

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Review: Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America by Karin Aguilar-San Juan

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6m11s06n>

Journal

Journal of Vietnamese Studies, 6(1)

ISSN

1559-372X

Author

Võ Đăng, Thúy

Publication Date

2011-02-01

DOI

10.1525/vs.2011.6.1.189

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

KARIN AGUILAR-SAN JUAN

Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 222 pages. \$22.50 (paper).

In this first comprehensive study of Vietnamese American place-making and community-building, Karin Aguilar-San Juan bridges the sociology of immigration and place with critical race studies in her *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*. Based on research conducted between 1994 and 2005 in Boston, Massachusetts and Orange County, California, *Little Saigons* suggests that the process of ethnic place-making in these distinct urban and suburban sites, respectively, reflects a conscious effort by Vietnamese Americans to “stay Vietnamese” in a “multicultural” American society. Yet, rather than embrace an essentialist view of cultural identities as fixed and unchanging, Aguilar-San Juan underscores how the terms and parameters for being Vietnamese in diaspora are being negotiated through the mutually constitutive processes of place-making and community-building. Ethnic places both cushion American ethnics from the violence of racialization while marking them as outsiders to the national polity. Thus, she argues that to “stay Vietnamese” is “not an act of constancy but of

purposeful, and ultimately strategic, shifting and changing in order to arrive at new ways of being Vietnamese in a U.S. context" (xxvii).

Given the complexity and disavowal of race in the current social milieu under liberal multiculturalism, Aguilar-San Juan reminds us of the significance of racial formation as a modality for understanding the historical construction of Vietnamese-American identities. Moreover, given the increased pervasiveness of globalization and transnationalism that is now part of scholarly and popular analytics, Aguilar-San Juan pushes us to reconsider the role of local places and the people who actively inscribe their histories, memories, and desires upon those places. Thus, her study challenges the untenable promise of assimilation laid out by traditional sociology at the same time that it critiques the drive to unmoor identities from geographical places in the interest of a cosmopolitan transnationalism.

If the new Vietnamese diasporic subject is imagined as a multiple-visa-carrying, globe-trotting cosmopolitan as writer Andrew Lam would have us believe, what may we learn from grounding identity in particular localities such as southern California's Little Saigon? The first part of the book answers this question by asserting the significance of a "platial" analysis. That is, through three processes of territorializing, regulating, and symbolizing, Vietnamese Americans define their place/position in the United States while simultaneously imbuing new meanings to the places they inhabit. These processes often overlap and inform each other. The author defines "platial" analysis as a critical conjoining of spatial theory's emphasis on the production of space with a "humanistic" emphasis on the agents and acts that turn those spaces into places. To best illustrate this, the book centers a comparative exploration of Boston's Fields Corner and Orange County's Little Saigon. This study reveals that the distinct history and geography of each place differently impacts the strategies Vietnamese American community leaders deploy to construct community. In Boston's old and dense urban neighborhoods, Vietnamese American place-making involves negotiation with its centuries-old liberal-activist legacy as well as with its spatial limitations for a uniquely Vietnamese American place. Given this context, Vietnamese Americans create more of a panethnic Asian-American place that serves to strengthen their solidarity with other racialized communities in Boston. In the sprawling suburbs of a racially diverse yet stratified Orange County, due

to an impressive critical mass, Vietnamese Americans have wielded notable power in claiming their territory and carving their stories into the landscape. Not only are the geographical impacts extremely visible via storefront names, street placards, and architecture, Vietnamese Americans from Orange County are highly visible in municipal and state-level civic leadership as well. Additionally, Vietnamese language news and entertainment media are headquartered in Little Saigon. In all of these sites Vietnamese Americans define their territory, regulate the parameters for belonging within this community, and symbolize their past stories, as well as their current needs and future goals.

Moving readers quickly through contexts of war, displacement, and resettlement, *Little Saigons* focuses instead on the active production and construction of community and identity in the here and now. One of the modalities for the construction of community is what Aguilar-San Juan calls “strategic memory projects”—such as anticommunist protests, Vietnam War commemorations and monuments, and the display of the former South Vietnam flag. These moments and symbols evoke a shared history as refugees from the Vietnam War and provide community leaders with a great deal of cachet and authority to structure community around this narrative of common loss and struggle. Because Boston has a long liberal antiwar tradition, the staunch anticommunist stance taken by many community leaders does not prove as effective in Boston as it does in Orange County. She argues that these “memory projects” reinforce the region’s political conservatism, thus reinforcing the impact of geography upon subject-making.

The last substantive chapter of the book deals with the exploitation and consumption of place through what the author calls marketplace multiculturalism, which moves beyond an “ethnic enclave” or “ethnic entrepreneurship” model of studying immigrant communities to explore how Vietnamese Americans create place in concert with state-sponsored multiculturalism. Here, one of the main differences between Boston and Orange County lies in the former’s emphasis on neighborhood development and affordable housing issues. In contrast, Orange County’s appeal is in its commerce-driven layout and symbolic cultural value as the unofficial capital of overseas Vietnamese, which promotes tourism to the region.

Little Saigons ends by suggesting what the implications of such a platial analysis on Vietnamese-American community formation may be. Aguilar-San

Juan relates this study to a larger Ethnic Studies and Transnational Studies readership. The author gestures towards differences with Cuban-American community formation and parallels with Mexican Americans in racialized discourses over immigration and issues of legality and belonging. She also acknowledges the gaping absence of analyses of gender and sexuality, the second and subsequent generations, and the “microdimensions” of family, home, and personal lives in her study. Despite these omissions, however, the book makes an important and timely contribution to the comparative and multi-sited study of Vietnamese Americans, and the complexity of crafting selves and creating community.

Thúy Võ Đăng, University of California, Los Angeles