Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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Interviewer: Tram Le
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TL: This is Tram Le with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine.

Today is December 15th, 2014. I will be interviewing Ms. Lan Duong at her home in Silver Lake, Los Angeles, California. Hello, Lan.

LD: Hi, Tram.

TL: Thank you for doing this project with us. Can you please tell me your name, when you were born, and where you were born?

LD: So my full name is Duong Thi My Phuong Lan. But I have shortened it to Lan Phuong Duong, but I do like to tell the story about my full five names because it speaks to how my father thought it would be really nice to have a poetic name for his last child and it’s also lyrical, so I’ve always held on to that. So I was born in 1972 in Saigon, and I came to the U.S. when I was two and a half years old. I’m the youngest in a family of nine. My father was a lieutenant colonel in the South Vietnamese Army. He fought against the French. He fought with the Americans and my brother was also in the army. So when we came—

TL: Which brother?

LD: My oldest brother. His name is Anh That and he is about 65. He has very clear memories of his time in the army.

TL: Did you say how many children?

LD: Nine.
TL: Oh, nine.

LD: Yeah. So we were able to come out of Saigon right before the Fall of Saigon because of my father’s connections—military connections—and so we were flown out of the U.S. to Guam.

TL: What was the date that you were flown out?

LD: If I remember correctly, like three days before the Fall, and then from Guam, we took a, let me see, okay, I think we got a boat ride from Vietnam to Guam, and then from Guam, we took a plane ride to the U.S. to Butler, Pennsylvania. And how we were able to do that is because of my father’s military connections, but then also we were Catholics, so we were sponsored by a huge church in Butler, Pennsylvania. That was the only way that we were able to get from Vietnam to Guam to Pennsylvania.

TL: Was your entire family able to go? Your mom, your dad, and all nine brothers and sisters?

LD: When we left, my mother stayed behind with two other sisters and so it was six sisters of mine plus me and an older brother. We had left and at the time my mother decided to stay back. So it was a conscious decision for her to stay back, but having said that, it’s only in retrospect that I was able to even understand the kind of negotiations that were happening at that level, because I left when I was two and a half so I didn’t have any concept of who she was, what Vietnam meant, and what kind of life my father led up until this point. So I always tell the story that my life really began when we arrived here in Pennsylvania, and all I remember was being held by my father with all these white people around because we were sponsored by an all-white Catholic Church in an all-white city—or town—called Butler.
TL: What’s your dad’s name and your mom’s name?

LD: So my dad’s name is Duong Ngoc Khanh, and his saint name was Thomas, so he goes by Thomas. And then my mother’s name was Le Ngan—Le Thi Ngan. So she stayed behind and took care of my sisters.

TL: Did you now know why she stayed behind or even then?

LD: Yeah, so part of the growing up process for me, growing up refugee, meant trying to piece these things together and to this day though, you don’t really have a full picture, right? Everything is borrowed. Some memories are borrowed or fabricated, loosely understood. So from what I understand, it was because of a very troubled history between my parents, that she decided to stay. And that troubled history, you know, involves abuse. It involves a very young marriage between two young people who probably didn’t know that they were going to have nine children—twelve children—but you know, three were born stillborn or one had died when she was young. So that’s the kind of intimate details that were largely left out of this family history until recently, until I had the courage to ask questions. Otherwise you know, it’s easier to just forget or live your life as if you were always American, right? So she stayed behind. She elected to stay because of a horrible relationship she had with my father. They got married too young. It was an arranged marriage, and they’re Catholic so she was forced to bear twelve children and forced to stay in this unhappy marriage for a long time. Part of who I am today is because I was nurtured on these stories of her strength and her resilience. So that makes me the feminist I am today. But at the same time I understand now that she didn’t want a mother, and it took me a long time to know and understand that.

TL: She didn’t want to be a mother?
LD: She didn’t want to be a mother. I think she was forced to be a mother. It was cultural. It was social. It was religious, but I know she had a very difficult relationship to my dad as well to the institution of marriage, probably, and to being a mother. And then also she wanted another life, I’m sure.

TL: What was her occupation in Vietnam?

LD: She had gone to high school but she had married when she eighteen, so she didn’t have much of a life.

TL: Or that many choices?

LD: Yeah.

TL: And what were your grandparents’ names and what did they do?

LD: I don’t know. I don’t know anything about grandparents, any kind of life before we left. I barely knew the kind of personal relationship between my father and my mother, so I wouldn’t know.

TL: Because nobody talked about it?

LD: No they talked about it.

TL: You don’t even know if your grandparents were merchants or anything like that? You wouldn’t have any idea?

