

The Bonderman Travel Fellowship Essay

I grew up mesmerized with traditional lore and legends before the war ended in my country of origin in 1975. My childhood was spent in South Vietnam--a land where personal and other ties are permanent and the four-thousand-year tradition both sacred and concrete. Aspects of Vietnamese mythology and history were imprinted by a famous legend. We were told that today's Vietnamese are the descendants of the dragon king and fairy. Everyone in Vietnam has heard of the ancient love affair of Lạc Long Quân--the offspring of a water dragon, and Âu Cơ--a mountain fairy. From this union, the fairy laid one hundred eggs that gave birth to "one hundred peoples" of Southeast Asia; yet, their epigrammatic marriage ended due to an incompatibility of water and fire. The Great Dragon, in the end, took fifty sons to the sea where they became Vietnam's fisherman and lowland farmers. The beautiful Fairy Queen brought the other fifty to the mountain where they became hunters and upland farmers. Similar to the version of the Seven Tribes of Israel, this poetic creation myth appears to allow all Vietnamese and other minority groups to live together peacefully in a country of the form of the dragon, and to unite as one to overcome foreign antagonists in difficult moments of history. It also made Vietnamese known for their great hospitality to others.

I also grew up absorbing many intriguing stories of ghosts and spirits which were thought to dwell in every tree, stone, mountain, cloud, stream, and animal. These spirits were said to be the wandering souls of the dead—the ancestors, fighters, and people who lost their lives in times of peace as well as war under the domination of the Chinese, French, or Americans. We honored these spirits—the medium between living people and the greater forces of nature—in rituals in order to maintain harmony between them, the elements, and the people. I also experienced an overprotected school girl's life due to my parents' fear of the complexities of an urban setting complicated by both war and the effects of modernization. Unsurprisingly, I knew by heart the only route from my gated home to the all-girl school that I attended. Literature and arts filled my imagination while living a life of stern early teenage familial expectations. But everything had changed with the fall of the country and the initial Vietnamese exodus in 1975.

Although I saw the ravages of war and lived under the oppressions of Communism, I never gave up hope or forgot my dream of freedom and opportunity in a free country. So strong were my desires for freedom and opportunity that I risked my life to escape Vietnam. I was imprisoned at the age of 18 for my beliefs. Only then could I understand the meaning of freedom. After my release from prison, I determined to escape the oppression of communist rule. Four years later I escaped on a small and overcrowded boat with no water and food. We encountered Vietnamese patrols at sea and had to surrender our survival resources. An American ship at last rescued us in a derelict boat, adrift beyond territorial waters. I was grateful to the captain's altruism, believing my survival was bestowed as much by my father's soul together with others' invisible spirits in the ocean. After a year, I was able to leave the miserable refugee camp on an isolated island in Southeast Asia, and finally arrived in the U.S. with no resources except an enormous hope for a better life. I have become a "Việt Kiều" (oversea Vietnamese) scarred by my experiences of the sea and traveling alone since April 1985.

Above all, my life had changed with the emergence of a compelling focus and goal. Like other refugees who have sought asylum in a new land, with a strong determination for a better life after a traumatic escape, I sought to pursue that better life through higher education and a continuing search for inner wisdom. These goals led me to community activism—first with my organizing two grassroots groups, one advocating for Vietnamese women against domestic violence, and another with Asian youth opposing police misconduct/abuse. For the past three years, I have been active in the mobilization of Vietnamese social service providers to establish a mutual assistance association in order to have a unified voice in addressing community and professional needs. Due in part to these community activities I was honored in the Who's Who among Students in American Universities & Colleges for my MSW degree in 1998. As the 1997-1998 California Sally Casanova Pre-Doctoral Scholar, I also received funding to travel to Ph.D.-granting institutions and professional meetings in the U.S. From that time, I started saving money from my post-master degree salary to participate in several professional conferences to satisfy my constant thirst for intellectual and spiritual learning. In other words, my travels were all related to that central focus of lifetime learning and community activism.

As a former refugee and first-generation college student, I have encountered and conquered the following problems in my efforts to become educated: (1) coping with financial and physical survival; (2) adjusting to a new and dramatically different culture; and (3) learning English well enough to excel in academic courses. The tremendous support of many faculty and friends also encouraged me to overcome the stresses experienced by a refugee separated from her family, and provided a much needed and reliable support system. Above all, my experience with trauma has taught me to cope with the fears of ego and be who I truly am. These life experiences have illuminated for me the meaning and nature of courage, patience, compassion, and faith. In addition, such experiences enhance my empathy with many Việt Kiều who are acutely aware of the conflicting loyalties to their original culture and the demands of adapting to their new host cultures. A significant number of Việt Kiều feel the need to maintain pre-revolutionary Vietnamese heritage and traditions, but many have negotiated a place within a more mainstreamed culture, while still others engage in the formation of distinct hybrid identities centering around dominant Western popular cultural forms and traditional cultural values. In short, diasporic Vietnamese identity has become multi-layered and is in flux.

