

Introduction

With a flash of light, a newspaper photographer's camera captured the moment of my family's arrival to the United States in Butler, Pennsylvania, in 1975. This grainy, black-and-white image accompanied a story that detailed how my family members had become the wards of a Catholic Church and the first refugees to arrive in this small town. The photo shows my father, my five siblings, and me. A lieutenant colonel in the Southern Vietnamese army, my father had been forced to flee before April 30, 1975, the day Sài Gòn fell to the communists in the war with the Americans. My father was among those South Vietnamese who had served with the US government and the southern military and who were evacuated or fled for fear of communist reprisal. Had he stayed, as did some of his friends, he would have been reeducated because of his perceived collaboration with Việt Nam's colonial and Cold War enemies. From the communist perspective, he was a traitor, and this picture of him in America was evidence of his betrayal.

The photograph attests to something else: my mother's absence. Not until I was much older did I realize that she was missing from the picture. She stayed behind when my father took the children and escaped from Sài Gòn. In the eyes of the communist regime, my mother might have been perceived as loyal to the national family because she stayed. From the war years through the postwar years, betrayal and loyalty would be important terms for both communists and noncommunists as they struggled over control of Việt Nam. Both sides often used charges

of collaboration and betrayal to redraw the bounds of nation. But by the late 1980s, those contentions had abated somewhat, at least in Việt Nam. In 1990, my mother was able to leave for the United States to be reunited with her grown children; conversely, overseas Vietnamese, including myself, began returning home. The staggered pattern of immigration and return that marks my family history is not unique. It demonstrates in concentrated form the kinds of jagged reunifications that took place for diasporans, as well as for those in Việt Nam, as families tried to reunify through multiple migrations and various homecomings in the postwar era.

This incomplete family portrait speaks to the fractures of war and displacement, recalling the trauma of betrayal writ large for the postwar national family of Việt Nam. As my family history suggests, the Indochina wars are imbricated with charges of treason and collaboration, charges that might be reversed with a shift in the political wind. Indeed, the government condemned overseas Vietnamese, like my father, as traitors and collaborators after 1975, but following its embrace of economic market reforms began in 1986, the government slowly opened the country's doors, welcoming overseas Vietnamese as part of its transnational family. Diasporans now return home as tourists, investors, scholars, and artists. After denouncing collaboration as betrayal, the state has recently imbued the term with a positive connotation of joint endeavors and creative productions. While overseas Vietnamese are still seen as potential collaborators, the meaning of "collaborator" itself has changed from someone like my father, who betrays the country, to someone who aids the country.

Given this history, *Treacherous Subjects* examines collaboration's doubled meanings in the cultural politics of Việt Nam and its diasporic populations, particularly those who settled in the United States and France. *Treacherous Subjects* asks: What does it mean to be a collaborator? How has collaboration been represented in history and culture? And how have collaborative practices been narrativized as acts of betrayal or loyalty? The book pivots on the word *collaboration* because of its vexed resonance within a modern Vietnamese history marked by French colonialism, US imperialism, Japanese occupation, and the economic role of foreign powers in postwar Việt Nam. This history shapes how Vietnamese subjectivities, both national and diasporan, are characterized by divided loyalties and shifting alliances. These treacherous subjects have been caught between opposing forces: nationalism, communism, occupying powers, and domestic states with competing claims to the name of

Việt Nam. Indeed, the aftereffects of colonialism and foreign occupation in Việt Nam have led to an anxiety about betrayal and its inverse, loyalty, embodying what Timothy Brook calls “collaboration’s haunting of the postwar world.”¹

My claim is that this haunting remains present not only for the Vietnamese in Việt Nam, but also for those who have made their way abroad and who identify as Vietnamese Americans or Vietnamese French. From Việt Nam to the United States and France, this legacy is particularly evident in film and literature, as artists grapple with the political and thematic meanings of collaboration today. *Treacherous Subjects* thus focuses on the term’s cultural significance, demonstrating that collaboration shapes the ways that major filmic and literary works have been produced and received. The book analyzes several postwar Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic cultural productions that are collaborative in nature or that use the notion of treasonous collaboration as a motif. It exposes how accusations of collaboration are contingent upon what is named collaborative, who is named collaborator, and who names her as such, depending on the dominant regime that has the power to define such terms.