LD: Well, so on my dad’s side my grandparents were of an intellectual class. That’s the extent of it and they were very strict with my father. My father wanted to be a monk and they wouldn’t let him. And so he became the good son that they wanted him to be, and that’s why he married my mother. I think these two people were very unhappy. They came together and they bore unhappy children (laughs) as a result. But so it was, a
generation of unhappiness and misery and sadness. But you know that’s what makes my family history interesting, I guess.

TL: Did your father suffer any physical wounds from the war?

LD: No he didn’t, but I know from what he tells me, his father was very strict with him, which means beatings, so that was normal. I mentioned that because I think the pattern of abuse then inherited from son to son.

TL: So when you came to Butler, Pennsylvania, do you know how long your family stayed there?

LD: We were there from ‘75 to ‘80—1980. And I had just the best of times because all I remember is playing the snow, meeting new friends, being the apple of my father’s eyes. That’s all I remember. And not understanding the history of war that we came from, not really seeing that at all. So everything was new and shiny and exciting.

TL: Were you aware that you were different or that you and your family were different from the rest of the families in Butler?

LD: We did. Let me see, how was that first—

TL: At such a young age, too.

LD: —Impressed upon me. I knew my sisters were having a hard time because they would come home crying because of the racism that they had experienced. They came when they were in high school. It’s probably the worst time to come over as refugees so I remember their sadness and feeling for them but I didn’t experience anything myself. It was very clear that we were different because of the way that we were given government cheese, or you know, big vats of ice cream and it didn’t taste good. Even back then I knew, but I still enjoyed it because I was with my family and my siblings. It was a
happier but very desperate time now that I think about it because we were just always
dependent on others for everything: food and clothing, sustenance.

TL: So by that time, had you gone through elementary school already?

LD: Yeah, by that time I was in second grade. My father decides to go to San Jose,
California, make the big migration like everybody else did.

TL: Well, let’s go back to your elementary school a little bit about elementary school
there? Do you recall any particular—

LD: So I went to a Catholic Nun school during my elementary school years and so it was
a great experience because the nuns were just very caring but then very strict. I feel like I
got a really good education about all the basics, but I was curious too. I had inklings of a
certain kind of spiritual consciousness when I was young, wondering about the presence
of God and wondering about how everything fit together. And so I think looking back, I
was probably a pretty introspective, kind of pensive child. I had my crazy moments
because I was the youngest and I think that I was spoiled, mostly by my dad but then also
by my siblings. So growing up during this time, I had no idea that I didn’t have a mother,
until later, because all my sisters really tried to be that maternal figure that I was lacking,
because they knew what it was that I was at a loss for. But at the time, things seemed
complete. Things that they would do is, we were just so poor that we would sleep three or
four in a bed, sideways, and they would hold me, all the time. So I grew up in a very
affectionate household or family and I was fanned to sleep during the hot days and then it
was very cold in Pennsylvania, so we kept each other warm. And it was a very miserable
time because we just came over and everything is borrowed. Everything was ragged. But
at the time I didn’t notice because things seemed, you know, whole. My father tried his
best to provide for us. He worked as a janitor. He tells me stories about how he cleaned diapers and he tried to be a technician but found that he couldn’t juggle being a father to about six children (laughs) and still try to work or go to school to be a technician, so he gave up and stayed at home to take care of me. So he was my life for a big part of my life. So my sisters were also important and again I saw my life though the lens of how close it seemed our family was. So that was the years of Pennsylvania where we had all white friends. We went to church; we were good immigrants in that way because we responded to the sponsors of this Catholic Church very well. My father’s a devout Catholic to this day; he goes to church every day. Recently we went back to Butler in order to visit some of these people, and it’s just ironic that we actually do better than them in terms of economic and social class and they’re still struggling. But all I remember from that time period was that they were very good to us.

TL: But do you recall you said your sister had some racial incidences? Do you remember what they were?

LD: Yeah, they were taunted in school. You know, called gooks or slant eyed. I happened upon my oldest sister’s diary and she talks about wanting to commit suicide. She was sixteen when she came over, so there was a lot of stuff I don’t know about that they went through and I’m sure it was hard. But I think because of those experiences, our relationships really forged and are stronger. And so we were, again, very close at this time, because we had no one else really. I had friends but at the same time I knew that my family was my life. There was nothing else. So we lived in this abandoned house that the county had given us and to me it was just this fun house because there was nothing to do but play, so I had very good memories of that. I also witnessed really horrible things, and
that is the abuse that was inflicted on my mother was then inflicted on my sisters. So I witnessed all of that. And I didn’t have the words to articulate how painful it was to see that or it is to remember that, so that was probably the worst, was to see that and not know what to do with it. I still don’t, right? And the reason why he did that is because I think he came from a very regimented family life, part of the military, so he wanted his family life as an extension of that in Vietnam, to be just as regimented, and on top of that there were all these disciplines that happened, not just because of the war but because he wasn’t as respected as he used to. So I think that was part of the reasons why he was, you know, quite frankly monstrous. So then—

