Thi Xin, Cécile and Cecilia: An Examination of Identity and Memory in Twentieth Century Vietnam Guided by the Life of One Woman

by

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Class of 2013

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Middletown, Connecticut April, 2013
For my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother.

With endless gratitude to Tony Day, for his patience, passion and time.
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PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Doan Thin Xi, aka Cecilia, 1917 – 1998
Doan Van Hành, father of Cecilia
Nguyen Tih Đạo, mother of Cecilia
Doan Van Phung, younger brother of Cecilia
Maurice Tifaine, first husband of Cecilia, father of Andrée and Jacqueline
Tribon, first name unknown, second husband of Cecilia, father of Denise
Robert Leclerc, third husband of Cecilia, father of Paulette
Andrée Tifaine, aka Rée, first daughter of Cecilia, born April 1943
Jacqueline Tifaine, second daughter of Cecilia, born March 1945
Denise Tribon, third daughter of Cecilia, born October 1948
Paulette Leclerc, fourth daughter of Cecilia, born March 1953
Le Viêt Do, husband of Andrée
Thanh Ngọc Nguyễn, husband of Jacqueline
Lilianе Nguyễn, aka Lily, eldest daughter of Jacqueline and Thanh
Thanh Nguyễn, aka Jojo, son of Jacqueline and Thanh
Christine Nguyễn, aka Chou-chou, daughter to Jacqueline and Thanh,
Nicholas Do, aka Bambi, son of Andrée and Le
Jaimie Tifaine Nguyễn, great-grand daughter of Cecilia, author of work
Figure 1.6: Current map of Vietnam.
INTRODUCTION

This account will explore my family’s life in Vietnam, – primarily in Hue and Da Nang – their escape from Saigon to the United States in 1974, and their journey to rebuild their lives in California. Within this narrative, I find the most intriguing character to be my great-grandmother, Doan Thi Xin, who went by the name Cécile, Americanized to, Cecilia. Born January 5, 1917 in Qui Nhon, Cecilia’s life in Vietnam spanned the periods of French colonialism, the Japanese occupation during the Pacific War of World War II, the famine of 1945, the First Indochina War, and the US-Vietnam war.

I knew Cecilia as Bà Ngoai, the Vietnamese term for one's maternal grandmother. As the eldest in my family’s first-generation of American natives, I was the only great-grandchild who knew her. She passed away when I was seven years old, and my hazy memories of our time spent together compelled me to delve into her past and to explore how her experiences formed her unique character. For me, the most mysterious facet of Cecilia is her Vietnamese past. As with many first-generation children, I spoke and understood Vietnamese when I was a child, and gradually lost that skill, as I grew older. In my mind, my time with Bà Ngoai represents the period in my life when I felt the most Vietnamese. As a person of mixed race – who does not look particularly Asian – having the last name Nguyễn has always drawn questions regarding my racial background and how I identify myself. Though I most closely identified with my Vietnamese heritage, I often felt like an outsider, ignorant of the language, and my family’s history.
Throughout this process, it was my hope to learn more about the history of my family, and in so doing, to learn about myself. In writing this piece, it was my intention to learn more about who Cecilia was by reconstructing and fleshing out the world in which she existed.

Because I was so young when she passed away, I was never able to ask her what her life was like and what made her who she was. I was too young to realize that she was such a fascinating individual whose life spanned an incredibly tumultuous and fluctuating period in Vietnamese history. She was a single mother of four daughters – Andrée, Jacqueline, Denise and Paulette – who were fathered by three different French men. Of course, the story of her life is interesting to me on a very personal level, but I hope to use her life as a lens through which to view this particular period of Vietnamese history and to create an image of what daily life would have been like for her and her daughters.

The chapters of this work are structured chronologically, each discussing distinct periods of Cecilia’s life. The first explores her early life in Qui Nhon, her first relationship with a French tobacco planter named Maurice Tifaine, the births of their daughters, Andrée and Jacqueline, and her decision to move her family to Hue in 1945. This chapter discusses how Cecilia, along with her aging parents and two young daughters, was able to rebuild their lives in Hue and open a Bistro, Cécile Buvette, which became a hub of gossip and information in her neighborhood. In Hue, Cecilia’s third and fourth daughters were born, fathered by two French military officers, Tribon (first name unknown) and Robert Leclerc. With the end of the First Indochina War, the French schools in Hue were closed and Cecilia decided to
uproot her family once more, in order to continue her daughters' French educations.

The second chapter chronicles the family's move from Hue to Da Nang in 1954 and how Cecilia, yet again, rebuilds her life. In Da Nang, the nuns at a local French school, Lycée Sacré-Cœur, took in Cecilia and her daughters. They offered Cecilia a teaching position, room and board, and an education for her four young daughters. All four daughters graduated from the Lycée Sacré-Cœur, the equivalent of a high school degree, and never forgot the kindness and charity shown to them by the nuns at that institution.

The third chapter marks a shift in the narrative, where Cecilia – now an aging mother of four grown daughters – becomes less of an active agent in the story of her life. This chapter, told largely in the voice of my grandmother, chronicles my family's harrowing and fortuitous escape from the country in November of 1974. The fourth and final chapter explores my family's stay at refugee camps in Guam and Arkansas, their eventual relocation to Southern California and their early experiences in creating new lives and identities in America.

Throughout my thesis, I use the name "Cecilia" to identify my great-grandmother, despite the fact that her birth name was Thi Xin. Once she began school, where the curriculum was taught in French, she adopted the name Cécile. My choice to use the name "Cecilia" is not just for convenience and continuity, but because this was a conscious choice she made in developing her identity. Her chosen name added to her Frenchness. As a former colony of France, being French raised one's status in Vietnamese society, and Cecilia made an effort raise her daughters in the French way. To
be clear, in exploring her desire to be French, my goal is not to pass judgment or to speculate as to what type of person my great-grandmother was, but to explore why she made the decisions she did.

Figure 2.2 1933, photograph of Cecilia taken at the age of sixteen in Qui Nhon.
As referenced in the title of my work, Cecilia’s various names offer a glimpse into her notion of self-identity. For me, her willingness – and even desire – to change reflects her determination to make the best of the opportunities presented to her; while she attended French schools, and later was involved in relationships with French men she went by Cécile, when she came to America, she Americanized her name to Cecilia. Some might write this off as an attempt to assimilate, but I choose to view her multiple names as a marker of her cultural agility and willingness to adapt.

As for primary sources, I relied heavily on interviews with Cecilia’s daughters, and other relatives who experienced these events first-hand. I also utilized French, American, and Vietnamese public archives, and physical documentation such as birth certificates, photographs, and records kept by my family. My goal was to recreate the story of a life through a pastiche of stories, photographs, documents, and literary works, which describe this narrative’s time and place.

As for my historical problem, I will explore the role of memory in the study of history. It is my opinion that family histories, and personal histories for that matter, provide an intimate portrait of how the larger events of history affect and shape the life of the individual. As many of my primary sources were interviews I conducted, my work deals heavily with the question of memory. Of course, memory is malleable and is inevitably influenced by retrospect and the passage of time. Although I asked my interviewees to recount their stories and memories as accurately as possible, there is the unavoidable obstacle of revisionist memory, consciously or subconsciously phrasing the past in a palatable fashion. In my work, this possibility of biased
story telling was compounded by the fact that those who I interviewed were the daughters of the subject of my research.

Although I did not experience any moments during my interviews that suggested dishonesty, I must acknowledge the possibility. It is my firm belief that those that I interviewed attempted to faithfully retell their experiences to the best of their abilities. In a true demonstration of their effort, Cecilia’s daughters – on several occasions – divulged quite personal and sensitive information that previously remained unknown, even to members of our immediate family. That being said, I conducted all of my interviews individually and later cross-examined the transcripts – as many of them contained the same stories – and confirmed any dates mentioned in primary documents.

Thematically, I explore the notion of Frenchness in twentieth century Vietnam. What vestiges of French imperialism remained and what did it mean to be French métis in colonial and post-colonial Vietnam? I also discuss the role of women in Vietnamese society and the societal perception of unwed mothers and children of mixed race. Did the sentiments felt towards these people vary from region to region? Through exploring the written accounts of Vietnamese women and their stories of independence and self-definition I explored the questions: What were Cecilia's opportunities? Why was she never married? Was this her choice or inability? How typical was her experience?

Hue-Tam Ho Tai faced similar questions when tasked with writing the memoir of her communist revolutionary aunt, Bao Luong. Though Luong’s life presented a fascinating yet seemingly conventional narrative for a
memoir – she was a revolutionary and Vietnam’s first political prisoner who was imprisoned for her involvement in a murder trial known as the Barbier Street Affair – her niece posed several questions, which resonated with my project. In her introduction the author rhetorically asks, "How should I present Bao Luong's memoir? As an example of the lives of ordinary Vietnamese in the early twentieth century or as a source of information about some still little-explored episodes or second-rank figures in the history of the Vietnamese Revolution? Should the focus be on gender?"¹

Though Cecilia never made headlines, nor was she embroiled in political intrigue, the story of her life is remarkable in its seeming lack of tension. After reading such autobiographical works as Kim Lefèvre's Mètisse Blanche and Kien Nguyen's The Unwanted: A Memoir of Childhood, one is overwhelmed by the pain, ostracism and shame felt by these children as a result of their mixed heritage and status as illegitimate children: Lefèvre was the daughter of a Vietnamese woman and a French military officer, and Nguyen was the son of a wealthy Vietnamese woman and an American GI. Lefèvre’s very existence as a product of French colonization was so offensive to her maternal, Vietnamese family, that her mother was pressured into surrendering her to a French orphanage at the age of six.²

Nguyen recounts in painful detail the ridicule he and his mother endured, tauntingly referred to as a "half breed."³ Most agonizing of all, Nguyen vividly depicts the physical danger he faced as an Amerasian.

Following the departure of American forces at the end of the Vietnam War, families with Amerasian children were targeted by the Communists; "mother's of Amerasians had their property confiscated by the communist government, were harassed and interrogated by local officials, imprisoned for short periods, and in certain extreme cases, sent to prison."\(^4\) Nguyen was raped and beaten by his mother's Vietnamese partner who sought to punish Nguyen's mother for having relations with an American. Though their traumatic experiences were separated by thirty years, Lefèvre and Nguyen both bore the stigma of their mixed blood "against the background of Vietnamese xenophobia and nationalism. Their looks signaled their heritage and were an unavoidable… reminder of Vietnam's fraught interactions with the West."\(^5\)

Fortunately, Cecilia's daughters did not suffer the cruelty inflicted on Kim Lefèvre and Kien Nguyen, but why not? What made their experience different? The answers to these questions are at the heart of my work – what I endeavor to explore is what made Cecilia seemingly immune to the social stigmas so frequently assigned to women in her situation, and how common or uncommon was her experience?

Through my months of research, I have yet to encounter a story of a woman who bore métis children and was not in some way criticized or ridiculed. But perhaps this lack of evidence should not surprise me, because what I am looking for is in essence, a lack of action, a lack of reprisal. This

\(^4\) Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, "Eurasian/Amerasian Perspectives: Kim Lefèvre’s "Métisse Blanche (White Métisse) and Kien Nguyen’s The Unwanted," Asian Studies Review Vol. 29 (June 2005), 117.

\(^5\) Ibid., 107.
absence of accounts of acceptance makes it almost impossible to calculate the frequency of stories like Cecilia's. It is possible, however, to explore the multitude of factors at play which may have attributed to her and her children's acceptance in their community. Plausible elements include, but are not limited to: the family's geographic location, Cecilia's above-average education, her contributions to the community as an elementary school teacher, Cecilia's ability to provide for her family, and her remarkably nurturing and empathetic character.

In my final chapter, I draw on is the imaginary and intangible nature of South Vietnam. South Vietnam was a notion and locality that existed during the American presence in Vietnam and vanished at the end of the war, only to resurface in Southern California. Today, Southern California has the largest immigrant Vietnamese population in the country. That being said, what is this location's role in Southeast Asian history? Do concepts of cultural and national identity necessarily need to be linked to a tangible place or physical unity? How do we define cultural identity in countries that have large diasporic communities?

