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## Conflict and Care: Vietnamese American Women and the Dynamics of Social Justice Work

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### ABSTRACT

This collection of essays explores the experiences of Vietnamese American women scholar-activists navigating the complexities of antiracist work within the Vietnamese American community. Each essay discusses the gendered and generational disciplining faced by the authors while doing social justice work and reflects on the choices they made in response. Attentive to the historical forces that have shaped the Vietnamese American community, the authors advocate for building bridges and fostering spaces of compassionate and radical care.

### KEYWORDS

Activism; antiracism; Black Lives Matter; community politics; gender; generational divide; intersectionality; social justice; Vietnamese American

### Introduction

This collection of essays explores the experiences of Vietnamese American women scholar-activists as we navigate the complexities of antiracist work within the Vietnamese American community. We offer lived experiences and ruminations on the perils of breaking silences and dismantling “good refugee” and “model minority myth” frameworks. Providing candid examples of challenges and losses we have faced in our personal lives, particularly within the context of COVID-19 and systemic racism, we discuss the gendered and generational disciplining we faced while doing social justice work, inner struggles that we felt, and the choices we made in response.

We are not the first to grapple with turmoil or fallout from vocalizing social justice values in the Vietnamese American community. Like those before us who are scholars and activists, we too navigate gendered and generational tensions in our research and teaching, volunteer work, and personal lives. For example, Thúy’s maternal instincts and professionalism were questioned as she faced backlash from family and community for her activism. Thảo’s heated exchanges with her mother over Thảo’s activism and political beliefs led them to be on non-speaking terms. Tú-Uyên reflected on a tragic loss and grappled with feelings of rage and despair while teaching her children about social justice and learning about self care and community care.

In response to these struggles, we could have chosen self-righteousness by denying our own limitations and biases, turning away from those with whom we disagree. But we chose to continue speaking up and advocating for what we believe in – to communicate and build

connections with those who support us as well as those who discipline or shun us. These short essays share our experiences, thought processes, and emotions as we attempt to navigate antiracist work with care, curiosity, and compassion. Our goal is to find ways to come together, especially working to bridge those ideologically apart from us.

## **“Vietnamese for Black Lives” and gendered dimensions of community politics**

### ***Thúy Võ Đặng***

On May 30, 2020 I joined the Black Lives Matter protest in Orange, California. The city of Orange was a “sundown town” where Black people were allowed to work but pushed out after dark.<sup>1</sup> This was the first organized protest here in response to a Minneapolis police officer’s brutal killing of George Floyd. Across the plaza where we gathered, police stood watch on the ground and on a building rooftop. Apprehension mounted inside me as the summer heat of Southern California intensified the electric atmosphere of resistance.

With my homemade sign that read “Black Lives Matter: end police brutality,” I circled the plaza attempting to ethically photograph signs to document this historic moment.<sup>2</sup> Signs of “I can’t breathe” and “No Justice, No Peace” and “Silence is Violence” surrounded me. A few young Vietnamese Americans held signs that read, “Đòi quyền sống của người da đen: Demand black people’s right to live” next to “Vietnamese for Black Lives.” I was intrigued and spoke to them.<sup>3</sup> Powerful statements, I remember thinking. I hadn’t thought to declare my own positionality as a Vietnamese American supporting BLM. They inspired me. Days later, I made a new sign when I joined another BLM protest in Irvine.<sup>4</sup>

In both locations, most protesters wore masks per public health guidelines. The energy and spirit of resistance were palpable, from the moments we took a knee in solidarity with Black folks to the chants we shouted into the stifling stillness of suburbia. I posted about the protests on my social media platforms and gave permission to Vietnamese language media to reshare. After public exposure, I expected some family and friends to disapprove since Vietnamese Americans are generally politically conservative and “we” showed up for Trump more than other Asian American groups.<sup>5</sup>

I did not expect to be chastised by my mother, who called after the Irvine protest and asked if I was in the crowds, putting my children at risk during a pandemic. Her words stayed with me long after, provoking a feeling of shame that came from the halting Vietnamese I used to speak with her, the inadequate ways I expressed my values to a refugee mother who might scoff at my privileged place in the “ivory tower,” the awareness that I went to these protests as a balm for the growing rage from my helplessness in the face of systemic racism. My mother never mentioned my support for BLM, only calling out my “risky” behavior for potentially contracting the virus. A Trump-supporting cousin alerted her to my activities. The gossip and collective disciplinary tactics are brutal in my Vietnamese circles, albeit not unique or inherent to it. No one asked me why I showed up for Black lives, or why I would attend protests after being careful to maintain social distance for months. Instead, I was questioned for my actions as a mother. This gendered and generational disciplining would come up again during the presidential election in November of 2020.