TL: So it prompted him to want to leave Butler to San Jose?
LD: This was in 1980s. Silicon Valley was the high tech industry and always jobs came up. My father went there because his friends were already there and my brother, at the time, he had just joined us, we came together in California but he was able to get a job in the high tech industry as well. So we made the move and it was five days on the road from Pennsylvania to California, all packed into two cars. It filled me with a sense of adventure because I didn’t know what to expect, I had only seen San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge in pictures and all I thought were palm trees and sunny weather. So when I got there I was eight and I didn’t know how, again it didn’t dawn on me how poor we were, and how cramped things were. But one of the earliest memories was seeing or feeling as if this new place was the Wild West, and I was just going to be the biggest, baddest cowboy that I could be. And so no one was going to stop me, not the least of my dad, right? So I was a ping-pong just jumping all around and happy to be here in California so we settled into a couple of homes and, again, very tight. We had about
seven people in one house, everybody working. My father was on, you know, welfare and he ran a very tight household, which means in the end I felt it was very economic. It was all about this certain calculation that people had to bring in at the end of the month. And so it was all about money and I can rationalize it now, but at the time it was very pressuring, it was very stressful to see my siblings have to work when they were sixteen and just give everything to my father. So I know it was very draining for them, but one of the things I was brought up with then is empathy for my sisters, who seemed to really toil under his regime. The reason I’m talking about it is because it really nurtured some of the feminist ideas that I had. I didn’t have any words or vocabulary to name it feminism but I know that this was what I witnessed and it’s outside of academic discourse and it was what it is. And this is that my sisters were very strong, they still are. At times they buckled under his, you know, stewardship, because he saw himself as a leader but at times they really bucked against that. I witnessed all of that and I have a very strong sense of compassion for what it is that they went through. So because of these kinds of pressures to work and to make money so that we can survive, I didn’t know anything else except outside of the fact that my sisters and my brother eventually were abused, were miserable, often they would marry too early or something in order to get out of the house, early to get away from my father. So I understood that early on. Even though we would live tight in one room, when the pressures really got to my father and was projected onto my siblings, I remember very well trying to hide in small spaces. So the house itself was already small and I would find the smallest corner. It was just easier, you know, to not be around that to shield myself from that. But so now I understand that that violence was part of the violence that he grew up in and so a culture of violence because of the war and
because of the colonial presence, because of all these structural forces, that all that made my father who he was. But then he also didn’t understand that there were these personal consequences to what he was doing, and these consequences are still with us. So I guess growing up, what was sustaining was not just my relationship with my sisters, but also a really tight group of friends that I made when I was about 8 years old in third grade. These friends today, I think we just try to make do and try to claim this neighborhood that we grew up in because we had nothing else. It was just us girls, we knew that the world was rigged. The system was rigged against us and so how we rebelled against that was stayed out late, made out with guys, got into fights, and tried to just out-pace or outgrow the refugee identities that we had. I think we knew that something was off.

TL: How did you know at 8 years old? What indicated to you that the system was rigged?
LD: Well as a young girl, my first encounter with racism was walking to school, third grade, and a boy walked alongside me and called me a nip and he said it with such vitriol and I know something was wrong even though I didn’t know innately was nip meant and I said, “you too,” and that really made sense. And then on I thought this was probably going to be a pattern here in California. And after that, growing through school, there would be factions: Vietnamese versus the Mexican girls, and the Black girls—it was very multicultural. There would be these divisions that you could tell that were marked by race and class. So we would be called nips, we would be called gooks, we would be made fun of, you know, ching chong, all that. So we tried to fight back and we tried to fight back with our fists and then also through humor. But as a young girl I knew that being a girl was also a vulnerable thing to be because we were also poor. So if I had gone to a friend’s house to visit her, I would have to go through very bad neighborhoods alone and
in the streets were just very scary and during this time if, nine years old walking in the afternoon on your own, and I would feel very vulnerable. I would try to be invulnerable by being tougher than I was but so one time, my friend and I were walking back from store and were accosted by a group of Mexican boys and so what that means is that, you know, we were felt up, surrounded, didn’t know what to do, just me and her. And so at that point I knew that that wasn’t right and it was because we were girls. So I grew up knowing through these experiences at home and outside the home that violence and sexuality were riven? Like these spaces were riven with tension. Tensions of violence then tensions of sexuality. It was because I was a girl that we were harassed in this way. Or it was because I was Southeast Asian of a certain class that we were harassed this way. So I started to make the connections early but I still didn’t have a vocabulary for it. So that’s for the high school and it was a strenuous time that I felt like I was breaking out of my shell. I thought I was a bad motherfucker. And I just thought that my friends and I could have fun and I was still doing, you know, okay in high school, I guess scholastically and getting away with a lot of shit. Stealing and you know, hanging out with all the wrong guys, doing all the things that teenage rebellion is about but with a different past and that past is because we were refugees. We were poor so it’s not as if we were rebelling because we were middle class and we were in the suburbs. No, it was because we didn’t have anything and everything was compounded by the fact that we were also girls without much support for being girls and being refugees. And so that really sharpened how I saw everything and the reason why I keep saying girls is because during that time, 1980s, there was a lot of media accounts about gangsters or model minorities. And so whenever you think about those identification markers, it was usually
gendered because the gangsters would be guys and then model minorities would be both guys and boys, or guys and girls, but I felt like we didn’t fit in either one category. So we just wanted to form our own identity. We thought we were really tough. This is only in retrospect that I can say that I got my ass kicked, right? We were racist, too. Homophobic, you know, because when you try to assert yourself, you usually try to do it at somebody else’s expense. But that’s how we tried to form an identity. So that’s how a lot of my thinking has been shaped is because of the experiences at home and then the kind of experiences that I had with my close group of friends.

