness. The classifications of Vietnamese-ness then create a divide for the Vietnamese and American cultures that keeps them separate. Due to such separations, purity calls forth a sense of homogeneity when moving the discussion from cultural to racial contexts. Thus, purity or in the larger sense, homogeneity serves as a fictional narrative that secures cultural lines and racial hierarchies in place. However, such narratives last only so long as they do not begin to unravel and a new narrative takes their places. The rupture that occurs between the reinforcement of an old narrative and the movement to a new one creates a need to conform and prove the purity of identity through markers of authenticity. From such markers, identity is substantiated in relation to the classifications set forth through the narratives. Unfortunately, the identification process is difficult for individuals whom the culture deems as something other than pure. Thus, a person must also “authenticate” her or his purity in order to eliminate their inconsistency within the culture.

Authenticity is a subject of debate among various theorists (i.e., Darling-Wolf, 2004; Gilroy, 2003; Hall, 1990; Halualani, 2002; Herring & Martinson, 2004; Keith, 2000; Johnson, 2003; Myhill, 2003). Scholars have argued societies’ racial and ethnic classifications influence perceptions of authenticity concerning individuals’ identities (Hall, 1990; Halualani, 2002). In this sense, authenticity is not so much an essential characteristic of individuals but a socially constructed concept constituted by hegemonic structures in a given society. Examples of such hegemonic structures that create social constructs that then come to constitute reified identities are the governmental, educational and religious institutions and community organizations where embedded racialized, gendered, and ethnicized discourses assign placements for particular individuals.

Because of these classificatory categories, differently positioned individual subjects come to serve as embodiments of certain sets of ascribed characteristics and ideals. Such systems of classification also set up norms that serve to constrain individuals' potential for identifications based on prescribed identity performances. For example, a Japanese-African American woman will need to embody a particular set of characteristics for each identification in order to be accepted as a woman, Japanese, and/or African, in addition to being American. The social iteration of such normative rules, through embodied performances, creates and maintains notions of authenticity/inauthenticity.

In his article, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Hall (1990) defines authenticity by way of the various historical and political contexts surrounding a given individual or group of people. Additional researchers (i.e., Gilroy, 1997; Drzewiecka & Halualani, 2002; Halualani, 2002) discuss diasporic theory in an attempt to address the historical and political effects that diasporic theory has on authenticity. From the combined questionings of "what is an authentic or inauthentic identity" and "how the disbursement of particular cultural groups has affected notions of authenticity" emerges the more encompassing question of "how do political processes, such as history, participate in the problematic in what society and individuals deem to be "authentic?"

In this chapter, I have outlined the problematic of authenticity as a marker of cultural identity by addressing the performative and historical diasporic constructions of authenticity. From these constructions, I now reveal the different investments a group or individual may have in regards to their (in)authenticity.

### *Performing Authenticity*

Butler (1990) argues the notion of identity (i.e., gendered identity) is embodied through an individual's performance within a particular location. This embodiment is identified through an individual's physical execution of particular beliefs and ideas or learned through society. She says:

Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause.

Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.

(p. 173)

I argue that such "corporeal signs and other discursive means," discussed by Butler, are societal influences and categorizations that produce identity and identity (re)authentication. Ina (2000), in his article *Performativity, Materiality, and the Racial Body*, extends Butler's performative discussion to include race. He argues that mainstream discourse repeatedly reiterates race as a space in which to normalize racial hierarchies. The U.S. Census is an example of this reiteration through its racial categorizations of U.S. citizens. The U.S. government divides Americans populations according to racialized groupings, which confines individuals to specific ideological roles (i.e., duties, behaviors, traditions, and dress attire, among others) (Leeman 2004). The problem with this scenario is an individual's agency is at stake when conforming her or him to a particular racialized identification. If a Vietnamese-White woman were seen as acting out of character and not being true or authentic to her ascribed identity, as



classified and socially learned through discourse in society, the Vietnamese community would place that woman low on the hierarchy of power within the Vietnamese community (Valverde, 2004). Butler's gendered-based performance may have introduced and connected the notion of performativity to authenticity however I embrace Inda's (2000) inclusion of the racialized effects performance has on the Vietnamese body because "Racial performativity is not a singular act of racial body constitution, but reiterative practice through which discourse brings about the effect that it names" (p. 88). In other words, we are halted and interpellated by the discourse and thus placed into an ideologically sustained hierarchy of racial authentic-ness.

Much of the discourse surrounding the naming of a Vietnamese area in San Jose, California follows Inda's racialized extension of performativity. It appears that one dominant discourse surrounding the naming of Story Road, a primarily Vietnamese business district, prescribes that whatever name chosen should continuously remind the Vietnamese community of whom they ought to be: not American and not Vietnamese but an "other" in America opposed to communism. The dispute over the naming of the business district heavily populated with Vietnamese, Chinese, and Mexican retail and food stores has been the focal point of discussion for this Vietnamese community. Madison Nguyen, the first Vietnamese council member ever elected in San Jose, moved for a name which included all members of the community, Vietnamese American Business District. The San Jose council later discussed the name New Saigon but many in the community felt it represented an acceptance to the current communist government in Vietnam. On the other hand, Nguyen felt that a more inclusive name would allow a

Vietnamese “American” identity to evolve since many in the Vietnamese community have lived in the U.S. for more than thirty years.

Many Vietnamese living in San Jose have found that the name “Little Saigon” would be more appropriate in conveying a Vietnamese American identity. As stated in Sherbert’s (2007) news article, Huy Minh Nguyen says:

It has a very special meaning to all of us Vietnamese-Americans in San Jose and what we stand for – we stand for freedom, we stand for justice, we stand for the most basic rights the current Communist government has taken away. ‘Little Saigon’ is a stamp for the Vietnamese-American identity. (p. 26)

Many in the community expressed this view during council meetings, through rallies and protests, and during community events. During the February Tết<sup>13</sup> Parade in San Jose, participants walking behind a float advertising Vietnamese stores<sup>14</sup> chanted “Little Saigon” while waving flags that read “Democracy Now” or that resembled the Vietnamese Heritage and Freedom Flag<sup>15</sup> and the U.S. flag (Griffy & Molina, 2008).



**Figure 1 - Personal picture taken at the 2008 Tet Parade in San Jose, California**

For these members of the Vietnamese community, the name Little Saigon refers to the anti-communist sentiment in South Vietnam during the time of the Vietnam War.

Remembering such history and opposition to the fall of Saigon communicates to the Social Republic of Việt Nam that the U.S. Vietnamese community has not forgotten the take over of the Republic of Việt Nam (South Vietnam) by the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (North Vietnam).

In Molina's (2008) news article, *2,500 Voices Call For 'Little Saigon' – Rally at S.J. City Hall Precedes Tuesday's Council on Vietnamese District Naming Controversy*, he ends with a quote from Dung Tran that reads,; "I support Little Saigon,," said Dung Tran of San Jose. "It stands for my country. I want that name back" (p. 1B). As a result of much debate and uproar regarding the naming of the Story Road business district, the San Jose City council decided not to name the area and let "privately funded signs that say "Little Saigon" go up" (Molina, 2008, April). This debate and the creation and displaying of the signs "Little Saigon" communicate Vietnamese American identity as an effect of the Vietnam War. In effect, Vietnamese Americans should not look for their identity in the U.S. but in the history of South Vietnam and that identity necessarily is one that resists the current communist ideals of Vietnam, accepts American democracy in America, and resents the loss of the city of Saigon to the North. Such identification however places many first and second generation U.S. Vietnamese into a state of limbo. This alternate space rejects the plural identification of being Vietnamese and American while simultaneously creating an "other" identification for Vietnamese in the U.S. They are a Vietnamese American in the sense they had to immigrate to the U.S. because of the communist take over in Vietnam. However, they are not "true" Americans because of their allegiance to Saigon and South Vietnam.

This dual sense of loss from leaving the homeland and the constant performance of remembrance of the fall of the Republic of Việt Nam expresses that the U.S. is not home but a refuge. Thus, Vietnamese may live in American but are not parts of the “true” American landscape. Through the constant struggle to enact remembrances to the fall of South Vietnam and Saigon, the San Jose Vietnamese community authenticates what it means to possess a Vietnamese American identity. The inclusion of race, as a concept, when discussing the performative effects of mainstream discourse allows for the examination of how the Vietnamese community (re)constructs, controls, and perpetuates a normative authentic Vietnamese identity in the U.S.

Lippmann (1965) “maintain[s] that our view of the world is inevitably based on sets of stereotypes, often perpetuated by the press, which prevent us from truly understanding those outside our social group” (p. 75 as cited in Darling-Wolf, 2004, p. 30). With this statement in mind, I question how individuals could embody an authentic identity if their view of the world is structured by stereotypes and scripts. On the other hand, how does an individual perform an authentic identity if the discourse is an effect of the community’s signification of authenticity? Not only does the performance signify the generalizations that govern our skewed markers of authenticity but also suggests identities we presumably believe are true and authentic, are not. Thus, I argue that the performative effect of such discourse, normalizes what it means to be “authentic.” From this social construction of racial normality, I problematize the notion of authenticity as a marker of cultural identity through a discussion of representation.

I believe similarity and difference sustain representations. The naturalization of such representations brings about stereotypes and constitutes what it means to have a

“real” and authentic identity. As explained by Hall (1997) stereotypes are a deeper set of representations that are a main cause of racial difference. Stereotypical images construct racialized meanings, which produce racial binaries, such as white/Asian, masculine/feminine, us/them, citizen/foreigner, civilized/barbarians. Differences created between the races, particularly representations and stereotypical images emerge for each group. Thus, the preconceived notions of race, centered upon the interpretation of racial meanings, through an effect of discourse on our performances of identity, are the basis for the perpetuation of particular stereotypical images of a ‘real’ Vietnamese. Moreover, the repetitive images circulating within knowledge of the authentic and inauthentic help reinforce the effect discourse has on an identity. Foucault (1980) says, “Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraints. And it induces regular effects of power” (p. 131 as cited in Hall, 1997, p. 49). Thus, from the construction of knowledge in regards to authentic racial meanings, stereotypes interpret and process a sense of ‘truth’ perpetuating the representational images that reinforce markers of authenticity.

Not only are these representations of Vietnamese currently hindering an individuals agency but the representations also perpetuate how society (within and outside of the Vietnamese community) will position authentic/inauthentic Vietnamese-ness in relation to particular issues, such as the Little Saigon debate in San Jose. I found through narrowing the focus from representation to stereotypes, Foucault’s (1980) notions of “power” and “knowledge” emerges (as cited in Hall, 1997, p. 49). Specifically I believe the formation of particular representations perpetuate the taken for granted image of an authentic Vietnamese and are governed by the acceptance, internalization,

and performance of the discourse. In other words, from society's construction of "truth" permits individuals to follow, accept, and perform particular notions of authenticity.

Hall (1997) states, "Stereotyping deploys a strategy of 'splitting'. It divides the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable" (p. 258). Omi and Winant (1994) acknowledge stereotypes as the means by which we know what we know about particular groups. Moreover, Foucault adds that it is through the conception of knowledge that the power begins to shift to one side of a given binary. For example, Tickner (2004) found that historically society's "division between work and home" constructed the term "housewife" (p. 17). This conceptual construction determines society's expectations of women and thus subjecting ideological characteristics onto women's identities. The same is true of the Little Saigon debate in San Jose.

