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Sharing the Travail of Reeducation Camps, Expelling the Betrayer: The Politics of Deportation in a Vietnamese American Community

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INTRODUCTION: POLITICS OF DEPORTATION

Deportation has become a hot issue in the United States, especially under the current Donald Trump administration, where it is a part of the president's "America first" agenda. Immigration raids and detention are the primary components of the new American "deportation regime."¹ The regime itself emerged with the application of principles of neoliberal governance to immigration in the late 1990s because of the surge in anti-immigrant sentiment and accelerated after the launch of the so-called war on terror in 2001. Trump has described undocumented immigrants as not only inassimilable but also criminal to justify the curbing of even legal immigration, besides clamping down on illegal immigration.²

The issue of deportation is about who should and should not be in a community. In the current deportation regime, "deportability" is initiated and imposed by state power; further, the process has been normalized and standardized.³ Deportability in the United States has been associated with criminality, which includes not only committing actual crimes within the United States or outside but also making bogus asylum claims.

The US government, moreover, has a long history of denying and

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expelling those whom the government does not want.⁴ Law professor Daniel Kanstroom advises that the deportation trend should be understood in its long historical context.⁵ Deportation is not only a technology of government to emphasize national borders but a way for a community to expel their “others” to maintain their unity. The political scientist William Walters explains that deportation, which has taken the forms of expulsion and exile, is an ancient practice. He adds that “exile is used against the individual who is understood to be a member of the political community or nation.”⁶

We think of deportation as a major issue now, but there was a unique case that involved criminalization and deportation for the older generation that relates to memories of the Vietnam War. I analyze here the scandal of Bùi Đình Thi, a former refugee from Vietnam, in Orange County, California (from the late 1990s to the early 2000s), which exposed that he was a guard in the Thanh Cẩm reeducation camp in northern Vietnam and which eventually led to his deportation from the United States. His case not only shows the anti-Communist stance of the Vietnamese American community but also illuminates the power of memories of suffering that took place after the end of the Vietnam War.

After the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN; South Vietnam), many former RVN citizens were forced into exile by triumphant North Vietnamese Communists. Many moved to and resettled in the United States and built refugee communities across the country, the largest of which was the “Little Saigon” in Orange County, California.⁷ Vietnamese American studies scholars such as Phuong Tran Nguyen point out that Vietnamese refugees in the United States constructed these diasporic Vietnamese communities and their “refugee nationalism.”⁸

Many academics argue that anti-Communism is not necessarily an innate attribute of these communities but a cultural praxis that sustains their ongoing community-building processes.⁹ Vietnamese Americans have rituals and commemorations different from the current socialist Vietnamese government, such as having a “day of mourning” to remember the Fall of Saigon, hoisting the former RVN national flag as their “heritage” flag, and calling their communities “Little Saigon,” not “Little Hanoi.”¹⁰ Many historians and sociologists studying Vietnamese American communities have discovered that the anti-Communism of Vietnamese refugees has been constructed through “strategic memory projects” designed to locate former South Vietnam as an actor in the dominant collective memory of the Vietnam War.¹¹ Phuong Trang Nguyen also points out that anti-Communism in the refugee community has been transformed in relation to changes in

US-Vietnam relations.¹²

Escape narratives of Vietnamese refugees have been available for the American public since the late 1980s, strengthening the image of these people as victims escaping from Communism and positioning themselves as “the new crusaders against communism.”¹³ In this picture, scholars generally assume that the Vietnamese refugee community is monolithic. Yet, as ethnic studies scholar Long Bui explains, it is not a tight-knit and coherent community; rather, it is characterized by “many forms of symbolic dismemberment,” and we should pay more attention to its internal dynamics.¹⁴ Anti-Communism was exploited by some Vietnamese community members to construct a sense of unity among the refugees because they needed to cope with potential divisions, tensions, and contradictions within the community. Accordingly, the deportation of Bùi Đình Thi should be seen in the context of these political and cultural struggles in the community.

In line with the above-mentioned scholars, I show how a particular version of former refugee memories was employed to justify the expulsion of Bùi Đình Thi before the emergence of the current deportation regime. Even though media and immigrant advocacy organizations criticized the federal deportation policy against former Vietnamese refugees, the case of Bùi Đình Thi has not yet been analyzed or argued in Vietnamese American studies or Asian American studies.¹⁵ In this article I address the reeducation camps in Vietnam, which were introduced in 1975 to assimilate former South Vietnamese into the newly established Communist nation, and the deportation from the United States of an abuser who injured and killed fellow camp inmates in one such camp. I will examine the case of urging deportation as a technique of community building and a mechanism for organizing, mobilizing, and defining the politicized memory of an exile community. By doing so, I aim to explore the ways in which the politics of memories of reeducation camps delineates the boundaries of the Vietnamese American community.