As a Vietnamese American cisgender woman who straddles the 1.5 and second generations in a community often defined by its refugee past, I felt the chasm of class and

education between myself and the majority of my large refugee family deepen as I pursued a Ph.D. in ethnic studies and a career in higher education as the curator of Southeast Asian diasporic history.<sup>6</sup> I've been privileged to volunteer in Vietnamese American organizations in San Diego and Orange counties. The deep commitment I have to archives creation and social justice work stem from the silences, burden of debt and guilt, and inherited trauma I experienced in my home and on the journey to learning about my history.

These Orange County protests were not the first social justice actions I participated in, but they were remarkable in the context of a global pandemic and reanimated public discourse about anti-blackness in America. With social media increasing the visibility and amplifying the vulnerabilities of communities, Vietnamese American politics became a flashpoint for debates about the differential impact of systemic racism and the complicity of communities of color in reproducing anti-blackness. Throughout 2020, I experienced more anxiety-ridden conversations and situations than any other moment in my adult life, including during the Hi-Tek protest of 1999.<sup>7</sup> Feeling the urgency, I jumped into conversations on social media, volunteered on equity programs, and strategized with fellow board members in the Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association about ways to move the needle in our community on social justice.<sup>8</sup> None of this seemed enough. I was in a persistent state of rage and anxiety and felt myself burning out from the emotional energy expended daily. But to persist in social justice work means to continue thinking about local impact and asking: how can “we” be better? How can we create an antiracist future from our position as “newcomers” and refugees to a nation that has inherited a legacy of anti-blackness, a nation built on white supremacy dividing and conquering its nonwhite people? Imperialism and militarism are the throughlines in the long American narrative that link us to other marginalized groups, but some Vietnamese Americans only acknowledge a “refugee debt” to the nation, choosing to advance ultraconservative values at odds with social justice.<sup>9</sup>

During the November presidential election, I shared more of my rage on social media than typical, partly as a form of release, partly to seek solidarity with others who might be just as tired of the misogyny and racism we bear witness to or experience. I shared two photographs of myself on election day and the day after. In the first, I wore a black t-shirt with the phrase “Đụ Má” [“fuck you”] followed by a list: Trump, ICE, the Police, Racists, Patriarchy, Capitalism, Homophobia, Mean People.<sup>10</sup> The next was me wearing a yellow “Vietnamese for Biden” shirt picked up at a Little Saigon rally. A Vietnamese American man, an elder, captured my photographs and shared them on his Facebook without tagging me, using Vietnamese language laced with gendered profanity to provoke more of the same from his circles.<sup>11</sup>

Following the harassment, a letter signed by “the public” was sent from an anonymous email account to administrators at my university calling for me to be reprimanded. The letter said, “Imagine a student, a parent, a faculty member, or a stranger seeing Ms. Dang’s profane message circulating on social media and learning that she is a member from UCI – one of the most respectable and recognized universities, how would the public feel about this?” The invocation of respectability directly contradicted the demeaning language that simultaneously targeted me on social media.<sup>12</sup>

The anxiety I felt manifested in stomach pains and insomnia all week. To cope, I leaned into the wisdom and care of my fiercest women friends, especially those who knew firsthand what it feels like to be berated by one’s community elders, to be called a communist and

whore, shamed for speaking the same words in the same language that our elders can use at will. I fought back on social media to shed light on the messiness of working in this community, calling attention to gendered double standards and the misogynistic approaches to shaming and silencing progressive voices.<sup>13</sup>

Yet through my anger, I also felt guilt because of my relative privilege compared to some of these elders. The guilt was followed by a gnawing shame. It wasn't about being ashamed of right-wing members of my community, but my shame for not being able to reach them despite my ethnic studies, social justice-oriented training and work. In the weeks that followed, when bombarded with images of Vietnamese Americans waving the yellow flag of South Vietnam at the U.S. Capitol, I sat with that familiar feeling again . . . shame. Cathy Park Hong suggests that "Shame is an inward, intolerable feeling but it can lead to productive outcomes because of the self-scrutiny shame requires."<sup>14</sup> While this passage calls out white progressives, it resonated with me for the shame I have carried in the spaces between my professional life, community work, and personal relationships. In these spaces, I oscillate between being infantilized for my imperfect and broken Vietnamese or praised for trying to retain my culture; judged for being derelict in my maternal duties or propped up as a model of ideal femininity for reproducing the next generation; positioned as traitor to my people or applauded for the noble work of safeguarding our stories; deemed elitist because of education or praised as a credit to my family. Confronting these impossible positions enables a reckoning with the elements of my community that uphold white supremacy and systems of oppression. Difficult questions about myself and my community surfaced. Are the rewards of raising awareness and building solidarities worth the risks of being targeted and hated? Why do our elders turn on us with a venom that seems especially reserved for us, women who can be cast as objects of reverence or as dangerous and dirty with the flip of a switch? When "the community" rejects us, should we also turn our backs on them? What are we willing to risk personally to stand up for social justice? Do I stop speaking to my own family when words seem to fail in these intimate relationships?