Above all else, my work deals with memory, nostalgia, and the place of personal narratives in the field of history. The study of history can be deepened, enlivened and enriched through exploring the life of the "average person," the individual. Used as an historical source, memory should be taken at face value. Of course an individual's memory is vulnerable to influence and manipulation, but the reasons behind the way in which a person remembers and chooses to recount their past are a valuable resource on their own. In the
work that follows, I hope to shed light onto the character of Cecilia and the time and place in which she lived.
CHAPTER I
Qui Nhon and Hue

It is late in the summer of 2012, I am sitting in the air-conditioned bedroom of Andrée and Le Do on Stagg Street in Canoga Park, California: the first home purchased by my family in the United States. The house on Stagg Street has served as my family’s homestead for almost forty years, the scene of Thanksgivings, yearly Tet celebrations, and weekly family dinners.

The house is situated on the corner of a block very typical of middle-class San Fernando Valley – modest, one story, single-family ranch style homes with fenced-in yards of varying levels of up-keep. Andrée and Le Do purchased this house in 1977 for around $75,000. In becoming homeowners, my family felt as though they had finally arrived, as Americans. The house is unremarkable, with a standard, all-American façade and manicured green lawn to match its neighbors. Within, however, the interior housed a world quite different from the surrounding American, nuclear families.

At the time of its purchase in 1977, the modest, four-bedroom, one-bathroom house on Stagg St. housed upwards of fifteen people, with the cast constantly changing as new friends and family arrived from Vietnam and as occupants found jobs and homes of their own. The family room and the garage were utilized as bedrooms, with bunk beds and sheets hung for privacy. Even after jobs were found and each branch of the family purchased homes of their own, Stagg St. remained the communal home, where all were welcome and fed, and it remains this way today. If ever a family member,

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6 Nicholas Do (Phone interview by Jaimie Nguyen, 16 March 2012).
friend, or acquaintance fell on hard times, they would always have a bed to
sleep in on Stagg St. In fact, in the 1990s, Andrée and Le converted their
garage into a small studio apartment to house recently immigrated members
of their church, free of charge.

![Figure 2.1: 1997, photograph of Cecilia with her four daughters and their
spouses at the family home on Stagg St. (from left to right: Paulette’s husband
Thanh Tran, Jacqueline’s husband Thanh Nguyen, Paulette, Denise’s husband
Hong Tran, Denise, Cecilia, Jacqueline, Andrée’s husband Le Do, and
Andrée).](image)

In this house, I am sitting with Andrée – the first daughter of Cecilia –
who is now seventy years old. Her legs are crossed as we sit together on the
queen-sized bed that she and her husband, Le, share. To give me her
undivided attention, she pauses the Korean soap opera – dubbed in
Vietnamese – playing on her big-screen television, a favorite among her and her three sisters. It is late summer in the San Fernando Valley, where the temperature frequently surpasses one hundred degrees. The air-conditioning is on.

As I began the interview, asking Andrée to describe what she knows of her mother's early life in Qui Nhon, Le chimes in, insisting that before I ask about Cecilia's life, I must first understand the importance of her family. According to Le – who in Vietnam was a respected professor of history – Cecilia's family had a tumultuous history in the city of Hue. He explains that a few generations before her birth, her ancestors lead an uprising against the Emperor, ostensibly Emperor Thieu Tri or Tu Duc. As the story goes, the rebellion was put down and the Doan family was run out of Hue, eventually settling in Qui Nhon. Le explained,

Her last name, Doan, D-O-A-N, that’s a famous family in Hue, imperial city. Very good, high, high-rank family Hue, in Central Vietnam. I don’t remember exactly the name, but the emperor tried to make a lot of people build him a big tomb, very famous, very beautiful, in Hue, near Hue city. People suffer, so that’s why the Doan family lead people to get up! A revolution against the emperor.

So that’s why the emperor and the government tried to kill them, assassinate them, the rebels. So the Doan family had to get out of Hue province, everyone who didn’t leave were killed. So that’s why your great-great-grandparents grew up in Qui Nhon seaport, not in Hue. They had to go out of Hue city. This was maybe three generations before Bà Ngoai. She has a good, intellectual family.7

Several generations after this folkloric, failed rebellion took place, Thi Xin Doan – known as Cécile and Americanized to “Cecilia” – was born on January 5, 1917 in the coastal town of Qui Nhon. Her father, Doan Van Hành,

7 Le Do (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 18 August 2012).
and her mother, Nguyen Tih Đaò, were land owning, rural farmers. After Tih Đaò experienced several miscarriages, the Doans had three children: Thi Xin, her brother Van Phung, and a second daughter, Thi Hung, who died of jaundice at the age of eighteen.

Since 1887, Vietnam had been a part of French Indochina. The French implemented many social and economic changes including a plantation economy, – specializing in tobacco, indigo, tea and coffee – the introduction of Roman Catholicism, a Western system of education, and a new Romanized script, known as quoc-ngu. As was the case in most of colonized Southeast Asia, many of the young men who were educated abroad – and who were expected to return and assume powerful positions within the colonial authority – returned, in fact, with their sights set on revolution and national liberation of imperial oppressors. For the Philippines it was José Rizal, and for Vietnam it was figures like Nguyen An Ninh and Phan Van Hum, both educated at the Sorbonne in the 1920s and 1930s. The emergence of a communist elite of young, educated people contrasted with the bourgeois capitalism promoted by the French occupiers.

Though many wealthy Vietnamese men often went to Paris for higher education, an option that was not available to women. Even so, Cecilia’s low birth would have prevented her this luxury. French authorities recorded that by 1930, 40,752 Vietnamese girls were enrolled in public or private French

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8 Since the thirteenth century, the Vietnamese language had been recorded using Chinese characters. Portuguese Christian missionaries introduced Latin script to Vietnam as early as 1527. The use of quoc-ngu increased dramatically in the twentieth century with the rise of literacy, it is now the national system of Vietnamese writing.

educational institutions, a dismally low figure in a country with a population of over twenty million. The vast majority of those educated girls were from a minority of middle and upper class families. A French administrator explained that within these institutions, a Vietnamese girl should learn to be "nimble, clean, kitchen-wise, and proficient in sewing, and should even know how to read and write quoc-ngu… [She should also] take pleasure in bearing lots of children."\textsuperscript{10} Despite these odds, Cecilia attended a French lycée in Qui Nhon where she excelled academically and learned to speak and write French fluently. In roughly 1935, at the age of eighteen, Cecilia earned l’éprouvé, the equivalent to a high school degree.

In the 1920s, the question of women’s role in society had become a social and political focal point. A cultural polarization was emerging within which women were becoming increasingly active and visible. On the one hand, there were the Westernized women, attracted to notions of individualism, consumerism and female empowerment. On the other hand, there were women who sought liberation through the equalizing ideals of nationalism and communism. Though obvious in retrospect, it was not clear in that moment that the question of gender equality and the role of women were being manipulated by both the French colonizers and the grassroots communist movement.\textsuperscript{11} Cecilia doesn’t fall cleanly into either category.

The traditionally, Vietnamese women were expected to adhere to the Confucian ideology of the “three submissions and four virtues”. The three

submissions divided a woman's life into three chapters, within which she was expected to submit to the authority of three men: her father in childhood, her husband in marriage, and her eldest son in her old age.

The four virtues outlined the fundamentals by which a Vietnamese woman should live her life: labor, physical appearance, appropriate speech, and proper behavior. In her pursuits of labor, a woman should not concern herself with scholarly interests. Instead, she should master the arts of cooking, feminine handiwork – such as sewing and embroidery – and should be sufficient in the physical work assigned to her by her father, husband or son, including but not limited to child rearing, farming, and maintaining the family home. Succinctly explained by David G. Marr, regarding physical appearance, a woman should "be attractive to one's husband but not enticing to others."12 In this demand alone, one can appreciate the impossible ideals expected of Vietnamese women. Marr continues, "In speech, one was self-demeaning and rigidly polite rather than assertive or imaginative. And in behavior, one was always honest and loyal to one's superiors."13

13 Ibid., 192.
Cecilia always wore a traditional áo dài, the conventional Vietnamese combination of a silk long tunic over loose-fitting pantaloons. Though versions of the áo dài had been around since the eighteenth century, the garments gained a resurgence of popularity – beginning with bourgeois
women – in the twentieth century. In 1930, the designer Cát Trường, known
as Le Mur by the French, updated the ensemble, using darts to create a more
fitted, streamlined appearance. The revamped áo dài came to signify the new,
modern women. Historically more popular in the South, the more
westernized áo dài was condemned as "decadent" by Northern Communists.
Jacqueline explained that Cecilia,

Always wore those [áo dài] until she died. When she
went out she always wore her Vietnamese tunic, she had
several. Áo dài. At home she would wear the áo ba bà and black
tunic. Going out she would wear the áo dài. And she’d put a
little bit of make up on. I used to sit next to her, in front of the
big armoire, she opened it and she has her cosmetic case, she
put on her powder Coti, I remember Coti, its very popular
foundation, and she put some lipstick and eyebrows.

In 1940, with the fall of France to Germany in WWII, France’s Third
Republic was replaced by the Vichy Regime, a puppet government that
answered to Nazi Germany. With the commencement of the Pacific War in
December 1941, Vietnam became an important asset to Japan, a German ally.
The Japanese sapped Vietnam’s natural resources in order to supply their
campaign in British Burma. The Japanese consumption of Vietnamese
resources lead to the Vietnamese Famine of 1945, during which between
400,000 and two million Vietnamese died of starvation.

Sometime in the years after earning her éprouvé, Cécile met Maurice
Tifaine. Jacqueline, explained,

When she’s done with school, she’s ready to get married
she has Vietnamese people who admire her, want to get to
know her, but she’s not interested. She met my father [Tifaine],

14 Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Yee, France And “Indochina”: Cultural Representations
15 Áo ba bà, the more casual, loose-fitting version of the áo dài.
16 Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
through an introduction from another girlfriend, who had been married to another director of a French company, plantation company... I don’t remember the name but it’s a tobacco plantation, my father was the vice president. Maurice Tifaine. They planted tobacco to make smoking tobacco, I heard my mom say that they didn’t make it but they sold it to companies to make cigarettes, called Melia. M-E-L-I-A. That’s very popular at that time. 17

Though they never married legally, Cecilia and Maurice lived together for several years in what is known as a petite-épouse, a term referring to these unofficial marriages where the Vietnamese wife and métisse children have no legal rights or privileges as French citizen. 18 During this time, Cecilia gave birth to the first of her two daughters with Tifaine, Andrée, born on April 8, 1943. During this period of late colonialism, ambitious or modern-minded Vietnamese women were faced with a conflicting Western message: the French supported education and the emergence of the modern woman, yet "wives" or lovers of Western men were legally viewed as no better than a bourgeois prostitute or common concubine. The social "malaise" of Vietnamese women during the first half of the twentieth century was the unfortunate result of the desire of many Vietnamese women to modernize and expand their social role and the lack of new opportunities. 19

Though it was common for French men to take Vietnamese concubines or wives, it was extremely uncommon – and frowned-upon by the majority of the Vietnamese and French – for these marriages to be made legal. More often than not, these relationships would result in métis children, and the father –

17 Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
who was not legally bound to support the family – would abandon them. The resulting children would only enjoy the rights of French citizenship if the father formally recognized them as his offspring. Those who recognized the vast majority unrecognized children championed a 1928 decree, in which the French government attempted to codify the convoluted process of recognizing a métis child as a French citizen.20

Demonstrating character and commitment to the futures of his children, Maurice Tifaine formally recognized Andrée at the French consulate in Qui Nhon, ensuring her French citizenship. For a brief few years, Cecilia and Maurice lived happily in Qui Nhon, he continued his work managing the tobacco plantation, and Cecilia stayed home with her parents and Andrée, and soon became pregnant with another daughter.