TL: So if your dad’s very strict how did you get away with such activities? Were you a different person at home or how did that work?

LD: Right, I was. I snuck out a lot. I would get caught every once in awhile but because I was also the youngest, he really doted on me, I got away with a lot. I was basically the black sheep of the family and he never abused me. And so I don’t know why it felt like I could, but that was because my sisters would, you know, shield a lot of that. So I guess sneaking out I still did while still in school so that helped with the cover. And then doing things behind his back he had no idea. No idea.

TL: At what point did you finally realize that you don’t have your mother living with you and that she’s in Vietnam?

LD: It was most apparent I think when we came to California and I saw Vietnamese families for the first time and how they seemed so cohesive. One time I would make something, you know for Mother’s Day, I used to hate Mother's Day, I still do. But you have to make stuff, right, in class for your mother and father. And so I did, it was like an ashtray or frame for my sisters because I didn't have a mother then. My sisters didn't
understand this gift giving because they didn’t know that I saw them in this way. So they were very indifferent and it didn’t really dawn on me that they didn’t probably be seen as a mother to me. And so it was very awkward but I was very hurt and so at that moment I knew that something was missing. And it was just not coherent, right? And so eventually I asked more about my mother and found out things about her that totally made sense to me at the time, or it makes sense to me now, about who she is and about how I am. The reason why—this is the story I’ve been told—the reason why my father abused her so much was because she was a profligate with her money, she didn’t know how to manage her money, and she would just spend. To this day we don’t know where or how she spent her money but she just spent. And by the time that we left my dad owed other people money and so it was, for him, a very shameful thing but now I know where I get my spending habits from. So it just makes sense or I inherited her, you know, her pension to eat up all the time and I think it’s because she’s from Hue and I always say that’s my Hue because I feel very akin to her in that way, in those gestures that really have really no meaning except for what I know and what I remember. But that’s what brings me closer to her even though we haven’t shared that much time together.

TL: So you did share some time with her?

LD: So she came when I was about 20 years old.

TL: She came to the U.S.?

LD: She came to the U.S. and it was as if I didn’t know her, of course, strangers but it clicked and eventually I just knew instinctively that she was my mother and our coming together needed to happen. But it wasn’t any easier emotionally.

TL: And at the time did she talk about anything? Did she live with you all?
LD: She lived with my sister and so my parents lived apart—they still do. It’s as if they’re just friends rather than, you know, husband and wife. They never were able to get a divorce because of Catholicism and so that just made things worse. And, let me see, so when she came I tried to talk to her but a couple of things was that at the time I didn’t know if I would feel a connection to her. And then linguistically she speaks in the Hue accent to this day. So very hard to understand and then be understood. The back and forth wasn’t there and so lack of intimacy because I didn’t know her and then also a kind of linguistic barrier made it so that it was just really hard to transition to being without a mother to having one and then now just kind of having a mother but symbolically rather than feeling as if, you know, you’ve been with this person a very long time. And so she came and that was when I was already an adult.

TL: Did your dad sponsor her? Is that how she came?

LD: That’s right. So he sponsored her and the reason why is because he felt this obligation to. He started the paperwork many, many years ago and it all came together 20 years after we had left, so one of the things that is so interesting is to see how our family history has also come alive through all this government paperwork. He started the reunification process a long time ago and so our life has been marked by government documents and so I have them. Recently I’m trying to get my sister over who's still in Vietnam and so I'm her sponsor and so the paperwork lends just another layer to our lives here.