Historically, the Southern Vietnamese have had to endure years of war and re-education from the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam. This war torn history of the Southern Vietnamese people dictates who they are now. They are free from the communism in Vietnam and have found a new space to perform and communicate both their anti-communist sentiments and pride for Saigon. This divide between the North and South Vietnamese transcends time and national borders, which is why the debate over the naming of Story Road escalated into weekly protests that raged against the San Jose city council's decision not to use the name Little Saigon and demanded the resignation of council member, Madison Nguyen (Recall Madison, n.d.). Therefore, the creation of such knowledge (the division between North and South Vietnam) perpetuates the imbalance of power within the Vietnamese American community. Such knowledge, as

an effect of discourse, creates an overall falsified regime of truth for an authentic Vietnamese American identity. Foucault (1980) explains:

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enables one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned... the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p. 131 as cited in Hall, 1997, p. 49)

I found this construction of knowledge, within the Vietnamese community, able to silence and marginalize groups who voice an alternate version of Vietnamese-ness in the U.S. For Madison Nguyen, a Vietnamese American identity is more than the remembrance of the fall of Saigon; it includes the current American culture in which the Vietnamese now live. However, many in the Vietnamese community find the void of homeland acknowledgement communicated Nguyen's lack of Vietnamese pride. Through the embodiment of such authentic representations of Vietnamese-ness, the Vietnamese community consumes, naturalizes and re-communicates an authentic Vietnamese identity.

In "systems of representation," new meanings are created from old historically based meanings. In other words, meaning is dynamic and identities governed by discursive representations within the dominant discourse, change over time. In her article, *Nymphomania: The Historical Construction of Female Sexuality*, Groneman (1995) discursively traces the notion of female sexuality over the course of three centuries. She finds that the signification of female sexuality changes over time because of the variety of clinical representations of "woman" create new meanings for female

sexuality. The same notion applies when looking at the U.S. images, in film and television, of Asian American women (Berg, 1990). Through various media images, representations of the 'stereotypical' and 'authentic' Asian American woman are constructed. These images change over time and thus, illustrate the problematic of authenticity as a marker for cultural identity. Hence, the changing definition of authenticity for each culture creates confusion and furthers debate on how discourse perpetuates, and the community authenticates, a particular culture and identity.

Through further examination of representations, I encounter the need to (de)construct stereotypes that are produced by the representations of particular cultural groups. If meaning changes and focuses on a particular group or individual, an examination of the discursive formations of stereotypes and how a body of knowledge becomes the dominant ideology is needed in order to uncover what is meant by the "authentic". The production and sustainability of particular performative acts constructs cultural authenticities of cultural identities. We are able to see how racial binaries, such as American/Asian, are drawn based on constructions of racialized meaning from the stereotypical images produced within a particular context. Thus, the preconceived notions of race, centered upon the interpretation of racial meaning, are the basis for the perpetuation of such images of authenticity (Omi & Winant, 1994). "Stereotype reveals the always present, already active link between our view of the social structure – its demography, its laws, its customs, its threats – and our conception of what race means" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 61). Through the constructed combination of both knowledge and racial meaning a reinforcement of stereotypes is achieved, thus giving the current culture the "authentic" conceptualization of what it means to be part of that particular



culture. The repetitive images produced through various mediums (i.e., media, social learning, among others) is an effect of the ideological truth construction of authenticity. Now that I have discussed the connections between performativity and identity, with regards to the effects of discourse in relation to ideological constructions of truth, I move to a discussion of the (re)construction and (re)production of ethnic and racial authenticity. I argue that authenticity is, in addition to being a socially constructed phenomenon, an affect of a historically seated diasporic identification.

### *Effects of History on Authenticity*

Embedded within the theoretical notions of representation and stereotypes are the concepts of ethnicity and race. From these concepts, the issues pertaining to what is authentic and inauthentic grow and help reinforce and establish ethnic and racial stereotypes. However, many terms used interchangeably in popular and academic discourse create confusion within the area of intercultural studies (Ponterotto & Casas, 1991). Thus, in order to alleviate such confusion I include explanations of each term, ethnicity and race. Ethnicity is often used interchangeably with race, but has a different meaning altogether (Root, 1992). Ethnicity is the learned behaviors of a "unique social and cultural heritage" which have been passed down from generation to generation (Ponterotto & Casas, 1991, p. 10). A few examples of ethnicity are codes of behavior, language, organization affiliation, religion, etc. (Ponterotto & Casas, 1991).

On the other hand, race is seen as a concept that "signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 55). Although some scholars (Zack, 2001; Ponterotto & Casas, 1991) view race as associated with geographical origins or genetic ancestry, Omi and Winant (1994) see

race as more of a process. This evolving process of race deals with the situational ramifications of an individual's racial background during any given situation. This fluid definition of race invokes numerous interpretations depending on the situation and context an individual may encounter thereby making the notions of race function as an evolving concept charged by the political implications of a given situation. In other words, the development of the concept race is useful when uncovering the development of what it means to be racially authentic. Therefore, not only does ethnicity help to reinforce stereotypes that are based on overgeneralizations of a particular racial group but also the very notion of being a part of a racial group helps to produce and reproduce the representations of what it means to be an authentic member of a particular race. Gilroy (2003) explains:

At certain points during the recent past, British racism has generated turbulent economic, ideological, and political forces that have seemed to act upon the people they oppressed by concentrating their cultural identities into a single powerful configuration. (p. 150)

From Gilroy's discussion of Blackness and Black diasporic communities in Britain, he found that the music of the black Atlantic culture was embraced by many Blacks living in Britain because, of the music's "expression of cultural distinctiveness" (p. 145). The Black communities' embracement of the music's authentic-ness develops a new identity and new authentication for the identity. Moreover, Myhill (2003) claims:

The ideology of 'authenticity' is really the same as the ideology of 'purity' which has underlain nationalistic movements, particularly Nazism... the concept of authenticity/purity allows one to appear to be taking an objective, egalitarian, and neutral standpoint on the value of different cultures while in fact creating a hierarchical system of a new sort. (p. 81)

What Myhill is addressing here is the historical happenings that have an affect on what it means to be of a particular cultural identity. However, how does history change the politics of authenticity? Who decides on what is to be authentic or inauthentic? Halualani (2002) addresses such questions through her examination of the Hawaiian diaspora in the U.S. Through her examination, she identifies three themes that constitute and argue for what is a “real Hawaiian.”

The first theme encompasses a reconstruction of the notion of “home.” The movement of the Hawaiian people brought about this reconstruction of what home is. To them being a “real Hawaiian” is not living on or in the area where your ancestors resided but instead remembering the memories of that place while living in a new location. Being an authentic member of this culture includes the remembrance of Hawaii’s colonialization and how that has brought change to many of the Hawaiian families within the U.S.

The second theme discusses the notion of pi’ikoi<sup>16</sup>. When communicating their authenticity with Halualani, members of the Hawaiian diaspora speak of their need to authenticate their membership within the Hawaiian culture by presenting a family lineage to prove that they are descendants of the Hawaiian culture. Halualani (2002) states “these enactments of pi’ikoi represented a symbolic means of reauthenticating their identity as Hawaiians in the face of the contested struggle over Hawaiianness with regard to the sovereignty movement and blood quantum mandates of the state” (p. 239). For this very reason, many Hawaiians find themselves fighting over land rights in Hawaii because they could not prove their authentic Hawaiian identity through documented family lineage.

The third theme she presents deals with the notion of blood. Not only is family lineage important to one's identity when re-authenticating Hawaiian identity, but Hawaiian's place emphasis on Hawaiian blood in order to achieve particular privileges. Halualani (2002) says:

The signifier of blood (kono) has been contentious with the Hawaiian community. This is due to the historical context of the 1900's when 'blood amount' or 'blood quantum' was used by the U.S. government to racialize and identify specific cultural groups... Blood became a form of 'scientific' classification use by governmental agencies to determine a person's race. (p. 238)

This blood quantum thematic rings true in Vietnam, too. The Vietnamese government must recognize a "true" form of blood lineage in order for a Vietnamese individual to purchase or own land. Any Vietnamese living within or outside of Vietnam are able to prove the authenticity of their blood is considered a *việt kiều*. For many Vietnamese living within the U.S., proving their Vietnamese blood is an obstacle they cannot overcome. For example, my mother did not want me to be born in Vietnam for the fear that I would not receive the proper documentation (i.e., a copy of the my birth certificate, correct spelling of my mother's and father's name, correct date of birth and location, among others) to authenticate my *việt kiều* identity. Because the hostile relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam has dissipated since the Vietnam War, many *việt kiều*'s return to the homeland in order to embrace their culture, family, and identity (which may or may not have changed because of the Vietnam War). Unfortunately, due to their inability to recover documented evidence of their authentic *việt kiều*-ness, many Vietnamese have not been able to access and/or obtain their privileges associated with *việt kiều*-ness. As illustrated thus far, the notion of authenticity is problematic. Depending on the history of a given people, what it means to be authentic or inauthentic

is determined by society's shaping of that cultural group during that particular time (Drzewiecka & Halualani, 2002).

The unveiling of Halualani's three themes argues for further intercultural communication researchers to not disregard the politics of authenticity when examining identity and diasporic communities. When referring to the politics of authenticity, Halualani (2002) states they are as follows:

A large set of politicized significations and discursive constructions of cultural membership that intermingle and oppose one another. These identity constructions of authenticity are political in that each construction is created and spoken from different positionalities and in response to past and present discourses of identity. (p. 221)

The ability to be accepted as part of a cultural group, to embody that authentic identity, draws forth a different set of positions. An individual must conform to the notions of what is appropriate for that authenticity if she or he wants society to accept her or him into that culture. Unfortunately, this authentic space is where the community draws forth-hierarchical positions of identity. When accepting an identity, an individual performs not only the current identity but past identity constructions that have influenced and shaped how their current identity is formed. Thus, through the performance of such an identity intercultural researchers are able to uncover the multiple ways in which historical changes position and authenticate identity.

Additionally, Halualani (2002) stresses the importance of "uncovering different identity constructions of authenticity and tracing the political consequences these carry for members of a cultural group. Who is included and/or excluded in terms of generation, age, language, place of birth, and geographic residency? What types of signifiers and speech acts are used to connect cultural members and exclude others"

(Halualani, 2002, p. 224)? Not only does the problematic of authenticity encompass the social construction of what is authentic or not but this authenticity problematic factors into the historically political components of a given society. Depending on the emotional investments an individual in the process of identification may have when identifying as an authentic member of a cultural group, an individual's agency can be swayed. For some multiracial individuals, passing as an authentic member of a particular cultural group may bring an elevation in power to that multiracial individual's agency within that given situation (Valverde, 2004; Williams, 1997). However, this elevation in power is not always the case. The complete opposite can occur leaving the individual with less power.

The problematic with authenticity is that each culture has its own histories. Whether those histories encompass a culture's past within one geographical location or if the memories span various continents, each culture still has a past that affects how and why they identify in a particular way. The politics behind particular identifications and how such identifications are proven to outsiders of a community begs the following question: how does a person prove her or his authentic-ness to those who question her or his identity? Through Halualani's (2002) demonstration of "authentic Hawaiianess," she demonstrates how the Hawaiian diaspora and the memory of that history plays a key role in the construction of what is authentic through the embodiment of particular definitions of home, family, and blood. "Cultural groups participate in the construction of their identities and definition of authentic membership" (Halualani, 2002, p. 224). No matter how "Vietnamese" I may feel, society may cast me as white because of my performed stereotypical white characteristics. I find that my white skin, American accent, and

westernized dress communicate a signification of an American, non-Vietnamese, identity. I also argue that these performed stereotypical characteristics are socially constructed and engrained into the psyche through particular socialized incidences that reinforce and cast the stereotypes into truth. The notion of truth victimizes me into various hierarchical types of authentications that surface for Vietnamese identity. Thus, in order to move beyond such normative conceptualization of authenticity, intercultural communication researchers must include a discussion of the performance and historical significance that may influence the ways in which authenticity is defined, communicated, and perpetuated among the diasporic Vietnamese community in the U.S.

### Chapter Three: A Critical-Phenomenological Investigation

By eliciting experiential descriptions of everyday life, phenomenologists can begin to gain understanding of cultural practices and how they operate in the large context. (Orbe, 2000, p. 606)

Variety of scholars have applied and utilized a variety of qualitative approaches to researching Vietnamese identity (Chan & Dorais, 1998; Kibria, 2000; Masequesmay, 2003; Valverde, 2001). However, I chose to combine two methodological approaches together, critical and phenomenological, in order to create a multi-methodological approach, I call critical-phenomenology, when researching identity and markers of authentication. Using a multi-methodological approach has allow me to understand the “lived” experiences of each Vietnamese interviewee through my examination of their stories while acknowledging the political influences (i.e., historical, economic and social, among others) that affects one’s Vietnamese identity.

