

H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 539

4 January 2024

Linda Ho Peché, Alex-Thai Dinh Vo, and Tuong Vu, eds. *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies: History, Community, and Memory*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2023. EAN: 9781439922897

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E539>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Daniel R. Hart | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

Review by Jana K. Lipman, Tulane University

The past decade has seen a proliferation of scholarship in Vietnamese American Studies, and experts in this field have dynamically, and provocatively, re-oriented research in Asian American Studies, the US War in Vietnam, and refugee studies. *Towards a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*, the new volume edited by Linda Ho Peché, Alex-Thai Dinh Vo, and Tuong Vu, adds to this conversation. Its authors maintain that South Vietnam, and its political and intellectual history, must be the starting point for understanding the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States. The volume contains numerous excellent essays, and it embraces an interdisciplinary approach from the social sciences to literary studies. It also succeeds in offering up its promised “framework,” centering diasporic South Vietnamese experiences as the point of departure and investigation.

This volume is responding to a historic American blindness vis-à-vis South Vietnam. For decades after the war, US diplomatic historians fixated on US actors, and if they included Vietnamese perspectives, these were typically from North Vietnam. They rarely, if ever, studied the politics of the United States’ ally, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).¹ The past decade has witnessed an undeniable shift, and there is now robust scholarship on South Vietnamese politics during the war.² In addition, the growth in Asian American Studies and Vietnamese American Studies has produced a theoretically and archivally rich field that probes refugee

¹ For example, George C. Herring’s *America’s Longest War*, and Marilyn Young’s *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*, two foundational texts, written soon after the war’s conclusion, rely almost exclusively on US sources and do not delve into the internal politics of South Vietnam. Later works from the 1990s, while excellent, still focused almost exclusively on US political leaders. George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: Knopf, 1979); Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991); Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998).

² For foundational books in diplomatic history that brought new attention to the Republic of Vietnam, see Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); and Robert Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2006).

identity and diaspora politics.³ Arguably the most prominent voice is Viet Thanh Nguyen, the Pulitzer Prize winning author of *The Sympathizer* and *Nothing Ever Dies*.⁴

In this new volume, Peché, Vo, and Vu argue that scholars must analyze South Vietnamese politics and refugee studies together. In their view, academics have failed to take South Vietnam and its intellectual legacies into account when writing about Vietnamese Americans. They call for greater attention to Vietnam's history of anti-Communism and nationalism that predated the US involvement in the war: "The discursive circulation of ideologies such as Vietnamese nationalism, republicanism, and anticommunism sprang from local roots and experiences long before the United States became involved in Vietnam.... In sum, to understand Vietnamese America, we should begin figuratively and literally with South Vietnam."⁵ In short, Peché, Vo, and Vu argue for a more deeply excavated history of South Vietnam, one that acknowledges anti-Communism's long history within Vietnam, and its importance to community formation in the United States.

This volume's emphasis on South Vietnam stands in contrast to the growing body of scholarship spearheaded by YẾN Lê Espiritu and Critical Refugee Studies. In 2006, Espiritu wrote ground-breaking articles in *American Quarterly* and the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*. She argued that the American media erased the history of US violence from its coverage of Vietnamese Americans and falsely represented Vietnamese as being "saved" by the American military. Espiritu called out the American media for representing Vietnamese as "good refugees" who could redeem the United States' failed war and re-assert US power and benevolence. She levels a pointed critique at US imperialism and militarism, and as an antidote, she calls for centering refugee subjectivity in scholarly and creative works. Her writings have inspired numerous scholars, including myself, and the formation of the Critical Refugee Studies Collective which has supported graduate students, scholars, artists, and activists.⁶

The contributors in *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies* take a different tack. They recognize Espiritu's contribution, but they want to recalibrate the direction of Vietnamese American Studies away from Critical Refugee Studies. The editors explain that while they too refute the image of Vietnamese Americans as a "model minority," they also "criticize scholarship that focuses too deeply on refugee subjectivity merely as a site for the critique of American empire" (2). They believe that her approach results in the representation of Vietnamese Americans as "passive subjects of the American empire" (6). In contrast, they assert that Vietnamese fled, not because of US imperialism, but because of the policies of the Communist government after 1975.