Rejecting my family and community is not an option. I also choose to stay in the struggle to advance equity and social justice. Black Lives Matter has provoked both the surfacing of anti-Black sentiments during the Trump era and movements of racial solidarity across generational lines. My own reckoning with Vietnamese American community politics has involved showing up for conversations that help me process the complexities of our refugee history and ultraconservative factions. I also try to speak up where I see the potential impact of my voice. I'm learning to be okay with stepping away when I need space to grieve, be angry, heal. Our community is not the sum of its most vocal haters; it is a constantly shifting space we're building as we go. Some days I feel utter despair that progress toward eradicating anti-blackness in my community is painfully slow; other days I am inspired and invigorated by the activists around me holding spaces of radical care for each other. Through the messiness, we must persist in the work of crafting an antiracist future.

## Refugee reconciliations: Mending the Trump divide

### *Thảo Hà*

Only once has mom said she was embarrassed by me. It wasn't when I was truant in high school, or ran with Vietnamese gangsters, or married a man seven years my junior and then

divorced him. It was when my cousin sent her a photo of me at a Black Lives Matter protest. It was publicly posted on social media, and her friends saw it, too.

Her disapproval stung because she's always been my cheerleader. Like many Vietnamese parents, mom enjoys boasting about her children, "My daughter is a college professor with a doctorate degree." She giggles with pride when people respond, "Ahh, very good, *giỏi quá*. So talented, *có tài*." I've never forsaken what she and dad went through to lay these opportunities at my feet. I can step through and forward with confidence knowing they've got my back. But something shifted in them, and perhaps in me, too, and I worry that our solid parent-child bond is at stake.

It wasn't a particular moment or an explosive event but a gradually increasing tension from being intensely at odds over Trump, Biden, China, Communism, Antifa, Black Lives Matter, hydroxychloroquine, and fake news. I tried to avoid political conversations with them, but they kept bringing it up. It was burning in them more than me. This surprised me because I'm the scholar activist and protestor holding the "Asians 4 Black Lives" sign with a fist in the air. Mom and dad are doting grandparents in Houston, Texas, enjoying their lives as semi-retired manufacturers of surgical eye patches. What was firing them up?

Mom brought up the January 6 Capitol riot, and it got heated over the phone. Deflecting blame from Trump, she said Antifa did it. I said the FBI refuted that. She said the FBI was her source. With frustration, I called her source "stupid fake news." She scoffed at my sassy insolence and exclaimed, "Hồn láo!" and she hung up. I called her back, but she wouldn't take my call. She ignored me for weeks. At first I was fine, even a bit relieved, but as the days went by, it started to hurt. I missed her and wanted to reconcile.

Four months earlier, dad and I argued in person over healthcare and immigration. When he called me brainwashed, I lashed out, partly because my heart was a mess from just burying a loved one who died of cancer while incarcerated for a wrongful conviction. I stormed out of my childhood home, just like I did when I was five years old, but as an adult, I dropped curse words as I slammed the door. I heard dad drop curse words, too. Mom came out to soothe me as I sat on the driveway with tears gushing. She said, "Come eat before you leave. I don't want you to be hungry on the plane." I thought of my deceased loved one. Realizing any one of us could go at any moment, I apologized to dad. We hugged and said, "I love you." Dad's forgiveness warmed my heart, and mom's phở warmed my tummy.

Dad has always been Republican, and I've been a progressive since college, but we've never argued over it. Mom was apolitical, but misinformation targeted at the Vietnamese American community leading into the 2020 presidential election impacted her to become a fervent Trump supporter. I also noticed the Trump zeal in longtime friends, coworkers, and most notably, a large portion of Vietnamese Americans. My relations with them became strained, but I wasn't alone. Vietnamese American relations across the nation are entangled in a web of animosity, hate, anger, fear, and a collective heartache from seemingly irreconcilable differences over political divides.

As voters, the number of Vietnamese progressives is increasing,<sup>15</sup> but more in the community still favored Trump over Biden.<sup>16</sup> Many pondered why Vietnamese Americans departed from a collectively progressive Asian America. Reporters provided explanations by publishing stories about our community politics from the east coast in Virginia,<sup>17</sup> on the west coast in Seattle,<sup>18</sup> and from the south in Houston.<sup>19</sup> Trump supporters were from my parents' generation but also mine. BLM supporters were from

my generation but also my parents'. Vietnamese at the Capitol riot were from Texas but also California. Biden campaign workers were from Seattle, WA, but also Atlanta, GA. The divides tear our community apart, and the diversity demonstrates the complexity of our community's dynamics, making it difficult to understand. But if we are to rise to the challenge of bringing our community together, it is imperative that we seek understanding.