#### *A Critical Approach*

Researchers working from a critical standpoint believe that reality is socially constructed in such a way that gives some individuals power over others (Hall, 1982; 1997; Littlejohn, 1999; Martin & Nakayama, 2007). The researchers working in this tradition “examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements” (Littlejohn, 1999, p. 225). Hence, from a critical approach, reality is a subjective apprehension of prevailing ideological/discursive constraints (Hall, 1982; 1997). Additionally, scholars (Hall, 1982; 1997; Littlejohn, 1999; Martin & Nakayama, 2007)



have assumed and emphasized the importance of studying the context in which communication occurs specifically focusing on macro contexts (i.e. historical, economic, and social structures). Within my research of identity and authenticity, I question the political context of Vietnamese identity development in how such contexts constrain (and enables) understandings of the power relations between the U.S. and Vietnam. In addition, I question how such understandings in turn constitute individual subjectivities. Thus, by questioning how power operates in the construction of one's identity I will be able to gain a better understanding for identity construction and authentication of Vietnamese living within the U.S.

### *Phenomenology*

Phenomenology is the study of human experience (Husserl, 1964; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Orbe, 2000). Scholars have defined phenomenology as the examination of essences (Husserl, 1964; Luijpen, 1966; Orbe, 2000) or “essential structures of various regions of phenomena” (Mohanty, 1997, p. 1). In other words, phenomenology is the search for the “essence” of lived experiences. In particular, I chose to focus on an extension of phenomenology, known as constitutive phenomenology (Husserl, 1964). The notion of constitutive phenomenology extends Husserl's original theorizations of phenomenology to include the method of transcendental subjectivity. Transcendental subjectivity is a reduction of the various intentional acts an individual partakes in to uncover the various subjective reasons for why individuals place into action such intentional acts. As the Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology (2005) suggests:

This procedure involves suspending acceptance of the pregiven status of conscious life as something that exists in the world and is performed in order to secure an ultimate intersubjective grounding for the world. (Tendencies and Stages within Philosophical Phenomenology Thus Far section, ¶ 7)

To explain phenomenological research, and more specifically constitutive phenomenology, I discuss two features of phenomenological research: the essence of the phenomenon and transcendental subjectivity.

### *The Essence of a Phenomenon*

When referring to a phenomenon, the experience could be associated with a plethora of ideas and objects. Husserl (1964) uses the term to describe how researchers discuss, analyze and theorize lived experience(s) (Luijpen, 1966; Mohanty, 1997). However, a phenomenon is not just the experience told by an individual, but the intentional acts that lead into and out of lived experiences. The notion of intentional acts came from Brentano's intentional theory of the mind (Brentano, 1995; Mohanty, 1997). This theory suggests that from intentional acts [i.e., beliefs, meanings, valuations, desires, love, hatreds, and so on" (Husserl, 1964, p. xiv)], individuals [or "people" as Husserl (1964) has argued] assign meaning to particular objects or ideas. "The peculiarity of intentional acts is that their objects do not have to exist" (Husserl, 1964, p. xiv). For the purposes of maintaining Husserl's vision of intentional acts, I use one of Husserl's illustrations of intentional acts to demonstrate how the essence of a phenomenon can be translated into an intentional act.

An intentional act may have as its object an existentially mind-dependent entity, for example, the idea of a mermaid; or its object may be something physical; or it

may be an impossible thing such as the round square; or it may be something possible but unactualized, such as a golden mountain. (Husserl, 1964, p. xiv)

These intentional acts allow individuals to construct ideas and experiences within their own frame of mind. I argue this frame of mind is not individually determined because of the context in which an individual constructs her or his ideas/experiences. The essence of being “about” or “of” something constructs the ideas, beliefs, meanings, values, desires, loves, and hatreds (Brentano, 1995). For example, mermaids are ideas “of” sailors who claimed to see mermaids while sailing around the world. On the other hand, a football is “about” an American pastime that involves men throwing around a pigskin oblong ball. The essence of being “about” or “of” something brings forth contextualized meanings associated with a particular intentional act. By bringing forth the hidden and/or unconscious meanings is where a phenomenological approach begins to uncover and illuminate the developments and significations of such ideas/experiences.

#### *The Transcendental Subjectivity of a Phenomenon*

Transcendental subjectivity is the idea of reducing an instance of reality down into individual parts. When put together the individual parts of reality constitute a singular instance of reality. Husserl (1964) believes that if you take the reducible parts of the “I” and/or the transcendental ego, you will be able to determine how reality thus shapes the essence of our lived experiences. Transcendental subjectivity focuses on how an individual’s experiences (i.e., intentional acts) go beyond her or his own consciousness to include a more contextualized understanding of reality. Husserl argues that intentional acts encompass our lived experiences and are identifiable through the examination of the transcendental ego. The ego is the conscious part of our brain that

commands behavior from our bodies. In other words, the performance of an experience and the choices behind such performances highlights the transcendental ego. Within my research, the transcendental ego is, thus, identifiable through individual's performances of identity and authentication. Hence, I use each performance of identity to understand the intentional acts surrounding an individual's lived experience. Thus, in order to access the lived experiences surrounding Vietnamese identity and authentication, and to uncover any social, economic, and historical influences on her or his identity, I use a critical-phenomenological approach. For this multi-methodology grants me access to the hidden negotiations of Vietnamese identity construction and authentication from personal experiences.

#### *A Critical-Phenomenological Approach*

Although Husserl's notion of constitutive phenomenological research can be understood as a reductionist perspective on consciousness and lived experience, phenomenology has been used in a variety of ways to help further research on identity (Broussard, 2005; DeTurk, 2005; Heinz, 2001; Tilden, Charmain, Sharpies, and Fosbury, 2005; among others). I could assume a phenomenological methodological approach, which focuses on human consciousness and an examination of identity, would be a perfect fit for identity research. However, taking a phenomenological approach to the extreme would include a reduction of individuals' intentional acts. This is problematic in that this reduction would assume that a few essentialistic ideals cause the intentional acts of an individual. To put it another way, Husserl believes that phenomenology reduces "the whole of reality to transcendently reduced data" (Husserl, 1962, p. xviii). The individual, the transcendental ego, is the reduction of such reality. In a sense, the ego

shapes our world and creates behavior. However, I venture one-step further. Instead of taking Husserl's phenomenology towards an extreme reductionistic focus, I argue for a combination of a critical and phenomenological approach that focuses on the social, economic, and historical, influences on Vietnamese identity and lived experiences. More specifically, by examining the stories told by each Vietnamese interviewee, through a deconstruction of the external factors framing the stories, I gain a better context-specific understanding of how individuals perform and authenticate their Vietnamese identities. This multi-method approach allows for a more in-depth examination of Vietnamese identity without losing the rich and contextual experiences, which help, define and illustrate Vietnamese identity within the borders of the U.S. For the remainder of this section, I present various reasons for why critical-phenomenology is an appropriate method when researching Vietnamese identity within the intercultural communication field.

#### *Critical-phenomenology and Multivocality*

First, a critical-phenomenological approach brings forth multivocality for the marginalized within society and academia (Orbe, 2000). Within the field of intercultural communication, multivocality is the act of bringing multiple voices to the surface of any situation (Chuang, 2003). It is with a multivocalic frame of mind that a researcher's awareness is heightened to expose the differences in every story or telling of an experience, depending on who is telling a story and when a story is being told. Not only will this approach help eliminate the essentialization of marginalized groups (i.e., by focusing research on positivist claims while using binary oppositions to explain particular phenomena) but a critical-phenomenological approach will also encourage the use of an

assortment of voices (Chuang, 2003). The proposed methodological move towards critical-phenomenology will allow for an uncovering of the, often, shrouded truths behind particular identifications. In essence, critical-phenomenology will more accurately expose why Vietnamese communicate their identities in particular ways through the analysis of the lived experiences that speak to the phenomenon of identity and authentication.

### *Critical-phenomenology and Ideology*

Additionally, critical-phenomenology calls attention to the relationship between ideology and identity(ies). Within every society, there are ideologies that tell individuals how to act and what to believe. These ideologies are universal truths that allow social groups to gain power or worldviews that bring forth a dominant group to power (Barker, 2000). Althusser defines ideology as being a "...system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group" (Althusser, 1971). He further explains through the interpellation process, where an ideology hails us and from our response to that hail, which we become subjects. Moreover, I argue that ideology is a socially constructed phenomenon that changes over time (Barker, 2000). This change can occur gradually or quickly depending on how accepting the individuals within the current ideology are to the newly created ideological structure(s). I believe that history relates to ideological change and visa versa. Specifically, this never-ending affect and effect between history and ideology will continue to evolve because of the contestation that ideology brings about. Protests, rebellions, and revolutions throughout the world (i.e., Million Man March held in Washington, DC on October 16, 1995) illustrate such contestations of ideology. Not every individual or group will be in the power seat when

particular ideals and worldviews are set forth. Through colonialism, particular cultural groups have been ascribed identities and conformed to particular teachings. Such ascribed identities and teachings will then change the way of life for that cultural group thus, changing their current worldview, their ideological state of mind. Thus, through a critical-phenomenological approach the connection between identity construction, authentication, and ideology will be uncovered from the various intentional acts described through the individuals' lived experiences. From the exposure of such intentional acts, critical phenomenology is able to account for how particular ideological influences of Vietnamese identity.

#### *Critical-phenomenology and Self-reflexivity*

Furthermore, critical-phenomenology invokes a self-reflexivity between the researcher and the phenomenon under examination. DeTurk's (2005) phenomenological examination found that three types of oppositions were used to categorize meanings of racial diversity. DeTurk's (2005) types of oppositions include:

Differing ideologies, which reflect both identity politics and generational differences regarding the temporal contexts in which we have been socialized; dialectical tensions such as those between similarities and differences and between the culture and the individual; and... contradictions between our lived experiences and the language we use to talk about them. (p. 3)

Moreover, DeTurk (2005) uncovered a type of language used to talk about diversity factors into the racial identity of the participants. Because of the reflexive nature of phenomenology, DeTurk's own identity brought forth a variety of values and beliefs to her study of race and identity. "The intent is to avoid theorizing at this stage, but rather to describe the phenomena under investigation as they reveal themselves. This required first identifying and monitoring my own personal standpoints on the issues under

discussion” (DeTurk, 2005, p. 5). In researching the lived experiences of an individual or group of individuals, a researcher must be wary of what she or he, as the researcher, is bringing to the table. DeTurk noted her ability to stick by the original thoughts of the participants through a stringent development of the narratives.

### *Critical-phenomenology and Context*

Lastly, I argue the most important reason for why critical-phenomenology is appropriate for identity research is it uncovers and exposes an individual’s contextualized lived experiences (Orbe, 2000), and more specifically an individual’s identity development and authentication. In other words, it allows for an examination and “an understanding of communicative processes in the accounts or words of the people themselves” (Heinz, 2001, p. 86). Within his hermeneutic phenomenological study, Heinz (2001) examines using narratives, the lived experience of eight bilingual individuals living within the U.S. Heinz (2001) looked for themes associated with the use of native versus second/third language use and identity. Despite varying differences between the individual narratives, Heinz (2001) noted interplay between language, identity, and communication. For instance, “speaking one of the languages available to them reflects and creates culturally conditioned aspects of identity” (Heinz, 2001, p. 101). What Heinz found is the type of language spoken determines particular identity characteristics.