TL: So the two sisters that your mom stayed with behind are still there or only one?

LD: Only one. My other sister was able to join us 25 years after we came.

TL: What of those sisters and what is your relationship with them?
LD: Hard because culturally it's so different and they’re also 20 years older than I am. You know, a whole different set of experiences.

TL: So your mom's still here in the U.S., she lives in San Jose but just in a different house than your dad.

LD: Yeah.

TL: Okay, and your other siblings—they are older—do they feel more of a connection with your mom?

LD: Some of my siblings feel a connection to her and some, those who are younger like me, feel disconnected. And, you know, she’s also a little senile so her memories are also fading, right? And so she doesn't, I don't know, we just don't have much of a connection.

TL: So now let’s go back a little bit to high school. Tell me a little bit more about that. Growing up, high school, San Jose, and possibly also why you thought that racism was more apparent to you in California, which is more a diverse state, more diverse population than Butler, Pennsylvania. Start with that first then we’ll go to high school.

LD: Okay. So in California I saw Vietnamese people, I saw mostly Vietnamese, Southeast Asians, Blacks and Latinos who were as poor as we were or poorer. And so it just kind of all gelled and made sense that we were struggling. But then struggling against each other. My only outlet during this time was the library, so I found my passion through reading and being able to step away or step outside kind of that world. So that world during high school, at the time I felt like, on top of the world, I thought I was popular. I thought I was a bad ass but I wasn’t. Or at least I thought I was among my own because the high school that I went to has a majority of Southeast Asians. It was because we were all refugees and we descended upon, you know, San Jose. But in reality, we were all
struggling. I mean now that I look back, we were, again, of a certain class, of a certain ethnicity. And there was a hierarchy in high school that I saw with Filipinos on top of the hierarchy then Latinos. Then Vietnamese were kind of like, there, up on top, but at the same time there were Laotians and Cambodians who we warped to others and I remember very clearly knowing that we were being mean, we were mean girls. That was the only way I think that we knew how to deal with ideas of difference at the time. I think I was just struggling to make sense of everything and be in and yet I knew that we were really out. Or at least I felt also very marginal to all these activities or all these kind of things that were happening that I thought made me popular.

TL: Was this a public high school?

LD: Yeah.

TL: So scholastically you did well? And academically you did okay?

LD: Mhm.

TL: So how was social events like prom or dances? How as that for you?

LD: Again, I think I was popular, you know (laughs), I had friends we kind of ruled a certain area of high school. I went to junior prom. I went to senior prom. I had boyfriends—

TL: Did your dad allow for you to have boyfriends?

LD: He didn’t know so it was all nefarious. But I don’t think I was really into the popularity because I always felt like an outsider so I remember clearly just trying to get away from everything once in awhile or very often escaping to the library. I was into old movies so I watched movies and I think it was because what I wanted to be was not there. I knew I wanted more and I saw more of that in literature or in movies. So I was a big fan
of 1920s actors and 1930s and ‘40s later on, like, film noir because the women were just so beautiful and so strong. So I projected, you know, all those things that I desired for myself onto the screen and then lost myself into literature. So because of that background, all of the activities that all my friends were doing, all the popular things, it didn’t appeal to me as much. I was doing some of that kind of half-heartedly.

TL: What kind of literature did you read?

LD: Anything. So I think I’ve spent half of my childhood in the library. I would read horror literature, romance, action. One of the things that I especially remember is reading about sex for the first time in the library and just being so titillated by it. So again, it was through the written word that I felt alive.

TL: So what did you think you wanted to be in high school?

LD: A writer. My aspirations were to leave San Jose behind, go to New York, and be a writer. But instead (laughs), went to school, went to grad school, and here I am. This is just another life that I had chose.

TL: So from high school, where did you go? What college did you go to?

LD: I went to UC Santa Cruz. I was an American Literature major and I was also writing poetry at the time so I knew that I, at the time, knew I wanted to write. And I picked up Toni Morrison’s book *The Bluest Eye* and was inspired by the fact that she was both a writer and a professor. And I thought if I wanted to graduate school, because I was naive back then, I thought I could write and I thought I could also teach. I didn’t know that teaching would be everything. So I finished at UC Santa Cruz, I worked for a year, and then I went to grad school at UC Irvine in Comparative Literature, completely unhappy because I didn't think this was my language— the theory, the people, the competitiveness.
I really longed for the kind of intimate relationships I had in San Jose, so I rooted myself in San Jose and I thought this is not for me. But then I also stopped writing so I think that was part of the problem. I didn’t feel spiritually or intellectually, you know, satisfied with just grad school. So while in grad school I would always come home and I would think San Jose was who I am and it’ll always be a part of my life. So I tried to distance myself from grad school and who I was as a San Jose girl. I always said that I put the ‘ho’ in San Jose. And that was because I really felt like I identified with this city. And then while going to grad school I realized that going home, eventually, that was also not who I was anymore. Like I’ve grown out of San Jose. And so it’s a lot of shifting intellectually during grad school and I realized I guess this was the route I was going to take - being a researcher, being a thinker. So I kind of put my writerly persona behind— or I put it away—so that I could be a scholar. In that, I think I’ve become something else.