With the 1940 fall of France to Nazi Germany, the position of French colonizers in Vietnam became precarious. In September of 1940 axis Japan invaded French Indochina. Throughout the period of the Japanese Occupation, the Viet Minh – a Marxist-Leninist national liberation group lead by Ho Chi Minh – had emerged as a popular movement against the presence of foreign powers in Vietnam. Fearing Japanese imprisonment, much of the French population went into hiding or fled the region. Tifaine remained with his family as long as he could, but at the insistence of Cecilia who feared for his life, he left Qui Nhon and sought refuge in the mountains. After the war, they planned to reunite in Hue. Andrée explained that,

During Japanese War, they got separated, he [Tifaine] had to go take refuge with the French army somewhere in the

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mountains, that’s why they got separated, then after that, he went to the mountains, and she had to migrate to the South, to the Center, to Hue.\textsuperscript{21}

In early 1945, while pregnant with Jacqueline, Cecilia fled to Hue with Andrée and her parents to live with family. The journey south was treacherous. Andrée continued,

On the road to Hue, they encountered some people who used to work in my father’s plantation, and they saw him in the mountains, very sick, with the malaria, and probably he died from that. So my mom, and her parents, and me, and she was pregnant with your grandma at that time, moved to Hue, where they knew some relatives over there. And before that, your grandma was born in Nha Trang, before we reached Hue, your grandma was born on the way, we were traveling by, how you say, by cart? A wagon, but pulled by cows. And she said that during that migration, they encountered a lot of bad things happening to them, like people tried to cheat her, someone asked to trade a blanket for some money, and then they run away with everything, they stole all the things of hers and her parents. Helpless, they were helpless.\textsuperscript{22}

I never met my father, but people say I look more like him. Handsome, hahaha. Then I don't know what they did with his body, I don't know, if they transported the body back to France or what, I don't know, my mother never said that part to me.\textsuperscript{23}

Traveling by cow-pulled wagon, Cecilia, her parents, two-year-old Andrée and newborn Jacqueline finally reach Hue sometime in April of 1945. In Hue, relatives briefly housed Cecilia and her family and directed her to the French government social services. As the girls were \textit{métisse}, they were eligible for \textit{bourse},\textsuperscript{24} which paid for their school tuition. After settling in, Cecilia borrows some money from family and uses these loans along with some savings from Da Nang to buy a small two-room house.

\textsuperscript{21} Andrée Do (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 18 August 2012).
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Bourse}, financial assistance given to documented children of mixed Vietnamese and French heritage in order to attend private, French schools in Vietnam.
Theirs was a small, single story house, second from the left, in a five-unit of a side-by-side complex. Their unit was situated on a busy street corner on Rue Chaigneau, across the street from a monastery. Realizing that she could use the heavy foot and motor traffic to her advantage, Cecilia opened a small bistro, Cécile Buvette, in her home. Jacqueline described the layout of her childhood home,

There’s a big front yard where she made an extra veranda where she put chairs and table and things like that and a sign that said ‘Cécile Buvette.’ Back home, we do business in the house. So in the front we built a big shelter, a veranda, and then she had four or five tables there. On the veranda itself, made of cement, a couple more tables. Then inside the house, in the big living room, we have a few more tables, two big windows in the front, after the living room we have a bedroom, which is open to the living room, so we put a curtain up to divide the rooms.25

Their house was a typical Vietnamese dwelling during the first half of the twentieth century. It was linearly structured with one room following the next.

The bedroom is the same size, with two big beds, Andrée and grandma sleep in one and me and my mom in one. Grandpa sleeps on a couch. After the bedroom there is an open square, a yard, and mom built another shelter there, outside, there were just two walls to separate from the other peoples houses, so my mom built a shelter with a roof where we have a bamboo bed and cabinets, a water tank, then you go in the kitchen, with a big backdoor and a window, very old style, and a bed where the maid can sleep, and a stove. Sometimes I’d sleep on the bamboo bed when it’s too hot inside. I used to climb and walk on the wall with my knife and pull all our neighbors’ bamboo leaves – the baby ones with the stick coming out – I cut them down and we make noodles out of it. Sometimes we kids would make pretend-tobacco with it, too. Ahh, we had fun.26

My mom and grandma cook all day in the kitchen and bring the food out to the bistro. Behind the kitchen was our

26 Ibid.
garden; my grandfather took care of the garden. And finally, behind the yard, we have to go out the back door and the restroom is right there; each house has its own toilet. We go up a few steps and open the door and there is a hole here where you poo, and a guy comes once a week or so and comes get the bucket.\textsuperscript{27}

Figure 2.4: 1970, photograph titled "Vietnamese House," taken by Jesse Overbaugh. Unfortunately, my family has no photographs of their home in Hue. After looking through photographs of Vietnamese homes from the 1940s, Jacqueline and Andrée agreed that this photograph most closely resembled how they remembered their home.

Andrée explained that her mother built her life and supported her family on the revenue she made from her bistro. Cecilia "had a lot of customers, mostly French soldiers, French GIs, civilian people passing by, and the \textit{convois},\textsuperscript{28} the truck that bring supplies and that," Andrée described.

\textsuperscript{27} Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Convois}, convoy, French military vehicles used to transport goods and supplies.
that the customers, "stopped by, and had lunch and things like this. So she's making money, supporting the family on her own."²⁹

There was a garrison down the road and a lot of Vietnamese and French soldiers in trucks would pass the Buvette. At her establishment, Jacqueline explained that her mother,

Always served traditional Vietnamese and French dishes, mixed together, like what we make today, Eurasien cuisine. My grandpa died while we were there, in the beginning, when I was six or seven years old. When he was alive, he helped too. I still remember. I have pictures in my mind of when he came back from the market, walking with the basket and his black Vietnamese tunic and white pants, and sandals and carries a couple bags of groceries.³⁰

Last time we went to Hue, remember you guys stayed in the car and I run back and forth, and found the cyclo guy³¹ that I remember? All this was torn down. The only thing that was still there was a tree I used to climb, this is my tree, the gioi doi³², the fruit is red, crunchy, juicy, like an apple but smaller.³³

Cecilia meets a French military officer named Tribon – no surviving witness of this period could remember his first name – with whom she has her third daughter, Denise. Upon seeing his newborn daughter, Tribon claims that she looks too Asian to possibly be his child, and he abandons the family.

Andrée explained,

But maybe should I say, before that, that she had three husbands, not two! Denise has another father. Tribon. I forgot his first name; I don’t know much because he was wasn’t there for long. He, he, he, he run away, after having Denise.

Years later, my mother told me that he doubted that Denise was his daughter, because he said that she looked more

²⁹ Andrée Do (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 18 August 2012).
³⁰ Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
³¹ Refers to the driver of a cyclo, a three-wheeled pedaled or motorized take.
³² Gioi doi, a tree native to Southeast Asia, known in the United States as the rose apple tree or Syzygium jambos.
³³ Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
like grandma than him, the French side. Too Asian. So he run away.\textsuperscript{34}

Cecilia's relationship with Tribon was, unfortunately, an experience all too common in late colonial Vietnam. French men would conceive children with Vietnamese women, and because they had no legal obligations to the family, felt no remorse in abandoning them. Before the 1928 French decree, which streamlined the process of documenting métis children, many mothers were pressured by their families and the French authorities to turn their children over to French orphanages. These orphanages were the French solution to the métis problem. Fortunately for her daughters, Cecilia does not seem to have been pressured in this way.

So after that, after a few years, my mother met Paulette's father, who is Robert Leclerc, he was in the French military. He is a good one, they have a new baby, Paulette, and he took very good care of us too. He considered the three of us like his own daughters, so they were happy.\textsuperscript{35}

She was happy for that short period of time. He’s in the army, he’s a, what they call, the sergeant. He’s a very good man, taking very good care of my grandparents and the four of us girls. My mother's whole family was Buddhist but she decided to get baptized with all of us in 1953. This is when got the name 'Cécile,' even though she already used that. We were all baptized at the same time.\textsuperscript{36}

This was a period of relative stability and prosperity for Cecilia and her daughters. The family's income was supplemented by that of Leclerc, and they were living a comfortable life.

Every Christmas we have nice toys, expensive toys, real toys you know I have real scooters, real dolls, with bassinettes to push the dolls around, big dolls with eyes that open and closed, very fancy. So we had a good life in Hue.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{34} Andrée Do (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 18 August 2012).
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
And then comes the year '54, '55, when the French government and all the French have to get out of Vietnam, because of the end of the war. He wanted her, to take her and the four of us to France with him! But, Bà Ngoai refused to go, because she still have her parents to take care of, and she did not want to abandon her parents behind. She couldn’t take them. The French government wouldn’t let them, and besides, they wouldn’t want to leave Vietnam, their country, old people...  

Despite Leclerc's pleads for Cecilia to reconsider, she was determined to stay in Vietnam and care for her aging mother. Leclerc was worried for the safety of his family if he left them behind. He had never been married and wanted to stay together, he promised a better life for them in France, but Cecilia was unwavering. Cecilia knew all too well the feeling of being abandoned, and she refused to put her family through that distress. As always, Cecilia put the well-being of her family and loved ones before her own happiness.

My mother always felt responsibility, responsibility for everybody. When her sister-in-law was pregnant, she stayed in my mother's house, my mother took care of her; she took care of the whole family. Her younger brother, Van Phung, he was like a playboy, you know, he's traveling, doing whatever he does. She always took care of him; he's her only sibling. Everywhere he goes he has a woman, and kids everywhere. He's a very good soccer player, very famous, a goalie. And every time he comes home, he gets money from Bà Ngoai, either from asking or from stealing. (Laughing) Yeah, he's the bad child in the family, I remember my grandparents having a hard time with him. But my mom always supports him, helps him. He didn't make much money from soccer, not enough for him to fool around! He’s also a very artistic person; he was in like a comedy, singer group.  

My mom felt so much responsibility. He [Leclerc] had to leave at that time; he went back to France. Paulette was only like a year old. He loved her a lot, he had never been married before, he had an old mother back home, and he insisted that we come but my mother never wants to go. Even the French consulate

38 Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
39 Ibid.
advised my mom to send us to France for our education like other families did – like other single mothers with orphan, Eurasien, or Métis children – but she wants to keep her kids. And we don’t want to leave her either. We cried so much when he left.40

With the departure of Leclerc and the French military presence, French Lycées began to close across Vietnam, including the French school in Hue which Andrée and Jacqueline attended. The education of her daughters was always Cecilia’s highest priority. She heard that a French school in Da Nang was remaining open and decided to relocate the family. Cecilia sold her bistro and, with her family and few belongings, she headed south.

40 Ibid.
CHAPTER II
Da Nang

Once we were in Da Nang, that's another story. When we moved to Da Nang it was summer in '54. I was nine, almost nine and a half. We don't have much; we just put everything in the truck, in a big truck.41

At the end of WWII, France regained control of its Southeast Asian colonies. The May 7, 1954 defeat of the French at the hands of the Viet Minh at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu brought the First Indochina War to a climactic close. Leclerc was expelled to France along with all other French military personnel and many French schools were closed across the country.42

After Leclerc's departure, Cecilia sold her bistro and moved her family further south to Da Nang so that her daughters can continue their French educations at one of the remaining Lycées, Sacré-Cœur. At Sacré-Cœur, Cecilia and her daughters were taken under the wing of Mère Ange, who gave Cecilia a position teaching grade school. In a 2012 interview, Andrée said of her mother, "At that time when she was living, people considered her as an emancipated woman. Because she went to French school, she was educated, studied English also, and married a French foreigner, un étranger."43

When she decided to move to Da Nang, Cecilia was starting from scratch, she had no job prospects in Da Nang and no relatives, she only had a few acquaintances. What drove her to uproot her life was the continuation of her daughters' educations. Jacqueline explains,

41 Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
42 Andrée Do (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 18 August 2012).
43 Ibid.
My mom had a girlfriend who lived in Da Nang; she was married to a French guy. They let us have a little room in their big house. So all of us moved into one room. My mom's friend moved to France with her husband and their kids; she didn’t have a mother to take care of like my mom. She rented out the house piece by piece and we stayed in our room. We only lived there for a year or so.\textsuperscript{44}

Once we got to Da Nang, my mother registered us at the French consulate and enrolled us at \textit{Lycée Sacré-Cœur}. My mom planned to put us as boarding students but we cried so much, people who worked there said that they’ve never seen kids cry so much. We were so attached to her. Every time my mom came to visit we stood there, guarding the door – the Mother Superior’s door – to make sure our mom didn’t escape from us! And sometimes at lunchtime Andrée and I would escape the school and run home; it was almost two miles away!\textsuperscript{45}

Through all of my separate interviews with Cecilia’s daughters, it was made abundantly clear that Cecilia fostered an intimate, trusting relationship with each of her daughters.