Within clinical research, a phenomenological approach is used to discuss how individuals’ identities are changed by disease or illness. Within Tilden, Charmain, Sharpies, and Fosbury’s (2005) phenomenological study, they found that the impact of diabetes on identity could enhance the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions. The



study revolved around a case study of a twenty-six year old woman who has developed diabetes since adolescence. Tilden, Charmain, Sharpies, and Fosbury used a phenomenological methodology in analyzing transcripts, case/field notes, and journal entries to assess any change in the patient's identity(ies). What they found was that the patient's identity "had been overshadowed by the development of a 'diabetic identity' (Tilden, Charmain, Sharpies, and Fosbury, 2005, p. 312). Using a phenomenological approach, Tilden, Charmain, Sharpies, and Fosbury (2005) were able to assess through the patient's own words how her new diabetic identity conflicted with her already present identity(ies).

Within another study, Broussard (2005) reports on the interpretation and understanding of bulimia nervosa as a part of a woman's identity. Despite a multitude of investigations, very little published research has assessed bulimic women's personal experiences and understandings of this disorder (Broussard, 2005). Thus, Broussard focused his research on the development of an eating disorder as part of a woman's identity in order to assist in further clinical diagnosis of this phenomenon. Overall, he obtained interview data, personal diaries, and demographic questionnaires from each of the thirteen women. Broussard noted that the "participants' narratives revealed four themes that characterized the experience of living with bulimia: isolating self, living in fear, being at war with the mind, and pacifying the brain" (Broussard, 2005, p.43). It is from these personal experiences that Broussard was able to identify the phenomenon and discuss possible contextualized reasons for why these women would attach the notion of bulimia to their identities.

Even though Broussard's (2005) study is used to further the clinical notion of bulimia, I argue that this phenomenological approach could be used to uncover discourses that can have an affect on one's gender identity. "In 1998, according to the American Medical Association, eating disorders rank as the third most common illness among adolescent females in the US with an estimated prevalence of 4%" (Dittrich, 2004). While bulimia is signified as an eating disorder that affects many individuals' lives, it can also be understood as a form of empowerment to many young women around the world. Through the movements of Pro-Ana and Pro-Mia<sup>17</sup> many women and men have begun to take back the power that has been stripped from them through images of how particular individual within particular gendered identities "should" look. Although Broussard (2005) does not bring up these movements throughout his study, the mainstream culture has viewed the societal and historical influence of bulimia (i.e. the Pro-Ana and Pro-Mia movements) can be factored into how these women are identifying. Thus, in order to get at any (un)conscious and hidden reasons for particular variations in Vietnamese identity, I use a combination of a critical-phenomenological approach to expose and interrogate identity and markers of authenticity.

From a critical standpoint, this multi-methodology will help uncover the varying political (societal, historical and economic) and ideological circumstances of a given culture that can affect how an individual's Vietnamese identity is developed and authentically maintained. Moreover, the phenomenological side to this combination approach allows for an examination of how, through personal experiences, the societal, historical, economic, and ideological circumstance of a given culture influences an identity. Thus, I pose the following research questions for this study:

RQ: What does it mean to identify as a Vietnamese within the U.S.?

RQ2: What are the politics of competing discourses on Vietnamese identity in the U.S.?

### *Methodological Considerations*

In order to engage critical-phenomenology, I followed a set of procedures that help my research engage the individual experiences and narratives given by my Vietnamese interviewees. Below, I delineate my methodological procedures with a discussion of my interviewee pool, data collection process, and analysis of the narratives.

#### *Interviewee Pool and Selection Process*

My interview pool consists of fourteen men and women currently living in the United States, whose family heritage(s) are linked to Vietnam and/or who is racially associated with the Vietnamese culture. I decided not to select interviewees based on how they identified (i.e., Vietnamese and/or Vietnamese American) because it would limit my interviewee pool and compromises the types of experiences shared. For example, one interviewee identified herself as being American and still ethnically identified as Vietnamese. Ultimately, allowing specific identifications to guide my interviewee selection would have inhibited the level of multivocality brought forth by using a critical phenomenological approach. Furthermore, I use a specific type of personal referral system for recruiting interviewees known as snowball sampling. As Babbie (2004) states, “this procedure is appropriate when the members of a special population are difficult to locate” (p. 184). Thus by using this sampling method, I am able to locate Vietnamese individuals who may not identify as Vietnamese but who are in fact ethnically associated with the Vietnamese people and homeland.

#### *Data Collection*

My data collection process found and uncovered the lived experiences of each interviewee's identity constructions and authentication. In order to access these lived experiences, I interviewed each Vietnamese individual by following an interview guide approach. "The purpose of guided interviews is to elicit the participant's world view" (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). By engaging in what Rossman and Rallis (1998) refer to as "talk," the interviewees will be in control of how the answers are framed and what type(s) of information is revealed. Although majority of the data was collected by means of interviews, I also asked each interviewee to fill out a short demographical survey. To better illustrate how I engaged each interviewee, I have outlined in more detail the three steps of my interviewing process.

*Step one.* At the beginning of each interview, each interviewee was given a consent form and a demographic survey to read, fill out, and sign. As asked in the consent form and the demographic survey, all interviewees had the choice to accept or reject audiotaping of the interview. However, I also verbally asked each interviewee for permission to record the interview. If the interviewee did not want to have the interview recorded, I took written notes to help me recall what was discussed throughout the interview. Overall, two interviewees did not want to be recorded, thus I took notes during the two interviews to help me recall the interviewees experiences.

*Step two.* During the interview, I asked each interviewee a series of open-ended primary questions in addition to a variety of probing questions. Through the technique of probing, I engaged each interviewee with talk to help her or him elaborate on specific stories in order to grasp a more detailed account of the narrative. For example, if an

interviewee addresses a topic that I did not know or understood, I then asked for further clarification.

*Step three.* At the end of each interview, I asked the interviewee about her or his willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. If I needed clarification of experiences discussed during our first interview, I would conduct a follow up interview no later than two weeks after the initial interview. Before ending the interview, I thanked each individual for her or his participation and asked if she or he knows anyone who would be interested in participating in my study. After the interview is over, I transcribed the interview and assessed if I needed to arrange a follow up interview. In the event I needed to arrange a follow up interview, I contacted the interviewee to schedule a second interview. Overall, I conducted three follow up interviews.

### *Analysis*

“Each transcript is unique; the meaning of the experience of interest will emerge from that transcript” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 184)

In reference to a phenomenological approach, the examination of transcripts is not limited to particular sections. The entire text needs to be examined in order to display and take into consideration all of the lived experiences. I used large chunks or “passages” from my interviewees’ responses to illustrate how identity, as the phenomenon, is emerging from the narratives and stories (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). After bracketing particular passages, I (re)read each passage in order to uncover “salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief that help me respond to my research questions” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 178). First, I wrote down short phrases (i.e., codes) summing up each passage that I bracketed off throughout the transcripts

(Miles & Huberman, 1994). In other words, this process allowed me to engage in open coding. Open coding is the ability to identify particular segments or words within the text that help illustrate the phenomenon under examination (Flick, 2002). After the initial open coding, I compiled the passages into larger categories. While determining which categories are relevant to my research, I also kept in mind my research questions. In doing so, I was able to illustrate how each Vietnamese interviewee spoke to the notion of identity and authenticity by furnishing examples from the different categories that emerged from the transcripts.

Moreover, I took into consideration the perspectives of my interviewees to overcome any interpretational threats to my study's validity. As stated by Keyton, "viewing the interaction from the perspective of those you study can overcome this threat to validity" (Keyton, 2004, p. 73). I accomplished this by being reflexive about my own Vietnamese identity and questioning how my own identity, authenticity, and subject position could influence how I interpret my interviewees' responses. As stated earlier, I am a Vietnamese American. Although I am well versed in the history of Vietnam I was born and raised in the U.S. In order to be honest and take into consideration the variety of reasons for why and where the phenomenon of Vietnamese identity might be occurring in the transcripts, I also conducted member checks to see if my interviewees agree with what I uncovered from the interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 1998).

#### Chapter Four: In Search of Identities: The Struggle for Authentic Vietnamese-ness

My interview pool consisted of six men and eight women currently living in the U.S., whose family heritage(s) are traceable to Vietnam and/or who are racially associated with the Vietnamese culture. Eleven of my participants were born in the U.S. while two were born in Vietnam and one was born in Cambodia. The three individuals who were born outside of the U.S. immigrated to the U.S. while still in elementary school and only one of them has obtained U.S. citizenship. My participants' ages range from eighteen to thirty-six. In addition, while ten of my interviewees are currently attending college, one identified as a graduate student, one identified as a business owner and four noted that they worked within local businesses in the area they currently live. Moreover, one participant, of the four that worked in a local business and the graduate student has received a four-year college degree. All other interviewees are currently pursuing a degree in college or decided to pursue their business careers immediately after high school or immigrating to the U.S.

Throughout my analysis of the stories and personal accounts communicated to me throughout my interviews, I found three re-occurring themes: (1) an admittance to a lack of historical knowledge of Vietnam, (2) have challenged the governance of Vietnamese-ness through an American/Vietnamese dichotomy of identity, and (3) a development of a "old yet new" identity. In what follows, I illustrate and discuss each theme by including the stories and personal narratives communicated to me during the one-on-one

interviews. However, I must first delineate how my interviewees approached and defined the various generations within the U.S. Vietnamese diaspora living in order to obtain a contextual knowledge of how the Vietnamese community uses historical knowledge of the culture to interpellate or reject my interviewees' avowed Vietnamese identities.

I found that many of the Vietnamese I interviewed, regardless of birthplace or the number of years residing within the U.S., discussed generation in relation to their historical understanding of Vietnam. This historical understanding entails remembrance of the Vietnam War, specifically the colonization of South Vietnam by France and U.S. in addition to the communist takeover by the north thereafter. As one interviewee stated:

I put [generation] into the category of like people who were directly involved in that [the Vietnam War] for us. And then there are the people who kind of grew up here [in the U.S.]. And then there is like us who are like more younger and I guess under 30-ish.

When asked how one separates the various generations of Vietnamese living in the U.S., one interviewee referenced generation as, "how we understand [our] place [and] purpose in living here [in the U.S.]." Specifically, the interviewee did not base her generational understanding on age or birthplace. Instead, she spoke of the political reasons, fleeing Vietnam because of the Vietnam War, communism and the economic opportunities in the U.S., for why the various generations have traveled/immigrated to the U.S. Thus, the political contexts of the time influences how the Vietnamese community communicates and performs their generational identities.



*What does history have to do with it?*

I know the basics of the Vietnam War. How the country was divided and a little bit about communism and how it is spreading and that was about it.

But history it doesn't get talked a lot about at home so I have never favored history. And I have never really known about the stories of my parents' history or my grandparents' history.

Many interviewees spoke of Vietnam's history as an elusive idea grounded in the stories not discussed by their parents and implied through U.S. discourse. I believe by allowing voids of history to remain empty in the minds of younger generation Vietnamese living in the U.S. the older generations are conforming to the U.S. anti-communist discourse.

But my parents never really stress history with me. They don't really talk about it or when I ask them they simplify it in very basic terms and they don't thoroughly talk about it.

Most of my interviewees learned about Vietnam in their history courses in elementary, high school and college. Many interviewees mentioned that the educational discourses in the U.S. communicate Vietnam as a communist regime. The U.S. discourse surrounding the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese communities across the country have constructed a very communist perception of present day Vietnam. War films and television series dedicated in educating the U.S. about the Vietnam War generally approach the subject from a pro-U.S., pro-democracy and anti-communist mentality. Additionally, the educational discourse communicates the fear of a communist take over in Asia (i.e., the domino affect). This is not surprising when considering the "Little Saigon" debate in San Jose, California. Not only did the

community petition to cancel the vote for the name, New Saigon Business District, but they recreated while simultaneously supporting past anti-communist ideas about Vietnam. As stated by my interviewees:

I just grew up learning just to be anti-communism.

Other than the Viet Cong taking over, I'm not sure.

I'm not so sure what deep [Vietnamese] history is about.

Well I think they [Vietnamese Americans] send a message to the communist government [in Vietnam] that we are claiming our name hood back.

Additionally, another interviewee acknowledged the idea of communism as being a secret in which his family communicated their distaste in the color red.

