

Learning Guide for: American Quarterly

Jana K. Lipman
Tulane University

“Give us a Ship”: Vietnamese Repatriates on Guam, 1975 *American Quarterly*
(March 2012).

Author's Introduction

I first came across information about the Vietnamese repatriate movement on Guam through my research on Vietnamese in refugee camps on U.S. military bases. One of the first U.S. Army After Action Reports I located included numerous pictures of the repatriates' protests and staged demonstrations. I stared at the images -- what was going on? Why were Vietnamese men having their heads shaved en masse or waving banners of Ho Chi Minh? And what were they doing on Guam in the first place?

The Vietnamese repatriates' stories complicate the Cold War narrative of Vietnamese migration since 1975, and yet because their protests took place on Guam, it also brings the history of U.S. empire into focus. For students, I hope that through the stories of Vietnamese repatriates they will be confronted with a narrative which diverges from the dominant representation of Vietnamese migration to the United States. Instead, they will need to consider the multiple stages and choices refugees confronted as they left Vietnam, which goes beyond a simple anti-communist politics. Furthermore, Vietnamese repatriates' stories demonstrate the possibility of agency and political power, even in a contested space like a U.S. military-run refugee camp, while at the same time, their ultimate fates reveals the structural limits on this very same individual agency in the aftermath of the U.S. war in Vietnam.

Author Recommends:

Susan Carruthers, *Cold War Captives: Imprisonment, Escape, and Brainwashing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

Carruthers' book is one of the most innovative books on Cold War culture, and she argues that stories of captivity were central to American understandings and imaginings of the early Cold War. She highlights the media phenomenon, which made momentary superstars out of Eastern Bloc defectors, and she analyzes American popular and official identification of communist society as a world of “camps.” Her work is a valuable counterpoint to “Give Us a Ship,” as it examines the symbolic politics at stake when individuals choose repatriation, defection, and return, and it also engages with the politics of “camps” in Cold War discourse. For students, it would be worth pondering why her examples and stories from the 1940s and 1950s became “cause celebres,” while the Vietnamese repatriates' campaign was all but

invisible to the American public.

Brian Doan, *The Forgotten Ones: A Photographic Documentation of the Last Vietnamese Boat People in the Philippines* (Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association, 2004).

Brian Doan is a photographer who documented a community of Vietnamese refugees on the isolated island of Palawan in the Philippine archipelago. The UNHCR ran a refugee camp in Palawan until 1996, after which date, hundreds of Vietnamese chose to stay in Palawan and wait for resettlement in a third country, rather than return to Vietnam. In limbo, their stories resonate with, although do not replicate, the sentiments of the Vietnamese repatriates. Adding yet another perspective to the Vietnamese refugee experience, their stories include the UNHCR, the Philippine government, local Filipinos, and an active Vietnamese community in the United States and Canada. Doan's book was published with the support of the Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association, and additional material is available at: <http://www.phototroph.com/artists/briandoan/boatpeople/index.html#> and <http://www.vaala.org/080819-The-Forgotten-Ones.php>

Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

Enloe's work is a classic in the field, and it is essential reading on gender, international affairs, and military culture. Students who read this work may be able to ask questions and critique my article in new ways, first asking 'where are the women' and then exploring how gendered politics play out in international affairs, and in this case, on Guam. Moreover, Enloe forces readers to "see" the military in new ways, ask how it works, and recognize the pervasiveness of military culture from Okinawa to Ohio and back again. Her work has inspired a generation of scholars to contemplate the local politics of the military and the geography of U.S. military bases, and her analysis is a constant challenge to stretch and push our understandings of the foreign and the domestic.

Yen Le Espiritu, "'The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon,'" *American Quarterly* 58.2 (2006): 329-52.

In many ways, "Give Us a Ship" is a response to Yen Le Espiritu's "We-Win-Even-When-We Lose," and the two could easily be read in tandem. Espiritu argues that the American popular media presented Vietnamese refugees in a redemptive idiom, positing that their success in the United States as a somewhat retro-active justification for the U.S. war in Vietnam. She then juxtaposes the media's projection of Vietnamese refugees as "liberated" and "successful" with contemporary representations of U.S. veterans as "noble" and "heroic." This article is a formative essay in Vietnamese American studies, as Espiritu critiques popular and simplistic representations of Vietnamese Americans, which erase more complicated histories of war, violence, and imperialism.

Ann Laura Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North

American History and (Post) Colonial Studies,” *Journal of American History* 88.3 (2001): 829–65; AND “Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen,” in *Haunted by Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006):1-22.

Another classic article for scholars of U.S. empire. Stoler’s work brings postcolonial studies and North American colonial history into conversation, and she argues for the need to study the “tense and tender ties” which bound colonial rulers with colonial subjects, namely the racial and sexual encounters that played out in the bedroom, the nursery, and other intimate spaces. While her essay focuses on colonial North America, the implications are central for scholars of U.S. empire more broadly construed, and her edited volume includes essays that ranged from St. Louis to Samoa. While “Give Us a Ship” does not wrestle with questions of sexuality or race-mixing, it presents as a site of inquiry an equally provocative and intimate place, the refugee camp. Reading the two works together, students can approach questions of “intimacy” and explore the dynamics of proximity, geography, and colonial rule.

A. Naomi Paik, “Testifying to Rightlessness: Haitian Refugees Speaking from Guantánamo,” *Social Text* Fall 2010 28 (3 104): 39-65.