Reconciliation won't be easy. As a social problem, a community's political struggle tethers its friction to its individual members.<sup>20</sup> Role strain develops when our aims for social change are hampered by those we love who hold positions in stark contrast to ours. Not being able to find ways to bridge differences bears potential for permanent disconnection. It's an emotional trauma, an affliction on the heart. These repeated wounds have taken their toll, rendering me to contemplate giving up and ditching efforts to repair relationships. But to what destination does that path lead? Perhaps an isolated and lonely one. Is it worth it? The mental gymnastics to figure this out is exhausting. At times, I rationalize my choices in a dehumanizing, cost-benefit analysis by weighing personal relationships against public struggles in pursuit of "the right decision."

The exercise of exerting my political identity within a community that fuels hostility at me pains me to the core. I want to respond with anger and hatred toward them. But that is harmful. I would be part of a social vacuum in which the vicious cycle of hate is perpetuated. Often, this cycle of hate leads to violence, evident in the current rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans.<sup>21</sup> Many within the community embrace a law-and-order framework, adding to the anti-blackness already established in our community. Vietnamese Americans like author and illustrator Thi Bui implored us not to fall into the trap of more policing, calling for a restorative justice approach. She was met with profanity, hate, and threats of violence by our own community. It was heartbreaking.

Where do we go from here? Biden won, but the legacy of hate and divide over Trump remains along with systems of violence, anti-blackness, misogyny, and xenophobia. Mending relationships in a hostile world calls for acts of love. But does this approach afford love to racists, sexists, homophobes, and hate groups? Do we give a pass to our racist or sexist or homophobic or xenophobic loved ones so long as we understand why they are that way? Closing the gap is realistic only when they wish to meet us at the bridge. There will be those who reject us or whose positions are too far, and we leave it at that. Reciprocity is a must. Viet Thanh Nguyen asserts that many in the Vietnamese American community understand our war, history, and politics through a singular lens, and reconciliation is only possible if they recognize there are other ways to understand such things.<sup>22</sup> Our task is to understand their lens and additional lenses well enough to explain to them. To succeed in this endeavor, a critical examination of our sociopolitical history is vital. We must learn and share, and they must learn and share, too.

As we enact our individual reach, we must also recognize the broader system wherein the Democratic establishment neglects our community while Republicans view us as "a canary in the coal mine."<sup>23</sup> We've had to create our own apparatuses to dismantle misinformation spreading through the consciousness of Vietnamese American conservatives. Trump strategists used talking points that exploit the triggers of our historical war traumas. They've filled the gap left by Democrats' failure to recognize that such traumas induce a refugee debt mindset and a model minority ethos.<sup>24</sup> It is our role to fill those gaps with compassion, understanding, and a love that drives the conversation toward reconciliation. Reconciling will take time, but it can happen. Martin Luther King, Jr. implored us to remember that "the



arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” If each of us works toward mending the micro and macro relations of our community, then together we can heal.

After weeks of silence from mom, I devised a plan to initiate amends. Lac Su’s memoir illustrates how Vietnamese parents don’t say “I love you,” but their actions speak for them.<sup>25</sup> Mom enacts love by cooking for us. Instead of, “I love you so let’s forget what happened,” she’ll say, “Are you hungry? I made you something.” This would be my angle. Due to COVID-19, mom worried about me not having enough to eat around the house. She made food and would ship it. My plan was to call dad to pass on a message to her – I ran out of her homemade *gà xé*, could she make more for me? I knew in my heart this would get to her heart.

I saw “Mama” on my phone’s call notification. My heart fluttered and I answered with joy, “Hi, mom! You’re not mad at me anymore, huh?” She replied, “I wasn’t mad at you. What are you talking about? Anyway, I’m calling because I need you to be extra careful. Our family friend, Bác Hạ, died today from COVID.” We talked about how scary it was, and I mentioned the *gà xé*. Our food talk led to a conversation about starvation during the war. It helped me understand her trauma more. I took the opportunity to explain food insecurity in America and how a strong social net helps those who go hungry, discussing the issue without attaching it to a political party. She agreed that social services were a good thing. Two days later, I got the delivery. This was love, and it would be devastating to lose this over political differences. It’s my pledge to come at her with compassion, understanding, and love. And I pledge to expand this outward to others in our community with the hope of one day seeing us in a place of harmony where the traumas of war no longer haunt us.

## The heart breaks open: Community care and compassion in times of loss

### Tú-Uyên Nguyễn

“Within the war we are all waging with the forces of death, subtle and otherwise, conscious or not – I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior . . .

Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”

– Audre Lorde<sup>26</sup>

My kids asked about what they saw on the video – the man gasping “I can’t breathe . . . . I can’t breathe.” They asked with sadness in their eyes, “Mommy, what did he do wrong? Why did the police kill George Floyd? Why did the policeman put his knees on his neck for so long? Even after he couldn’t breathe or move? Why didn’t anyone help? Why are people protesting and yelling ‘Black Lives Matter’? Why are some people saying ‘All Lives Matter’ and ‘Blue Lives Matter’? Aren’t the police supposed to protect us?”

It was the last week of May 2020, and we were watching news coverage of George Floyd’s murder and the developing protests and uprisings in communities nationwide. I had just finished teaching a few days before, relieved to have finished a jarring semester. Schools across the U.S. had converted to virtual learning two months prior as the COVID-19 pandemic escalated. My sons and I were together at home and as we watched the chaotic news unfolding on TV, they asked me questions that I struggled to answer. How could I possibly answer my children’s questions when I was struggling myself to understand what



was happening? I felt a surge of rage despairing in the pit of my stomach, my heart breaking from helplessness. What would I want my 11- and 15-year-old children to remember and learn from this tragic time? What changes need to occur from this reckoning with America's racist legacy? What could I do to help?

In the midst of these disparate thoughts, my mom phoned for her daily check-in. “Con và hai đứa có khỏe không? Mẹ coi tin tức thấy sợ quá. Cần thận nghe con. Đừng đi đâu.” She had felt scared watching the news and wanted to make sure we were OK. She told me to be careful and to not even think about participating in any protests. My mom and I had been at odds about politics, race, gender, and anti-blackness issues in the past. She knew I had taken the kids to other community protests, pre-COVID. She kept telling me to be careful, to think about our family's safety and welfare. I knew my mom had good intentions, but I could feel my body getting agitated from her continuing admonishments. I told her “OK” in a firm voice and said I needed to make dinner, then hung up. My sons saw I was visibly upset and asked me what was wrong? Why was I so impatient with *Bà ngoại*/grandma? I felt exhausted and had no energy nor words to explain, no answers. As my body felt the flood of emotions overflowing into tears, all I could do was reach out and embrace my boys.

Three years before, my kids and I were watching TV on a Saturday night when we heard a faint call from the master bedroom. We ran upstairs to find my husband, their dad, lying on the bed, gasping for air, struggling to say he could not breathe. We called 9-1-1 and the paramedics came within ten minutes to take him to the ER. Two days later, he passed away from lung failure caused by metastatic liver cancer.

Seeing George Floyd's horrifying murder triggered these memories for me. I thought about the trauma of witnessing death – the shock my body felt, how I could barely eat or sleep for days, weeks, and months after my husband passed. Every cell in my body felt defeated, fearful, paralyzed. I thought about how our children witnessed their father's death and wondered how this loss would affect the rest of their lives. I thought about how my parents and my husband's parents and his siblings would cope, after having so many dreams and hopes for a brighter future as refugees from a war-torn country.

I thought about the race riots of April 1992. I saw the video of Rodney King being beaten by police officers as news broke about their acquittal.<sup>27</sup> Watching the grainy footage looping over and over on TV, I felt a sickening knot forming in the pit of my stomach. I couldn't believe the horror of the repeated baton blows, the utter lack of humanity. I asked myself many of the same questions my sons now ask me. What has changed in 30 years?

I was a sophomore biology major at UC Irvine in 1992, taking my first women's studies class and learning from brilliant authors: Grace Lee Boggs, Sandra Cisneros, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Louise Erdrich, Trinh t. minh ha, bell hooks, June Jordan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker. For our class final, we had to create a performance piece. I gravitated toward Audre Lorde's poetry and essays. Her writings, especially those reflecting on silence and activism while she was fighting through cancer, resonated and inspired me to speak up more in personal and political spaces. Voicing my views was something I had struggled with since arriving in America at seven years old with my family as “boat people” refugees. I did not know a single word of English and felt like I didn't belong in this new land where others often asked, “Where are you really from?”

As I learned about intersectional feminism, social justice movements, white supremacy, the model minority, marginalized communities, and historical silences juxtaposed to

Rodney King's dehumanizing beating, I wrote a poem entitled "Silence" for my class project. This poem would later be published as part of a curriculum, *Vietnamese Americans: Lessons in American History*.<sup>28</sup> My political consciousness had been awakened as I learned from activists like Audre Lorde and others how to transform silence into language and action.<sup>29</sup> After long conversations with my parents about the risks and dangers of venturing abroad, I had convinced them to let me travel to Southeast Asia and Washington, D.C. to volunteer in refugee camps, interviewing unaccompanied minors and advocating for their sponsorship to the U.S.<sup>30</sup> I went on to participate in student protests at UCI for Asian American studies.<sup>31</sup> I learned that I could no longer be silent, that my voice, in chorus with many others, could shine a light on hidden truths and make a positive and lasting difference.