THE REEDUCATION CAMP EXPERIENCE NARRATIVES

After the Fall of Saigon in April 30, 1975, a process of reeducation of South Vietnamese was initiated by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in May 1975. The new regime ordered various groups of South Vietnamese to register for reeducation. In June, soldiers, noncommissioned officers, and rank-and file personnel of the former RVN were asked to undergo a three-

day reeducation. Others were to be confined to the sites of reeducation until the course ended. At that time, “the government gave the clear impression that the reform study would last no more than a month for even the highest ranking officers and officials of the former government in South Vietnam, and ten days for lower-ranking officers and officials.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, very few of these officials were released within that period. The former members of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) accounted for the majority of those with the longest sentences, and the last detainees were freed only in 1992.¹⁷

Hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese former officials and soldiers, as well as college students, were sent to the camps, where most of the officials were detained for many years under harsh conditions, including hard labor and limited food. The annual mortality rate among reeducation detainees was estimated to be 10–15 percent during 1975–79.¹⁸ Thus, Vietnamese not only in Vietnam but also those overseas who had family members and friends in the camps were concerned about the situation; however, the existence of reeducation camps and the lives of camp detainees were not well known in US society in the late 1970s. The American public did not pay much attention to the reeducation camps after the Vietnam conflict ended.

Memories of experiences in the reeducation camps have been widely shared among Vietnamese since the 1980s through cultural productions, such as movies, novels, and memoirs.¹⁹ Narratives by former camp prisoners became an integral part of Vietnamese American history because they are evidence of the cruelty of Communist Vietnam, which provides these former prisoners the right to claim asylum in the United States. The reeducation camp experiences are not only personal accounts but also collective ones, since the prisoners survived terrible state persecution that earlier refugees were able to avoid.²⁰ Accordingly, the narratives of the earlier refugees and the camp survivors became interconnected in constructing the communal memory of sufferings of former South Vietnamese.

In the following, I introduce some narratives of reeducation camps from the Vietnamese American Oral History Project at the University of California, Irvine, which was created in 2011 to collect individual experiences of Vietnamese Americans.²¹ These narratives are full of descriptions of hardships they experienced during their time in the camps and before leaving Vietnam. For example, when the Vietnam War ended, the collapse of the government led to tough living conditions for the people of the South. Nguyễn Đan (1948–), an army veteran, described his situation at

that time:

Some had to leave the country by boats and ferries; some in the city had the means to do so but did not know where to go. I ran to the docks searching for boats and vessels, but they were no longer there, so we had to stay behind and live. After about a month, there was an order to attend training courses or else go to jail. So, we had to obey them and went. Staying at home was not an option.²²

His account shows how desperate the situation was for people in the South; they had almost no prospects. Nguyễn Đan wanted to leave the country but could not because he had no means to do so. Further, he had to go to a reeducation camp, which he called “jail.” He thinks that they “used the term ‘reform,’ but, in fact, it was like being imprisoned.” He continued:

At that time, a month or two after the Vietnamese Communists occupied the South, virtually all former Vietnamese followers of the former regime were captured. All were sent to reform prison. The Communists searched each house and, then, arrested everyone. Like everyone else, I was taken away. I was first told that because my rank was that of a captain, I would only be gone for ten days and, then, returned home. I told myself, “Just go, it will be alright.” I believed the talk about ten days, for what it was worth, and left. Who knew it would go on endlessly? After ten days, even a month, I had still not been told about a return date. They put us into training and made us learn this and that. They distributed seeds. Then we realized, “Oh damn, we got tricked!”²³

Nguyễn Đan felt that he was taken to a reeducation camp by deceit, as he was first told that he would be there for only ten days. He eventually spent four years in the camp; after escaping from it, he tried to leave the country seven times. The length of imprisonment mattered because his life in the camp was completely controlled by his captors.

Nguyễn Văn Lành (1941–) also felt that he had been tricked into reeducation camp since he spent eight years there. He says: “But that was just a lure. After one month, we were sent to prison. Some people stayed there for twelve to fifteen years, not one month. No one came home after a month. That was a trick used by the Communists.”²⁴ He thinks that the promised short-term reeducation was “a trick” of the Communists to

imprison people of the South. Indefinite imprisonment was even more intolerable for them than being treated as second-class citizen after the war.

While the conditions of the reeducation camps varied widely, regarding certain features of the camps there was a similar camp routine. There was an emphasis on political indoctrination and mandatory “confessions” during the early stages of reeducation.²⁵ Camp prisoners were subjected to intensive political indoctrination by being lectured on the crimes of “American imperialism,” the glory of labor, the inevitability of the victory of Vietnam, and the generosity of the new government toward those who resisted the enemy during the war. After being lectured by political cadres, they would discuss the lesson in smaller groups and write essays summarizing it. Another feature of reeducation that continued throughout one’s imprisonment involved confession of past wrongdoings. All prisoners in the camps were required to write confessions, no matter how insignificant their misconduct had been.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS PROGRAM

Groups of people in the United States who knew about the situation protested the abuses perpetrated by the newly established Vietnamese government. These included the Virginia-based Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association (FVPPA) and other human rights advocacy groups, such as the Aurora Foundation, which was established by Ginetta Sagan, a well-known Amnesty International activist. These two groups became famous for their advocacy activities that led to the establishment of the Humanitarian Operations (HO) program.