My mom had intentions to leave Da Nang with my grandmother and Paulette to go to Cap Saint Jacques,\textsuperscript{46} in the South, because French people were still there and she could open another buvette restaurant. That was her plan. At that time she still had some gold, a little bit of money.\textsuperscript{47}

But we cried so much that the mother superior, Mère Ange, offered our mother a teaching position so she could stay close to us. Mère Ange saw that my mom had a degree and was a well-educated person. She talked to her, she called her in to her office and said, "You have to come live here with us, for your daughters. Otherwise, its not good for them to run like that." So they found a place for us to stay, a small house with one room.\textsuperscript{48} My mom was teaching elementary school, first, second and third grade. Mère Ange gave us so much – she \textit{héberge}\textsuperscript{49} us – without her generosity I don’t know what would have happened to us.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{44} Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Cap Saint Jacques, today known as Vũng Tàu, is a Southern Vietnamese city located in the Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu Province.
\textsuperscript{47} Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
\textsuperscript{48} Andrée Do (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 18 August 2012).
\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Héberger}, from the French verb \textit{héberger} meaning to accommodate or to offer room and board.
\textsuperscript{50} Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
Cecilia recognized that the best thing for her family was for them to all remained together.

So we stayed there, our mom only had a small room but we would always leave school to stay with her. Paulette was still a baby so she stayed at home. But the three of us were always sneaking home, eating food… My grandmother would always make just have a small pot of rice, but we never could finish that! I don’t know how we ate so little! And grandmother cooked outside in the plain air; there’s no kitchen, she put a table outside and a stove, she cooked with charcoal and she made everything. During the summer we lived together, all of us in that small room! I don’t know how we all fit in there.\(^\text{51}\)

In their close but cozy quarters, the family of six settled into a new and prosperous life. While Cecilia taught during the day and the three older girls were at school, Cecilia’s mother would cook and clean and look after baby Paulette.

In Da Nang she made new friends and was a very hard-working woman. I remember at that time in Vietnam we didn’t have réfrigérateurs yet so she went to the market three times a day, morning, for lunch and for dinner. Always good and fresh food. Before she started school, at recess time – because it’s not that far! Only two blocks away – at the break time she runs to the market get something, run home and cook for us! (laughing)\(^\text{52}\)

When she was a teacher she was so respected by her colleagues. She had very nice writing, very beautiful handwriting, so some of her colleagues who couldn’t write as well as her would ask her to help writing on the board, on the black board for them. They wanted the kids to have good handwriting, to write well, and grandma has very beautiful writing.\(^\text{53}\)

Somehow – perhaps through her education and her loving, companionate nature – Cecilia did not seem to endure the ridicule and shame inflicted on so many Vietnamese women who had relations with French men,

\(^{51}\) Ibid.
\(^{52}\) Andrée Do (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 18 August 2012).
\(^{53}\) Ibid.
or at least, her daughters did not witness any prejudice. In fact, far from being ostracized, Cecilia seemed to become a respected member of the community wherever she went. In Hue, her bistro served as a popular local hub, and in Da Nang her role as an elementary school teacher put her in the position of a role model and moral arbiter.

![Figure 3.1: 1955, photograph of Cecilia at age thirty-eight, reclining in a loose-fitting áo ba bà, reading a newspaper.](image)

In her autobiographical work, *Métisse Blanche*, Kim Lefèvre recounts her life growing up in the town of Son Tay in North Vietnam. She was the daughter of a Vietnamese woman and a French military officer who abandoned her mother while she was pregnant. Lefèvre recounts the shame
and injustice of her childhood. In a rigidly patriarchal society, fatherless children were left without an identity, and this was far worse for those of mixed race. These children had to deal not only with the trauma of paternal abandonment and lack of identity, but also the cruelty and ostracism suffered by their mothers at the hands of Vietnamese society. Lefèvre expressed blame she felt, placed on her by her family and community from a young age; she was a physical reminder oppression of the French colonizer.

Growing up in the North, Lefèvre recalls the traumatizing experience in 1946 of being hidden by her mother to protect her from the Vietminh who were searching to punish those with French blood. This racial witch-hunt against Vietnamese with Western blood was repeated over three decades later at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, this time focusing on those children with American fathers. Lefèvre shares her heart-breaking memory of hearing her uncle tell her mother, "Believe me, you're nursing a viper at your bosom, her French blood will take over despite your good deeds. She... will betray you." Even those of her relatives sympathetic enough to remain in contact with her mother maintained their deep mistrust and hatred for her métis child.

Lucking, Cecilia's daughters did not incur the hatred felt by Kim Lefèvre. Perhaps it was the difference in locality that resulted in such different experiences: Lefèvre was raised in the Communist North, whereas Cecilia's family resided in the South. Entire books have been written on the historic differences between the North and South. The differences most

55 Ibid., 33.
relevant to this narrative can be summarized as follows: the North has historically been linked to Nationalism, Communism, Confucianism and social conservatism, whereas the South has been more adaptive to foreigners, accepting of Catholicism, favors democracy and capitalism, and has been more receptive to Westernization. Stereotypically, Northerners are viewed as being more concerned with status and appearances and are wearier of change, whereas Southerners are free with their money and embrace social dynamism.\(^\text{56}\)

Throughout numerous interviews with each of Cecilia’s daughters, none of the women were able to recall an instance where they felt demonized or discriminated against due to their race, or the unmarried status of their mother. On the contrary, the family seemed to be a beloved fixture of their neighborhood and school. I was fortunate enough to experience this love and admiration first-hand.

In the summer of 2009, I, along with twelve members of my family, went on a month-long trip to Vietnam. For most – including all four sisters – it was the first visit since they left the country in 1974. We arrived in Hanoi and meanderingly drove down the serpentine coastline to eventually depart from Saigon. Though the vast majority of my relatives and my family’s friends had since emigrated from Vietnam, there still remained some acquaintances and neighbors in Da Nang. Though I cannot speak Vietnamese fluently, I understood enough from these reunions to comprehend how beloved Cecilia and her daughters were within their community. In particular I remember meeting my mother’s nanny who had worked at my

\(^{56}\) Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
grandmother and grandfather’s home for over ten years. Before meeting her I was prepared for the outpouring of emotions – my grandmother had repeated to me time and again how it was her deepest regret that she was unable to bring her to the United States. After being seen as a tourist by almost every Vietnamese person I encountered, it was moving that she acknowledged me as someone who somehow belonged, "you have Chou-chou's light hair," she said to me, referring to my mother, whom she helped care for until the age of two.

Nearly everyone remembered the four sisters as con dep pháp "beautiful French girls," conveying love and endearment, far from the contempt shown towards Lefèvre in her childhood. Perhaps this was because they were from the South, where Westernization and Catholicism were more accepted. Or perhaps it was because of Cecilia’s magnetic, nurturing character; without fail, everyone with whom I’ve spoke who knew her mentions her maternal and compassionate disposition. She was not ostentatious, but she was enigmatic. Somehow, Cecilia and her daughter’s experience defied the norm. Rather than ostracized, she was embraced.

Andrée, always the most studious of the sisters, excelled academically and wanted to follow in her mother’s footsteps and become a teacher. She described her academic conviction,

So we grew up there, in that school, under the surveillance of the nuns. I graduated from high school, and then I went to Hue to study. I have a higher education because of the scholarship, the miracle, and I was more focused, I enjoyed school more than my sisters, I didn't want to get married right away.57

57 Andrée Do (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 18 August 2012).
Revealing a similar mindset to that of her mother after completing her éprouvé, Andrée chose to postpone marriage until after completing her lycée education.

I was at the University of Hue in ’63 and ’64, and then the nuns from Sacré-Cœur somehow found a scholarship for me to study in Paris. I don’t know how, but they found it. They loved; they had so much love for us. I went there in ’65 and I stayed until the end of ’70, the last two years I worked as a secretary at the Ministère des Étrangères, and I studied at the Institut Catholique de Paris and at La Sorbonne. I remember, I remember when I was twenty-five, they had a special celebration in France for all the girls who are not married by the age of twenty-five, it’s called Fête de Stainte-Catherine. I don’t know the reason behind the tradition, but they celebrate that like a, not a bachelorette party exactly, but something like that, every year.58

Figure 3.2: c. 1968, photograph of Andrée in Paris, enjoying the festivities of the Fête de la Sainte-Catherine holiday.

She (Cécile) was mostly close with me, she always followed up very closely with me, every time I was doing my homework, studying late, she stayed up late with me and asked

58 Ibid.
me about what I studied and she'd make me recite my lesson to her so she can know if I know it well, she helped me a lot.\footnote{Ibid.}

Growing up in Qui Nhon, Cecilia, along with the majority of Vietnamese, was raised in the Buddhist religion. It is unclear when she decided to begin observing Catholic practices, but it is likely that the process of her conversion began while she attended lycée. Cecilia placed a high premium on \textit{Frenchness}: she had children with French men and went to great lengths to have her daughters educated at Lycées. What were Cecilia's choices and limitations? What does her desire to raise her daughters as "French" say about the social and cultural attitudes and ideals of her time and place?

In 1954, French Indochina was dissolved under the Geneva Accords, which separated the North and South at the 17th parallel. This dramatic shift in authority caused panic among many non-communist northerners. During a mandated 300-day period of free movement almost a million northerners, mainly Catholic, moved south, fearing persecution by the communists. Thousands of families fled south only to realize that they could not escape the violence. In the late 1950s, the Vietcong began a guerrilla campaign in order to overthrow Diem's government in the South, which the Vietcong saw as a masked colonial regime. "Worried about growing communist movements in Asia, the United States shifted from supporting the Viet Minh during World War II to opposing all left-wing nationalist movements in Southeast Asia."\footnote{Craig A. Lockard, Southeast Asia in World History (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 153.}

At this time, Cecilia was living in Da Nang, only 208 km from the Vietnamese Demilitarized Zone. Between 1962 and 1965, Cecilia's eldest
daughter, Andrée, received a scholarship to study at the Sorbonne in Paris.

The 1966 marriage of my grandmother, Jacqueline Tifaine to my grandfather, Thanh Nguyen, marked the first of Cecilia’s daughters to permanently leave the house.

Andrée,

We grew up in that school but after your grandma got married to your grandpa, they moved away, to their own house. When I was in France they all still lived at the school until your grandma was married. And Bà Ngoai, Denise and Paulette moved in with them, I was in France at the time. The building of Sacré-Cœur is still there, but the building we used to live in was destroyed after the war, I think they built an apartment building there. You visited that area, the area we lived, and where they lived at your grandmas house, by the beach. We went to the beach all the time, when it was hot, or in the evening, we just walk over from home.

When I was in Paris we wrote to each other all the time. I didn’t keep the letters; it’s all lost. We didn’t bring much with us when we came here [to the U.S.].

In 1963, Buddhist frustration with Diem’s Catholic regime in the South erupted into mass demonstrations. The demonstrations were catalyzed by Quang Duc, a Buddhist monk who performed a public act of self-immolation on a street in Saigon. Diem, unwilling to compromise, ordered the Xa Loi Pagoda raids, which killed hundreds of civilians and monks Diem’s blatant acts of violence against his own people lead the US to reverse its support of Diem, who was assassinated later that year. Plagued by incompetent politicians attempting to fill the power vacuum, South Vietnam was left vulnerable to the communist North. Continuing power struggles tore families apart along political lines.

61 Andrée Do (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 18 August 2012).
The United States began increasing its support of the democratic South and in 1965 the US sent ground forces. Yet again, a Western power was embroiling itself in Vietnam. This moment marked an important shift in Vietnamese culture, the new American presence. Despite an arranged cease-fire in observation of Lunar New Year, communist forces attacked major targets in South Vietnam during the 1968 Tet Offensive. This blatant disregard for the laws of war turned US public opinion even further against American involvement.