Most expressly, the book interrogates the practices and themes of collaboration in order to elaborate on the term’s gendered dimensions. My close readings elucidate upon the discursive power of naming those who are “traitors” and “heroes,” “enemies” and “friends,”² in the formation of community and nation-state. In the postwar era, charges of collaboration score the anxieties involved in the work of nation-building and community-making. In cultural form, the collaborator is often figured as a female traitor, an “outsider” who enables collective solidarity against the menace of the treacherous subject that she embodies. Centralizing the figure of woman, *Treacherous Subjects* delves into the politics of collaboration to ultimately challenge the braided ideology of patriarchy and nationalism that undergirds denunciations or celebrations of collaborative acts. *Treacherous Subjects* develops a mode of analysis I call trans-Vietnamese feminism, which decenters nationalist notions of the family and familial notions of the nation, both dependent on each other and on circumscribed roles for men and women. Trans-Vietnamese feminism especially finds its inspiration in the works of writers and directors in Việt Nam and the diaspora, who have used their art in order to challenge traditional notions of gender, family, and nation.

Traitors and Heroes: Remaking the National Family

The ways that artists deploy the notion of family in their works relate to Việt Nam's postcolonial narratives of resistance and liberation, which consistently use rhetoric about family and filiality.³ Like Patricia Pelley, I read this discourse of heroes and traitors as productive and prescriptive,⁴ but I further argue that these constructs are deployed in both national and diasporic discourses, allowing for these formations to demarcate outsiders and insiders within their borders. The subject positions of “traitor” and “hero” within the bounds of a family imagined as the nation, and the nation itself as a family, are not only interpellative, they are also crucial to the disciplining of subjects in Việt Nam and the diaspora in terms of gender and sexuality.

Discursive terms such as heroes and traitors also work dialectically in narratives about how Việt Nam was either won or lost, in ways that commemorate the past and fundamentally shape the future. In contrast, historians of collaboration have mapped a more complex moral topography of the difficult choices the colonized and occupied had to make during and after war.⁵ In so doing, they point to a profound ambivalence underlying the story of colonialism, rejecting the moralizing and teleological framework that accompanies the narrativization of anticolonialism. This book adds to such discussions by focusing on Vietnamese and diasporic narratives about collaboration and the metaphorical family. More saliently, the book marks out the discursive effects that narratives of collaboration produce: gendered figures of heroism and treason whose symbolic significance lingers today.

To fully understand the implications of these terms, it is important to briefly chart Việt Nam's collaborationist history, beginning with the most well-known group of collaborators during French colonialism: the Constitutional Party. This political organization was considered “the most powerful native Vietnamese group operating at the time, and the most influential.”⁶ To use Jay Carter's words, this “subject elite” was composed of an educated, intellectual class of men, later denounced by the anti-colonial resistance movement. *Collaborateurs*, such as Pétrus Phạm Kỳ and Phạm Quỳnh, began as Catholic translators for the French colonial administration and employed the Romanized alphabet of *quốc ngữ* to disseminate colonial documents.⁷ As Milton Osborne observes, collaborators believed that *quốc ngữ* would help to eradicate Chinese traditions. As such, these “interpreters” took charge of educating the youth in the colonial metropolis and exercised their limited power as intermediaries

to try to achieve Vietnamese autonomy through Franco-Vietnamese collaborations.⁸ They used explicitly familial language, viewing France as “father to a Vietnamese son.”⁹ But their proposals for reform were limited and aimed at obtaining French citizenship for their own class, since they saw themselves as exceptional to the colonized masses.¹⁰

Anti-French agitator Phan Bội Châu, regarded as “the first great modern Vietnamese nationalist,”¹¹ strongly opposed the Constitutionalist Party and its ideals. For enlightened scholars like Phan, as Walter Vella argues, the goal was not to leave Western modernity behind but to transform Việt Nam into a modern Western-like nation: “progressive, economically prosperous, socially liberal and politically independent.”¹² Phan’s imagined Việt Nam was modeled on America and a national lineage that included “Confucian heroes who knew the path of social evolution and used their conscious will to guide society through it.”¹³ His celebration of heroism extended to women, as Phan was also known for championing the rights of women and advocating for women’s self-motivation within the terms of national revolution. Advancing the idea that women play the role of “mother to the nation,”¹⁴ Phan famously declared that when a woman was asked for her name by a courter, she should reply that her “surname is Việt, given name Nam.” Within the revolutionary imagination, women could be maternal heroines only when married to the country, pledging their patrimonial allegiance to the national family.¹⁵ These gendered and heteronormative metaphors about the national family found their apotheosis with Hồ Chí Minh’s familial rhetoric.