The HO program, formally known as the Special Release Reeducation Center Detainee Resettlement Program, is a US federal special migration program for former reeducation camp detainees and their close family members under the already established Orderly Departure Program.²⁶ The Orderly Departure Program was based on an agreement with the Vietnamese government to allow many of the former detainees to leave the country because the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees negotiated to ameliorate the situation of “boat people” fleeing Vietnam by boat.²⁷ Reports about drownings and piracy created growing global concern for the boat people in the late 1970s; between 1978 and the mid-1980s, approximately two million Vietnamese fled the country by boat. In 1989, Robert Lloyd Funseth, US senior deputy assistant Secretary of State and acting director of the Bureau for Refugee Programs, negotiated with the government of the

Socialist Republic of Vietnam to allow for emigration of former reeducation camp prisoners to the United States.²⁸ Thus, the HO program was established to grant immigration to the United States to any person who had been imprisoned in a reeducation camp for more than three years; their family members could also immigrate.²⁹

According to Vietnamese American historian Sam Vong, the HO program was made possible by the efforts of the Vietnamese women leaders of the FVPPA.³⁰ The president of the FVPPA, Khúc Minh Thở, immigrated to the United States in 1977, and in the autumn of the same year, she convened an informal gathering in her home called the “support group of wives and family members” of Vietnamese political prisoners who were detained in reeducation camps.³¹ This eventually became the FVPPA, which sought to win the release of the members’ husbands, family members, and friends. Thở was in the Philippines from 1975 to 1976 and, on learning about the imprisonment of ARVN soldiers, contacted other refugees and US diplomats and their friends.³² Using her personal network, as well as official advocacy activities, the FVPPA under her leadership forged a national movement to bring former reeducation camp prisoners to the United States.

In the process, the FVPPA made the issue of family reunification an urgent humanitarian issue needing to be resolved. Claiming that their struggle was about not only freeing the camp prisoners from Communist Vietnam but also helping the released prisoners reunite with their family members, their activities gained much broader support from the US society and Vietnamese American communities than the activities of similar anti-Communist activists.³³ US officials in Congress, the State Department, and the White House considered “humanitarian” all those issues that involved family reunification: POW-MIAs, reeducation camp prisoners, Amerasians, and, more broadly, emigration through the ODP.³⁴

According to historian Amanda Demmer, the FVPPA’s emphasis on family relationships and family reunification served two major functions. First, it secured family reunification through the release and resettlement of political prisoners. Second, it resonated with the Reagan administration’s emphasis on a return to “family values.”³⁵ For the Reagan administration, reeducation camp prisoners needed to be saved by the US government not because they were the United States’ responsibility after its abandonment of South Vietnam but because of the cruelty toward families of the Communist government of Vietnam.³⁶ Therefore, family reunification with the Vietnamese in America meant correcting the separation of families and rearticulating family values by bringing the remaining family members to

the United States.

The concept of “family values” also provided a sense of unity to the Vietnamese American community because the program actually brought their family members, loved ones, and friends to the United States. So, the program itself played a role in concealing the differences—when and how they came, what they do for a living, and how they feel about the United States—among people in the Vietnamese American community.

Washington announced special initiatives calling for the detainees’ release and pledging to resettle former prisoners and their close family members in 1984, 1988, 1989, 1991, and 1996.³⁷ Through the HO program, by August 1993, nearly seventy-two thousand former detainees and their families had immigrated to the United States. A year later, that number had swelled to over one hundred thousand, and by November 1995, the total exceeded two hundred thousand.³⁸

THE MEANING OF THE HO PROGRAM FOR FORMER CAMP PRISONERS

The miserable plight of former reeducation camp prisoners, signifying the brutality of the government of Vietnam, justified their decision to leave. In 1982, Nguyễn Văn Lành wanted to leave the country after his release from camp; however, he did not have enough money to escape. Thus, he waited for some time and applied under the HO program to leave Vietnam. Back then, according to him, “everyone tried to find every possible way to get out of Vietnam because people who lived in Vietnam, as you may know, used to say that if a light pole could walk, it too would leave.”³⁹ Whoever could walk wanted to leave Vietnam; thus, leaving it was a justifiable choice for everyone. Therefore, the HO program was a godsend for people like him, who had paid such a heavy price for being a former ARVN soldier. He was imprisoned for eight years, but his experience in the camp became a ticket for him to immigrate to the United States.

Nguyễn Văn Lành appreciated the efforts of Khúc Minh Thơ of the FVPPA because she persuaded government officials and politicians to create the HO program. In his understanding, “they analyzed that the Vietnam War was caused by the Americans and that, when they withdrew, they left us in a precarious situation. Therefore, there were people who knew about our situation, and they fought for us to come over to America.”⁴⁰ According to this logic, the United States was responsible for the suffering-filled experiences of former reeducation camp prisoners because the nation had abandoned them; so, they must be compensated by being admitted to the

United States as political refugees. However, Nguyễn Văn Lành had to wait for more than ten years after his release from the camp before he could finally enter the United States on August 30, 1994.⁴¹

Like Nguyễn Văn Lành, Mai Van Tra (1949–) was frustrated with his condition after being released from the camp because “the US government abandoned the Vietnamese people.” Thus, he shares Nguyễn Văn Lành’s appreciation for the HO and says, “Now I see the American government creating programs for Vietnamese military officials who fought against the Viet Cong to attempt to pay them a sort of compensation, and I think that’s okay.”⁴² Former reeducation camp prisoners, like these two, saw the HO program as reparations made by the US government for abandoning them. Although some former camp prisoners were able to immigrate to the United States, their lives after the move were not easy. Mai Van Tra says that “in our new lives here, we still have to work to earn our living.”⁴³ Many of the HO refugees expected a much better life in the United States than they would have had if they had continued to live in Vietnam. Pham Ba Joseph (1938–) was in a camp for more than three years and received sponsorship to come to the United States, but his life in the States proved to be as hard as life in Vietnam after the camp. He said that he “wanted to make a better life, but he was too old to do anything. It was very painful to watch his life slip away from him.”⁴⁴ Immigration to the United States did not help him to recuperate from the war. To survive in America, HO refugees like him had to compete for entry-level jobs against other immigrants who were twenty years younger.⁴⁵ Although many of the HO refugees suffered from extreme depression owing to their camp experiences and attempts to reconstruct of their lives in the United States, they did not express any grudge against the United States, at least not about their resettlement.⁴⁶