LD: Vietnamese American.

TL: How does that identity play into all of this? What does it mean to you to be a Vietnamese American in terms of speaking the language or practicing traditional stuff?
LD: Well I teach about Vietnamese Americans and I teach about our history. I teach about the war, I teach about culture, so all of that comes to play inside the classroom. I try to make it come alive for my students.

TL: But growing up—how did that affect you?
LD: So not intellectually (laughs). Growing up how did I identify as Vietnamese American?
TL: Or how did that affect you? That identity.

LD: So for the longest time I denied the fact that we were Vietnamese—or that I was Vietnamese. I would tell people that I was, you know, half Italian. Like, that really worked. So it was as if I was denying who I was.

TL: Half Italian and half what?

LD: Half Italian, half Vietnamese. Because I have to say that one of my actors was Sophia Loren. So I fantasized about what I wasn’t and that would be I wasn’t poor, I wasn’t young, I wasn’t a young girl and I was rich. So I wanted to be all these things. So when it really congealed for me as a Vietnamese American was probably in high school because all my friends I knew were Vietnamese. All of the gang bangers were all Vietnamese and were all struggling to find a footing, you know, in American culture and history. I think that’s the larger context for everything. So we thought we ran the town in the sense that at the time Vietnamese Americans have this like, notoriety as gangsters. So I think that it was very seductive for us because it allowed us to think of us in some way as being powerful, at least in the public. So again, the gang bangers that I knew and hung out with, some of my friends, kind of cultivated that identity for ourselves and we played at being dangerous. And so part of that danger was embracing the fact that we were different and that we were Vietnamese.

TL: Did you actually engage in any sort of illegal activities as part of this gang? Well, I mean, you said you stole.

LD: So not me per say, but witness to drug making, handling of guns, you heard all this talk about, you know, jumping people. Being a part of fights just because, you know, you were at a party and somebody looks at you the wrong way that was just our new you. It’s
about fighting, surviving, and asserting yourself in all these places like parties, garage parties and karaoke bars because we felt like we really owned the night. So now as a scholar I think back and what we did was we tried to take back, I think, some of the sense of disempowerment that we probably felt.

TL: Did you speak Vietnamese to your dad at home and to your siblings? Everybody did?
LD: We did.

TL: Did you also celebrate certain traditional stuff like Tet\(^1\) and cung\(^2\)? Did you guys cung to ancestors?
LD: No, because as Catholics we thought that wasn’t a ritual or practice for us. So our daily rituals would be going to church. The church we went to was all Vietnamese. The priest that I know, that we all knew, were Vietnamese. So every part of our lives was about being Vietnamese in a Vietnamese city. And being Catholics just kind of reinforced that identity so we celebrated Tet but not regularly with very set traditions. We would go to hoi cho\(^3\) but my father would go off and do his own things because he likes to play Chinese chess. So he would be in these competitions at hoi cho and he’d win. And so he had that other life that he was really happy about. But for me, Tet was about going to hoi cho, really like, tearing it up, stealing mirrors, you know, at the games and trying to get into places for free. We were really pha\(^4\). That’s what we did. Very dan choi\(^5\) and go to the parties at hoi cho. And I don’t know, just trying to make a ruckus every time.

TL: Did your siblings know about these?

\(^{1}\) Vietnamese New Year  
\(^{2}\) Offering to gods  
\(^{3}\) Fair  
\(^{4}\) Causing trouble  
\(^{5}\) Partier
LD: No.

TL: Nobody knew?

LD: No.

TL: You were different when you came home.

LD: Right. Double life.

TL: So how was it going to college? Did you go to college with any of these friends?

LD: No.

TL: So how was that? Going to college without the sort of influence of these friends and then did you find yourself then more?

LD: Yeah, no. I felt very alienated in college because I didn’t have the closeness of friends in that context and then that continued, grew worse during grad school. But then I reconciled with the alienation and I think that that had always been there because I always felt time to be on my own anyway to go to the library. So that ran alongside my desire to be a part of this gang. And so I think I led a double life not only at home but with my friends. And so that just translated even more clearly when I was in school and I spoke a different language. I was of a certain class because of my friends I was the only one who went to college and then later on graduate school and left. I was one of the few that left. So that sense of alienation was really compounded by the time I came to grad school. Yeah, very different.