So it's like a secret part of the family where like you're suppose to be anti-communist and I hear like better dead than red and stuff. But it doesn't have a lot of meaning, because they [older generation Vietnamese] don't connect it to us [younger generation Vietnamese] anyway.

One interviewee challenges the anti-communist ideals within the Vietnamese community in California. When talking about a red carpet Vietnamese movie premier, he expressed that many Vietnamese came to protest about the use of a “red” carpet because of the signified “communist” meaning placed on the carpet by the Vietnamese community. This stirred up many emotions for this interviewee when explaining his anger towards the protesters:

Its' just a color. I mean it's the Bay [Area] and you are still scared of the color red. You are still in control...you've not really escaped [the Vietnam War] you [are] still in that [war] because you [are] still in fear of them [communist].

When asking the older interviewees about the difference in how the generations understand the anti-communist sentiments towards Vietnam, an interviewee born and raised in Vietnam stated:

“For the older generation like myself who grew up after the war, we still have that emotional attachment to the Saigon name. So it's a tough debate I think.”

The ideologies attached to the use of the color red draws repeated significations of communism to Vietnam and the Vietnamese people living in the U.S. In turn, the ideological assumption that red equals communism communicates and warrants an anti-communist sentiment within the U.S. Vietnamese diaspora. Support of the simultaneous signifying act of communism and anti-communism is also evident when a riot broke out at a local video retail store in Los Angeles County due to a picture of Ho Chi Minh prominently displayed in the front window. Here the signifier is different (a movement from the color red to a picture of Ho Chi Minh) but the signified meaning generates a similar attachment to communism. The (re)fixing of meaning that repeatedly occurs when using multiple signifiers and a common signified meaning discursively communicates representations of Vietnamese identity. The discursive nature of fixing representations creates, maintains and normalizes the communist ideologies of Vietnam and anti-communist ideologies in the U.S. It is from such fixed representations that the U.S. discourse, an effect of the anti-communist ideology, would hail anyone identifying themselves as Vietnamese within the U.S. as part of the anti-communist regime.

When hearing the term “Vietnam,” many of the interviewees noted their immediate thoughts of the Vietnam War. From the acceptance by and from the U.S. and the diasporic Vietnamese’s understanding of the Vietnam War, my interviewees

expressed resentment and resistance to the current communist regime in Vietnam and the representation of it in the U.S.

When you hear Vietnam, you think of the war... I wish it wasn't like that. But it's just what it is.

Even when approached by her parents, one interviewee noted her thoughts of rape, tragedy and war by the mention of a U.S. Vietnamese War movie.

It's funny because my mom wanted me to take my boyfriend to a Vietnamese War movie and automatically I knew what that meant. It meant that if there is a girl, she's going to get raped and it's just going to be tragedy. And so that's what a Vietnamese movie is to me about the war.

For one of my interviewees, combating such anti-communist ideas is important for the youngest generation Vietnamese living in the U.S. Through his college Vietnamese Student Association (VSA), he and other students were able to generate newsletters about "ancient [Vietnamese] history, where it's like a bit more into the old history of Vietnam."

Another interviewee also noted the desire to research Vietnamese history for a talent show at school. Not only was this important to him but also for the community. He acknowledges many Vietnamese Americans do not know the history of Vietnam but at the same time there are many older generation Vietnamese Americans who do remember. His acknowledgement of the generational differences in historical Vietnamese knowledge is the direct reason for why he believed that a more in-depth inclusion of Vietnam's history should be included in the talent show. Furthermore, some Vietnamese communities have tried to bring together the generations so that all Vietnamese could learn about each other. While talking about her experiences within a Vietnamese community discussion group, an interviewee admits to a lack of knowledge

about the Vietnam War in the U.S. while reaffirming the older generation's anti-communist thoughts in regards to the Vietnam War.

One of the things we talk about or that I really notice and brought up myself was fear like my parents. After 9/11, my mom told me not to wear sandals because then I couldn't run away from the terrorists if they bombed my school. And she was always talking about like bushes, like terrorists or like people popping out of bushes. She was so afraid throughout my childhood at everything. And then in the fishbowl, we just learned like a lot of people have similar kind of experiences with their moms and their parents. And so I really got like, okay, like fear seems to be a big part of that generation and then I started thinking like why that was so and then led me to the Vietnamese War and then how they came over to America. Everything is different and so I've understood a lot more through that experience.

I found the cyclical relationship between the lack of knowledge and the reclaiming of such knowledge reinforces anti-communist ideals within the Vietnamese American communities. Highlighting history as an affective marker of perpetuating an anti-communist ideology brought forth a performative resistance within the younger generation Vietnamese.

Living within a community that does not accept your newfound knowledge of your avowed identity as necessary or appropriate will generate resentment as well as a drive to develop new avenues for communicating one's identity. When talking with my interviewees, I found myself negotiating my own Vietnamese identity. A few of the younger generation interviewees inquired about the Vietnamese legends and pre-Vietnam War histories. I felt as if I became the historian and the interview became a lecture on what I knew about the history of the Vietnamese people. Unfortunately, the younger generations were not alone in their quest to uncover how much historical knowledge of Vietnam I had. All but one of my older generation interviewees unwittingly placed the authentic gaze onto my identity, which potentially could cost me an open-door ascription

into the Vietnamese community. When speaking to an older generation Vietnamese I would know that my avowed Vietnamese identity is under scrutiny by the persistent nature of their questions. Whether or not I communicated to the older generation a valid form of historical Vietnamese knowledge or not, my own lack of anti-communist sediments undoubtedly raises questions about the authenticity of my avowed Vietnamese identity. I found myself feeling like an ant under a microscope in the sun. I felt a burning sensation throughout my body with each additional question asked by the older generation regarding how significant the Vietnam War is to my Vietnamese identity, as if each of my wrong answers caused the magnification of the sun to come closer and burn brighter.

On the other hand, the younger generation interviewees who knew much about the various histories of Vietnam shared them openly. In this case, the conversation became oriented around swapping stories and knowledge of the homeland. In this instance, I felt a mutual bond, a more relaxed and tranquil space, between my interviewee and myself. This bond seemed unbreakable because we, in that moment, began to shape our Vietnamese identities and histories together without having to prove our Vietnamese-ness. I found the U.S. Vietnamese diaspora's acceptance and agreement with U.S. anti-communist sentiments towards Vietnam interpellates and corporealizes an authentic performative Vietnamese identity for many younger generation Vietnamese. Therefore, the ideologically produced discourse and the re-communication of said discourse within the Vietnamese American communities, in effect produces markers of an authentic Vietnamese identity emerge.

### *Dichotomy of an American/Vietnamese identity*

When asked, what “proves” or “demonstrates” a real Vietnamese identity, my interviewees expressed two parts of their identity that complicated the stereotypical mold of being a “true” and “traditional” Vietnamese; their American and Vietnamese identities. Some even questioned the very idea of an authentic Vietnamese identity, due to the loss of Vietnamese language and historical knowledge amongst the younger generations of Vietnamese Americans. The marginality inflicted on to the younger generation by the community creates an American versus Vietnamese binary opposition. When telling me about his thoughts surrounding the question, “what are you,” an interviewee expressed his concern with the constant expectation for him to identify as an “other” who is not American and thus not part of an American identity. “I mean they are asking how I am different...so I would like to know what's American?” He later said, “I won’t identify with being Vietnamese because that's how we are different” in retaliation towards the idea of acknowledging your difference in the U.S. when saying, “I am Vietnamese.”

Moreover, the feelings of being different do not stop with the answering of the question, “What are you?” Some of the interviewees became U.S. citizens after their arrival to the U.S. from Vietnam. It is from this “formal” acceptance of inclusion as an American that my interviewees found difference thrust upon their identities yet again. “I don't really feel like I'm an American citizen yet. I have the paper and documents but I still feel like I am Vietnamese.” Because of these feelings of being different in comparison to being American, an interviewee expressed his desire to interact with the Vietnamese community, “I still feel more comfortable around people of [my] same ethnicity.” The idea of splitting apart and comparing the notions of American and

Vietnamese in order to justify one's place within U.S. society has created a void in what an authentic Vietnamese identity would look like.

One interviewee, who was born in Vietnam and brought to the U.S. by his parents when he was two years old, spoke of the desire to find ones "lost" identity amongst the divide between being American or Vietnamese.

So I actually questioned my own Vietnamese identity when I first got here. Because I actually didn't get very involved in like Vietnamese culture and history and embracing I guess my culture [and] identity until [I] got here, until I met a lot more [Vietnamese] people that were kind of lost like [me]. Kind of not sure exactly what their culture is or how much there is of it.

Some of my interviewees mentioned the cause of this "lost" identity as a primary result of another divide between national identity (those who are born here and blood ties to the homeland). "Since you were born here I think you feel more like you're an American. But you still have a history of Vietnamese in your blood too." Even though the idea of blood versus birthplace may separate the two national identities, American and Vietnamese, some of the interviewees have tried to take a little of both, the American and Vietnamese, in order to bridge the difference between the two. As stated by an interviewee:

I think because I appreciate both countries like I grew up here so I have a very strong feeling for this country. So, maybe I consider myself half-half. Maybe half leaning towards Vietnam and half towards American.

Another interviewee noted her half Vietnamese and half-American identity created an opportunity for her to achieve a higher-class standing.



I guess there is some privilege in saying Vietnamese American, because now the privilege of being in America where things are more or less socially stable and we're a lot better off [economically] than the rest of the world.

Although this “half-half” identity may seem to create a sense of companionship between the notions of American and Vietnamese, I believe that such “half-halving” of identity reinforces the ideology that being part American is a necessity in order to succeed and reach a higher level of living and status in the U.S. For example, for many years the Vietnamese have been deemed uncivilized by various colonial forces, including the U.S. It is the constant reminder of Vietnamese as inferior and thus needing the help of a more modernized state that the idea of difference reappears.

When negotiating such dualities in identity, most of my interviewees expressed a conflicting sense of excitement and frustration. Often times when performing a Vietnamese identity one must embody all of the historically seated sediments and language speaking duties of the Vietnamese community. When interacting with my interviewees I found my own Vietnamese identity contradicted the Vietnamese community’s assumption of authentic-ness. I did not speak the language, I am culturally mixed being that my mother is Vietnamese and my father is American and I look beyond, but still include, the Vietnam War as a historical link to my ancestors. The inability to control how much of my American-ness and my Vietnamese-ness is understood by another is wearisome and alienating. I am faced with accepting, without question or complaint, a Vietnamese-other identity or an American-other identity. Either way I flip the situation, the stigma of being an other in the U.S. is still invoked. However, when performing a dual, “half-half,” identity one is given a lot more freedom to choose which

performance of identity to communicate. For many of the younger generation Vietnamese found an excitement in blending the two cultures together. This was their moment to create, not choose, their identities. For avowing a Vietnamese American identity allows for the inclusion of the English and Vietnamese languages, American and Vietnamese cultural customs and a more holistic view of Vietnam's history as markers of identity. However, the idea that a person would only see her or his identity through difference would be a very premature conclusion even though the reoccurrence of the binary, American/Vietnamese, surfaced throughout most of the interviewees' stories. I found that not only did the interviewees all believe that their ascribed identities were a composite of all things not American but that there were also "unique" characteristics about their identity that communicated much more about Vietnamese Americans, especially the younger generation, than a focus on the duality of being either American or Vietnamese.

*Culminating an "Old yet New" identity*

There is the medium generation or whatever. I feel they are kind of, I don't want to put this way, but just because I don't [know] why I think that way. But I feel like out in this generation we, some of us, don't identify [as] Vietnamese. Some of us like struggle to find that identity and like making that culture.

For most of my interviewees identifying as either Vietnamese or American was not enough. Those who considered themselves as being part of the youngest Vietnamese generation in the U.S. saw their Vietnamese American identity as a blending of the new and the old, one in which needed to be researched and (re)communicated to the Vietnamese community and the U.S. As one interviewee explained:

I have a friend and I consider him a proud Vietnamese-American and he does spoken word poetry. He incorporates a lot of his Vietnamese heritage and he likes to tell them through history and include that in his poetry. He also likes to look at what's currently happening in [the Vietnamese community] and incorporating that into his poetry as well.