This was because they wanted to build community in the United States. For example, Nguyễn Thị Nhạn (1934–) left Vietnam in 1975 without her husband, who had to stay in a reeducation camp for another four years. When her husband came over later and told her about his camp experiences, it was beyond her imagination.⁴⁷ He unsuccessfully tried to leave the country twenty-seven times and finally came to the United States under the HO program to join his wife and children in 1989. After coming to the United States, Nguyễn Thị Nhạn’s husband volunteered for an organization that was a sponsor of the HO program. They helped people that came under the HO program to rent houses when they first arrived, besides assisting them to complete their paperwork. After that project, the organization started paying for funeral services for people who came under the HO program but whose

families did not have money for a funeral. Nguyễn Thị Nhạn's husband headed that project for about ten years until he died in 1999. People like him helped former reeducation camp prisoners to resettle and rebuild their lives in the United States. The activities for HO refugees not only assisted them, but also framed the politics of respectability for its members. Their common past as reeducation camp prisoners provided them with strategies for survival.

The above-mentioned narratives of the beneficiaries of the HO program have showed how, by conveying how badly they were treated, they constructed an image of their Little Saigons as non-Communist refuges and a bulwark against communism. By 2000, the program accounted for one out of every six Vietnamese Americans.⁴⁸ Anti-Communism was the most significant cultural attachment they could maintain and demonstrate in the United States in an era marked by the normalization of US-Vietnam relations and the seemingly hopeless situation of rebuilding their lives in the United States.⁴⁹ A majority of the HO refugees were former soldiers who were imprisoned for at least three years; thus, their resettlement was far less successful than they had hoped. Nguyễn Đan portrayed his situation at the end of the war:

At that time, I was like many of my former army friends. After we had shed our uniforms, instead of returning to our personal lives, we felt much destitute. No money, no cash, no job, and no career. Our education was incomplete; we had to leave midway in our school careers to become soldiers. While we were soldiers, the Viet Cong had already entered the South. My period of service coincided with the darkest phase of the war, but it was like that for most families. Everyone was scared, confused, and did not know what to do. The future was bleak.⁵⁰

Former soldiers like him and his friends were much less unfortunate and disadvantaged than other Vietnamese refugees.

There are five subgroups in the Vietnamese American population, which are usually identified as: the pre-1975 elite, the boat people, the ethnic Chinese, former reeducation camp prisoners, and Amerasians.⁵¹ Thus, there have been various perspectives and divisions owing to the composition of the individual community. The most privileged South Vietnamese had already moved to the United States before and right after the Fall of Saigon, whereas the HO refugees were left behind suffering in Vietnam until they

came to the United States where, according to many English-language newspaper reports, they were “tragic survivors who faced just as much hardship in the States as in Vietnam.”⁵²

THE DEPORTATION OF BÙI ĐÌNH THI

In 2000, the US Immigration and Naturalization Service launched an investigation after several survivors of the Thanh Cẩm reeducation camp in northern Vietnam identified Bùi Đình Thi of Garden Grove, California, as one of the camp’s brutal enforcers. The accusations against Bùi surfaced in 1995 when Father Nguyễn Hữu Lễ, an ordained Catholic priest who left Vietnam and lives in New Zealand, detailed his experiences at Thanh Cẩm, including atrocities committed by Bui, in a manuscript memoir. His story was widely circulated on the internet and, gradually, calls grew to charge Bùi for the crimes he committed in Vietnam in the late 1970s.

The allegations against Bùi were mainly based on the following reeducation camp incident.⁵³ On May 1, 1979, Father Nguyễn and four other prisoners tried to escape but were caught by guards the next day. All five were severely beaten by the guards and Bùi. Bùi was a former ARVN soldier and Southerner, but he volunteered to be a guard himself to get better treatment in the camp. Bùi killed one of the escapees, former major in the ARVN Đặng Văn Tiếp, by stomping on his stomach. He meted out similar treatment to Father Nguyễn, but the latter survived.

In Nguyễn Hữu Lễ’s memoir, the scene of Bùi’s crime was depicted as follows:

After beating me for a long time, Bùi Đình Thi left me lying on the floor. Later, I found out that he had turned to “visit” Đặng Văn Tiếp and Nguyễn Sĩ Thuyên while I was lying nearby. After having lain quietly for a while, I went into a coma and do not recall how long it lasted. When I woke up, Bùi Đình Thi was dragging me up the concrete steps from the hall yard to the solitary confinement section by pulling me by my feet. Unbearable pain made me regain consciousness, and then I witnessed another terrifying scene: Bùi Đình Thi beating Đặng Văn Tiếp to death. The scene is inscribed on my soul like an image that invades one’s skin and flesh.⁵⁴

Nguyễn’s retelling of his brutal near-death experience recalls the pain he would have felt when he was beaten by Bùi, a former ARVN soldier, and the

anguish he felt on witnessing the death of a friend. Because he could not forget the experience, he decided to write it down and let people know what happened in the camp through the internet. Nguyễn's vivid depiction of the violence raised concern not only among the Vietnamese in the United States but also other overseas Vietnamese communities. His book, eventually published in Vietnamese in 2003, had sold more than seventeen thousand copies by 2013.⁵⁵