For myself, my personal fear of the ocean has gradually subsided; yet fear of traveling alone outside America has endured. My sheltered childhood together with the trauma experienced by a boat person, who witnessed interpersonal violence during my flight and refugee camp period, as well as in poor American neighborhoods, has combined to make any travel to better understand the world seem only a fantastic dream. Every now and then I envy the lives of adventurous Western women as portrayed on television - persons unbound by a sense of geographical limits. I yearn for the opportunity to broaden my intellectual and personal horizons through travel to places where people have solved life's puzzles through different cultures and societies. Yet the focus of my passion for knowledge and community activism distracts me from that dream and longing. I love to engage in work, practical or theoretical, that addresses issues of culture, art, war, trauma, survival, spirituality and development.

After living twenty years in California, I recently decided to continue my journey to wisdom through the Ph.D. Program at UW. Recognizing self-transformation as a largely neglected but critical factor in wellness, I aim to develop spiritually-based models of prevention/ intervention that can be of demonstrated effectiveness in reducing the suffering of refugee and other displaced populations. I have joined others through mutual caring, connectedness, and growth at the community and societal level to fight against oppression and discrimination in a movement based on non-violence and compassion. This is a positive way to empower myself and disenfranchised populations. However, the opportunity to travel in order to broaden my worldview never seemed possible until I became aware of the Bonderman Fellowship.

Unlike the first wave of Vietnamese refugees, whose family ties, resources and elite backgrounds assisted in merging into the new environment, later comers had to negotiate a difficult path of personal and cultural transitions. Like others, my feelings of elation and relief with arrival to asylum were overwhelmed by the tremendous losses—family bonds, soul mates, friendships, homeland, and shared identity. I made a dear friend in camp, who shared in these transitions. My friend and I particularly embraced our common experiences—being of the same age, having been rescued by the same ship, having volunteered as interpreters in the same refugee health clinic, and having taken the same language/cultural classes. At the end, we were two people traveling empty-handed getting on the same airplane to the US. But regrettably we parted from each other at SEATAC to start a new life. In due course we turned out to live very different lives after twenty years. My friend's love of traveling became his obsession. Moreover, he was apt to live in the past, disclosing that the refugee camp time was his happiest. He, more than anybody else I've known, revisited these abandoned primitive camp locations several times, in addition to his exploration of other regions in the world. Our conversations were filled with his updated news of our former boat companions. I admired my friend's powerful memories of that past, and his commitment not to forget. And so I was terribly

grieved by his sudden death from cancer in spite of a life dedicated to being healthy in spirit, mind and body. As I experienced this huge personal loss, I felt myself being happy, realizing that he was at peace having had a chance to travel again to Vietnam and say goodbye to all his loved ones. I felt happy for his final return to Vietnam because Vietnamese, who died far from home without a family to tend their graves, were traditionally viewed with great pity. My friend did not become an unfortunate "wandering soul" after all. Ultimately, his soul will not perish in death, but will be reincarnated in another existence.

In the view of ordinary Vietnamese persons, death and the dead are deemed a natural part of life. So, through my loss of a dear friend, I realize that death is not only an abstraction. This is perhaps the ultimate irony in the human condition: that death gives life its ultimate shape and meaning. Life on earth is but a temporary stop on the Vietnamese's journey to death and other reincarnations. While dealing with his terminal illness, my friend mentioned his wish to be well and travel again - and not in a coach class seat! I believe he is now taking that next journey. And I believe that I will definitely fly with him again, next to each other on the same journey as we did twenty years ago. In the mean time, I would like to conquer my fear in order to travel abroad following my friend's adventurous path. My temporary earthly farewell to my friend reaffirmed to me the idea that best way to meet death is to confront it, to live bravely and deeply despite its constant presence. I am interested in travel to certain areas of the world so I can capture awe through the colorful lens of Việt Kiều's stories. I want to better understand how the Việt Kiều have managed their adjustments to new lands and peoples, and to help give voice to the richness of those lives. As the Vietnamese say, "In a river current, it is not the water in front that pulls the river along, but the water in the rear that acts as the driving force, pushing the water in front forward." Through this prospective journey, the spirits of my friend and hundreds of thousands Vietnamese lost in the ocean will be the water in the back pushing me—the water in front moving forward...

