Marketplace Multiculturalism: Packaging and Selling Vietnamese America

Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Macalester College*
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Introduction

This essay focuses on the efforts of Vietnamese-American leaders to package and sell Vietnamese-ness so that their communities can take advantage of state-sponsored discourses and practices of “marketplace multiculturalism” in order to build economic and political clout. These multicultural discourses and practices serve as conduits between global processes—including the migration and subsequent place-making of refugees as well as the normalization of United States–Vietnam relations—and the shifting sociospatial terrain of U.S. metropolitan regions as evidenced in the emergence and growth of Vietnamese-American places such as Orange County’s Little Saigon. The integral role of Chinese-Vietnamese as entrepreneurs in the Vietnamese-American ethnic economy poses some important challenges to the production and construction of Vietnamese-ness in the U.S. context.1

Marketplace multiculturalism: Linking global to local

Multiculturalism is a heavily contested concept in the United States: for the current purposes, however, multiculturalism is best understood as a state-sponsored agenda that regulates the policies and practices associated with racial and ethnic differences as they are manifest in schools, the media, workplaces, and the corporate...
boardroom. In their interdisciplinary collection of essays, Avery Gordon and Christopher Newbury remark on multiculturalism’s “potential to reform racial inequalities within existing institutions” and underscore multiculturalism as one of the “baseline conditions necessary for the establishment of multicultural democracy in the United States” (1996, 77). There is not room here to identify the specific social spheres or institutions that would have to be deeply transformed so that a true multicultural democracy might actually come to life in this country. For now it is important only to note that during the past twenty years, neoconservatives have rendered the political agenda of multiculturalism nearly toothless by reducing the objective of racial justice from the civil rights era to the much more benign act of putting a few brown faces “at the table” while whites remain in charge.2

Within U.S. metropolitan regions, multiculturalism has become a hot ticket to economic growth and development, as well as a necessary feature of tourist and heritage districts often constructed around ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown. In other words, multiculturalism as it actually exists today in the United States is more of a strategy for selling culture—linking global changes to local development—than a road to political and social justice.

The consequences of this marketplace version of multiculturalism for the economic and political empowerment of racialized ethnic groups such as Vietnamese Americans are mixed. On the one hand, Vietnamese business districts such as Little Saigon in Orange County provide jobs, services, resources, and a “sense of home” to a population that is otherwise marginalized from white, middle-class society. On the other hand, the growth of these districts depends upon the reification and commodification of Vietnamese culture, which leads in turn to complex problems of authenticity and misrepresentation. While these problems are inherent in marketplace multiculturalism, they manifest in unique ways within Vietnamese-American communities and places that deserve their own telling.

Shopping in a “Communist-free zone”

Efforts to revitalize central Orange County by celebrating and supporting business growth in Little Saigon have been
boldly interlaced with a neoconservative ideological agenda. By meshing their community-building and place-making demands carefully and closely with the structural and ideological requirements of Westminster’s city officials, Vietnamese Americans have been able to advance their own business and political projects. In a climate that racializes Vietnamese Americans but does not openly acknowledge the meaning and impact of racism and white supremacy, marketplace multiculturalism demands that Vietnamese-American leaders promote a post–Cold War culture of anti-Communism and obtain positive recognition for their role as U.S. allies during the war in Vietnam.

Marketplace multiculturalism took hold of the city of Westminster most definitively in the 1990s. In 1992, the city created a steering committee to address long-term planning. The idea of the “Bolsa Corridor Specific Plan” was to bring more tourism into Westminster by improving parking, auto and pedestrian traffic flow, and the aesthetic appearance of Little Saigon. The Specific Plan was never adopted; instead, the city’s General Plan incorporates some guidelines for future commercial and residential development. The General Plan contains a simple statement with regard to development in Little Saigon: “Little Saigon is the only recognized CPA [community plan area] at this time. Westminster desires to establish a regional tourist destination commercial, social, and institutional attraction [sic] based on an Asian ethnic theme in this area.” By the late 1990s, Little Saigon had become an essential part of Westminster’s self-marketing lexicon. In the 1996 Business Directory of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce, the Westminster Redevelopment Agency occupied a two-page spread with this announcement:

Westminster: A great place to shop, live, play, or visit! With all that Orange County has to offer, visitors and residents alike will find Westminster centrally located, with a wide variety of shopping and one of Southern California’s more unusual ethnic shopping districts—Little Saigon!