At the helm of this national family, as an “elderly Vietnamese sage,”¹⁶ Hồ Chí Minh based his political identity on the role of an ascetic, patriotic statesman who expounded on his protection of Vietnamese tradition and the reunification of the family as nation.¹⁷ Sharpening his rhetoric about national unity, Hồ used the trope of the family, likening it to a hand, to describe Việt Nam. The inhabitants of the country—though unequal—were adjoined like fingers for a common cause.¹⁸ In the war with the Americans, Hồ’s regime named as “traitors” those Vietnamese nationals who betrayed the fatherland (*tổ quốc*) by cooperating with the American government. For Hồ Chí Minh and his followers, the ultimate traitor to this family and the figurehead for the “puppet regime” was the president of South Việt Nam, Ngô Đình Diệm. Characterizing the South as its militarily and morally weaker counterpart, the Hà Nội regime bolstered its own position as Việt Nam’s political stronghold through Hồ’s image as an avuncular head of state and his devotion to the country (he once called himself Nguyễn Ái Quốc, literally, “Nguyễn the Patriot”).

For the North, the most troubling aspect about South Việt Nam, or the Republic of Việt Nam, was its collaboration with the French and then the Americans. Sài Gòn, South Việt Nam's capital, rapidly gained a reputation for corruption during the 1960s and 1970s, and it was regarded by the regime in Hà Nội as the "enemy within," the country's most vulnerable aperture to foreign contamination because of its openness to capitalism.¹⁹ Consequently, Hồ Chí Minh's regime portrayed the Army of the Republic of Việt Nam (ARVN) as feminized, decadent, and cowardly, particularly in contrast to the determined soldiers of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRV) and the National Liberation Front (NLF).²⁰ The rhetoric of treason, conjoined with the term "puppet regime," denoted a southern submission to the power and seduction of US currency.²¹ Within this context, betrayal is gendered feminine and stems from a treacherous false consciousness, which was treated with ideological conditioning after the war ended.

Kinship metaphors and the trope of loyalty abound in the postwar diaspora as well. In the introduction to his translation of *Truyện Kiều*, or *The Tale of Kiều*, the beloved nineteenth-century epic poem by Nguyễn Du,²² Huỳnh Sanh Thông argues that Vietnamese diasporic subjects are "victims of a perverse fate" similar to the poem's main character, Kiều, a wandering prostitute.²³ Thông appropriates female suffering by arguing that the term for overseas Vietnamese, *Việt Kiều*, is based on the character of Kiều, who eventually returns home after many trials. As errant subjects dispersed globally in the postwar era, diasporans always look homeward, according to Thông's reading. Forging an identity informed by migration and displacement, the exilic community remains a fundamental part of the national family. In spite of having migrated elsewhere, the exiles' true roots are in Việt Nam. These popular notions of kinship, family ties, and nationalistic sentiment reinforce a sense of transnational cohesion through the production of "a fictive ethnicity."²⁴

The Vietnamese state continues to hail the family today, but in different ways. In Việt Nam's transition to a market economy, with the "downsizing of the socialist welfare system, and return of the household as a unit of production and consumption," families occupy a central role in the country's political and economic structure.²⁵ Along with the reconfiguration of the family, the meanings of collaboration, betrayal, and loyalty have also changed with *Đổi Mới*, or "Renovation,"²⁶ in 1986. *Đổi Mới* was itself preceded by a chain of events that demonstrated how the national family had been fundamentally altered after the war ended. In 1975, North and South Việt Nam were reunified, but the