To these ends, the editors provide an alternative framework, one that is far less critical of US imperialism or the US War in Vietnam than that of Espiritu's work, but one that still actively explores the complexity of Vietnamese American communities. Following the introduction, Y Thien Nguyen's article, "Legacies and Diasporic Connectivity: Dialogues and Future Directions of Vietnamese and Vietnamese American Studies"

³ For a sampling, see *Phuong Tran Nguyen, Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); *Long T. Bui, Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory* (New York: NYU Press, 2018); and the foundational work, *Sucheng Chan, The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight and New Beginnings* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

⁴ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (New York: Grove Press, 2016); *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

⁵ Linda Ho Peché, Alex-Thai Dinh Vo, and Tuong Vu, "Introduction," in Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies: History, Community, and Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2023: 1-22, here, 2. Hereafter Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*.

⁶ YẾN Lê Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1 (1-2): 2006: 410-433; Espiritu, "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: US press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon,'" *American Quarterly* 58 (2): 2006: 329-352; Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Critical Refugee Studies, accessed August 11, 2023, <https://criticalrefugeestudies.com/>.

sets the stakes for the volume as a whole.⁷ In this essay, Nguyen expands on the co-editors' themes and argues for the “connectivity between South Vietnam and Vietnamese Americans” (24). Nguyen is interested in the formation and creation of anti-Communism within the Republic of Vietnam in the 1950s through the 1970s, and how this political culture subsequently shaped the diasporic community. He argues that republican anti-Communism was “a hegemonic and dynamic nationalist ideology that has been shaped and reshaped by South Vietnamese and Vietnamese American actors across history” (26-27). Nguyen explains that the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem (1954–1963) harnessed the power of anti-Communism, turning it into a hegemonic, popular-cultural “script” (30). While I believe Nguyen over-states the Republic of Vietnam’s commitment to republicanism, this chapter is provocative and successful at making connections between war time politics and diasporic politics.

Unlike many edited volumes, this one works as a whole, and the essays propel the central thesis forward. The first part of the book emphasizes civil society, which includes discussions of civil society and the distinctions between non-communism and anticommunism in South Vietnam’s intellectual landscape.⁸ The second part explores Vietnamese American community formation in specific geographic locales and economic sectors, with an emphasis on New Orleans and Los Angeles.⁹ The final section reflects on cultural production, religion, memory, and knowledge-making.¹⁰ Collectively these chapters examine the idea that Nguyen lays out in his opening chapter that national formation in South Vietnam led to community formation in the United States (30). The book succeeds in cohering around a central argument, with many of the articles in dialogue with each other, and the volume showcases interdisciplinary approaches to Vietnamese American Studies.

While I believe the work of Critical Refugee Studies remains convincing, these authors present a meaningful counterpoint and new directions for scholarship. The volume includes a wide range of perspectives and an engagement with Vietnamese American political organization and cultural production. That said, I have a few inter-related questions or critiques for the volume’s authors. Most centrally, who defines “South Vietnam,” and who “counts” as South Vietnamese? Do Vietnamese who lived in South Vietnam but did not support the RVN “count” as “South Vietnamese”? What about Vietnamese refugees who are not from the south, but rather are from central or northern Vietnam? Are there distinctions between South Vietnamese from urban and rural regions? The volume generally assumes that people who lived in the political boundaries of the Republic of Vietnam between 1954 and 1975, and then who fled the country after 1975, identified with the

⁷ Y Thien Nguyen, “Legacies and Diasporic Connectivity: Dialogues and Future Directions of Vietnamese and Vietnamese American Studies,” in Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*, 23-39.

⁸ Nguyen, “Legacies and Diasporic Connectivity”; Van Nguyen-Marshall, “Voluntarism and Social Activism in Wartime South Vietnam,” in Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*, 40-56; Wynn Gadkar-Wilcox, “Universities and Intellectual Culture in the Republic of Vietnam,” in Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*, 57-75; and Tuan Hoang, “The August Revolution, the Fall of Saigon, and Postwar Reeducation Camps: Understanding Vietnamese Diasporic Anticommunism,” in Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*, 76-94.