Paik’s work moves us from the Pacific to the U.S. naval base in Guantánamo Bay, and here instead of Vietnamese advocating for repatriation, HIV+ Haitians testified for refugee status and asylum in the United States. In both cases, readers are alerted to the power of U.S. military bases as extra-legal spaces, as well as the development of camps on what is ostensibly American soil. Moreover, one is also confronted with the voices of people “in between,” and Paik artfully analyzes the politics and nuances of their testimonies as she develops a discourse of rightlessness.

David Vine, *Island of Shame* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

In a similar vein, David Vine’s *Island of Shame* moves students to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. The U.S. government leased (and leases) the island of Diego Garcia, which is technically a British colony. Vine narrates both the removal of the Chagossian population and their subsequent legal suit to return to Diego Garcia as British subjects alongside the history of U.S. policy makers’ notions of military geography. His work again illuminates the strategic power in island sites as they act as limbo spaces, military bases, and isolated enclaves. In this case, the Chagossians are neither repatriates nor refugees, but rather see themselves as living in exile, petitioning for return, even as Diego Garcia has become a strategic node for the U.S. military in the “War on Terror.”

Online Materials:

Guantánamo Public Memory Project, <http://hrcolumbia.org/guantanamo/>

Bringing together scholars, museum specialists, archivists, artists, and activists, the Guantánamo Public Memory Project seeks to engage the public in a conversation about detention, human rights, refugees, and memory through a historically informed engagement. It seeks to historicize contemporary debates about the U.S. naval base in

Guantánamo Bay and the politics of detention, finding moments of tension and convergence between the past and the present. To that end, it is launching a traveling exhibit in 2012 as well as an interactive website. Through multiple perspectives and experiences, it complicates the public perception of “Guantánamo” and generates new discussions about U.S. empire, the military, refugees, detention, U.S.-Cuban relations, and human rights.

The Insular Empire: America in the Marianas, (2010) (DVD)

http://www.horseopera.org/Insular_Empire_2010/

The Insular Empire is a one-hour documentary, which is an excellent classroom teaching tool for raising issues about American colonialism with college level students. The documentary focuses on four individuals on Guam who each articulate a distinct political vision, from a former Guam Senator who founded Guam’s Commission for Decolonization, to an ardent supporter of statehood, to a key negotiator who brokered the U.S. covenant. This documentary documents the role of the U.S. military on the island along with the preservation of Chamorro culture. It is both accessible and challenging for students and an excellent stimulant for discussion.

Texas Tech Vietnam Virtual Archive, Vietnamese American Heritage Project

<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/vahp/>

The Texas Tech Vietnam Virtual Archive has an immense collection of digitized resources related to the U.S. war in Vietnam. Moreover, the Vietnam Virtual Archive has a Vietnamese American Heritage project, which includes an extensive collection donated by the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/vahp/fvppa.htm> These materials include documents related to the Orderly Departure Program, the Humanitarian Operations program, and resettlement programs in the United States.

Vietnamese American Oral History Project

<http://sites.uci.edu/vaohp/blog/>

Scholars at the University of Irvine have recently launched the Vietnamese American Oral History project to document and archive Vietnamese American experiences.

Sample Syllabus:

Course: U.S. Empire

Topic: Guam and U.S. Pacific Empire

Screening: *The Insular Empire: America in the Marianas, (2010)*

Readings: Vicente M. Diaz, "Deliberating Liberation Day: Memory, Culture, and History in Guam," *Perilous Memories*, Geoff White, Takahashi Fujjiti, and Lisa Yoneyami, eds. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).

Jana K. Lipman, "Give us a Ship" Vietnamese Repatriates on Guam, 1975, *American Quarterly* (March 2012).

Course: Asian American Studies

Topic: Refugees, "Boat People," and Camps after 1975

Readings: Nam Le, "The Boat"

Sucheng Chan, *The Vietnamese 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2006), pp. 57-96.

Jana K. Lipman, "Give us a Ship" Vietnamese Repatriates on Guam, 1975, *American Quarterly* (March 2012).

Chan Kwok Bun and Kenneth Christie, "Past, Present, and Future: The Vietnamese Refugee Experience Twenty Years Later," *Journal of Refugee Studies* (1995) 75-94.

Course: American War in Vietnam/Vietnam War in America

Topic: After 1975: Vietnamese Refugees and U.S. Political Culture

Readings: Yen Le Espiritu, "'The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon,'" *American Quarterly* 58.2 (2006): 329-52.

Jana K. Lipman, "Give us a Ship" Vietnamese Repatriates on Guam, 1975, *American Quarterly* (March 2012).

Andrew Pham, *Catfish and Mandela*, (selections)

Focus Questions

1. What is a "refugee"? What are the politics of defining who is and who is not a "refugee"? Are the Vietnamese who flee South Vietnam in 1975 refugees -- why or why not?
2. How do the politics of U.S. colonial governance over Guam shape the dynamics of the Vietnamese repatriate movement? Would a similar movement have been possible in the continental United States, say on Camp Pendleton in California? Or in U.S. military bases in sovereign nations, e.g. the Philippines or Japan? Why or why not?
3. The Vietnamese repatriates use a range of tactics to make their case to U.S., Vietnamese, and Guamanian officials. What are the tensions within the repatriate

group? Which strategies seem most successful? Explain.