I believe that this “old yet new” identity is an affect of the long and complex four-fold colonial history of Vietnam. From my conclusions in chapter one, Vietnamese did not create and maintain the many cultural customs currently thought of today as being truly Vietnamese. Such customs as traditional dress attire, language, dances, and food, among others have been changed and molded to fit the modernizing efforts of the colonial power at that time. Thus, it is of no surprise that many Vietnamese find it hard to regain true historical knowledge about Vietnamese customs because of the constant (re)introduction of colonial ideologies on the Vietnamese culture.

When planning a talent show for the Vietnamese community, an interviewee expressed his desire for a blending of U.S. culture along with Vietnamese cultural knowledge he and his community members were able to uncover. Additionally, he expressed his frustrations with not being able to read or speak the Vietnamese language and identify traditional Vietnamese dances.

It is hard to define what traditional Vietnamese dance is because, I don't know, we've been looking into it but I can't really tell what exactly is purely traditional Vietnamese dance. So we're like mixing like lyrical and jazz and we mix them. Because of his frustration, which many other members of the talent show also voiced, he and his cohorts were able to create a more contemporary identity for their Vietnamese generation. These younger generation Vietnamese Americans combined “the new and

the old parts of [being] Vietnamese [in the U.S.]” which allowed for a more up-to-date Vietnamese identity in the U.S.

And I think its an interesting fusion because we have like the old traditional Vietnamese, like the fan dance with the umbrellas and all that good stuff. But then you also have the new youth generation and how those two [traditional and new Vietnamese traditions] like lay on top of each other and how that they mix with each other. You have the traditional dances but then we bring in hip-hop. That tells the story. And also like we didn’t have any like purely traditional dance but we have a fusion of lyrical, jazz and traditional.

From the use of the “old” discourse surrounding traditional Vietnamese customs and an acceptance of their current “new” American customs communicates the inclusivity of both the subjection of the younger generation by the dominate ideology dictating Vietnamese authenticity and the liberation from such interpellation through their recreation of a “old yet new” identity that crosses both Vietnamese and American cultures.

Not only does the interviewee see his identity as being a mixture of the old and the new but he also sees this happening in Vietnam. Because China, France, Japan, and the U.S. have colonized the Vietnamese for over a thousand years, Vietnam has become an eclectic mixing spot for different cultures. Not only do some of the Vietnamese holidays, clothing, and language resemble other Asian cultures but also many French and American restaurants and stores are filling the streets of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (formerly known as Saigon), the two largest cities in Vietnam. As the landscape and culture changes, because of particular historical events, so does the ideology of Vietnam (Buttinger, 1967a; Chapuis, 1995). Before Vietnam was an independent country, the ideology referred to all Vietnamese as uncivilized people. Thus, the Chinese and French influence on the Vietnamese language created a hybrid language that encompassed

Chinese vocabulary and the Latin alphabet. It is because of these continual changes to the Vietnamese culture within Vietnam that many of the U.S. Vietnamese communities agree with and subject the colonial “popular” views onto the younger generation of Vietnamese Americans. Therefore, not only do many of my interviewees consciously understand that this is happening but they also acknowledge that something needs to change. Hence, this change is uncovered in the blending of the “old yet new” by the younger generation Vietnamese Americans.

From the many stories told during my interviews, most acknowledged that the Vietnamese community did not consider or see them as Vietnamese because they did not follow the “traditional” and “popular” views of Vietnamese-ness.

Well, the Vietnamese community does not know that I'm Vietnamese, and I hear them talking. There's been one or two occasions where they [other Vietnamese] were talking about me but they didn't know that I understood. So the way that they view me is that they don't view me as Vietnamese.

My interviewees express their ability to liberate themselves from the traditional views of Vietnamese identity through community involvement with others from their generation.

As one interviewee stated:

The reason why we get together is to like to help each other piece together our identities, because people come, a lot of this has come from our different backgrounds, [and] some from the communities that who like don't [know] anything about the Vietnamese traditions.

From this interviewee's perspective, joining others with similar experiences helps begin the conversation as to what is a Vietnamese identity in the U.S. For some, simply promoting the knowledge of Vietnamese culture would help bridge the gap between the generations. While explaining how she was involved in planning the Vietnamese cultural

show, she expresses how important it is for the younger generation to communicate their newfound knowledge and identities to the masses.

Because we do this culture show, like we have this community to tell our stories to so people [can] keep them because in the history books, in the textbooks, people don't learn about it.

Furthermore, many of the interviewees have seen a change in the number of younger generation Vietnamese involved within the Vietnamese community. When discussing his involvement in his local Vietnamese Student Association, an interviewee noted:

Before I felt it was very, even like five years before, I felt it was a little less organized, formalized. It's very like, let's just get together [and] helping with a lot of logistical cohesiveness. I think we are just really pushing for this kind of networking thing. And that really helps the younger generation connect with the older generation. Like there is a lot of networking, because we realize we can do stuff by ourselves, there is kind of potential when we do stuff together.

Even though college campuses primarily house and govern most VSAs across the U.S., the development of community-oriented organizations allow for discussions and expressions of the growing number of participants wanting to help bridge the gap between the generations. The Union of Vietnamese Student Association (UVSA) is one such organization. Although UVSA does have organizational ties to the many VSAs, an interviewee noted many UVSA members have no affiliation with a local VSA. I found because the UVSA is more open in its membership as a networking organization, many younger generation Vietnamese have begun to participate more and more. Additionally, another interviewee informed me that many youth events (i.e., talent shows, cultural shows, parades, cultural gatherings), like the one discussed below, express the need for a

space where the younger generation can come together and discuss issues without defending who they are and what they stand for.

A UVSA youth forum [is a place] where it was the younger generation [who] talked and the adults couldn't talk. They [older generation] could attend it and listen to what the younger generation said because I know some adults are very very passionate about it and they are like, "No you are wrong." But we had a youth forum where it was like what the younger generation thinks without influence.

Another interviewee noted that even though there are many generational differences within the Vietnamese community, the one marker of Vietnamese-ness that affects the relationship between the generations the most is language. However, the blending of the English and Vietnamese languages grants him a new space in which to bring the generations closer.

All of them [older generation] don't speak English that much, so we have a language barrier there too. I guess to have that communication and also just because we live in America, doesn't mean we will understand each other. I think language is very important so we will just hold on to it, because language of our people, if that's lost then more things can go, just keep on like fading away. And so that's why in our VSA show, we try to have the right balance of Vietnamese English.

The ability to create a space for themselves, the younger generation Vietnamese, has allowed for a discussion and negotiation of their own Vietnamese American identities. For example, an interviewee expresses her excitement in the development of a youth forum where the younger generation Vietnamese Americans can come together and talk about their place in the U.S.

It's [an Asian American community organization] really delving into the community and it's really good because it's people my own age who understand my experiences. Through that I've understood a lot more about the old generation.

Although it may sound like the younger generations are able to carve out a place where they may communicate their identities freely without consequence, many of the interviewees told me that it is extremely hard to liberate themselves from the more traditional views of Vietnamese identity. Language, knowledge of the homeland and respect for your elders are just a few of the ingredients a younger generation Vietnamese must possess when wanting to be acknowledged as a true Vietnamese within the U.S. One of the interviewees recalled an experience she had with her parents while watching a Vietnamese pageant on television and how the importance of language has carried on:

I mean I was watching some Vietnamese pageant with my parents and like the girls on there like if they couldn't speak Vietnamese well, my parents automatically dismiss them, "Oh! Like how could you represent us?" And it was a clear distinction between speaking it well and they [her parents] could tell the accents, American accents. So like she [another participant who spoke Vietnamese] talked very, very well. He [her father] automatically knew that she came from Vietnam and they're like, "Alright." And then she also have to speak English well too. So it was like a decision, but she couldn't speak good awkward English and good Vietnamese. She had to like be both, but they were so down on the girls who couldn't speak Vietnamese very well or who struggled with the Latin accent. And, yeah, like even at this Vietnamese warm hearts and winter concert, that we had for a charity kind of thing like one of the Vietnamese Americans who were honored at the ceremony for being like economically successful with this young girl who started like a clothing business, and she was like twenty, in her twenties. She had to go out there and give a speech, she was so nervous and like my heart went out here. Because everyone was, I could hear them all around me, like "She doesn't speak Vietnamese like how could they honor her?"

On the other hand, the interviewees who considered themselves part of the older generation reiterated repeatedly that knowing the language and customs is not enough. One must also help sustain cultural identity markers in order to preserve the culture.

I have friend I feel I consider to be proud [Vietnamese] and she is always talking about the food and she is always making the food. She is speaking the language all the time when she is on the phone with her friends or her family. I feel that



she is really trying to preserve as much of it [Vietnamese culture] as possible and use the language as much as possible.

This preservation of knowledge expresses the older generation's desire to remember and re-establish authentic markers of Vietnamese-ness from the homeland to the diasporic (re)created communities in the U.S. This brings me back to my discussion of using dominate ideologies to govern, control and dictate Vietnamese-ness. I believe that the performance of speaking in Vietnamese, mandated by the diasporic community, highlights the colonialist ideologies in the changing and reinsertion of the Vietnamese language. The Chinese and the French chose to "update" the Vietnamese language in order to modernize the ethnic group. I argue that this updating created, in effect, a new discourse of the Vietnamese language, which hailed and subjected the Vietnamese to an identity based on re-education and modernization. Similarly, the current performative assumptions for the U.S. Vietnamese diaspora has (re)created an authenticating performance that communicates a link to the Vietnamese homeland and thus a rejection of America and the English language. For if a Vietnamese speaks English and not the Vietnamese language, the community will not consider her or him as an authentic Vietnamese. As stated by an interviewee who acknowledges the tension between speaking the language and link to the homeland:

I can say language being a big part there, because a lot of the old generation is still hard for them to like speak in English and pick that up. And I guess a lot of the youth; they have never been to Vietnam. So it's kind of hard for them to [speak] Vietnamese when all their lives they've been growing up in America, but then their soul acknowledge that they are Vietnamese.

The combining and splitting of the old and new has shown many younger generation Vietnamese that creating a unique identity is influential in the future development of the

Vietnamese diasporic community. Although many in the younger generation accept their newfound identities, there is still a tug-a-war occurring in relation to the amount of mixing that could occur between the old and the new. Not only would the younger generation expect me to perform my Vietnamese American-ness, but also the older generation would expect a heightened level of proficiency in both the Vietnamese and American cultures. Thus, I would have to walk and talk seamlessly in both cultural contexts in order for the Vietnamese community to accept me as a true authentic Vietnamese. Unfortunately, I have yet to experience walking and talking seamlessly in both contexts as I find it nearly impossible to accomplish with the variety of northern and southern Vietnamese cultural variations (i.e., linguistic, clothing, custom, food, among others).

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

Some of the most violent articulations of purity and racial exclusivism come from diaspora populations. (Clifford, 1997, p. 250)

From my observations of Vietnamese identity and readings of the literature, I argue that the dynamics of authenticating ethnic identity among diasporic Vietnamese is based, ironically, on the othering that occurred during the years of colonization in Vietnam. So why is this important for Vietnamese living in the U.S.? What does it mean to identify as a Vietnamese and what are the politics of competing discourses on Vietnamese identity? These questions have guided my interrogation of Vietnamese identity and authenticity. From such interrogations, I found many Vietnamese within the U.S. have admitted to a lack of historical knowledge of Vietnam, have challenged the governance of Vietnamese-ness through an American/Vietnamese dichotomy of identity, and are continually developing a “old yet new” identity, which bridges the gap between the generations. Furthermore, I contend the many stories told to me support my claims that the U.S. diasporic Vietnamese community (re)constructs, controls, and perpetuates a normative authentic Vietnamese identity that in effect maintains a disconnect between being Vietnamese and American. It is from such disconnect that Vietnamese are signified as an other, who possess a foreign and non-American identity and sustains the racialized framework within the U.S. Although each of the interviewees’ experiences are slightly different, each interviewee portrayed a sense of distinction and negotiation

between being Vietnamese and American as well as discussing ways in which the younger generation Vietnamese liberate their Vietnamese identities through the creation of an “old yet new” identity. My goal is to illustrate an understanding of how the ever changing historically and ideologically driven Vietnamese discourse polices and maintains Vietnamese identity within the U.S.