With president Nixon’s 1969-1972 policy of "Vietnamization," the US began to build up the South Vietnamese Army, in order to prepare them for an American departure. With growing opposition to the war at home and

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disapproval abroad, the US began to withdraw its troops in 1973. For many Vietnamese, particularly in the South, the withdrawal of American troops meant the abandonment of their cause and the end of anti-communist hope. Many families were torn apart as people frantically tried to flee the country.
CHAPTER III
Escape from Vietnam

After completing lycée, the three eldest daughters – Andrée, Jacqueline, and Denise – put their mastery of the English, French and Vietnamese languages to use. While studying at the Sorbonne on a scholarship from 1965 – 1970, Andrée worked at the Ministère des Étrangères. When she returned to Da Nang in 1970, she again worked for the French government as an institutrice at the Lycée Nguyen Hiên – which Andrée noted was the old Lycée Blaise Pascale – instructing school children in the French language. Denise worked as a secretary for the US Army in Da Nang, where she met a German journalist. The two married and moved to Germany together in 1973. Jacqueline worked as a secretary and a switchboard operator at the American consulate in Da Nang.

Figure 4.1: 1972, photograph of Denise working as a secretary and translator for the US Army in Da Nang.
In an hours long interview, Jacqueline recounted in vivid detail the weeks and days leading up to the family’s final departure from Vietnam. During this time, Jacqueline worked as a secretary and switchboard operator at the American consulate in Da Nang. She began her story:

It was early in 1973, there’s a lot of commotion in the city. People walk around and you don’t know who is Viet Cong and who is a normal citizen; there were infiltrated people. But I still go to work everyday. I go to work with my basket only, but at home we prepared suitcases and everything.

Two weeks earlier I asked my boss to give me three tickets for my mom and Lily and Jojo to go to Saigon first, because there was so much confusion in Da Nang. They stayed at a cousin’s house in Saigon. So I only have Chou-chou, Grandpa, Andrée, Le and Bambi.64

Through her work at the consulate, Jacqueline was privy to the developments of the war, and by the fall of 1974, she recognized that the Viet Cong seemed to have gained the upper hand. She had the foresight to realize that the family would soon have to leave Da Nang and move south. Not wanting to leave her post, she sent her two eldest children – Lily and Jojo – and Cecilia to stay with relatives in Saigon.

Jacqueline continues:

One afternoon, my boss comes to the office, rushes in, she gives me four tickets, and she says, "Go take your family! We move to Saigon! We are in a hurry!" Oh, I was so scared… They said, "just take the tickets, go by yourself to the airport." I hired somebody, a cyclo guy at the door, and told him to go tell my husband to come with the suitcases. We already had them packed at home, for weeks.

Before I left my post I called the big boss and said, "Who should I leave the position to now? Someone has to operate the switchboard when outsiders call in and the phone keeps ringing, ringing! So who do I leave to do that now?" Even in that moment, I remembered I have my responsibilities to call

64 Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 22 October 2012).
the big boss – the one that hired me at the consulate – and I remember he told me, I remember all this time, he said, "Just leave it there for the Filipinos." Because the Filipinos are foreigners too, they employ a lot of Filipinos. So he told me, 'Just leave the office for the Filipinos, they will take over. You just go to the airport with your family."65

Despite her boss' instruction to go to the airport on her own, Jacqueline knew that in all of the confusion and chaos she would be unlikely to find her family. She waited for them to meet her at the consulate.

So my husband arrived at my work – at the consulate – with Chou-chou and the suitcases on one motorcycle, and his brother, Anh, brother's wife and four kids – so six of them – on two other motorcycles. Together we're nine people. So we were all there, we hire the motorcycles again to take us to the airport. I just have a small suitcase; I still have that Samsonite in the closet here. Thanh has some small bag.66

As they wove through Da Nang traffic on their heavily laden hired motorcycles, Jacqueline could see that the news of the approaching Viet Cong forces had already began to spread. The traffic was heavier and more frantic than usual, with the increased activity and constant stream of convois whipping up a constant cloud of dirt and smoke. Jacqueline recalls the family's journey to the airport:

And my luck starts right there. By the time we get on the motorcycles suddenly there is a guy driving a Jeep down the same small street. The jeep is open on both sides so he pops his head out and he recognizes my husband and he says, "Thày! Teacher! Where are you going?" And we said, "We go to the airport now!" And he said, "Why don't you get in, I'll take you there!" So instead of the motorcycles, we were all able to get into his Jeep and drive over to the airport, and he dropped us at the gate.

At that time, the military, the Vietnamese military, air force, who guard the gate of the airport, they saw all of us coming in with our suitcases, all of us employees of the Americans, and they say, "Oh! They leaving! They leaving us!

65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
They leaving the country!" Because there are already people talking about how we lost the country. So they leave their posts, they go home and take care of their families. All the Vietnamese military run home.\textsuperscript{67}

At this point in the day, the city was in a state of panic, especially in and around the airport. The Vietnamese people were thrown into a terrified frenzy when they realized that the American army was leaving Da Nang. As the Vietnamese airport guards had left their posts, masses of people started pouring in, desperate to get on a plane heading south.

So we just get into the airport, I went straight into the area where we’re supposed to meet, the air terminal for the air force. So we meet there, and once I arrive there I see everybody from my work, standing around, talking. And then I saw a line that goes into the warehouse and I knew there’s something going on in there, so I told my family, ”Just get into line.” I saw my boss, and she went home to get more stuff! So we were the only ones that got right into line.

The lines moving, and by the time we’re first in line they stop. They say they have enough people in there already. I could see through the warehouse that there’s airplanes on the other side so I knew we were in the right line. But it’s my luck again, I don’t know why but the guy that stands there, guarding the gate, who is an American – they’re all American now, the Vietnamese employees are all gone now – somehow, I remember the American guard saw my face, maybe he recognizes me from working at the Embassy. So when he saw my face he pulled me in and said, ”Okay, let’s go in!” So me and my family get in! And when I’m inside I see a lot of people around, Americans too. So we all sit on the floor. And those girls that I worked with that are talking are still outside, they get left behind, some of them didn’t get to the US until twelve, fifteen years later.\textsuperscript{68}

Jacqueline followed her instincts, staying focused on getting her family out of the city. After years of working with the Americans, she knew the importance of always having the correct paperwork.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
And then I realize that I only have four tickets, and we are nine people! And I knew everything has to be in order for the American people, you have to have proof! So somehow I walk around and I see the Alpha Hue – what we call the American in charge of Hue. I tell him that Mr. Buckley – which is his friend and my boss – gave me tickets, I said, "I have nine people, including 5 kids, and Mr. Buckley only gave me four tickets so I don't know what to do now."

So he told me, "Just go. There are a lot of planes going from now on to take you guys to Saigon. So don't worry, just go to the airport." He just pull out a piece of paper, a ticket or something, from his pocket and said, "Here, fill out the other people's names."

This is my third luck: the Jeep, getting into the warehouse, and now this ticket.69

In recounting this story, Jacqueline harped on what she believes to be her luck. Though admittedly, elements of my family’s journey to escape were fortuitous, the driving force was Jacqueline. In my opinion, her "luck" truly refers to her tenacity.

So I go back to my group and carefully write down everybody's names. And later, by 9:30 in the nighttime, they say, "Okay, get ready, we go to the airplane. We ready to board." So all of the people in the warehouse go out the other door. There was an airplane parked there. Everyone in the warehouse is rushing out so I just pull my family to stick together and follow the long line out. I heard my husband's brother, Anh, mumbling, "Why we always rush, rush, rush?" And I say, "Of course, we have to be together and get to the front! Rush, rush, rush!"

We got lucky and we board the plane, see? That's luck. We board the plane, and once the plane lands in the capital, we all, "whew!" We all sigh. And then we stay in the air terminal, waiting for a bus to take us out.

Then I heard the radio call in, people screaming, yelling, "Come and send airplanes! Come and save us!" But from the time my plane took off, commotion came in at the airport in Da Nang. You know those GIs, those Vietnamese GIs who left their post? Now civilian people are rushing into the airport, they try to find a way to go! Everybody is running around so the planes don't want to land.70

69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
The plane my family boarded was one of the few that could land that day, as the swarms of people attempting to flea Da Nang made landing nearly impossible.

People were screaming on the radio and oh, I was so scared. I checked my family all the time and counted, okay, everyone’s there. So many people around us at the airport in Da Nang, people we know, were separated from their families. People were walking around talking, casual, but me, I rush. I keep us all together. And so we get on the plane. My co-worker was with her son in line with us and her husband just walk around talking to people, and he get left behind! Just like that!

So when we board the plane, we hurry, right? I always rush, rush; that’s why we board the plane, they cut the tail. No more civilians. No one else. Because there’s Americans still and they need room for Americans. But they said, "Next one! You’ll get on the next plane!" But my plane was the first and the last one that landed. No other plane dared land after that; too much commotion. Some people hang on the airplanes and they just drop, they think they can hang on the airplane, but they drop.71

This horrifying image of civilians falling to their deaths – driven by fear and desperation to escape by any means necessary – has been immortalized in wartime photography.

After this brief yet traumatic airplane voyage, my family arrived in Saigon.

So we were lucky, we got to Saigon, stayed at my cousin’s house, we reunite with my mom and Lily and Jojo. Andrée, Le and Bambi are still behind in Da Nang; Rée has connections with the French so she’s trying to go to Paris. But Le, he’s a civilian, he’s not French, but still he stayed behind, didn’t want to leave his family. And in the end, he can’t go to France, only Rée and Bambi. So, – and this is another story here – in the end he comes to Saigon on a truck, hanging on to the side of the truck full of people all the way from Da Nang to Saigon, on the highway, thousands of people were killed like that. Rée and Bambi went to the airport back in Da Nang – they had to sneak the French people out of the country – and they

71 Ibid.
went to France. Le was lucky; he got to Saigon only a few days after us. Maybe he’s meant to leave; he’s meant to be alive. So he meets us in the capital a few days later.\textsuperscript{72}

Forced to separate from his wife and son, Le miraculously made the journey from Da Nang to Saigon. Restless after days of waiting at her cousin’s house, Jacqueline was eager to occupy her mind with something other than her constant worrying.

A few days after we arrive I get a phone call from the American consulate in Saigon, a Vietnamese guy, who asks me, "Do you want to volunteer work? For no money. Come to the embassy and help people register from other cities. "I volunteer right away! I say, "Yeah yeah yeah!" You know, I love to work, to be busy. They reached me because in Da Nang, on the last day, I gave the embassy my contact information for Saigon, and in Saigon we have to register where we are staying. So I went to work everyday. I am one of the first volunteers. At first people laugh at me for working for no money. But later on people start working because they know that maybe if they work they will take them to America! And people hear that I work to register people so they think that I can help them go to America. But I keep explaining, I'm very frank, I just say, "No, I just register people because we have to have records and know how many people from central and north come down to the capital, to the south." But they don't believe me, everyone comes to me saying, "Please can you add this person on my list? Because she's my aunt, she's my niece" but I keep explaining that, "No, my job is just to register, it's not to add names for a trip to America." But I add the names to please them.\textsuperscript{73}

Although Jacqueline was not in a position to help anyone leave the country, she knew the importance of staying hopeful and boosting morale. During this brief period, she felt that she was the only person in her family who grasped the severity of the situation, and who questioned – if worse came to worse – whether they would be able to leave the country.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.

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Then the day that we have so much commotion, the lady at the consulate, the chauffer, comes to pick me up at home to go to work. Because now, there is a curfew. Before the gate at the consulate was open, but now because of the curfew the gate is closed. Nobody can enter. But somehow this chauffer the chauffer with the big car comes to pick me up for work. We go through the gates and there's this guy, his name is Lannigan, I think he is CIA or something like this. He speaks Northern Vietnamese, the first time I speak with him on the phone I thought he was a Vietnamese person who spoke English really well. He spoke to me on the phone with a Northern Vietnamese accent then he switch to English with no accent and I admired him so much! Then later I realized he was American.

So, there were a few days like this at work where the chauffer lady would pick me up and drive me then we just sit at work and don't have much to do. We just sit there with so much commotion outside.