This is my hope for my sons and other youth who are currently growing up during this incredible time, grappling with similar yet markedly different societal challenges from generations before them. I hope they feel increasingly empowered to amplify their voices and cultivate restorative resources for global thriving well beyond this period of shattering chaos and loss. I hope they continue to ask challenging questions and learn from past wounds, from those who may not agree with their views. I hope they develop critical consciousness, compassionate care, and courageous curiosity to speak up and work with others to creatively and effectively address social justice issues that continue to plague us.

During the pandemic, my sons and I have turned to daily exercise and mindfulness meditation as practices for nurturing compassion and collective care. We don't always succeed and the kids sometimes do so begrudgingly, but we try to go outside daily for walks, runs, or rides around the neighborhood. At night, we practice meditation together before bed. The regular practices have made a noticeable difference in how we communicate as a family and care for one another.

From August through October 2020, wildfires ravaged parts of California and my parents stayed with us for a few days as they had to evacuate their home. One night over dinner, my mom talked about the upcoming elections and said she was going to be voting for Trump. Instead of reacting in anger and rolling my eyes like I usually do, I calmly asked her to engage in a conversation about voting. My older son, who usually reminds me to be more patient with grandma, gave me a knowing nod and grin of affirmation. Communicating with curiosity, care, and compassion is a continual work in progress for our household. We are only human and still get upset and moody when we are stressed and exhausted. However, we are attuned to each other's emotions and vulnerabilities and make the effort to reach out to one another instead of reactively withdrawing. Whenever I am agitated, my kids suggest we hug it out or venture outside to exercise collective care. They constantly remind me to laugh and be open to learning.

In reflecting on the past year, I think about the traumatic losses we have collectively endured in fighting this worldwide war against dis-ease. COVID cases continue to rise.<sup>32</sup> Racism, violence, numerous inequities, and mental health concerns continue to disproportionately affect marginalized communities globally. With such daunting challenges, I wonder how we might heed Audre Lorde's call to become courageous warriors rather than passive casualties in our battles against loss and death? How do we care for and comfort one another when we are forced apart and feeling overwhelmed and exhausted? How do we build resilience and where do we turn for refuge in the midst of ruptures

globally and within our own families? How could we meet this moment to practice compassion, empathy, and love when our hearts are broken with pain?

There are no easy answers. However, the pandemic this past year has made more clear how interconnected we are. As we face the inevitabilities of heartbreak and loss in life and death, we need to care for our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits in community. One way to do so is to creatively and courageously find common ground within points of conflict in order to build bridges toward an antiracist, socially just, and compassionate future. As bridges rely on balancing tensions for their strength, so we must rely on one another (in spite of our differences) to protect the most vulnerable and build resilient communities. In framing community care as self-preservation, Audre Lorde recognizes that radical self-care and healing must be done in community for true lasting liberation.<sup>33</sup> The wars we are fighting should not be against each other, but against the forces that threaten our collective humanity. In times when we cannot care for ourselves, we persist by leaning in with others to find reciprocal safety, belonging, and love in our chosen communities and other communities we may bridge through collective care. My family directly witnessed and experienced this community care when our beloved was going through cancer and after he passed. Family, friends, work colleagues, neighbors, students, and strangers donated funds, brought food, cleaned our house, drove us to appointments, provided company and emotional support, and embraced us as we wept. We could not have made it through the difficult times otherwise. We continue to see this community empathy and kindness during the pandemic, as the worst of times can bring out the best in people. Through periods of devastating loss and grief, our hearts cannot help but break from unbearable pain. Yet I choose to believe that these fractures can also be openings to access expansive communities of care and compassion, if we act from a place of love.

### **Conclusion: Bridging divides, together while apart**

A phrase that has circulated widely since 2020 is “together while apart.” It emerged in response to COVID-19 public health recommendations to keep physical distance, while acknowledging that society’s essential foundation is human connection – togetherness. This is the basis for our approach to bridging differences in our community as well. Even while members of our community may seem far apart in our values, there is a bridge we can build in the spaces between us. That might look like how Thúy recognizes her relative privilege to elders who discipline or shame her; how Thảo navigates her mom’s expressions of love through food; how Tú-Uyên practices compassionate care and mindfulness in communicating with her sons and parents.

The bridges we build are attentive to the historical forces that have shaped our community – a divided homeland, the violence of war and its aftermath, the ruptures of migration, and the traumatic losses we carry in our resilient resurrections. These bridges sometimes look like rickety and precarious “monkey bridges” in rural Vietnam that must be navigated with some skill and experience, and with hope and courage.