TL: So have you found that to be, like, other grad students having similar stories too?

LD: I think so. I think a lot of people of color who’ve become scholars in the same trajectory that I might have taken feel a sense of disconnection to the environments from which they came and I think it has to do with class and capital. So whenever I come back
to San Jose, come back to my father’s house, everything looks so shabby. The books that I used to love are no longer there or they’re just dusty or they’re just in bad shape. So I know I don’t belong in that world anymore but part of me is still there.

TL: What about talking to your friends again? When you go back do you meet up with them?

LD: I try to. I still feel very close to them. It’s as if, you know, we’ll always be sisters. It’s just, again, different language, different class, different capital that I have.

TL: Do you feel that they also sense that? Do you feel any tension in terms of they feel like you’re different now coming back?

LD: No tension, I think. When we get together it’s always good.

TL: How did you meet your husband?

LD: Let’s see, I was at Berkeley at a poetry reading and it was an open mic and at the time I had brought some poems and I thought I would, you know, drop some words. From that point on, because he was one of the organizers of the poetry reading, kept in contact but in a very superficial way because I just wanted to be a part of this group. I just thought it was so fantastic. They were called Ink and Blood--Muc va Mua. It was like this group of Vietnamese American writers and I just thought this is amazing, this is what I want to be. A writer. And this is the kind of people I want to hang out with. And it was just, you know, so important to find a room of your own among your own, right? So I went to a lot of their events and eventually he called and we went out on a date. At the time I was very non-committal because I wanted to explore. I was gonna go to graduate school so I didn't want to be tied down and I also had no interest in him initially.

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6 Ink and blood
TL: How old were you at this point?

LD: I was 24 and most of the men that I met—and I knew early on that I wanted to be with either Black men or with Vietnamese or with Mexicans so—

TL: Why those three?

LD: Because those were the kind of guys that I would see in my environment so I didn’t have any fantasies about White men or other kinds of Asian men. But I was a serial dater and I think part of it was I just liked to meet people and talk to people. So when he came along, we didn’t click and I thought that was okay, just you know, leave it behind. But what was really important for me because I was dating Vietnamese guys and I knew, again, I wanted something more and the guys that I grew up talked about cars, talked about bodybuilding, or couldn’t talk to me about the movies that I loved or the books that I loved to read. There was a huge disconnect, I didn’t know what to do about it, I thought it was me. I thought I was the odd one. So it was always that outsider feel to being in San Jose even though I was supposed to be in the in crowd, whatever that means. So I knew I was different and so when I met Viet, who was at the time in graduate school in Berkeley and then on his way to being a professor at USC, I knew he was different and at the very least, even though we didn’t like each other, we would have commonality. So it turns out that his family also came to Pennsylvania in 1975, we were at the same refugee came, we were processed there and then we migrated to California, roughly the same time, in San Jose. And another coincidence is that we would always be at the library so that’s where he found comfort and solace and I did too and I imagined that we would’ve like, crossed paths, but as kids and we wouldn’t have known it. So I think in some ways it was destined. But he was very important to my intellectual life because he was the only
person that got it, being from San Jose but then also being a scholar and what that means and the kinds of disconnect that happens when you are of a different class than from where you came from.

TL: So how were your parents’ reactions to him?

LD: They were happy he was Catholic, so that a plus even though neither one of us is really practicing. He was, you know, in grad school about to be a professor so they thought on paper he was great. I think our parents, because it’s a very small tight-knit community up in San Jose, everybody knows each other especially within the church community so his parents knew my parents and there weren’t any problems.

TL: So going back to grad school then, what surprised you most about grad school when you got there?

LD: It was hard, it was hard work. Not that I didn’t know hard work, I just thought I was smart, that I could do it, but it’s a different kind of smart. It’s mostly about perseverance and mostly about learning this language. And I wasn’t sure I wanted to learn it because it’s not how I talked. So after the second year I was sure I was gonna quit and I thought I’d just be a writer and it never happened because after your second year then you go into the dissertation and then you have to go forward. So that’s what I did. But graduate school was a very alienating experience, you know, because I had to move from San Jose to Irvine and I didn’t know anyone. Irvine is not very welcoming, you know, to somebody like me who, again, I felt very tied to San Jose. My identity was all wrapped up in that. And so to go to Irvine and become a graduate student, feeling very self-conscious about my lack of intellectual—or what I thought was intellectually capital—made me feel very, you know, different there as well.
TL: But in terms of being Vietnamese, was it more strange than being in Southern California and being closer to the Vietnamese community?