Rée and Le had a Jeep in Da Nang but when the commotion started someone too the Jeep down to Saigon, so luckily we had a Jeep in Saigon for the commotion. So I told them to just get ready, sit outside the embassy in case we have to leave we can all go. It was in early April. So when I was at work in the consulate, the last few days, Le and Rée – she doesn't go, she stays at home because she doesn't go, she follows the French again with Bambi, so she stays at home at the house with Bambi and the maid. And before we left Tuan's mother asked my mom to take care of Tuan to go, she gives my mom two pieces of gold or something but my mom doesn't take it, she says, "if I can take him I'll take him, if can't get in he can't get in and he'll have to stay out. So just tag along." 74

Cecilia took guardianship of Tuan, aged seven, and Minh, aged six.

Both boys were nephews of Le and the oldest sons in their families. Across Vietnam, people were realized that the country would fall to the communists, and begged retreating US military personnel to take their children to America. Some of the most powerful photographs taken during this chaos are of mothers, holding their children up towards ascending airplanes, in the hopes that they could have a better life in the United States.

74 Ibid.
So Le, Tuan, Bà Ngoai, Paulette was not my immediate family, right? Than, me, and my three kids, that’s my immediate family, we’re five. So together we’re nine, again. So everyone sits outside the consulate in the car when I go to work.

And one day I look outside the door at the consulate and I see people, American people, a lot of them coming into the building. So I thought it was a meeting or something. And suddenly I see one of the American guys who worked in Đà Nẵng, and he was the boss of one of my girlfriends at work, and I saw he motioned to her and she picked up her bag and walked out the door. And I sat there and I thought, "Oh my god, she’s picked to leave." So she left and she didn’t come back. Then suddenly, this Lannigan guy who speaks Vietnamese so well he stands at the door and now he aims at me, he calls me out, and inside myself I think, "Oh my god I’m so lucky."

I’m so nervous, I walk out the door, we stand at the corner and he asks me, "How many people are in your family?" I knew right away that we were picked. So told him sixteen people. And he says in Vietnamese, "Why so many? That’s too many, there’s only your immediate family." And so okay, I go down to nine people, so he told me, "Okay, take your family, go to this address, knock the door, say the code and go in." Ah, I was so nervous. So he gave me a pen and I wrote the address and code on the palm of my hand.\footnote{Ibid.}

With this vital information literally in hand, Jacqueline hastily set out to find her family. For the past week, the family had their bags packed and in the truck. While Jacqueline was at work, the entire family would sit in the truck outside the consulate, waiting for the possibility of departure, which they knew could come at any moment.

So I rush out to the car where Le and everybody were waiting. They were waiting there all day; I don’t know where they go pee and things like this. So we go to the address and I remember the big, iron gate. We buzz, then come in, and I see two three big bus there already. In Sài Gòn there’s lots of rich people with these big villas so there were big busses parked on the front yard of this big house.

So I went in there, waiting to get on the bus to go to the airport. Le has a bag and a backpack, daddy has a military backpack, I only have a suitcase and each of the kids has a bag. And each one of them wore a dog tag I had made for them, in
case they got lost, with Denise’s address in Germany. So, before we board the bus, there is a rumor running around saying that when you go to the airport the Vietnamese police will stop the American buses to see where you are going and if the know you’re trying to escape, they’ll put the men in jail. And I was so scared and so naïve, I go over to a soldier and ask him if this is true, and he says, “I think so, I’m not sure,” something like that but he says something that makes me think the rumor is true and I get scared so quick, so I tell the two men, Le and Thanh, “You guys stay behind” because that way they can escape on a boat or something like that, you know, some other way. Because if they catch you and put you in jail there is no way they’ll get out of the country. They’ll never find us again.\textsuperscript{76}

Stricken with the fear that Le and Thanh would be arrested and placed in a communist prison indefinitely, Jacqueline decided that they must stay behind and find another way out. Both Le and Thanh were prominent professors and known anti-communists, this would guarantee them lengthy stays in political prison and likely torture if they were captured.

So the men stay behind and now it’s seven: me, Bà Ngoai, my three kids, Paulette and Tuan. So we board the bus and I start crying, like we’re going to a funeral, because I just left my husband behind. So, when we get to the airport, we go to the airport, we go through the Vietnamese gate first, and they don’t do anything to the American bus! They just look, look, look and we go through! I was so mad. And the next gate is the American gate. Who’s scared? We are American employees! So we go through the gate and they drop us at the building where we used to work. It seems like they already prepared the groups, which groups go where and the location name. Maybe building A, location one location two, something like that. So they drop us, suppose, now I’m just guessing, but they drop us at location 3, on the ground, next to the building, on the ground they made us divide by group, so my group sits here.

It was already evening and I was crying. My group was a small group; I don’t know how many people, but a small group, just the people on the bus. I look around and there’s men around and I was so furious with myself that I was so naïve and made Le and Thanh stay behind. I was so stupid!\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
Furious at herself for being so easily convinced by rumors of communist raids on buses heading to the airport, Jacqueline was determined to get Le and Thanh to the airport by any means necessary.

So I told my mom, "Okay, you stay here, sit here with Paulette and the kids. If they announce that it's our group's turn to board the airplane, just go! I need to go get the guys." Because I am an employee, I have my badge so I can go in and out. And my mom starts mumbling, "Oh, what am I going to do without you? We don't speak the language, you stay!" But I made her stay, because if we lose our spot in the line, that's it! So she stayed and I took Chou-chou along to try to find a phone to call home to see what happened to those two. So I walked to the terminal with Chou-chou and found a phone and got on line. Then when my turn came I couldn't dial the number because I was so nervous! I couldn't! And I was crying, crying, I was so upset, and then I just turned around and I saw my boss coming. See how lucky I am?

It's God sending him. The big boss. This is Buckley, the big boss, the boss of Lannigan. He walks over and he sees me and asks, "Why are you crying?" And I tell him, "My husband and my brother-in-law couldn't come because of the rumor and I was so stupid to believe it!" I told him something like that, I don't know how well I explained myself in English because I was so upset. But he understood me that they stayed behind because of the rumor. And the soldier that told me that the rumor was true was a subordinate of Buckley, I can't remember his name now. And now Buckley says, "No I told him to let Jackie and her family go through! I said I will take care of her!"

The subordinate lied; he didn't tell me that Mr. Buckley had said anything about me. Or maybe Buckley was lying, who knows. I didn't say anything. So now the big boss says, "Don't worry, you just go back to your group. I will take care of your husband." But I don't trust him, I don't know him well, I just know that he is the big boss and I'm scared of him. So he promised me that.78

Jacqueline did not trust that her powerful, American boss would remember the promise he made to her, but there was nothing more to be done. Now it was time to wait and pray.

78 Ibid.
So I go back to the group, and we sit there all night, on the runway outside. And I cry, cry all night. We just sit there. And I tell my mom that tomorrow I will leave the base and go to the house and find them and bring them there. So in the morning I thought our good luck was changing, because all the other groups sitting on the runway were leaving! Some groups had already left during the night. One by one all the groups were boarding planes! And my group keeps sitting there with no announcements. It seems like they forgot about us. At that time I thought that someone had stolen our group’s manifest so that other people could leave or something, I don’t know. Everybody was leaving but our group! But I didn’t know that this was good luck too.

So early in the morning I took Chou-chou to go and try to find a phone again. I finally found someone to help me call the house and I got through and the maid answered. She was crying and begging me to take her with us, and this is always my biggest regret. I could have taken her and she would have had a different life. I didn’t know, I thought there was no room except for the people on our ticket, but I could have taken her. That is my biggest regret. We were all so scared. I just didn’t know.

So then I talk to Andrée on the phone and she says that the embassy sent somebody over early this morning to come pick up the two men! Oh my god, I couldn’t believe it. Mr. Buckley had remained true to his word and sent an official car to pick up the men and reunite them with their family.

It was such a relief. So I go back to the group and think okay, just have to wait. It’s already the afternoon and we’re still sitting there, we’ve been there for a full day already. And late in the afternoon, I couldn’t believe it, an embassy taxi pulls up and those two guys come out, just like that, Le and Thanh. I couldn’t believe it. Fate, huh? Those two were meant to leave Vietnam. So it was like fate, the taxi brings those two guys in... Oh! We are so lucky, we are reunited. And then, at the time we had to redo the manifest because it looks like our group’s manifest was lost, that’s why we’re the last group waiting here all night. So an American guy comes over and gives us a blank manifest and says, "Write your names on here in sequence that they used to be. If you guys add any names or do something wrong, you will be expelled. You will be out of the trip." But with all the commotion I write so fast, write the names of my group then pass the list to other people but in the commotion I forgot to

79 Ibid.
write Paulette's name! So when it's done, I put her name at the bottom of the bottom of the list, which is over one hundred people.\textsuperscript{80}

At this moment the most important thing was that the whole family was finally together again, whatever happened next, they would be with each other. Jacqueline obsessively counted and recounted the members of her family, making sure no one would get left behind.

Meanwhile, when they reunite with the group and they explain to me how they got here. The chauffeur, she told me that "I buzzed, I did a lot of ringing, ringing, I ring several times but no body answers because it's a three story house and the guys are all the way on the top floor, drinking coffee. And they didn't hear, but it was fate, they were meant to be. They finished their coffee and came downstairs at the last moment, at the last buzz." She said, "I'll buzz one more time and if no body comes I'll leave." See? Fate. They opened the door. And then the guys told their side of the story that after they had their coffee they were planning to take their backpacks and go to the Oceanside, to the port to try to get a boat, bribe with gold and escape. So if they left any earlier or later they would have missed each other, they would have missed the chauffeur. And if this woman hadn't buzzed so many times they would have missed each other.

So somehow they are meant to be, somehow, you know, that's why they're here. I keep thinking it's fate. These two have already been rejected, you know, left behind, so many times. Already left behind, but now they are reunited. So we're reunited, we have our manifest, and all the other groups have been picked up by busses, but our group has to walk! To the air terminal. By the time we get there and are ready to board the plane its already evening time.\textsuperscript{81}

The waiting dragged on and on, and in this state of motionless limbo, Jacqueline was left with her thoughts. Though she had nearly single-handedly been responsible for getting them all this far, she was tormented by the thought of those she left behind.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
We stand in line again, I tell my family stand in line. So at that time we have nine people, right? Excluding Anh's family who were rejected, left behind. That’s the part that bothered me almost two three years after the fact. Every time I think I think about it I get so mad I think, “Why I’m so stupid?” you know, but because they lived too far in Saigon, it’s so scary, they should have come and lived with us. They cried so hard when we left, they came and found out we left already and they cried so much. So that part kills me, I keep dreaming of coming home and trying to rescue them, tell them to go to the airport and meet us, or something, for the whole year I dreamed of this. But even more painful is that I left behind the nanny, in Da Nang. When we left, she had her day off, was with her family, and I couldn’t reach her in time! She lived with us more than ten years; I still can’t believe that, she’s still there…

To this day, Jacqueline contends that the biggest regret of her life was that she was not able to bring her children's nanny with them to the United States.

So we stand in line to board the plane. And I look at people in line ahead of me, they have gold and they let go, they don't care what you bring, except arms. So when my turn comes they announce, "We can only accept seventy-five of you civilian employees. Because we have to leave room for the high-ranking Vietnamese Air Force families." And this included people I knew from Da Nang. High-ranking officers. So when I hear this I am scared! Because we are near the front of the line but Paulette's name is at the end of the list! On the manifest! She's number one hundred-something. I was so worried. So the line moves, moves and I don't know when but when it comes to me, my turn, I have my whole family right behind me, the man with the list, I remember my whole life, says, "Jackie? Take your whole family." Ah! They don't count the people they don't say the names, they just let us through! "Take your whole family." They don't say the names or count or anything! I don't even know this man! He's a military man, a stranger! So this makes me think that maybe the big boss must have said that when it comes to "Jackie Nguyen take her whole family."