What, then, gives us hope that we can collectively build a brave antiracist future? Introspection and awareness are key, for it will shape how we enter into collective action. For this to be sustainable, Patricia Hill Collins proposes that solidarity building be based on coalitions of collective conscience rather than political convenience.<sup>34</sup> She expands on this idea from Martin Luther King, Jr, who encouraged the creation of “a grand alliance of labor,

civil rights forces, and intellectual and religious leaders” and a movement rooted in “spiritual and moral forces” committed to the highest ideals of humanity. This idea frames communities not only based on intersectional commonalities of identity, history, and shared experiences, but also on a broader collective conscience that prioritizes how people interact and communicate across varying and diverse viewpoints. We recognize that Vietnamese Americans need not share the same views and our experiences are on a spectrum informing disparate responses to Black Lives Matter, COVID-19, anti-Asian hate, and the ongoing divisions wrought by our shared legacy of white supremacy. We continue to learn how to build bridges from grassroots organizers, poets, educators, artists, our elders, and our youth. And we learn from each other. Holding space for each other’s heartbreaks, fears, and triumphs may be one of the most revolutionary ways we forge a path forward together.

## Notes

1. Organizers must have chosen this location with some deliberate gesture toward the legacy of white supremacy here; after all, the far-right John Birch Society office was once located just a stone’s throw away from the historic Orange town center. For more information on sundown towns in the U.S., see James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: The New Press, 2005).
2. I photographed signs and not faces and I asked for permission whenever possible. For more discussion on ethical considerations in documentation work, see Sam Gregory, “Cameras Everywhere: Ubiquitous Video Documentation of Human Rights, New Forms of Video Advocacy, and Considerations of Safety, Security, Dignity and Consent,” *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 2, no. 2 (July 2010): 191–207.
3. I kept the recommended distance of 6 feet away from the protestors.
4. The Irvine Civic Center protest could be described as suburban and tame, with volunteers passing out a wagonful of hand sanitizer, bottled water, and granola bars. Police were present, but gave protestors plenty of space and distance and directed traffic. My new sign was double-sided with “End Police Brutality” on one side and “Vietnamese for Black Lives” on the other.
5. See Kimmy Yam, “Who are the Asian Americans still voting for Trump in spite of his ‘China virus’ rhetoric?” NBC News, October 27, 2020; and Kate Ly Johnston, “Vietnamese-Americans more likely to vote for Trump, survey says. How are their liberal kids coping?,” USC Annenberg Media, September 21, 2020.
6. My professional pursuits center preservation of Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese diasporic history collections at the University of California, Irvine Libraries Southeast Asian Archive. My work in the archives explores the intersection of ethnic studies and community archives, which necessitates an engagement with social justice issues. For an overview of the role of archival work in social justice, see Ricardo L. Punzalan and Michelle Caswell, “Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice,” *Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 86, no. 1 (2016): 25–42.
7. The Hi-Tek protest in 1999 took place in Little Saigon when a video shop owner, Tran Van Truong, placed a Vietnam flag and portrait of Ho Chi Minh on display in his window. Two months of protest ensued with an estimated 10,000 people at its height. See Thuy Vo Dang, “Vietnamese American Anticommunism,” in *Asian Americans: An Encyclopedia of Social, Cultural, Economic, and Political History*, ed. Xiaojian Zhao and Edward J.W. Park (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2014): 1151–54.
8. Founded in 1992, the Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association is a 501(c)3 nonprofit arts organization based in Orange County, California and produces programs such as the international Viet Film Fest.