Nguyễn's camp experiences, published first on the internet, led to a surge of accusations through articles written by members of overseas Vietnamese networks against Bùì for crimes involving torture. Accordingly, Nguyễn Đình Thắng, a human rights advocate and executive director of Boat People SOS, a Washington, D.C.–based Vietnamese American advocacy group, filed a complaint against Bùì with the Immigration and Naturalization Service in March 2000. Nguyễn Đình Thắng consulted many witnesses, who provided documents and photographs to support his request for authorities to investigate the incident, because he was concerned about the use of fraudulent records being used to bring former Communist officials into the United States under the refugee programs.⁵⁶

The move to publicize the alleged crimes of Bùì came as the result of many people sharing Nguyễn Đình Thắng's article and questioning why Bùì had made it into the United States. Nguyễn Hữu Lễ writes that when he visited California in July 1995, every ex–Thanh Cẩm camp prisoner he met knew that Bùì was living in Orange County. Although Bùì had served as an enforcer at the camp, he went into civilian life from the camp in 1981. Nguyễn Hữu Lễ was transferred to another camp in 1988 and stayed there for a year before being released. In January 1989, he fled to Cambodia and, then, to Thailand; he eventually settled in New Zealand in 1990.⁵⁷ Later, he learned that Bùì had entered the United States as a refugee in 1994 and had become a legal permanent resident two years later.⁵⁸

Nguyễn Hữu Lễ criticized the situation in his memoir: “The criminal has entered the United States under the HO program and lives in comfort in a free country among his victims and the loved ones of refugees and compatriots who left the country to escape the brutal Communist regime.”⁵⁹ It was disturbing, not only for former camp prisoners, but also for members of Vietnamese American communities to find that people like Bùì were in the United States after what he had done in the camp. Furthermore, he was in Garden Grove, a city in Orange County, California, which is home to the largest overseas Vietnamese community. He blames Bùì's presence for “bringing back the pain for many people.”⁶⁰ Bùì's very presence was a cause

of pain not only for Nguyễn Hữu Lễ but for all the former reeducation camp prisoners.

That Bùi Đình Thi and Nguyễn Hữu Lễ, who were the abuser and the victim, respectively, in the camp, met in the United States again was ironic. To start with, it was unforgiveable that Bùi was living in Orange County's Little Saigon, where many former reeducation camp prisoners reside. It was offensive to the community. The arrival of Bùi Đình Thi, who committed crimes in the reeducation camp, in the United States through the HO program was seen as unjust, and people believed that those like him "sooner or later have to pay the penalty."⁶¹ The Vietnamese American community leaders believe that "political asylum is a privilege reserved only for those who have been mistreated or abused for political reasons."⁶² "The privilege of political asylum" offers former ARVN soldiers the opportunity to differentiate themselves from other immigrants. But it ignores that some of them came without having experienced the suffering of the reeducation camps, whereas others had to remain and suffer. Accordingly, the deportation of Bùi became considered necessary for the community to tighten the identity of Vietnamese Americans, especially among former ARVN soldiers, as political refugees.

The practice of attacking others in the name of the dead has long plagued the Vietnamese diaspora.⁶³ In the past, some Vietnamese Americans, particularly journalists, have received death threats, and a few have been killed because they were viewed as supporting Communists.⁶⁴ Protests and demonstrations have occurred when some people believed that their community was in danger of being taken over by Communists. For instance, there was a huge demonstration in 1999 known as the Hi-Tek incident in Orange County, California.⁶⁵ The Vietnamese American owner of Hi-Tek, a small video shop, displayed the red flag of Communist Vietnam and a poster of Ho Chi Minh. This act angered people in the community, and eventually he was driven out of business. Later, in May 2000, at Falls Church, Virginia, Mai Thai Nguyen was found dead from head injuries suffered in a brawl that ensued after he obstructed a ceremony, organized by the local Vietnamese American community to mourn the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fall of Saigon.⁶⁶ The media reported that Mai Thai Nguyen showed disrespect during the ceremony, which enraged some of the other attendees, who violently attacked and killed him. These incidents show the power of the community to shape its experience through cultural representation and narratives.

In August 2003, Bùi was arrested by the Immigration and Naturalization

Service at his Garden Grove apartment for starving, beating, and torturing prisoners at the Thanh Cẩm reeducation camp. He could not be criminally prosecuted in the United States because US law allows persecution only for torture outside the country after November 1994. A news item mentions the opinion of a sister of Đặng Văn Tiếp, the man whom Bùì allegedly killed. She said she wanted Bùì deported because “he is a cruel animal, not a human being. . . . If those who killed Jews in World War II came to the United States, you would not accept them. I think [Bùì] has done a similar crime.”⁶⁷ Here, Bùì’s murder and human rights abuses in the reeducation camp emerged as the present crime of his being present in US society. He was considered undeserving of residence in the United States because he was the torturer of those came to the United States under the HO program.

In this way, the reeducation camp experience did not simply provide people with a sense of victimhood but also with a sense of belonging to a community and “deservingness,” wherein they were welcomed to stay in the community. By criticizing the violence that the former guard inflicted on many reeducation camp prisoners, the Vietnamese Americans themselves were able to lay claim to justice. Although justice could not be delivered by the current government of Vietnam, the US government could do so by deporting Bùì. In a sense, this was redemption for reeducation camp survivors and their families, who not only suffered by losing the war but were also punished by the newly established government of Vietnam. The end of the war was the beginning of the suffering of former South Vietnamese because in the eyes of the Hanoi government, they were people who needed to be “reeducated.”