"Jackie? Take your whole family." Can you believe that? Just like in Da Nang when we got into the warehouse. He said the "whole family" and we stayed in a group so Paulette got in! No problem! So we walk in, get into the bus to get to the airplane. And the men, Thanh and Le, were still worried, so

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82 Ibid.
they each carried a child in their arms, Thanh carried Chou-chou and Le carried Tuan. Jojo walked. And so they acted occupied with the kids cause we were still worried that maybe the moment when we get on the plane, that’s the moment where they check! Where the Vietnamese military employees will say, "What you doing here? You try to escape?" Or something. I was thinking how much gold I would have to bribe if they ask us.

Jacqueline was accustomed to the way things worked in Vietnam; a well-placed bribe could be the difference between a new life in America and political persecution in Vietnam.

So when the bus stopped and the airplane was open, the big, what they call it, C-132 or something, with the big belly open, so we can just get it. The bus was there, doors open, and daddy have Chou-chou, Le have Tuan, rush! Into the airplane! Nobody ask any questions! Just get in! And I follow them. And then we sit on the, you know, just the mesh seats. It’s a military plane, no cushions or anything, you know, just nets. Big nets. So we sit in them, Le in the front, I’m sitting here, and the doors still open, people still coming in, and I’m still scared thinking "maybe they wait for everyone to come in and then they count!" you know and see who’s in here, who’s legal and trying to get out of the country. But we wait, wait and everybody boards and the doors coming doooown and, "Phew."

Then I feel relaxed. And when the plane starts going up, and Americans announce, "Okay, you’re leaving the country, you may never be back." And some people start crying.83

They arrived on an American military base in Guam where they were held for just over a week. In the American airlift, over 150,000 refugees were brought to camps on US bases around Southeast Asia before they could be resettled in the states.

And then we’re in Guam. We arrive in Guam. And that’s like a good journey for me. Because all I worried about were the two men, but everywhere I go I’ve been treated well, "Jackie, Jackie." Everyone knew me. Even Guam, when we get to Guam, it’s midnight or something, everybody have to go to areas to tents, everybody sleeps in tents. Later on when I find out Guam is a snake island, lots of snakes everywhere! They

83 Ibid.
can go into you’re house! But I didn’t know at the time. But we were lucky, we didn’t sleep in the tents. They bring our group, because we have high-rank Air Force families, they bring our group to a warehouse area, where the whole warehouse is set up with beds with blankets with white sheets, everything! And I remember my bed is right at the end. And next to us is Filipino employees or something, I don’t know.

So we each have our own bed, the whole thing, everything comfortable. The next day my mom went out, talked in sign language with the Filipinos and they gave her money, gave her grapes! Which is new to us! Now we’re refugees. But, you know, everything’s comfortable. I’m so lucky, and we enjoy the cafeteria, everyday we have three meals there, and at night after dinner we went back for the movies. I watched two big movies there! *Papillon*, and something else I don’t remember. I can’t remember, maybe in English. We stayed there about nine days, but after four days we hear the radio announce that we lost the country. Over to the Communists. And people cry and things like that. But me? I’m fine. 84

Jacqueline, like her mother, always made the best of her situation. She tried not to dwell on the country she left behind – the only country she had ever known – and focused on the day-to-day, keeping mind and body occupied.

You know, I’m sad because I left people behind, Chu Anh’s family, and our maid.

Sometimes I just lay down and think about them and it manes me sit up because I am so mad at myself. I’m so stupid. When I said sixteen people why not just stick with sixteen people? I could have done that. It’s all women! I should have said that. I keep thinking of Anh and his wife and kid... We all should have stayed together. When we were in Saigon, it’s too far away and too fast, we didn’t have time to call them and find them, then we’re at the next destination. It’s too fast, it’s all too fast. We have to get to the place right away. So. They were left behind.

So then, hmm, then we arrive in Guam, stay there comfortably, well-fed. Then it’s the day we have to go to America. It’s nighttime, and it seems like we have to board a plane that’s destination is Arkansas! Fort Chaffee. And I feel sad. We expect California! Everybody dreams of California! Even though we don’t know much, we hear that California is... 84

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84 Ibid.
the best! It look like, it feel like, it have Vietnamese weather, something like that. But now I have to go to Arkansas? Fort Chaffee? I don't know what that place is, but knowing its not California, I feel upset.  

Jacqueline, like most of her fellow refugees, had never heard of a state called Arkansas. As natives of a tropical country, the new climate of Middle America could have presented a substantial shock. Luckily, it was summertime.

At nighttime we board and we arrive at Arkansas at early in the morning. They bring us to the barracks, its military barracks, empty barracks, and now they divide into rooms. Wood rooms, with cloth curtains for each wall. So we're nine people so we have two doors coming in with two curtains, pieces of drapes, you know, and we have two double beds for nine people. So our family there, we stayed in barracks. And later on I find that Fort Chaffee is the best! And we're lucky to stay in the barracks. Because people who went to California, stayed at Camp Pendleton, they stayed under the tents they lived in the tents. They have to get the water... We have air conditioner (laughing), we have heater, we have water, we have a bathroom! We have place to wash our clothes, we so lucky! And we have a cafeteria right across the street.

I have like a month and a half living like that, like I'm on vacation! We have some money so we can go to PX and buy stuff; PX stands for the Post-Exchange. In Vietnam they have Post-Exchange where only military men can buy things – they can buy Coke and cigarettes – so in Vietnam we ask employees to buy us something, because its very, very precious to have a case of Coke for Tet, or something like that, or Tide for washing clothes, it's deluxe stuff! If we can buy that it's only from black market.

Jacqueline relished in her time spent at Fort Chaffee, jokingly referring to it as her "American vacation." The family spent their days relaxing, eating and attending educational and cultural orientations sponsored by the US government. Many at the camp believed that they would someday, maybe

85 Ibid.
86 Tet, Vietnamese lunar New Year.
87 Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 22 October 2012).
even someday soon, return to their country. While some held out hope, Jacqueline prepared to stay in the United States for the long haul and encouraged her family to prepare for what lay ahead. Together, they attended English language classes and were instructed by American officers on the subject of American culture.

So we stay at Fort Chaffee for almost two months. We left after the 4th of July; we'd been there since early in May.

When we were there I volunteered to work again, right away! I was working at the Lost and Found. Oh it was fun! Looking at peoples’ stuff (laughing). I remember I saw a Rosary and thought, "Oh, someone’s Catholic." Lots of suitcases were open. I worked there for like a couple weeks or something, I don't remember, but then I heard that USCC Office hire people, and they pay $2.65 an hour!

So I went down there for an interview, they hire me right there on the spot! They gave me a position, like a caseworker, I have to take care of people who come and register and ask them where they want to live. Illinois, the people from the Church of Illinois, they take a lot of people! And Minnesota, maybe they need laborers or something. So a lot of families come and I ask, "Do you want Illinois?" And a lot of people say, "No, can I have California?" But I don't take care of California; I just take care of Illinois.  

California seemed to be the dream for all of the refugees at Fort Chaffee, including Jacqueline. California was a place they had seen in movies, and could therefore clearly visualize their new Californian lives. While Jacqueline dreamed of California, Cecilia was convinced that her family belonged in France.

And one day Thanh, Le's brother, he got out, he got sponsored with his wife and daughter, because he had an American friend who happened to live in Woodland Hills, California. So once they get out to Woodland Hills, the church asks, during the sermon, "Who wants to sponsor Vietnamese families?"

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88 USCC, the United States Catholic Charities, an organization, which worked to place Catholic Vietnamese refugees with Catholic sponsor families.  
89 Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 22 October 2012).
So we leave, around after Fourth of July, but meanwhile, before that, we already, every night, Bà Ngoai said every night, "We are French, we have to go to France." She keep, every night, discussing about it, when we sleep, in our bed, I argue with her, I said, "No, I'm American, I work with Americans. America is better, richer, you know, more prosperous land," but my mom keeps saying, "We are French, we have to go back home, to France, what are we going to do here? We don't speak the language," blah, bla, blah. So we went to the French representative, we did all our paperwork, took pictures, I have all our paperwork still, there. Ready to go to France.\(^{90}\)

Although Jacqueline had dreams of starting a new life in America, Cecilia was determined to go to France. She would point out that she spoke French, her daughters spoke French, so why would they go to a country where they hardly knew the language? What would they be able to do there? Jacqueline tried, time and again, to explain to her mother that the job opportunities were better for them in America than they were in France, that in America they would have the chance to start again. In France, there was already a Vietnamese population, but in America they would be the first wave of Vietnamese people and they could create their own path and place in American society. Cecilia stayed resolute in her belief that they were French and belonged in France.

But suddenly, Ta Re, after staying back in Vietnam, she was evacuated out with the French people from Vietnam. All the foreigners have to leave Vietnam. So when Ta Re arrives in Paris with Bambi she calls the refugee camp in Arkansas, I was there I gave the pone to my mom, she call over and she says, "Stay in America. Life in France is the same like in Vietnam; it's not that good. America is a big, dream country."

Oh, I was so glad to hear that! Now I told my mom and she stopped complaining. And so that’s why we all stayed in America. Thanks to Réé’s phone call. If not, in a week we would have left for French! And been stuck in France. Maybe we’d be

\(^{90}\) Ibid.
speaking French right now, you know, different. We would have a different life now.\textsuperscript{91}

With these words of advice from her eldest and trusted daughter – who was herself \textit{in} France – Cecilia conceded, and the family began to prepare for their journey to the west coast.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
CHAPTER IV

Saigon, USA

In November of 1974, my family flew from Guam to the United States where they stayed for a few weeks at refugee camp in Fort Chaffee in northwest Arkansas. At this time, the United States government offered only four manners by which a Vietnamese immigrant could leave a refugee camp: by seeking repatriation in Vietnam, by receiving third-country resettlement through said country's embassy, by providing proof of at least $4,000 per member of the family to establish that the family could immediately support itself, or by finding an American sponsor. After a few weeks, my family was matched with an American host family in San Fernando Valley, California through Jacqueline's work with the USCC. Jacqueline described her excitement at the prospect of rebuilding her life in California, a place she had seen in the movies:

So my sponsor, he's an engineer from CBS station, his wife is a housewife: Ralph and Jen Maurrizi. In Woodland Hills. They have big house, four bedrooms, and they have three kids! Just like my kids. Just like me and Thanh. And their kids are each three years apart just like mine, only one year older. They have two boys and one girl. I have two girls and one boy. So they agree to sponsor us. So me, when I heard the news, I went quick to USCC so we could prepare to go. I was so excited!

When I got to the office, the director told me that if I stay and work at the camp, at the end, when it's done, I can pick to go to any state I want! But at that moment I want to go out and see the world, you know? You know, see how America look like. And I hear such good things about California, the Californian dream, that the weather there is like Vietnam, warm. So I say, "No," I say, "I want to go!"

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93 Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
As is the case with most immigrants, especially those who enter new countries _en masse_, the job opportunities are often limited to minimum wage, unskilled work. In the case of the influx of Vietnamese immigrants to the US in the 1970s, the reality of these modest occupations were particularly biting as many of those who fled Vietnam were highly educated, forced to leave their country for fear of political persecution: "cabinet ministers, generals, lawyers, radio station managers, etc., found themselves faced with employment as cooks, waiters, bell boys, dishwashers, and janitors."\(^94\)

The men in my family fell the furthest occupationally. The first jobs they found were menial. Le, who was a professor of history, and my grandfather, Thanh, who was a mathematics professor in Vietnam, found their first few jobs at factories, working as unskilled operators on assembly lines.

Jacqueline soon found work as a file clerk, and the couple, along with their three children, moved into a two-bedroom apartment not far from the home of their sponsors. The apartment they rented was right next door to that rented by La and Andrée. Andrée found her first job in California working as a translator. Jacqueline continues,

> So we stayed in Woodland Hills and we were sponsored, and we stayed with this lady, Jen, and she was very nice, they feed us, they help me looking for a job. We stayed there maybe two, three weeks, Thanh got a job right away working as a labor worker for a Vitamin place, and he come home smelling like Vitamins, oh! I hate that smell!