Although there is no mention of Vietnamese identity in the intercultural communication field, I found there was much more to identity than being an affect of history and ideology. It is through the constant acknowledgement and support of the diasporic vision of Vietnamese identity that the Vietnamese community reinforces the already present racialized hierarchy within the U.S. The “Little Saigon” debate in San Jose not only exposes but also reinforces the American/Vietnamese dichotomy. Since the beginning of the debate, the Vietnamese community has found itself split into two faction: patriots to the current anti-communist regime in Vietnam and those (mostly younger generation Vietnamese Americans) whom support a more inclusive and multicultural Vietnamese American community. With the unveiling of the Little Saigon banners along Story Road, the Vietnamese community allowed and presented a new marker of Vietnamese-ness but also a reinforcement of previous markers that insinuate a historically imbedded tie to the loss of democracy and of Saigon in Vietnam. The waving of both the American and Vietnamese Heritage and Freedom flags at the Little Saigon banner ceremony became markers for many younger generation Vietnamese to consume and follow.

The need and desire of the diaspora to pose for pictures with the Heritage and Freedom flag and to sing the Social Republic of Việt Nam’s national anthem are

performative reminders, to the diasporic Vietnamese communities, of the need to battle for democracy and freedom against the communist regime in Northern Vietnam. The ceremony seemed to be well received until I was handed and told to wave the Heritage and Freedom flag during the ceremony. In that moment I began to notice that many who were without flags were “told” and not asked to wave the flag. I am not saying that the community was rude in their actions but they were quite insensitive to the varying degrees in which a Vietnamese American might participate in this ceremony. For example, I held the flag but did not wave it. I also noticed that many Vietnamese, who had the Heritage and Freedom flag shoved into their faces, resisted the need to hold a flag by shaking their head side to side. Unfortunately, the event was not a space in which someone in the Vietnamese community could abstain from such participation. I heard such words as; “you have no pride until you support our community” and “holding the flag and singing shows everyone you have Viet Pride.” I was shocked and disheartened by such comments, some of which were directed at me when someone in the crowd noticed that I was not singing the national anthem. It did not matter that I did not know the song or that I did not speak Vietnamese. What mattered in this moment was my ability to show Viet Pride; pride in my homeland, pride in the name Saigon, and pride in this Little Saigon district which in turn is a space, an American space, to promote the anti-communist sentiments and a reclaiming of the old Southern Vietnam capitol Saigon. Similar to my interviewee’s experiences at a red carpet event, the use of anti-communist discourse is needed to follow the political agenda of the older generation. By expecting newer generations to not only recognize the often hidden and unspoken histories of Vietnam’s colonial past along with the perpetual use of authenticating markers of

Vietnamese-ness, the current diasporic community has juxtaposed itself against and in comparison to the U.S. The contrast between a community that uses the pro-democracy of the U.S. landscape to promote the loss and turmoil brought upon the Vietnamese diaspora by the Northern Vietnamese and the rejection of a more inclusive American label for the community communicates the need to fight against the communist take over in order to return Saigon to the Southern Vietnamese. Therefore, the continual link to the homeland can be understood as a marker of Vietnamese-ness, which promotes the desire for the Vietnamese diaspora to return “home” from their political exile in the U.S. and in turn marking the U.S. as a temporary home for Vietnamese.

By not allowing for a re-creation of Vietnamese identity in the U.S., the racialized framework subjects many younger generation Vietnamese as either American or an “outsider” to this country. For example, many of my interviewees were concerned with the U.S. Vietnamese community’s attachment with U.S. anti-communist ideals. As mentioned earlier, I argue that such anti-communist sentiments are still present and avowed by the diasporic Vietnamese community because of the diaspora’s ability to find refuge in the U.S. during and after the war and their ability to carve out a new political space they can call home. This ability to create and sustain a new home in the U.S. allows diasporic Vietnamese to create a Vietnamese identity different from the representational communist Vietnamese identity attached to present day Vietnam: an identity that is based on a Southern anti-communist view, which sustains the Republic of Việt Nam regime.

This dissertation has not only been educational for me but to many of my interviewees. I have learned that not only do I find myself part of the younger generation

of Vietnamese living within the U.S. but that my own Vietnamese identity is in a constant state of flux due to the highly upheld signifiers used to determine and fix Vietnamese-ness by the diasporic Vietnamese. Moreover, many of the interviewees expressed their gratitude and approval of asking about their identities. One interviewee stated, “I’m glad you allow us [younger generation] to talk about ourselves and who we are instead of the old ones who tell us how to be.” From these comments, repeatedly communicated to me throughout my interviews with younger generation Vietnamese, I began to understand how much control and power the diasporic Vietnamese community has over authentications of Vietnamese-ness in the U.S.

For this reason, I argued that the U.S. diasporic Vietnamese community, influenced by the colonial forces, which have dominated the Vietnamese homeland, (re)construct, control, and perpetuate a normative authentic Vietnamese identity that in effect unwittingly maintains racialized frameworks in the U.S. society. To prove this thesis, I believe the separation between the notions of Vietnamese and American sustains a U.S. racialized hierarchy through the warranting of authentic markers of Vietnamese-ness (i.e., working historical knowledge of the homeland, the ability to speak the Vietnamese language and an identification and support for anti-communist ideals). As Hall (2002) states in his discussion of race and social structures:

One must start, then, from the concrete historical ‘work’ which racism accomplishes under specific historical conditions – as a set of economic, political, and ideological practices, of a distinctive kind, concretely articulated with other practices in a social formation. These practices ascribe the positioning of different social groups in relation to one another with respect to the elementary structures of society. (p. 59)

Hall articulates racialized frameworks as a discursively repeated act of racism, which can prove to sustain and maintain racist ideologies within the current society. Specifically, Hall explains that the slavery inflicted upon Blacks in the U.S. has created and structurally sustained a racial framework that will continue to oppress Blacks even after their emancipation.

The position of the slave in pre-emancipation plantation society was not secured exclusively through race. It was predominately secured by the quite specific and distinctive productive relations of slave-based agriculture, and through the distinctive property status of the slave (as a commodity) and of slave labor-power, coupled with legal, political, and ideological systems which anchored this relation by racial ascription. (Hall, 2002, p. 59)

I believe such racialized ascription is also apparent in the historical relationship between Vietnam and the U.S. For many Vietnamese, the use of the American landscape as a political platform for their resentment and hatred of communism and the loss of Saigon creates a racialized identification for Vietnamese as an outsider to U.S. Although the Vietnam War ended, for the U.S., at the end of the 1960's the Vietnamese who were driven from their home and took refuge in the U.S. are still seen as such, as refugees who will strive to reclaim their home in Vietnam. This idea is still apparent in the many of the experiences of my interviewees. Whether it is a talent show, beauty pageant, youth forum or red carpet movie premier the Vietnamese diaspora still questions the blending of American and Vietnamese. The constant drive to promote Vietnamese as a Vietnamese-only community maintains the historically seated identification of Vietnamese as a foreigner, refugee, and temporary entity to the U.S. landscape. However, the historical impact of such racial formations surrounding the Vietnamese



community must not only be discussed in relation to the diaspora's history in the U.S. but the immigration of "Asians" in general.

Since the time of the transcontinental railroad, the U.S. has summoned Asian immigrants to its borders as a form of cheap labor in order to help the country grow and prosper. From such acts of Asian slavery, came numerous changes in the discourse surrounding the migration of Asians to the U.S. (i.e., the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the Immigration Act of 1891 and 1924, and the Integration and Nationality Act of 1952, just to name a few). Yet, the constant non-American stigma attached to Asians is what historically seats the division between Asian and American. Takaki (2000) illustrates such divisions between Asian and American when discussing the economic struggles many Asians faced in the U.S.

Pushed out of competition for employment by racial discrimination and white working-class hostility, many Asian immigrants became shopkeepers, merchants, and small businessmen. Self-employment was not an Asian 'cultural trait' or an occupation peculiar to 'strangers' but a means of survival, a response to racial discrimination and exclusion in the labor market. (Takaki, 2000, p. 125)

Many Vietnamese ethnic enclaves have grown exponentially since the Vietnam War. The U.S.'s willingness to free many of the South Vietnamese from the northern communist regime has been the basis for such growth. When compared to the immigration of many Europeans (i.e., Italian, Irish, and German, among others), the U.S. did not see nor treat the Vietnamese in the same way as their "white" counterparts. This is not to say that European immigrants did not face discrimination. They did. However, many Asian and Vietnamese immigrants since then have become victims of the economic challenges based on the white/other dichotomy that fuels and sustains racialized frameworks within the U.S.

What calls forth such indictment is the ubiquitous marking of the signifier “American” as only white which in turn signifies those who are not white as strangers, foreigners, and others. From my findings, I uncovered that the youngest generation of Vietnamese living in the U.S. has found themselves in the middle, both between being Vietnamese and American and between the current communist regime in Vietnam and those who oppose it. In their personal stories, specifically in their tellings of community action efforts dedicated to the concerns of younger generation Vietnamese, the interviewees communicate their individuality and uniqueness in order to liberate themselves from the diaspora’s “inaccurate” authentic shell of Vietnamese-ness. As Alexander (2006) states while discussing cultural performance as a site for social agency:

... passing is a reflection of one’s positionality (politicized location, which is always relational to people and that which is being passed) – knowing that the existential accomplishment of passing always resides in liminality. This is not the process of becoming but the state of being betwixt and between two performance communities... with the performative expectations of both communities serving as mediator in a tense feud. (Alexander, 2006, p. 73)

From Alexander’s notion of passing, I believe the younger generation has the ability to create a new identity that not only gives them individuality but also allows them to pass within the American and Vietnamese communities. This is not to say that they will have both, an American and Vietnamese identity, but that they are able to negotiate their position in the larger context of the U.S. racialized frameworks in order to carve out their unique authenticity against other diasporic groups in the U.S.

The experiences of the younger generation, and how they combat the essentialist views of Vietnamese-ness by the diasporic Vietnamese community, are similar to Gonzalves’ (1997) discussion of Filipino-ness in a Pilipino cultural event entitled,

Cultural Evidence, at San Francisco State University. The event “provided a ‘venue’ for the creativity of its members and its surrounding community” that allowed for an inclusion of “Spoken Word” and a “Hip-Hop Experience” which showcased a new form of Pilipino identity not included in previous Pilipino cultural shows (Gonzalves, 1997, p. 178). Cultural Evidence not only brings forth a new sense of what Pilipino-ness signifies but also creates a space in which to question current markers of authentication within the U.S. Pilipino community. The ability to move away from essentialist homogenized views of identity “highlighted the process of identity as an unfolding set of contradictions and possibilities, rather than the fixed structure of identity to be (re)presented” (Gonzalves, 1997, p. 180).

The discourse I primarily focus on through out this dissertation deals with the use of the name “Little Saigon” for a strip of road in San Jose, California. The naming of Little Saigon has proven to be more than just a name for the present day Vietnamese community living in the surrounding areas. The name transcends time and brings many community members back to a moment in their lives where the communist forced the Vietnamese to choose between who they are and what they “should become” (i.e., one nation under communist rule). For many of the diaspora Vietnamese, the term “Little Saigon” brings about resistance to the communist regime that took over South Vietnam that ultimately resulted in the fall of Saigon and its renaming to Ho Chi Minh City. For the younger generation the idea of identifying solely as anti-communist is a far removed reality because of their desire to look beyond the Vietnam War and into the additional colonialized history of Vietnam by the Chinese, French, and Japanese. The younger generation Vietnamese involvement in Vietnamese community groups (i.e., support,

youth, and service groups) and educational student organizations have created a space where they can (re)create their Vietnamese American identities to encompass a historical and present (“old yet new”) account of their avowed identities. One interviewee noted his and his parents’ reactions to the performance of this new liberating identity during a Vietnamese cultural show:

I came with my parents and I stand in the very front row and I was so inspired and like [the show] amaze[d] us. The Vietnamese who use it [cultural show] to come together like this and to create something solid. This is so powerful and so like grand, talking about the Vietnamese story.