country also faced grave crises at the national and international levels. The state's attempts to collectivize land and reform agricultural output had disastrous results. Two years later, following Việt Nam's invasion of neighboring Cambodia, the United Nations and the United States imposed a trade embargo on the country. Because of Việt Nam's border wars with China in the late 1970s, support from communist China ceased as well. During this time, refugees fled Việt Nam in successive waves.²⁷ As a result of so much political and economic instability in the postwar years, the reformers who established *Đổi Mới* had several goals: "improve lagging productivity, raise living standards, and curb rapid inflation."²⁸ In more symbolic terms, *Đổi Mới* became an ideological compromise between the forces of globalization and the anti-colonialist, nationalist spirit Việt Nam was founded on. The advent of *Đổi Mới* also set in motion intense anxieties about opening the country to the global market, along with its related impurities and impact on gender roles.²⁹ Within the context of the country's new economy, the state now attempts to reform its subjects according to "neotraditional" constructs of family and filiality.³⁰

On the cultural front, the market reforms of *Đổi Mới* created the conditions for the Vietnamese film and publishing industries to develop, allowing for greater cultural exchange between Việt Nam and other countries. Việt Nam's foreign policies permit diasporic artists to return to the homeland and work collaboratively with the government to produce their work. Once denounced for having abandoned the homeland, Vietnamese diasporans are now "an inseparable part of the community of Vietnamese nationalities."³¹ The state's embassy webpage has recently described this community as exerting "political and economic influence" on Việt Nam but notes that they are also essentially stateless. Because of their statelessness, as the state observes, they would do better to invest in Việt Nam's future. In service of this idea, new immigration laws allow for five-year visas for returning Vietnamese, and recently instituted dual-citizenship laws also ensure that diasporans can become not only naturalized citizens but also cultural workers of and for Việt Nam.

Aspiring to be an Asian Tiger like some of its Southeast Asian neighbors, the country positions itself as a major geopolitical player within the region. In so doing, the state constantly refurbishes its relations with France, the United States, and its own diaspora, parts of which still agitate for regime change and thus severely test the model of affiliative relations that the state envisions for itself and the overseas community. Neoliberal economics, nonetheless, trumps political ideology and determines the

methods by which the Vietnamese state manages its relationship with its past enemies, including those within the diaspora.

For the diasporic community, the act of naming collaborators and traitors within the symbolic family is influenced not only by a Cold War discourse but also by Việt Nam's recent ascension in the global economy, as well as the international stature and geopolitical visibility that WTO (World Trade Organization) membership endows on the Vietnamese government. After the war ended, the overseas community often labeled those diasporans who returned to the homeland and/or worked with the Vietnamese government as "traitors" to the southern Vietnamese regime. In a newspaper commentary written after the 1994 lifting of the US-led trade embargo, for example, a Vietnamese American writer lists the numerous ways in which one is a traitor to the overseas community because of his/her relationship with the government in Việt Nam.³²

Within the Vietnamese American community, the most notorious traitors have been both male and female,³³ but as I show, anticomunist discourse uses familial rhetoric to specifically position women as sexual collaborators. In culturally nationalist terms, women prostitute themselves when they disavow the diasporic community and its politics. As a result of the normalized ties between the United States and Việt Nam since 1994, however, more and more Vietnamese diasporans have returned to the homeland for touristic, familial, and work-related reasons. The use of "traitor" to describe those who return is less frequent as Vietnamese American calls for reform have become more moderate.³⁴ But the charge of treason can still be used to discredit a person's reputation. For example, Le Ly Hayslip, who is the subject of Chapter 2, is a woman who was branded a "traitor" in the early 1990s by some members in the Vietnamese American community for her charity work in Việt Nam.³⁵ More recently, the controversy surrounding naming a business district "Little Saigon" in San José, California, and Councilwoman Madison Nguyễn's involvement is similar. Nguyễn is also seen as a traitor in the eyes of the Vietnamese American community because she has allegedly nurtured business ties with communist Việt Nam.³⁶ Furthermore, there are continuing protests and demonstrations against Vietnamese officials and nationals who travel to the United States. When Vietnamese President Nguyễn Minh Triết came to the United States in 2007, he was met with protests in San Diego, California, and Washington, DC. More recently, in 2010, at singer Đàm Vĩnh Hưng's concert in San José, California, war veteran Lý Tổng dressed up as a woman, approached the singer on stage, and sprayed him with mace.