It seems that Bùì’s deportation was the result of organized anti-Communist activity seeking to purge an impostor from a Vietnamese American community, the result of a battle between anti-Communists and Communists outside Vietnam. However, the story is more complicated even than that, because some people thought that expelling the man for crimes he committed outside the United States more than thirty years ago was too cruel.⁶⁸ The case against him was “coming too late” and “he should be allowed to live out his life in his adopted country.”⁶⁹

Others insisted that justice had to be served. One community activist claimed that “the Communists have committed thousands more crimes than he has, but a crime is a crime.”⁷⁰ Recognizing his crime was a way to remember their suffering. Nguyễn Hữu Lễ wrote that he would like to share with all the prisoners who, like him, have been beaten and beaten by Bùì Đình Thi. “We have suffered injuries that will last for the rest of our lives.”⁷¹

He cannot forget the pain; rather, he is trying to find ways to remember it. The issue is not forgiveness but the consequences of the past injustices. By writing about his past experiences in the reeducation camp, Nguyễn Hữu Lễ has shared that experience with people who underwent similar suffering and informed more people about the truth of the camp.

Father Nguyễn's memoir, by going viral on the internet, brought about the need to deport Bùi to the general public's consciousness. His personal recollection was meant to bring justice for what had happened in the camp, but it opened up the issue of the bigger collective indignities faced by many others as a result of the war generally.

GLORIFYING THE EXISTENCE OF SOUTH VIETNAM

At the end of April 2004, even though Bùi Đình Thi denied torturing anybody, the testimony from camp survivors led Judge D. D. Sitgraves of the San Pedro Immigration Court to rule that he was eligible for deportation under the Immigration and Nationality Act, which prohibits giving a safe haven to people suspected of human rights violations.⁷² The judge ordered Bùi's expulsion from the United States, claiming that he had violated US immigration law. In 2006, Bùi died in the Marshall Islands while awaiting a compromise between the governments of Vietnam and the United States on an exchange of prisoners.⁷³

Bùi's case can be summed up as follows. A former reeducation camp guard's record as a betrayer and abuser of South Vietnamese people was recalled, and the community fought to evict him from their community in the United States. This incident shows the ways in which the community tried to underscore their legitimate existence in the United States. By expelling the former guard, the community claimed that they were victims of Communism and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Moreover, the campaign for Bùi's deportation obscured the class differences between the rich and fortunate first-wave of former Southerners who came in 1975 and the struggles of later HO refugees. Thus, not only US society generally, but also Vietnamese Americans failed to make a distinction among various categories of Vietnamese immigrants. Emphasizing the sins of an abuser, the deportation evoked memories of the war and its aftermath to minimize HO refugees' personal sufferings in the United States and to reinforce the concept of "refugee nationalism."⁷⁴

The deportation also elucidates a refugee politics of memory that constructs or reconstructs Vietnamese American nationalist imaginary based

on cutting off certain people from the community. Without sovereignty within their community and the existence of a formal territorial geography to claim as theirs, the community cannot simply imprison certain individuals at will, but they can find alternative ways to punish and push them out.⁷⁵ Given that, through this deportation case, the Vietnamese American community reclaimed its past history without articulating the problems of former South Vietnam, such as political corruption, coercion, and religious persecution.

The Bùì Đình Thi case excited both local and international media in Vietnamese and English for a while.⁷⁶ BBC's Vietnamese news service reported: "For the first time after 1975, the United States deported a former Republic of Vietnam soldier on charges of torturing and killing political prisoners in reeducation camps in Vietnam."⁷⁷ In the same article, Bill Odenrantz, legal director of the US Department of Homeland Security, stated that "US law cannot allow the US to be a safe haven for people who have committed atrocities, such as brutal murder." The US claim of being a nation of refuge has a long history and, according to this point of view, Bùì's admission under the HO program was an error.

The admission and deportation of Bùì can also be analyzed as showing the nature of the United States as a "militarized refuge," a phrase coined by ethnic studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu.⁷⁸ The United States is not only a safe haven for the oppressed but also a country whose military intervenes in countries in the name of helping the oppressed.⁷⁹ The HO program helped many former reeducation camp prisoners to come to the United States, but it intensified the South Vietnamese nationalist logic that induced and propelled the deportation case.

Bùì's deportation story illuminates how reeducation camp experiences could be grounds for the "deportability" of Vietnamese Americans and how accusations of torture could be used to ensure accountability for human rights violations. In addition, a sense of victimhood in the community made a scapegoat out of Bùì that glorified the former existence of South Vietnam. By invoking the suffering and wounds experienced in reeducation camps, organizations such as Boat People SOS and supporters of deportation erased the history of US colonialism and imperialism to show themselves as US allies in the past and present. Reemphasizing the brutality of reeducation camps was necessary in the era of normalization of US-Vietnam relations to validate an overtly militarized memory of the war, because many of the camp prisoners were ex-ARVN soldiers who never received proper acknowledgement of their mistreatment. The HO program was significant

for Vietnamese American communities, yet refugee resettlement programs could not reduce the traumas of the political conditions of Vietnamese Americans changed rapidly after the end of the 1980s.⁸⁰ After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US attitude toward Vietnam gradually changed as well, and the US embargo on Vietnam was eventually lifted in 1994. The normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam signaled to Vietnamese Americans the end of “the era of the boat people and America’s moral obligation to Vietnamese refugees.”⁸¹ Since the end of the Cold War, human rights abuses and commemoration of the suffering of detainees has had a greater influence on the US government and Vietnamese Americans to justify their anti-Communism. The experiences of former reeducation camp detainees can be considered a rebuttal of the United States’ attempt to reconcile with the former enemy.