Mr. Le Pham, a respected elder and one of the first to set up his newspaper business in Little Saigon, shared with me an idea
that Little Saigon could become part of a big tourist triangle in southern California. The following excerpt came from my first interview with him in 1996.

**Mr. Le:** The most important business in Little Saigon in the future should be eating.

**KASJ:** Eating? You mean like Chinatown?

**Mr. Le:** Yeah, eating. Because the basic tourist concession is a triangle of Disneyland in Anaheim, Knott’s Berry Farm, and Little Saigon.

**KASJ:** Huh.

**Mr. Le:** With, very far away, the Queen Mary in Long Beach.

**KASJ:** Yes. Uh-hm.

**Mr. Le:** Let me tell you. In the three other place, the eating was very bad. . . . I think in 5 years, or around 2000, along Bolsa will be a good place for a hundred of eating places. It’s look like Waikiki.

Mr. Le’s comments suggest that one of the prerogatives of marketplace multiculturalism could be to turn Little Saigon into Orange County’s Asian ethnic kitchen. The notion of Bolsa Avenue converting itself into a giant wok for hungry tourists may boggle the minds of some readers, but other business leaders seem to think this dream is plausible.

At certain times, marketplace multiculturalism requires an even more pronounced political collaboration on the part of both City Hall and Vietnamese-American leaders, whether in business or community issues. Thus, in 2004, both the cities of Westminster and Garden Grove proposed and then passed resolutions that were commonly understood to establish Little Saigon as a “Communist-Free Zone.” In fact, these resolutions suggest that Westminster and Garden Grove are really more worried about the budgetary implications of managing political conflict in Little Saigon than about preventing visits by Communists. The sheer size of the Vietnamese-American population in Westminster and
Garden Grove, and their growing economic and political clout—both have elected Vietnamese Americans onto their city councils—make it financially advisable for both cities to take seriously the cultural and political claims of the Vietnamese Americans in their midst.

The “collapse” of Harmony Bridge in 1996 illustrates the tensions among the potential uses of culture and ethnicity in Little Saigon, and the tendency of marketplace multiculturalism to exacerbate those tensions. On one side, Orange County’s premier developer, the Chinese-Vietnamese rags-to-riches entrepreneur Frank Jao, thought that building a minimall on a footbridge would be good for his business—and, therefore, good for the Vietnamese-American community. In Jao’s eyes, using Chinese architectural references would enhance the bridge’s aesthetic appeal to tourists. On the other side, Jao’s detractors saw in his scheme a hidden plot to transform Little Saigon into a Chinatown, thinly disguised under the label “Asian Village.”

Blissfully unmoved by the controversy over whether or not Jao’s project was too Chinese and therefore an illegitimate addition to Little Saigon, Westminster’s city officials simply returned to the trusty theme of the free-market economy and anti-Communism. Referring to Little Saigon as “the cultural and economic capital of the Vietnamese free world,” Westminster Mayor Charles Smith confirmed that the political-economic and the symbolic/cultural dimensions of globalization are indeed intertwined, and that the rise of Little Saigon fuels both the city’s economic growth and its neoconservative ideological agenda (Los Angeles Times, 3 July 1996).

Questions and implications

These brief glimpses of events in Orange County’s Little Saigon indicate that marketplace multiculturalism is wrapped up with an ideology of diversity that meshes happily with the region’s famously conservative and anti-Communist leanings. As Vietnamese-American leaders seek to build their communities and establish places that contain, anchor, and symbolize those communities, they must attend to the demands of marketplace
multiculturalism. One of the first demands is to produce and construct a version of Vietnamese-ness that can explain and justify the presence of Vietnamese in the United States and also generate and sustain commerce in the Vietnamese-American business districts. In other words, Vietnamese culture and identity must be transformed into something that is saleable in the United States—and preferably be tasty and digestible in a literal sense.