But we stayed with them about three weeks, and we move out to an apartment as soon as Thanh have a job. Which was minimum pay at that time. So he come home at the end of the day, smelling like vitamins and I made him take off his clothes right at the door because of the smell! And at that time I got a job too; my sponsor got me an interview in Woodland Hills and I got the job right away! As a file clerk.\(^95\)

During the two years the families spent living in the tandem apartments, Cecilia, now aged fifty-seven, was charged with watching the children: Lily aged eight, Jojo aged five, Chou-chou aged two, Bambi aged one, Tuan aged seven, and Minh aged six. Tuan and Minh were younger nephews of Le whose families were unable to accompany their sons to the US. Andrée and Le raised the two boys as their own; it wasn't until the mid-1980s that boys were able to reunite with their parents in the US.

Although only fifty-seven, Cecilia already resembled the tiny, elderly woman that I remember from my childhood; her long, silver gray hair wound into a bun. Cecilia was tasked with enrolling Lily, Jojo, Tuan and Minh in the local public elementary school. While the older kids were at school, Cecilia would take long walks with Chou-chou and Bambi, to the park or the supermarket.

Cecilia was no stranger to starting from scratch; however, in the past she relied heavily on her education, her language skills and her ability to teach. For the first time in her life, Cecilia was met with a language barrier. Though she understood English quite well, Cecilia felt the acute self-consciousness particular to being an immigrant; she was too shy to speak English. Language aside, Cecilia was, for the first time, encountering mass

\(^95\) Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
public transportation, six-lane roads and high ways, and immense, refrigerated supermarkets.

The initial resettlement of Vietnamese immigrant scattered the population across the country "to such an extent that at first they had to accommodate to American life on their own without the intermediary of a Vietnamese community."96 This was a conscious decision made on the part of the American government. By the 1975 end of the Vietnam War, over 150,000 – generally well-educated – Vietnamese people had been airlifted to American bases in Wake Island, the Philippines and Guam.

These immigrants were later relocated to refugee camps in Arkansas, California, Florida and Pennsylvania. In 1975, President Gerald Ford signed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Act, which streamlined the immigration process and allowed Vietnamese refugees to take part in a domestic resettlement program.97 In order to prevent Vietnamese ghettos from forming, the American government purposefully dispersed the Vietnamese population across the country. In the short-run, this diffusion only served to negatively effect the immigrant population as it denied them the comfort of proximity to one another. And in the long run, this plan had no longevity as many immigrants eventually relocated to form large Vietnamese communities in Texas and California. Luckily for my family, they began their American lives in California and had to just wait for friends and extended family to join them.

In 1976, my grandfather was accidentally burned with acid while working at a factory. He did not have insurance, and was unemployed for a time. In order to make ends meet Jacqueline worked three jobs. Her three children remember this period as the "minestrone soup days" where Jacqueline would make a huge vat of the hearty soup on Sunday that would feed the family for a week. After her years spent working for the American army and US Embassy, Jacqueline's clerical work soon became banal. Though she felt qualified to move up the ranks of the company at which she was employed, she was frustrated by the limitations placed on her by her foreign accent. She explains,

I work as a file clerk for a few years and I’m so upset because I look around and see all these jobs I can do! I had tears in my eyes because of my pride. I have a desk that I can never sit down at because you have to stand to file! One day, the boss’ secretary realized I could type, she told the boss, and I was promoted to typing clerk. After a few months I got bored of typing but I couldn’t move up because of my accent. They said I couldn’t take orders on the phone because people can’t understand my accent. And it hurts, it hurts my feelings. In Vietnam I have a background, I worked with the Air Force and at the consulate, but I don’t have anything in America; I’m a plain person. So my boss suggests I take computer-programming classes; I don’t have to talk to the customer as a programmer.98

Frustrated but not demoralized, Jacqueline enrolled in night classes for computer programming. Around this time, in 1977, Andrée and Le became the first members of my family to own a house. They bought a modest, four-bedroom home in Canoga Park; on Stagg St. Buying this house was the first step in my family’s journey towards the American dream, complete with a pool. On move-in day, the new occupants of the house numbered fifteen

98 Jacqueline Nguyen (Interview by Jaimie Nguyen, Los Angeles, 9 January 2013).
people, including Cecilia, the Do family, the Nguyen family, and various
other relatives. To make her surrounding feel a bit more familiar, Cecilia
planted a persimmon tree in the backyard, which still stands today and hangs
heavy with fruit every fall. The pool now served as the kids' primary
babysitter, and Cecilia was free to wander and explore her new neighborhood
on foot.

On her walks, Cecilia took note of the local flora growing on neighbors'
property, gathering what she pleased. Decades later, Lily recalled a
particularly embarrassing episode where Cecilia – who was not comfortable
speaking in English – instructed her to ring the doorbell of a neighbor and ask
if she could cut down some of their banana leaves, while holding a machete.

Though all but one of the family's adults were working out of the
house all day, and most nights, the "minestrone days" were a thing of the
past; Cecilia had quickly learned to adapt her Franco-Vietnamese recipes,
using American ingredients.

Jacqueline's children remember the last years of the 1970s and the first
few of the 1980s as a time where they rarely saw their mother; she worked all
day and attended class at night. Though arduous and seemingly never-
ending, her pursuits were ultimately fruitful as she was promoted again and
again:

So I went from filing clerk, to typing clerk, order clerk, to
become computer operator. And during that time I go to
college. But I could only take one unit, one class at a time. It
takes so long. It's my third language so it takes me so long to
read and understand the reading, so I reread, reread. It took me
five years to get through my two-year degree, my AA degree.
At that time I have to type in a card, some programs take
three hundred cards and you have to carry those cards with you
in a bucket. If it happens that it drops and the sequence is out of
order, you have to reorganize them all. I had a hard time, so many times I wanted to give up; I have tears in my eyes, but my pride is bigger. I always compare, thinking, "Why she makes more than me?" It’s because of the piece of paper, the degree. You have to have that. So after I get my diploma they move me to programmer assistant; and that’s it, my programming life begins! (laughs) Then after a long time, after I hit the 13-year mark with the company, they said that in this field you have to move around to learn more, explore, make more money. Every time you move you make more money. So that’s why I venture a lot, few years here, few years there.

Figure 5.1: c. 1980, photograph of Cecilia and her four daughters at the family home on Stagg Street in Canoga Park, CA (from left to right: Jacqueline, Denise, Cecilia, Paulette, and Andrée).

Though Jacqueline recounts this decade of her life in her characteristic humorous, blasé manner, this period was a physically and emotionally taxing experience for the family. The constant fatigue and financial stress felt by Thanh and Jacqueline ultimately led to the unraveling of their marriage. Despite their divorce, the family remained close.

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99 Ibid.
Sitting with my grandmother in the house on Stagg Street, flipping through photographs almost four decades after their journey to America began, I was struck by the lack of continuity in the photographs depicting my great-grandmother. In the last photograph of Cecilia taken in Vietnam, she looked tired but youthful and round-faced, her hair shiny and black with subtle hints of silver. In the next photograph, taken in the United States perhaps five years later, her face appeared thinner and creased; her characteristic chignon had faded to gray. I noted the dates of the photographs and asked my grandmother how she accounted for her mother's dramatic change in appearance, in a word, she responded, "stress."  

The gray-haired, narrow-faced woman depicted in the second photograph was the Bà Ngoai I was familiar with. Despite the rate at which she aged in those five years, the process seemed to end there. My memories of Bà Ngoai are sparse but vivid. When I was in preschool, my mother was attending college at UCLA during the day. After my mornings at school, any available relative would pick me up and drop me off at Stagg Street, where I would spend the afternoon with Bà Ngoai.

She would greet me at the front door and cautiously close the door behind me, carefully sliding the chain lock back into place. A snack would be prepared, usually toast with cream cheese and sugar or a warm bowl of cháo. After eating, we would settle into her twin-sized bed and drift into our afternoon nap while watching Wheel of Fortune or The Price is Right. I can still recall the scent of the pungent smelling salts she sniffed every time we woke

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100 Ibid.
101 Cháo, Vietnamese rice porridge.
up from our nap. She taught me to sing Vietnamese songs and poems, the words of which I have long since forgotten. I remember her long silver hair that she wrapped around itself and knotted at the top of her head, without a tie or clip, and her uniform of a traditional, black áo dài; within its folds I could always find a butter cookie wrapped in a napkin.

Figure 5.2: 1994, photograph of Cecilia and me at a family gathering.

Around 1997, Cecilia was overcome by her Dementia; I was too young to see the symptoms. In her illness, Cecilia had vivid flashbacks of her final years in Vietnam; she insisted that Andrée only drive on side streets, lest the
Viet Cong attack them on the main thoroughfares of the San Fernando Valley. The less lucid she became, the more powerful her memories from the war haunted her.

Cecilia, who had been the driving force in the family – who had frequently uprooted and rebuilt her life in order to ensure her daughters' educations – became trapped in the past. Unable to bear the notion of placing her mother in a nursing home, Andrée was forced to lock Cecilia in the house during the day, after several instances where Cecilia set out on a walk and was unable to find her way home. Andrée painfully recounted to me how each morning when she would leave for work, Cecilia would beg her to take her with her: she was too confused and scared to be alone.

In the end, the symptomatic memory loss of Dementia took Cecilia's life; she drank from an open bottle of Formula 409, believing it to be tea. The last years of Cecilia's life – her simultaneous loss of and entrapment within her memory – bring full-circle this work's exploration of the notions of remembering and forgetting in order to maintain and create one's chosen identity.
Figure 5.3: 1986, photograph of Cecilia at Zuma Beach in California, wearing her usual áo dài and holding her nón lá\textsuperscript{102} to block the sun.

Less than thirty miles away from the house on Stagg Street is the neighborhood of Little Saigon, located in Orange County, California, which contains the largest population of Vietnamese people outside of Vietnam. Little Saigon offers Vietnamese immigrants all the comforts of home, one can

\textsuperscript{102} Nón lá, meaning "leaf hat," a traditional Vietnamese conical hat.
easily live and work in this neighborhood with no knowledge of the English language. A 2004 documentary, *Saigon, USA* profiled several generations of Vietnamese residents of Little Saigon, in an effort to portray the struggles with identity within this immigrant community. What the filmmakers captured was an older generation, who remembered the war and mourned the country that was taken from them, and a younger generation in the familiar first-generation limbo, stuck between being "an immigrant" and "too Americanized." This documentary includes footage of the massive protests that erupted in Little Saigon in 1999 as a response to a storeowner's display of a Ho Chi Minh poster in his shop window. The fifty-two days of protest that ensued loudly revealed that the wounds of the war would never fully heal for those who experienced it first hand. In perhaps a moment of healing, the demonstrations culminated in a hugely attended candlelight vigil, a public prayer for the freedom of their countrymen in Vietnam.

What this documentary portrays is an identity that is in a constant state of fluctuation: Vietnamese, American, métis, immigrant, citizen, Catholic, Buddhist, atheist. This notion of an identity in conflict, or perhaps, an identity of conflict, deeply resonated with my personal process in writing this work, and my uncertainty of my intentions.

Throughout this process, I couldn't help but feel the pangs of exploitation. Frequently, when I told people I was writing a history of my family, the immediate response would be an excited variation of, "Did you find out any family secrets?" And admittedly, when I began this process, I

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103 *Saigon, USA*. Dir. Lindsey Jang and Robert C. Winn. Perf. Andrew Lam, Tony Lam, Le Khac Ly (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 2004) DVD.
wanted to uncover something secret and salacious, something to make my family's history a story, but why? Perhaps to somehow portray my relatively unremarkable family as relevant in the grand scheme of History?

What began as an endeavor to understand the life of my great-grandmother, to better grasp what she experienced before I knew her, and to answer the questions I never got the chance to ask, turned into something unexpected. I gained an appreciation of the millions of stories left untold by the conventional textbooks: the ways in which great moments in history affected, or went unnoticed, by the common person. And throughout this process, – to contradict myself – I came to realize that there is no common person, no true universal experience. The life of Cecilia, of Bà Ngoai, wasn't particularly radical, it didn't have an impact on Vietnamese society or history, but it was her story. The experiences she had, the choices she made, and the opportunities she provided for her daughters offers a unique insight into this period in Vietnamese history, through snapshots and memories.

When I began this project, I expected to come away with a story. In reality, what I gained were fragments: fragments of a life that can't be encapsulated in anecdotes or broken down cleanly into timelines or relations to historical events. These are all just fragments, but they are fragments of my origins.
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