CONCLUSION

The deportation of Bui was a way for HO refugees, their families, and their supporters to reclaim the Vietnam War as a war fought between the North and the South between Communism and anti-Communism. It, furthermore, legitimized the South Vietnamese motive for waging the war. This was the situation before the escalation of the war on terror and the mass deportation of “criminal aliens.” Hence, the case represents the transition from the end of the Cold War to the war on terror, when memories of injustice in reeducation camps were employed to condemn human rights abuses and commemorate the suffering of Vietnamese Americans.

In the current deportation regime, government deportation prevails over the form of community-based deportation described here. In December 2018, Trump administration officials met with Hanoi officials to discuss a pact that the two countries signed in 2008. Formalized under President George W. Bush, it protected the Vietnamese who came to the United States before July 12, 1995, from deportation. More than eight thousand Vietnamese residents in the United States who escaped from their homeland but were later found guilty of crimes would have been at risk of deportation if Trump administration officials succeeded in changing the agreement as they hoped to do.⁸² Younger Vietnamese Americans demonstrated against the Trump administration’s move, but the older generation did not line up in support of the younger people. There is the generational divide on deportation issues not only because the older generation tends to be more Republican leaning but also because they trust the US government’s

decision about who should stay and leave as well as their own choices of who deserves to be exiled from their community.

NOTES

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¹ Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz, eds. *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

² Tung Nguyen and Sherry Hirota, “Trump’s Next Target: Legal Immigrants,” *New York Times*, Sept. 25, 2018.

³ De Genova and Peutz, *Deportation Regime*, 6.

⁴ Hidetaka Hirota, *Expelling the Poor: Atlantic Seaboard States and the 19th-Century Origins of American Immigration Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Eithne Luibheid, *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

⁵ Daniel Kanstroom, *Deportation Nation: Outsiders in American History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁶ William Walters, “Deportation, Expulsion, and the International Police of Aliens,” *Citizenship Studies* 6, no. 3 (2002): 268–69.

⁷ Linda Trinh Vo, “The Vietnamese American Experience: From Dispersion to the Development of Post-Refugee Communities,” in Jean Yu-Wen Shen Wu and Ming Song, eds., *Asian American Studies: A Reader* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000): 290–305.

⁸ Phuong Tran Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 1–15.

⁹ Thuy Vo Dang, “The Cultural Work of Anticommunism in the San Diego Vietnamese American Community,” *Amerasia Journal* 31, no. 2 (2005): 65–86; Karin Aguilar–San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014); Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee American*; Long T. Bui, *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Aguilar–San Juan, *Little Saigons*, 18–35.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 63–64; Y Thien Nguyen, “(Re)making the South Vietnamese Past in America,” *Journal of Asian American Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2018: 65–103.

¹² Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee American*, 120–38.

¹³ Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 22–23; 29.

¹⁴ Bui, *Returns of War*, 88.

¹⁵ For newspaper articles, see, e.g., Charles Dunst, “Trump Administration Quietly Backs Off on Deporting Vietnamese Immigrants,” *New York Times*, Nov. 22, 2018; Eric Tang and Viet Thanh Nguyen, “Victims of War, and Now Victims of the Trump Administration,” *New York Times*, Dec. 3, 2018. Organization such as the Southeast Asia Resource Center have

been vocal in raising awareness about Southeast Asian American deportations.

¹⁶ Ginetta Sagan and Stephen Denney, "Reeducation in Unliberated Vietnam: Loneliness, Suffering and Death," *Indochina Newsletter*, Oct.–Nov. 1982.

¹⁷ Amanda Demmer, "Forging a Consensus on Vietnamese Reeducation Camp Detainees: The Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association and US–Vietnam Normalization," in *Domestic Politics and US Foreign Policy since 1945*, Andrew L. Johns and Mitchell B. Lerner, eds. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 198.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ For example, a movie called *The Journey from the Fall*, directed by Ham Tran, depicts poignantly the plight of reeducation camp prisoners. There are also many memoirs of camp experiences. See, Doan Van Toai and David Channoff, *The Vietnamese Gulag* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986); Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn, with E. E. Richey, *The Will of Heaven: A Story of One Vietnamese and the End of His World* (New York: Dutton, 1982).

²⁰ Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee American*, 125.

²¹ <https://sites.uci.edu/vaohp/>.

²² Nguyen Dan, University of California, Irvine Vietnamese American Oral History Project, VAOHP0072.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Nguyen Van Lanh, University of California, Irvine Vietnamese American Oral History Project, VAOHP0073.

²⁵ Ginetta Sagan and Stephen Denney, "Reeducation in Unliberated Vietnam: Loneliness, Suffering and Death," *Indochina Newsletter*, Oct.–Nov. 1982.

²⁶ Demmer, "Forging a Consensus," 200.

