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Karin Aguilar-San Juan. *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 222 pp.

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When the United States' venture in Vietnam failed in the early 1970s, one consequence was that a large number of Vietnamese became refugees, and the refugee population continued to grow as the southern government fell to the north and additional waves left Vietnam. Vietnamese refugees in the United States are of diverse classes and ethnicity, including a large ethnic Chinese cohort. Under family reunification law, Vietnamese immigration is ongoing.

The initial U.S. approach was to scatter Vietnamese refugees throughout the United States in order to reduce disruption to local economies and social arrangements. Quickly, inevitably, dispersed refugees relocated to a handful of locations, particularly those more amenable in climate, those with at least nascent communities of similar people, perhaps Chinatowns, to provide a semblance of home. The dozen or so significant centers of Vietnamese population in the United States, some more sophisticated and concentrated than others, are known collectively as Little Saigons.

Little Saigons are sites of adjustment, adaptation and accommodation, as people uprooted have to define and negotiate what it means to be Vietnamese in America. They have to deal with racial issues – what is white, what is Asian, and where does Vietnamese fit? Is Vietnamese-American a commercial come on for tourists, an anti-communist legacy of South Vietnam? How do Vietnamese people fit into a white society that defines Vietnam as a war, not a home they know as "Viet Nam"? This is not to even consider the generation gap or the class differences or the multiple ethnicities broadly covered by "Vietnamese-American."

Aguilar-San Juan chose her two Little Saigons less for inherent qualities than for familiarity and convenience for research. In the 1990s she lived first in Boston

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then in southern California. Neither is necessarily representative of the broader community of Little Saigons, but none of the others are "typical" either, each having developed in its unique setting under influences such as geography, demography, and history. Houston's Little Saigon, for instance, matches neither Boston's nor Orange County's Little Saigon. The two Little Saigons are unlike one another. Vietnamese numbering 145,000 dominate Orange County, California, while in the Boston neighborhood they are a minority of only 10,000 competing with other ethnic groups. The processes of developing an ethnic community and the character of the community are markedly different due to the relative sizes of the populations, their political and economic clout, and also the different characters of Knott's Berry Farm/Disneyland Orange County and old ethnic neighborhood Boston.

In California they can create their own memorial while in Boston, a place with much more "Euro-American" history than southern California, they adapt to those already existing, those established by previous immigrant groups to commemorate the Vietnam War. The Italians and Irish and Puerto Ricans that make Boston, like Chicago and other American cities, a patchwork of "ethnic" neighborhoods have already honored sons and daughters who served in the war. In California the Little Saigon is much larger and more distinctly Vietnamese. Rather than a residential neighborhood, Little Saigon in Orange County consists of miles of businesses designed to draw the tourists from Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm. Developing Little Saigon as a site for the tourists to experience Vietnamese food defines the area as the ethnic restaurant center of the county but not necessarily an ethnic neighborhood. In Boston the smallness of the population means that the Vietnameseness of the neighborhood has to accommodate to the Puerto Ricanness and so on. Little Saigon in California remains beneath the surface a place where a refugee can maintain language and customs brought from Vietnam but Little Saigon in Boston lacks that option.

Aguilar-San Juan approaches the subject as a feminist sociologist; although she does not express the feminist sociological tendency to read society as adversarial, she does define place as a process rather than a geographical location. She also rejects Orientalism, the former fashion of treating Asians all the same. Rather, as an Asian American, specifically Filipina, she approaches the Vietnamese community in America with awareness that "Asian" is a Western category that does not fit any

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"Asian" community all that well. Her methodology includes interviews and incorporation of the pertinent literature. Her goal is to understand – or at least begin to understand – how Vietnamese refugees maintain a sense of being Vietnamese despite being thrust into an alien environment. It is a matter of developing a "placial" underpinning, a space populated by Vietnamese and with Vietnamese memories and associations.

Although she has been researching this topic since 1994 and has visited the studied sites several times, Aguilar-San Juan acknowledges that she barely scratches the surface by exploring three aspects of what it means to define and preserve a group identity in an alien society. She notes that she has left unaddressed the gender issues among others. She also admits that her research has been in English-language sources, her interviews with English speakers. Given that the inability to communicate with one's subjects directly in their own language is a major handicap for an ethnographer or any other scholar seeking to access her sources, Aguilar-San Juan points out that she is not alone in this deficiency. No other researcher has worked in Vietnamese. Other scholars have not acknowledged their language deficiency, she says. Aguilar-San Juan is the first to acknowledge that no researcher has been able to penetrate into the Vietnamese American sense of self, the identity beneath the language barrier. And she finishes with more unresolved issues than resolved ones; the book largely ignores gender, sexuality, the second generation, and the relationship of Vietnamese in America with those in Vietnam. Most important is the question of how a community can maintain an identity that is a historical snapshot when the world around them and the world they left are changing. That said, she provides a good starting point for examining communities and neighborhoods where ethnic groups attempt to define and preserve what is essential while adapting and adjusting to a culture different from their own.