From the recreation of this new discourse, similar to the one illustrated by Gonzalves (1997), the younger generation is beginning to perform, through current and future involvements in the community, their new identities to the diasporic Vietnamese community and the U.S. This liberating experience has challenged the dominant ideology taken up and perpetuated by the diasporic Vietnamese. It questions and discredits the diaspora’s acceptance of an outdated Vietnamese identity in order to embrace the present location and upbringing of the Vietnamese living within the U.S. By maintaining an authentic performance of Vietnamese identity, the diaspora pins the younger generation against an essentializing identity, which internalizes and normalizes the binary between the American and the Vietnamese dichotomy. However, in the recreation of an “old yet new” identity, through community events, the younger generation is able to find a space in which to communicate their up-to-date Vietnamese American identity.

Our world is shrinking and because of the wide reaching tentacles of technology and the constant movement of individuals from one country to another it

would be useful for future researchers to read and discuss my study on Vietnamese “American” identity in relation to Vietnamese living, for example, within Canada or Australia. Questioning and interrogating the dominate markers of Vietnamese authenticity in other contexts would prove useful in uncovering the new ways in which Vietnamese negotiate similar representational struggles operating within different racial dynamics. What I have uncovered in this dissertation is that the discourse delineating markers of authentications of Vietnamese-ness perpetuate a normative Vietnamese identity in the U.S. Nevertheless, the younger generation has the ability and the space in which to contest such markers through the creation of their “old yet new” identities. By not simply avowing to “traditional” performances of Vietnamese identity, many of the interviewees were able to create spaces, within their university and community settings, in order to resist the widely accepted notions of Vietnamese-ness, held primarily by the older generation, to create a more all-encompassing identity. For example, the younger generation’s events included both English and Vietnamese languages, traditional fan and umbrella dances along with hip-hop and lyrical, as well as including histories not normally discussed in the U.S. diasporic communities.

One interviewee expressed his concerns with the development of a Vietnamese student run newsletter that included a picture of Ho Chi Minh on the front page. He said that many of the members of the organization, as well as him, were afraid that the Vietnamese community might protest the article. However, the student organization printed the article regardless of the anticipated community backlash. For the organization members, the article, which illustrated the life of Ho Chi Minh, did not

communicate a “communist attitude and disrespect towards the older ones [older Vietnamese generation]” but instead educated the younger generation about their country and how Ho Chi Minh helped bring Vietnam out of the Chinese colonial shadow.

Furthermore, I believe by allowing voids of history to remain empty in the minds of younger generation Vietnamese, the older generations are conforming and re-communicating the U.S. Vietnamese ideologies, which hinders the development of the “old yet new” identity. By not allowing for alternative and multiple versions of Vietnam’s history, the younger generation are then left to absorb the singular ideology that Vietnam is a communist state and those who are in the U.S. are against it and should perform their identities accordingly. Krieger’s (2008) newspaper article entitled, *Flags fly over ‘Little Saigon’: Banners Symbolize Triumph for Activist, Immigrants*, illustrates this singular view. Since the first San Jose council meeting in 2007, many in the Vietnamese community have argued for the name, “Little Saigon” in order to communicate the diaspora’s distaste of the communist regime in Vietnam and the fall of Saigon. On October 11, 2008, members of the community installed eighteen privately owned banners along Story Road. These banners read, “Welcome to Little Saigon San Jose” under a small representation of the Vietnamese Heritage and Freedom Flag.

From the inclusion of such discourse, whether it is the name, the banner or both, I believe that the Vietnamese community is (re)communicating, through the discourse, an anti-communist ideology. By (re)representing the Vietnamese community as possessing an anti-communist Vietnamese identity, the diaspora is

inadvertently commanding all those who opposed the name and the banner to rethink what a Vietnamese identity should stand for. From the subtitle of Krieger's (2008) newspaper article, *Banners Symbolize Triumph for Activist, Immigrants*, I believe the Vietnamese community is communicating themselves as "immigrants" who are not of this country and as "activist" who need to act out against the current communist Vietnamese government. However for the younger generation who have no recollection of Vietnamese history, this topic is seen as, "putting [emphasis on] Vietnam as a bad place and here [U.S.] as our safe place to live," "a issue not important to me when [living] in American," and "making [the younger generation] choose a side when there's no side to fit." Therefore, when researching identity I charge researchers to be inclusive of the many Vietnamese communities around the globe in addition to the various ways in which these communities and the multiple generations within them contest markers of authenticity. I believe that if we choose not to include such notions as globalization, along with our interrogations of authenticity in future discussion of identity, we will be ignoring the level of power authentic markers of identity have on the growing Vietnamese communities around the globe.

## Postscript

Whenever I make a new friend or meet someone for the first time, my Vietnamese-ness is what draws attention to my performances of identity. I have to admit that I like being the girl that looks exotic and is unique because of her minute knowledge of the Vietnamese language, I only know a few words but it still impresses people, and food in addition to knowing the American culture. During my four years at Fremont High School in Sunnyvale, California, I was active in many extracurricular activities. Whether it was being a lieutenant of the Featherettes dance team, president of Cascades, an all-girls community service organization, or even a member in the Safer Choices club, which promoted safe sex to all students at my high school, I still stood out because of my blending of Asian features and knowledge of the Vietnamese culture.

All my life, I have always taken pleasure in communicating my Vietnamese identity to anyone outside of the Vietnamese community. Nevertheless, when interacting in the Vietnamese community, I often feel lost and rejected because the community does not hail me as being Vietnamese. From my own experiences, I have found that my “white” features, “American” accent and inability to speak the Vietnamese language properly has pushed me beyond the outer limits of what it means to be Vietnamese. However, from this research, I have discovered that I am not alone. When listening to my interviewees’ stories and experiences, I began to realize there is nothing wrong with my Vietnamese-ness. I noticed this change in attitude when talking to a younger



generation Vietnamese during our second interview. She asked, “What makes [up] your Vietnamese identity?” I replied:

I am who I am because of the complex history in Vietnam. I guess am who I am because of the Vietnam War. Or because of the move and current settlement of Vietnamese in the U.S. and I guess I am who I am because of the struggle between what it means to be Vietnamese from those [younger generation] who have grown up here. I would just tell people that I am Vietnamese American.

Of course, I did not always think this way. I knew that the Vietnam War has influenced my Vietnamese identity because of my parents meeting in Vietnam and quick marriage because of the war. However, after reading about the continual struggles of the Vietnamese people since the time of Chinese colonial rule that I can no longer believe my identity is only influenced by the current U.S. ideology. For it is the constant re-writing and re-absorbing of discourse, as an effect of the dominant ideology, which allows for an acceptance of the new “as” old. It believe this is why many of the younger U.S. Vietnamese find it liberating to openly admit to an identity that encompasses who we were and who we are now.

From my earlier discussions, I noted the four-fold colonial powers in Vietnam tried to erase the old and only promote the new. For example, the Chinese version of the Vietnamese language was replaced and is currently accepted as “the” Vietnamese language when in fact the language was re-created twice, first by the Chinese and then by the French, because the Vietnamese were a group of illiterate uncivilized barbarians who need to be re-educated for their own good. I believe that using such narrow frames of reference when authenticating identity is problematic because it promotes an acceptance of the rules and changes inflicted upon the Vietnamese by those with more “modernizing” ideals.

Not only do I now question my yearnings for the Vietnamese community to accept me as a true Vietnamese, I have come to believe that my Vietnamese-ness should not be compared to the anti-communist diasporic identity brought here by my mother, my aunts and uncles, and by many who are part of the older Vietnamese generation. It is in this new context, a place where I am both Vietnamese and American, that I have changed my understanding of Vietnamese-ness to be more inclusive of the “new” with the “old.” My identity is not only situated in the past but also the present and the future of the Vietnamese community in the U.S. Without such consideration of these three outlooks on time, we never will truly move away from the separation of the races in the U.S. and the continual use of authentication as a marker of identity.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Người Mỹ gốc Việt refers to a Vietnamese American or a person residing within the United States who is of Vietnamese decent (người = ethnic group; Mỹ = American; gốc = origin; Việt = Vietnamese).

<sup>2</sup> The Vietnamese government changed the countries name from the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRV) to the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam (SRV) in 1976 (Wood, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> In 2000, the U.S. Census (Barnes & Bennett, 2002) reported that about 1.2 million Vietnamese individuals currently live in the U.S., of which eight hundred and twenty thousand are foreign born (Malone, Baluja, Costanzo, & Davis, 2003). Vast Vietnamese communities have prospered because of the arrival of the major flow of Vietnamese into the U.S. after the Vietnam War. These communities, based mostly in California and Texas (U.S. Census, 2002), have intertwined themselves into the U.S. landscape, creating a mark within U.S. media. Currently, there is much to observe about the Vietnamese population from media texts, such as Vietnamese newspapers, television stations, and movies produced in the U.S.

<sup>4</sup> Other renditions of the legend refer to Lạc Long Quân as the Dragon Lord of the Sea.

<sup>5</sup> Nam Việt refers to the Vietnamese south of China (Nam = South; Việt = Vietnamese).

<sup>6</sup> Au Lac stands for “country of the Viets” (Ashwill & Diep, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> The Lake of the Restored Sword’s name is based on a legend of Le Loi. After expelling Chinese invaders it is said that Le Loi took a boat ride on the lake to return his heavenly sword to the golden turtle. (Ashwill & Diep, 2005; Jamieson, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Phan Bội Châu started the Đông Du Movement in the early 1900’s.

<sup>9</sup> Phan Chu Trinh was a member of the Association for the Modernization of Vietnam. He spent many years in Japan to learn ways to modernize revolutionary activities (Jamieson, 1993).

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<sup>10</sup> Hồ Chí Minh established and led the Viet Minh during Vietnam's break and eventual independence from France.

<sup>11</sup> The Vietnamese government had changed the country's name from the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRV) to the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam (SRV) in 1976 (Wood, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Việt kiều is an individual who is of Vietnamese decent. It is also used to label those who have Vietnamese "blood" relations to the homeland (Chan & Dorais, 1998). The term việt kiều can also be used as a marker of economic status. Many Vietnamese living outside of Vietnam are labeled việt kiều and expected to return to the homeland in order to bring back money to the family and country. More commonly used terms by those who have migrated from Vietnam to other parts of the world (i.e., part of the Vietnamese diaspora) used the terms Người Việt Hải Ngoại (meaning Vietnamese living overseas) or Người Việt Tự Do (meaning Vietnamese who are self willed or Vietnamese willing to be free).

<sup>13</sup> Tết stands for Vietnamese New Year in Vietnamese

<sup>14</sup> The Vietnamese stores are located on Tully Ave in San Jose. This area is heavily populated with Vietnamese food and retail stores as well as Vietnamese neighborhoods.

<sup>15</sup> Until nineteen seventy-five the Vietnamese Heritage and Freedom Flag was the national flag of the Republic of Việt Nam. The Social Republic of Việt Nam replaced it with a red flag with a yellow star.

<sup>16</sup> Halualani (2002) refers to pi'ikoi as "the practice of claiming to be of higher rank than one is claiming to be something one is not" (p. 236).

<sup>17</sup> Pro-Ana (Pro-anorexia) and Pro-Mia (Pro-bulimia) are movements started by individuals (women and men) who believe that anorexia and bulimia could be used to take back control over their own bodies. The lack of control over one's body may be attributed to a particular society's gendered ideals of what men and women should and should not look like.

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