Consequently, at least in Orange County, Vietnamese-ness is construed to be a “theme” just like any other ethnic or cultural theme that has shaped America’s tourist and recreational spaces: the obvious example is, of course, Disneyland. The success of Little Saigon will be measured, then, in terms of the number of tourists it can attract and, equivalently, the amount of revenue it can generate not necessarily for its ethnic entrepreneurs but more importantly for the local and regional economies.

Along the way, Vietnamese culture is transformed into an object that is divorced from its true historical context; that is, to put Vietnamese-ness on par with other cultural commodities, certain key elements of the past, specifically the role of U.S. neocolonialism and imperialism in Vietnam, must be erased. Turning Vietnamese refugees into America’s “heroic allies”—and Vietnamese-American business districts into symbols of “freedom” and “democracy”—is part and parcel of marketplace multiculturalism. For that reason, recent resolutions to declare the cities of Westminster and Garden Grove to be “Communist-Free Zones” may be read as enhancing the Vietnamese aspect of those cities, because the resolutions represent the growing political clout of Vietnamese Americans in Orange County and throughout other U.S. metropolitan regions as well.

Meanwhile, the day-to-day work of running small businesses in Little Saigon is primarily left to ethnic Chinese Vietnamese whose cultural contributions to Vietnamese America have been, and will continue to be, disputed. When Frank Jao came under attack for his proposal to build Harmony Bridge, his Chinese-ness and the purportedly Chinese aspects of the architect’s blueprint—not Jao’s potential misuse of public funds—were the target. The growth of the ethnic Chinese Vietnamese economy exacerbates a
“crisis” of authenticity in Vietnamese America. This crisis is an inherent part of marketplace multiculturalism; that is, distortions of culture cannot be avoided. But in a racialized situation in which Vietnamese refugees and immigrants are lumped together with other Asian ethnic groups, and in which some Vietnamese places have to compete with much older and more established Chinatowns for recognition and resources, the centuries-old overlap of Vietnamese and Chinese culture in Vietnam presents a specific and peculiar dilemma here and now in the United States.

Department of American Studies
Macalester College, St. Paul, Minnesota

NOTES

1. This essay is derived from a chapter of my forthcoming book entitled Staying Vietnamese: Community and Place in Orange County and Boston. In this book I compare Vietnamese-American community-building and place-making in Orange County, California, and Boston, Massachusetts. The main point of the book is that in both regions, place is a central and persistent component of Vietnamese-American community, and that place-making allows assimilated and suburbanized refugees and immigrants, as well as their U.S.-born children, to sustain certain ways of being Vietnamese in America. The book makes an intervention into the scholarly discussion of Vietnamese refugees that has ignored the theoretical impact of place on Vietnamese-American identity and community-building. In the book I also explore race and racialization (turning Vietnamese refugees into Asian Americans), and memory (commemorating the U.S. war in Vietnam from a Vietnamese refugee perspective).

2. Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe neoconservatism as a political project based on individualism, market-based opportunity, and the curtailment of excessive state intervention; and as a racial project that refuses the legitimacy of “group rights” (1994, 123–30).

3. In fact, the cities do not actually ban Communists from Little Saigon. First, they declare that they do not “condone, welcome, or sanction stops, drive-bys, or visits” by “representatives or officials from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.” Westminster adds that they do not welcome “commercial or trade delegations” from Vietnam either. Second, they resolve to obtain ten to fourteen days prior warning from the U.S. State Department of any such travel plans on the part of Vietnamese officials. Finally, the cities resolve not to repeat the mass demonstrations of 1999 and the unprecedented finance burdens (my italics) they incurred. Westminster specifies that it paid $750,000 to the Westminster Police Department and neighboring police forces because of the Hi-Tek incident in which anti-Communists went on a rampage when the owner of a video shop displayed
a Vietnamese flag and picture of Ho Chi Minh in his shop window. Garden Grove states simply that it spent “an inordinate amount of public safety funds” to maintain “peace and order in Little Saigon” at that time. Basically, the resolutions are an attempt to avoid overspending public funds on conflicts that are internal to the Vietnamese-American community.

REFERENCES