LD: No, because at the time my research laid with the Vietnamese community but it was still an intellectual abstract exercise. Who I was and what I claimed to be was still wrapped up in who and how I grew up, so I couldn't make that connection yet. So what helped was finally, I think, taking my feminist studies classes or Asian American studies classes. And I think through those classes I was about to learn a certain vocabulary and I was able to define what it was that I experienced and what I witnessed. And so it all kind of came together in graduate school, where I was able to define patriarchy and say that’s what defined my life. I was able to define the war and how that has structured how I see everything. And understanding, you know, Asian American studies but then also the history and the lineage and how we all fit into social justice movements. That all gave me kind of the framework to put everything into place. So graduate school was both a boon but then it also threatened to really burn me at the time. But I could not have become what I think what I am today, which is a critical thinker about things like race and class and sexuality. It’s because those classes really gave me a framework and a language to speak these experiences.

TL: So when you say your work is in the community, what do you do?

LD: What do I do? I see my teaching as being very informed by what I want to do for the community, which is have students know where we’ve come from, why we’re here in the U.S. I tried to impart to them that they can also revise and redo what has been handed to us. This doesn’t have to do with the Vietnamese class, per say, but I hope to impart to all my students that they could speak back and in speaking back they can also help the
community through art or through organizing, through protests. So I try to give them the tools to feel empowered and use that sense of empowerment to help the community and then also critique it.

TL: So what is your relationship like with the Vietnamese American community in Little Saigon?

LD: So I’ve been involved with VAALA [Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association] since 2007 initially through film but that is my only community organizing work that I’ve done thus far. In San Jose, I wish I could do more but I don’t feel a sense of pull to it, to that city, as much. But everything kind of comes together for me academically but then also in terms of community in Orange County. My work is here, I live in Southern California, and a lot of my friends are in these arts organizations. So I think my community work has been fueled by this commitment to seeing the community grow in terms of diverse thought and not grow in terms of population, but grow in terms of trying to think about our history and reflect on it and move forward and think about steps for moving forward. So I’ve been involved in the Vietnamese International Film Festival, I’ve been involved in VAALA, arts organizing, and arts events. I think that’s really important to me, to have that sense of community, and recently working with the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists network in San Francisco. So that’s really grounded me and helped me shaped what I think is my community activism. But since 2009 and F.O.B. II [F.O.B. II: Art Speaks], I’m not so gung-ho about it anymore and really reluctant to be in the spotlight as it relates to anything controversial or controversy in the community. I would like for something like that to happen again but I’m not sure if I want to be at the forefront as it was a few years ago, or 5 years ago. I have high aspirations for this
community; I think it can be better. I think it can be more progressive and so I would, you know, would love to be part of that progress. I just don’t know how to do it yet.

TL: So now that you’ve had a son, how do you imagine you would pass on some of that thinking or that identity? I mean, he was born here in the U.S. although he has two Vietnamese parents. How do you imagine raising him with that identity?

LD: Being Vietnamese American and not having any sense of relationship to Vietnam, I’m not sure. My goal is to raise somebody who is intellectually curious, multilingual. So one of the things that I will press upon him is of this history that we come from and have him know that Vietnamese Americans, we’re just one group among many in the U.S. and we’ve had a certain history with the U.S. but I would really love it for him to be part of social justice movements for all ethnicities, for all genders. So it’s not just about being Vietnamese American, although I’ll emphasize our history, I think it has to be—especially his generation—has to be about knowing the history of many races here in the U.S. and how to work on a more just reality for everybody. So that’s what I’m going to emphasize with him.

TL: Just also curious, with a lot of Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 generation growing up with very refugee immigrant parents, themselves growing into a more Western sensibility about living life and all that, how much do you want to share with your son this history that you’ve had to grow up with?

LD: Everything. He will know everything. He will know so much that he’ll probably not want to know more (laughs). We’re full of stories and I think that that’s one of the legacies that I want to leave behind is that not only did I have a life, you know, outside of
taking of care of him, but his grandparents did too. And that he comes from a long line of strong Vietnamese people and he will know that.

TL: If you could do something over in your life, would you do anything differently?
LD: Probably not. I’m too old (laughs) to go back. I mean, I guess we’ve made our decisions and because of them I am who I am today.

TL: And what would you say is one or a few of the things that you’re the most proud of in your life to this moment?
LD: My son and the fact that I had enough gumption to write a book.

TL: Is there anything else that you’d like to talk about that we didn't get to cover or any last words for future generations or anything like that?
LD: I don’t think so. That’s it.

TL: Okay, well thank you for sharing and for being very honest about your family’s history, Lan.

--End of Transcript--