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### Author

Vo-Dang, Thuy

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# book reviews

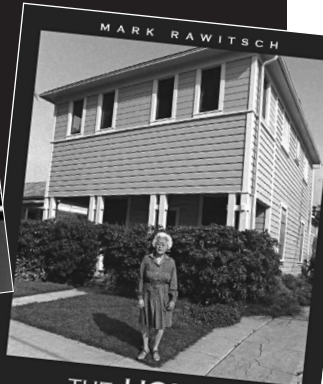
## Transnationalizing Viet Nam

*Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora*



Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde

MARK RAWITSCH



## THE HOUSE ON LEMON STREET

JAPANESE PIONEERS AND THE AMERICAN DREAM



AFTERWORD BY LANE RYO HIRABAYASHI



## book reviews

TRANSNATIONALIZING VIET NAM: COMMUNITY, CULTURE, AND POLITICS IN THE DIASPORA. By Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2012. 198 pp. hardcover, \$74.50).

*Transnationalizing Viet Nam*, by Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde, explores the complex and evolving culture and politics of a vexed diaspora. Her methodology includes ethnography and in-depth interviews over the span of two decades. Her research sites are the circuits of Vietnamese popular music, early information communication technology forged between Viet Nam and its overseas communities, and the anticommunist protests against Vietnamese American art, Vietnamese-language news media, and a young politician in the California Bay Area. Situating her work in dialogue with Asian (Area) Studies and Asian American (Ethnic) Studies, Valverde focuses on the real and affective transnational networks that shape Viet Nam and the diaspora. This theoretical positioning urges Area Studies to consider questions of racialization and ethnic identity while simultaneously employing a more contemporary Asian American Studies analytic, foregrounding histories of war, global displacement, and legacies of imperialism.

While decades in the making, *Transnationalizing Viet Nam* is rather timely in its publication since it lands in the apt company of other recent scholarly studies of Vietnamese and diasporic formations: Karin Aguilar-San Juan's *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (2009), Isabelle Thuy Pelaud's *This is all I choose to tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* (2010), Nhi T. Lieu's *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (2011), and Lan P. Duong's *Treacherous Subjects: Gender, Culture, and Trans-Vietnamese Feminism* (2012). Thus, Valverde's work is part of a field-defining moment for Vietnamese American/Diaspora Studies. This book offers the first "insider" perspective that grapples candidly with Vietnamese American community formations, particularly its anticommunist politics. It serves as an invaluable resource for students and researchers interested in understanding the Vietnamese American community, but also offers a model

that adeptly bridges Area Studies research with Asian American Studies through the framework of transnationalism.

Noting, for example, how cultural exchanges between Viet Nam and the U.S. influence the music production and consumption of Vietnamese Americans, Valverde attends mainly to the political-economic contexts for those exchanges. She details the shifting tastes of producers and consumers of music, and describes the hybridization of Vietnamese music across time and space, from Chinese and French influence to the global music scene dominated by American musical forms. The ethnographic details and translated music she provides make a strong case for the impact and import of cross-border networks in creating rich, dynamic forms of hybridized cultural production—increasingly sustained by collaboration and exchanges between Vietnamese inside the homeland and overseas. These networks open up new channels for communication, shaping transnational identities on both sides of the ocean.

Valverde's transnational framework posits that three dominant political forces impact the lives of Vietnamese in diaspora: the United States government, Viet Nam government, and "staunch anticommunists" in the diaspora (27). For example, in 2008, San Jose City councilmember Madison Nguyen was under fire for the initiative to name a business district in San Jose, California, home to the second highest concentration of Vietnamese Americans. In her analysis of the Madison Nguyen-Little Saigon controversy, Valverde argues that "[a]t its core it was about control of overseas Vietnamese identity, an identity influenced by Viet Nam and U.S. governments as well as staunch anticommunist community members" (143). Situating this case among other public instances of community protests, demonstrations, and boycotts, Valverde believes a small, raucous minority vies for power and polices the boundaries of diasporic identity through the vehicle of anticommunism. Furthermore, she observes that "the Vietnamese American community lives in a state of fear. . . The ethnic enclave essentially serves as a prison and the rabid anticommunists as its guards" (111).

Her assessment of the "rabid" anticommunist community faction has only been a sidenote in other scholarly works, thus her close examination gives a more thorough understanding of community politics. This characterization has been the mainstream media stereotype of first-generation Vietnamese Americans as well. The second half of the book describes public protest by anti-communists against Vietnamese American art, media, and political

leaders, arguing that this community bloc has effectively policed the parameters of ethnic identity and belonging through intimidation and reprisal. Valverde's focus on art and media as important sites of inquiry shows us that identity formation is complex and forged at the intersection of multiple sites, all deserving of critical attention. Yet, while offering an important foundation for the study of Vietnamese diaspora, a more nuanced analysis might also take into consideration the loss and erasure of South Viet Nam from dominant histories in Viet Nam and the U.S. These are forces undergirding the cachet of anticommunism in this refugee/ethnic community. In other words, how might anticommunism be treated with more complexity than as a problematic form of conservative politics policing community and identity? Might we approach anticommunism in the community as a multiple and contradictory cultural discourse, as potentially productive, one that may produce alternative forms of knowledge and ways of being?

In the book's discussion of the controversy over an art installation of foot baths painted as South Viet Nam flags and *Nguoi Viet Daily News'* feature of this art, Valverde argues that the anti-communist protestors' message was unclear. Rather than direct their protest at the artist, they enacted the longest-running anti-communist protest against an ethnic newspaper. This case study provides the basis to advance a critical and nuanced discursive analysis of community politics. Perhaps the reason for targeted and sustained protest against a newspaper rather than an individual highlights the primary function of anticommunism in this community—to counter the historical erasure of refugee histories in dominant spheres of American life. The newspaper has been a space for the Vietnamese American community to vie for representation through and against structural forces of assimilation, hybridization of culture, loss of history, and language. Valverde uses the protestors' apparent "success" in getting newspaper editors fired and shutting down dialogue as a measure of the level of fear anticommunists elicit in the community. Rather, the "success" of such anti-communist articulations might lie in the momentary eruption of contradictions, ambivalences, and ghostly hauntings of a community still grappling with the legacies of war, displacement, and loss. These eruptions serve as catalysts for change, when the notion of community itself can expand and shift, perhaps toward something more open and inclusive.

Thuy Vo Dang  
*University of California, Irvine*