Through my own healing from trauma and losses, I have learned to accept and live my life as an act of unceasing prayer and offering to the Spirit. I regret none of my experiences because I realize that I exist to learn the lessons of life, to develop heart, and to embrace others. Through my intellectual journey, I have come to appreciate oral history for its democratic, human and intimate qualities in research, conducting better understanding and human solidarity. Talk story as a form allows for sharing in a context that does not call for censoring out the cultural and spiritual, which often happens in the secular world. For many Việt Kiều the physical journey was completed long time ago, but the emotional one is ongoing. Hence, seeking to express the spiritual essence of the Vietnamese people, to address what it means to be Vietnamese at this time in history is important to me, personally and professionally. If given the chance to travel to observe the Vietnamese diaspora in the world, I want to reflect upon the atypical dilemma of change caused by a turbulent century, leaving a rich culture split apart, with its people spread around the globe. The tragedy of 'boat people' — tens of thousands of whom perished at sea or were victimized by pirates — and the extreme maltreatment and humiliation imposed on tens of thousands of others in re-education camps will not be easily forgotten. As mentioned earlier, this story of diaspora is actualized by the Vietnamese ancient legend symbolic of our kinship separation and forced migration. It also represents the possibilities of spiritual recovery, resolution of grief and troubled memories.

Overall, I am interested in a synthesis of knowledge based in intellect with other ways of knowing based on a healing and reconciliation focus. My intention is to talk to many Việt Kiều exile artists, especially women, concentrated in at least two countries on each of three continents—Europe, Australia, and Asia. For example, my interest in visiting Paris in France and Berlin in Germany reflects the large number of Việt Kiều who live in those cities. Similarly, I am also inclined to visit Prague of Czech Republic where I could talk to Northern exile artists among the 60,000 Vietnamese resettled there as former guest workers. My outreach to them incorporates a personal effort to reconcile the historical conflicts between North and South Vietnamese. In addition, Sydney in Australia/New Zealand and New Caledonia — the islands in the South Pacific Ocean from east of Australia where many Vietnamese went to work in the colonized coffee plantations and later in the mines—would be priority destinations. Last but not least, I also interested in

Northeast Thailand where more than 100,000 descendants of Viet Kieu who fled from not only political upheaval and persecution during the pre-colonial era in the late eighteenth century but also the communists during and after the Vietnam war.

I am interested in listening to both young and old generations of exile artists and understand their individual motivations, talents, joys and fears through their paintings, film makings, confessions, diatribes, melodies and lyrics. As commonly agreed, artists have long been the voices of social criticism that prevails among people who feel unable to speak. Furthermore, "exile is compelling to think about, but terrible to experience," especially for artists. I wish to have further insights of, and sensitivity to, these artists' meaning of "home" and "healing" as well as their cultural impact on their host societies in the years before, during, and after the Vietnamese exodus. The more I research various spiritual traditions and faith practices, the more I'm convinced of a shared vision of "depth thinking" and "depth feeling" in the roots of suffering, oppression and alienation. I want to explore whether people hurt by the experience of war and relocation heal at their roots in order to feel again, and how people learn to live, beyond merely surviving, harmoniously with others, and heal deep wounds to spare the next generation from having to relive the older generations' hurts. Engaging these issues as functions of the human spirit and heart level means not reducing faith to purely psychological or therapeutic principles.

For Vietnamese artists living in exile, the camera and tape recorder seem to be a kind of validation -- the magical objects that make their lives more real. Certainly, I want to be a "star maker" to be able to portray their stories, not just my own. Their stories would be explored as multi-faceted as the human spirit at small, turning-point moments while they seek an identity that transcends the political and social boundaries of both their adopted land and the space occupied by the memory of a land that is no longer theirs. I hope to bring to light some of the conflictual notions of identity in exile and the cultural production of national versus transnational imageries. I want to be exposed by their work that provides a vantage point for examining issues of dislocated and blurred identities that reconfigure Vietnamese imagery. Definitely, the lives of *Viet Kiều* artists would undermine any idea of uniformity in face of the widely divergent forms and content of their storytelling. Their exile stories cannot be viewed only through the lens of war, tinted blood red and jungle green in other words. They offer a valuable source of inspiration and information for my effort to revise the numerous ways of constructing cultural identities and defining the boundaries between them. As Edward Said and others have pointed out, exile also makes possible originality of vision. "Often it is when we journey," Marguerite Bouvard writes in her foreword to *Landscape and Exile*, "that we see the most clearly, both the places we have left, and the new and strange places of arrival." Without such conscientious attempts, only fairy tales of lives in transition are sustained. Without such determination to conquer fear of living to the fullest, only certain ways of knowing are nurtured. Thank you for your consideration.