²⁷ Judith Kumin, "Orderly Departure from Vietnam: Cold War Anomaly or Humanitarian Innovation?," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 27, no. 1(2008): 104–17. Not all boat people were former detainees or camp escapees, but it was the prevalent option for many of them.

²⁸ Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association, <https://snacooperative.org/ark:/99166/w6v206pq>, accessed Jan. 24, 2020.

²⁹ Sam Vong, "'Compassion Gave Us a Superpower': Vietnamese Women Leaders, Reeducation Camps, and the Politics of Family," *Journal of Women's History* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 124.

³⁰ Vong, "Compassion," 107–31.

³¹ Demmer, "Forging a Consensus," 197; Vong, "Compassion," 113–14.

³² Vong, "Compassion," 112–13.

³³ *Ibid.*, 117–18.

³⁴ Demmer, "Forging a Consensus," 200.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

³⁶ Gil Loescher and John A. Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America's Half-Open Door, 1945 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 203; Judith Kumin, "Orderly Departure from Vietnam: Cold War Anomaly or Humanitarian Innovation?," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2008): 104–17.

³⁷ Demmer, "Forging a Consensus," 196.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 212.

³⁹ Nguyen Lanh Van.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Mai Van Tra, University of California, Irvine Vietnamese American Oral History Project, VAOHP0025.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Pham Joseph Ba, University of California, Irvine Vietnamese American Oral History

Project, VAOHP0051.

⁴⁵ Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee American*, 127.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 127–28.

⁴⁷ Nguyen Nhan Thi, University of California, Irvine Vietnamese American Oral History Project, VAOHP0143.

⁴⁸ Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee American*, 126, 128.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 125–29.

⁵⁰ Nguyen Dan.

⁵¹ Aguilar–San Juan, *Little Saigon*, 20.

⁵² Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee American*, 127.

⁵³ Claire Luna, “Man Is Charged in Vietnam Jail Torture,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 9, 2003, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-aug-09-me-enforcer9-story.html>, accessed Jan. 24, 2020.

⁵⁴ Nguyễn Hữu Lễ, *Tôi Phải Sống* [I must live] (San Jose, CA: Vietnam Democracy Radio, 2013), 350–51.

⁵⁵ Huy Phương, “Câu Chuyện Một Linh Mục [The story of a priest]” *Nguoi Viet Daily News*, Dec. 15, 2013, <https://www.nguoi-viet.com/nhin-tu-little-saigon/Cau-chuyen-mot-linh-muc-4123/>.

⁵⁶ Linh Mục Nguyễn Hữu Lễ, “Tội Ác Bù Đĩnh Thi Tại Trại Tù Thanh Cầm–Phần I [Bù Đĩnh Thi’s crimes at the Thanh Cầm Reeducation Camp–Part 1],” *Viet Bao Online*, April 21, 2001, <https://vietbao.com/a16980/toi-ac-bui-dinh-thi-tai-trai-tu-thanh-cam-phan-i>, accessed Jan. 24, 2020.

⁵⁷ Nguyễn Hữu Lễ, *Tôi Phải Sống*.

⁵⁸ H. G. Reza, “Deportation for Vietnam ‘Enforcer,’” *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 2004.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Linh Mục Nguyễn Hữu Lễ, “Tội Ác Bù Đĩnh Thi.”

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 135.

⁶⁴ Cases include that of journalist Triet Le and his wife were killed in September 1990. “Political Motives Said Possible in Slaying of Anti-Communist Columnist,” Associated Press, Sept. 24, 1990, <https://www.apnews.com/387b393e7251093d25f74351b4f45a5a>, accessed Dec. 10, 2019.

⁶⁵ Aguilar–San Juan, *Little Saigons*, 79–80; Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee American*, 131–32.

⁶⁶ Phuong Ly, “Death Reopens War Wounds,” *Washington Post*, May 27, 2000, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2000/05/27/death-reopens-war-wounds/d66b0395-06ac-4382-afbc-ab65526bbe8e/>, accessed Dec. 10, 2019.

⁶⁷ “Vietnamese Refugee Accused of Killing,” Associated Press, June 11, 2001.

⁶⁸ Mai Tran, “Camp Enforcer Not a Torturer, Wife Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 2004.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Linh Mục Nguyễn Hữu Lễ, “Tội Ác Bù Đĩnh Thi.”

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⁷³ Huy Phương, “Câu chuyện một linh mục.”

⁷⁴ Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee American*, 13–14.

⁷⁵ Bui, *Returns of War*, 90.

⁷⁶ Schou, “Bring Us Your Torturers”; H. G. Reza, “Deportation for Vietnam ‘Enforcer,’” *Los*

Angeles Times, April 28, 2004; Mai Tran, “Vietnam Camp ‘Enforcer’ Won’t Fight Deportation,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 2004; Mai Tran, “Camp Enforcer Not a Torturer.”

⁷⁷ “Tòa án Mỹ đã xử xong vụ Bùi Đình Thi [American court finished the case of Bùi Đình Thi],” BBC Vietnamese, May 6, 2004, https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/regionalnews/story/2004/05/040506_buidinhthi.shtml.

⁷⁸ Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 174–75.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Y Thien Nguyen, “(Re)making the South Vietnamese Past,” 85–86.

⁸¹ Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee American*, 124.

⁸² Anh Do, “Among Vietnamese, a Generational Divide Arises in Fight against Deportations,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 28, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-viet-deportees-20181226-story.html>, accessed Dec. 10, 2019.