9. A growing body of scholarship examining refugee debt has emerged in the last decade. See, for example, Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
10. I co-designed this t-shirt with another Vietnamese American woman scholar/writer/activist/friend as a creative outlet for our accumulated rage from the Trump presidency.
11. By the time I caught wind of this violation, there were close to 100 shares and more hateful comments about me. I, along with friends, reported this to Facebook and the original and shared posts were taken down. The following day, he persisted by cropping the same black t-shirt image and reposting yet again with toned down commentary in Vietnamese, careful not to verbally assault me, but rather inviting “the community” to judge whether a profane woman is fit to be an educator.
12. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) first coined the term “politics of respectability” in her examination of the role of Black women during the Progressive era, but it has since been used by numerous scholars to shed light on intraracial class politics. See P.J. Harris, “Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women’s History and Black Feminism,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 1 (2003): 212–20.
13. There was no professional fallout for me from the anonymous letter. They ironically attempted to send it to the chair of Asian American Studies, likely not aware that the discipline was founded as a proverbial middle finger to white supremacist knowledge production, so their misdirected effort was all for naught. The support that poured in from friends, acquaintances, and strangers bolstered my resolve to keep speaking up. In a brief video statement, I referenced how activists have protested Donald Trump’s misogyny with pink pussy hats and “Nasty Woman” t-shirts. Part of my statement included: “In my girlhood I frequently heard ‘Đù Má’ tossed around like a filler word by the Vietnamese men all around me, from the dinner table to the Little Saigon restaurants in Orange County. And these same men, unable to see their hypocrisy, would turn around and call a girl/woman a whore for using that same word in protest. It’s not just the double-standard I want to call out – it’s your effort to try to control our bodies, our language, our lives. Well, Đù Má to that. It’s my community, too, and I will keep fighting for the most vulnerable among us. Even if that includes you” (November 14, 2020).
14. Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World, 2020), 87.
15. Anh Do, “Young Vietnamese American progressives lead a generational split with conservative elders,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-11-02/vietnamese-american-progressive-movement-backs-biden-campaign>.
16. Matt Stevens, “Asian-American voters prefer Biden to Trump, a new poll found,” *New York Times*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2020/09/15/us/trump-vs-biden/asian-american-voters-prefer-biden-to-trump-a-new-poll-found>.
17. Valerie Plesch, “Why are Vietnamese Americans so divided over Trump? How the legacy of the Vietnam War is shaping many Vietnamese Americans’ picks in the upcoming election,” *Al Jazeera*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/11/2/vietnamese-american-voters>.
18. Nina Shapiro, “Among Vietnamese American voters, the Trump-Biden presidential race inflames old wounds,” *The Seattle Times*, October 17, 2020, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/trump-biden-contest-inflames-bitter-divide-among-vietnamese-americans-immersed-in-historical-wounds/>.
19. Dan Q. Dao, “Why ‘Black Lives Matter’ Is So Divisive for Houston’s Vietnamese American Community,” *Texas Monthly*, September 3 2020, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/news/black-lives-matter-billboard-houston-vietnamese-american-community/>.
20. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).
21. Cady Lang, “Hate Crimes Against Asian Americans Are on the Rise. Many Say More Policing Isn’t the Answer,” *Time*, February 18, 2021, <https://time.com/5938482/asian-american-attacks/>.

22. Viet Thanh Nguyen, “There’s a reason the South Vietnamese flag flew during the Capitol riot,” *Washington Post*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/01/14/south-vietnam-flag-capitol-riot/>.
23. Kat Chow, “Asian-Americans Continue to Drift Away from the GOP, but It’s a Complicated Story,” *National Public Radio*, October 12, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/10/12/497063888/asian-americans-continue-to-drift-away-from-republicans-but-it-s-a-complicated-s>.
24. A refugee debt mindset is the belief that being allowed to enter the country is a gift, and the debt is paid off through gratitude and “good deeds” that earn us a place in America. This is upheld by the model minority myth in which Asian Americans are viewed as the “good minorities.”
25. Lac Su, *I Love Yous Are for White People* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).
26. Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light and Other Essays* (Garden City, NY: Ixia Press, 2017).
27. On March 3, 1991, Rodney King was brutally beaten by LAPD officers after they stopped him for high-speed drunk driving. The violent beating was caught on camera by a bystander and broadcast on TVs worldwide. On April 29, 1992, a jury acquitted the four charged police officers, setting off riots in Los Angeles, CA that killed 55 people, injured over 2000, and resulted in \$1 billion of property damage. “Rodney King Riot: Timeline of Key Events,” AP Images Spotlight, accessed February 25, 2021, <https://apimagesblog.com/blog/2017/4/28/rodney-king-riot-timeline-of-key-events>.
28. I wrote the poem in 1992 and it was published online in 2004, as I was completing my doctoral studies in public health at UCLA; [http://www.learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/kits/vietnamese\\_lessons\\_and\\_extras.pdf](http://www.learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/kits/vietnamese_lessons_and_extras.pdf).
29. Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (paper presented at the Modern Language Association’s “Lesbian and Literature Panel,” Chicago, Illinois, December 28, 1977). First published in *Sinister Wisdom* 6 (1978) and *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Spinsters Ink, 1980), <https://electricliterature.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/silenceintoaction.pdf>.
30. This activism was part of my involvement with Project Ngoc, a UCI student-led humanitarian organization (1987–1997) that advocated for Southeast Asian refugees. The organization history can be found in the Project Ngoc Records, MS-SEA016, UCI Libraries Southeast Asian Archive.
31. For archival collections that document the history of student protest for UCI Asian American Studies, see Beginnings of Activism for the Department of Asian American Studies (BADAAS) at University of California, Irvine collection, AS-198 and Asian American Studies protest video, AS-190, Special Collections and Archives, UCI Libraries.
32. The U.S. surpassed 500,000 COVID-19 deaths in February 2021, the highest in the world, accounting for 20% of the nearly 2.5 million coronavirus deaths globally and matching the number of Americans killed in World War II, Korea and Vietnam combined. “Vaccine Efforts Redoubled as U.S. Death Toll Draws Near 500K,” *US News & World Report*, accessed February 25, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2021-02-22/vaccine-efforts-redoubled-as-us-death-toll-draws-near-500k>.
33. Lorde, *A Burst of Light*.
34. Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Race Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).



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