⁹ Elwing Suong Gonzalez, “Building a Place in the Space of Los Angeles,” in Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*, 97-115; Ivan Small, “Vietnamese Americans and their Homeland,” in Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*, 116-132; Christian Collet, “Vietnamese American Politics, Evolution at the Grassroots, 1981-2020,” in Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*, 133-153; Jennifer A. Huynh, “Diversity in Identities, Industries, and Business Strategies,” in Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*, 154-177; and Nguyen Vu Hoang, “Trapped within the White Frame: Vietnamese Americans in Post-Katrina New Orleans,” in Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*, 178-196.

¹⁰ Hai-Dang Phan “The Unreconciled: Phan Nhiên Hạo’s Poetry of Diasporic Testimony,” in Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*, 199-221; Duyen Bui, “Diasporic Nationalism,” in Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*, 222-239; Quan Tue Tran, “Remembering War and Migration,” in Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*, 240-56; Thien-Huong Ninh “Devotion in Diaspora,” in Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*, 257-272; Thuy Vo Dang, “The Preservation and Production of Diasporic Knowledge,” in Peché, Vo, and Vu, eds., *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies*, 273-286.

RVN.¹¹ However, in general, the authors do not consider the role of Vietnamese who might have supported the revolutionary movement, those who might have changed their minds and/or negotiated loyalties during the war, the role of disillusionment after the war, or the politics of ambivalence.¹² This serves to flatten both the very real, Cold War contest, and the regional and class diversity of the Vietnamese who fled the country after 1975. As Ivan V. Small notes in his contribution, Vietnamese diasporic anti-Communism in Canada, France, Germany, and eastern Europe is more muted than it is in the United States (119). A closer examination of the volatile politics within South Vietnam would add yet another layer to the volume's contentions and perhaps complicate the specific politics and community formation in the United States.

The contributor who wrestles with these ambiguities the most is Hai-Dang Phan, a translator and poet. In his excellent chapter, "The Unreconciled: Phan Nhiên Hạo's Poetry of Diasporic Testimony," Phan investigates the diasporic Vietnamese poet, who chooses to continue writing in Vietnamese, eschewing an English-speaking (and thus presumably wider) audience. His work remains censored in Vietnam and unread by Anglophone readers. Hai-Dang Phan explains: "Working in the obscurity of a poet exiled from his primary audience, Phan nevertheless gives testimony through his poetry to the historical and cultural perspectives on the war from the vantage of a southern Vietnamese of the postwar generation now living in the diaspora" (200). He illustrates how the poet resists "reconciliation" between Vietnam and the United States (204-205). The inclusion of the poems in Vietnamese and English, followed by Phan's literary analysis, provides a strikingly singular voice that does not align with a nationalist project: "Refusing to get with the political program, Phan was and remains a recalcitrant voice, neither conciliatory nor nostalgic" (206). Through this reading, his poetry reflects an "antagonistic relationship to a postwar society in both Vietnam and the United States..." (17). In a volume that generally does not critique the US War in Vietnam, this article stood out for its ambivalence and its willingness to reject simple binaries.

This is an important and thought-provoking volume with strong essays and a clear intervention in the literature in Vietnamese Studies. It provides an alternative to Critical Refugee Studies and makes a case for the centrality of South Vietnam in Vietnamese American communities. It will be of great interest to scholars in Asian American Studies, US foreign relations, and refugee studies broadly construed.

Jana K. Lipman is a professor of US foreign relations, US immigration, and labor history at Tulane University. Her latest book is *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum-Seekers, and Repatriates* (University of California Press, 2020), and she is the co-translator of *Ship of Fate: Memoir of a Vietnamese Repatriate* by Trần Đình Trụ (University of Hawaii Press, 2017).

¹¹ For an older work that analyzes the North Vietnamese intellectual and ideological project of conceptualizing "Vietnam," see Patrica Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

¹² For a recent article that examines how the US anti-war movement affected young people among Saigon's elite, see, Nguyet Nguyen, "Accidental Activists: USAID Builds an Anti-War Elite," *Diplomatic History* 46: 3 (2022): 549-574.